



PEOPLE'S HEALTH TRUST - ACTIVE COMMUNITIES CASE STUDY



East Thirsk Community Hall



East Thirsk Community Association – Parent, baby & toddler group

Introduction

This case study focuses on how the East Thirsk Community Association parent, baby and toddler group was conceived, and what it aims to do and achieve, as part of the evaluation of the Active Communities Programme managed by People's Health Trust. The report draws on interviews with the project team, partner and participants, observation of the group in session and the monitoring information submitted as part of the programme's six monthly review cycle.

About the project

Since 1994, the East Thirsk Community organisation has been providing services to the local community from its base at East

Thirsk Community Hall on the Hambleton Estate. Early in 2014, it was successful in its bid to People's Health Trust to set up a parent, baby and toddler group at the hall, which is open three times a week. The project aims to provide a safe space for families to meet, socialise and support each other with the added benefits of play workers on site and visits from external providers offering a wide range of activities to meet their needs. It was a new idea designed to fill a gap that has existed following the closure of a play group, five years previously, for children aged from birth to pre-school.

The Hambleton Estate is a social housing estate surrounded by private housing. People who live there experience disadvantage, rural and social isolation. The hall is

accessible for families who travel on foot as many do not drive and cannot rely on the limited local bus service. Its location next to the local primary school is convenient for families with older children at school. The school and project founders identified a shared need to support families to prepare their children for starting school. By working together with local people, the project aims to improve children's abilities to settle and progress well on starting reception class, enjoy and achieve at school. Plans are now in place to formalise the partnership and track children's progress as they move from the parent, baby and toddler group through to school.



Main findings

- ➔ Through their engagement with the project, families have improved social links and ties, which for some have been particularly significant in helping them to achieve improved mental health and wellbeing and the associated benefits that brings. More widely, the project has brought a sense of community which is changing how parents feel and their daily social interactions when out and about in town.
- ➔ By working with and for the local community, the project is providing a range of ways for parents to contribute to project design and delivery through different processes for collective control that are proportionate and appropriate. As a result parents feel able to have a say in how things are run and are satisfied with the amount of 'collective control' they have. This brings a sense of ownership and helps to sustain participation.
- ➔ Building on local contacts and knowledge of the community, the project team has designed a project that clearly meets the needs of parents with young children, and in doing so, has filled a gap in service provision. The project is building on its success by formalising links with a neighbouring school, which it is hoped will in time improve health and wellbeing and educational attainment.

Who is involved?

Parents living in the local area are invited to attend via marketing leaflets and word of mouth. Building on the original target of 30 regular

attendees, the parent, baby and toddler group now attracts up to 80 parents of different ages and backgrounds each week, reflecting the diverse local community that includes Eastern European immigrants and travellers.

"There is inclusivity, anyone and everyone is welcome." (Project staff)

Many parents attend regularly because they want to share what they do with other parents, talk to and support each other, and meet in a safe place where their children can socialise.

"[They come because] 'they're lost and don't know what to do.'" (Project staff)

"They have a sense of belonging to something...a sense of purpose when they come here." (Project staff)

The project founder is the Chair of Trustees who checks in weekly with the project team. With the Trust's funding, a project manager was appointed, who works 6 hours a week bringing skills in people management and problem solving plus the ability to 'make things happen'. A playgroup leader and assistant are onsite 8.25 hours a week during term time, split over three sessions. They are supported by volunteers who include participants attending the project on a regular basis with their children and grandchildren, some of whom are also members of the project "steering" group.

What opportunities does the project offer?

At each session, a wide range of play equipment is set out for children to play with while mothers can find a seat to sit down, chat and watch their children interacting with others whilst playing with them. The hall

offers a large, clean and hazard free space, which means that parents feel able to stop and take time out. The sessions also run at convenient times, unlike other groups that run across children's nap or meal times.

"You can relax and enjoy yourselves – there is normalness." (Beneficiary)

"It appeals to a wide spectrum of people and is really suitable for both toddlers and babies." (Beneficiary)



Described as an "outlet" by parents and the team, the project is as much about the parents as it is about the children, and provides a rare opportunity to come together, especially in an area like East Thirsk where limited services are available.

"If it wasn't here there would be nowhere else to take them." (Beneficiary)

The project team highlighted how the fact that parents must stay onsite (as the group is outside the realms of Ofsted provision), means

that they benefit too from the experiences the group offers.

"Mums can chat, drink tea and take part in messy play which gives them a sense of achievement." (Project staff)

"It provides opportunities for them to develop communication skills, how they interact with others and improve their health and wellbeing because they are getting out and forming friendships." (Project staff)

While giving parents the "freedom" to meet new people and make new friends, the group has brought in activities that help with stress management and self-development; *"anything from nail painting and massage to community education – CVs and First Aid"* - as a result of feedback from parents.

"They do a lot and are really supportive, I have a fear of choking so I spoke to a few others and they brought First Aid in." (Beneficiary)

By bringing opportunities such as the First Aid training into the hall, the project has made this accessible for parents who would not otherwise be able to travel to attend these courses.

The project offers different ways for parents to get involved in how the project is delivered through collective control, according to their interests and capacity. Most often ideas emerge on an ad-hoc basis as parents talk and the project team are approachable and on hand to respond to requests. As with the case of First Aid training, the programme of activities at the parent, baby and toddler group is shaped by what parents say they need or would like to do. The refreshments are bought and prepared with their involvement. There are also focussed sessions when parents are asked how they

would like to celebrate festivals and other occasions. In addition, the "steering group" offers a more structured process for collective control. It involves informal gatherings with people who are interested in having a say about how the project is delivered and making sure that it meets the needs of local people. Ideas and decisions are discussed and agreed on an on-going basis in consultation with participating local people and the project team, rather than via formal meetings.

What has the project achieved?

Through positive and sustained engagement with the project, parents and their children have benefitted in many ways.

"It's like a bit of a sanctuary." (Project staff)

"It offers a holistic curriculum for Mums and children." (Project staff)

For parents, attending the parent, baby and toddler group has helped them to develop greater social links and ties (a key programme outcome), reducing the feelings of isolation that they had been experiencing. It has helped to develop their support networks, including new friendships that extend outside the group.

"It's an opportunity to see people, I can't imagine how miserable and lonely I'd be if I didn't get to see my friends. It's brought new source of support to the area." (Beneficiary)

"[Outside of the group] there are more friendships in the playground, they can join in and feel part of a group...a couple of Mums have said that." (Project staff)

"They've supported me a lot, I lost my father two days before having a baby and developed panic attacks and anxiety, I thought I was going crackers and then I met [a friend] here [who had experienced similar]." (Beneficiary)

For some individuals, the group has been life changing. One Mother with anxiety described how the routine and safety that the group offers has enabled her to attend, when previously her anxiety prevented her from leaving the house.

"It's got me out of the house, I have anxiety issues and I needed that stability...it's got me a social life, it's got [child] a social life, without this I'd be stuck at home." (Beneficiary)

Also, knowing that the play workers and other Mothers would watch her child while she relaxed after a night shift at work brought invaluable support and reassurance.

"I've got my confidence back, I'm getting better, and I'm me again." (Beneficiary)

Frequently parents described how they had grown in confidence. They were more able to socialise and share their views and had become more confident in their parenting capabilities, learning to try new things both at the group and later at home.



"The project has achieved masses for Mums and children, it is lovely,

welcoming and the children have more skills when they come in to nursery". "When Mums meet here and can see other children it puts their minds at rest." (Partner)

There were individual examples of parents who had learnt new skills in maths, or taken steps towards finding work with the support of a careers advisor who comes in and offers group and 1-1 support and advice.

At the same time, the project has been hugely beneficial for the children. Parents and the project team shared examples of how children had made friends, had fun and enjoyed themselves. "You can see the spontaneity", which some children did not demonstrate when they first started attending. Group games and singing have encouraged children to communicate, helping to support language development. By thinking about what toys are available and how they are set up in the hall, children are encouraged to share equipment, interact with other children and learn from spending time in a group (that includes their parents and play leaders who also act as role models). They learn "behavioural norms", which they can apply outside of the project. By helping parents with potty training and other such examples, the project is also supporting child development.

"Coming here has given the children so much empowerment, and once they are [empowered] it helps the parent, they realise that they can do that, they can challenge them and give them the confidence [to do different things], which gives the children a sense of empowerment." (Project staff)

"I see the children interacting and growing, playing together and

learning basic rules about what's acceptable." (Project staff)

"My child was very unsociable, normally he wouldn't go near [anyone else], he was very clingy and now we get through the door and that's it, he's off." (Beneficiary)



The interviews with the project team and parents also suggested that the project is demonstrating aspects of the outcome of collective control (another key programme outcome), through collective action and some control over what activities are offered. Project beneficiaries felt a sense of ownership which has helped to sustain participation and to create a happy atmosphere on-site. Even parents who are not members of the steerage group were satisfied with the level of control that they have over the project.

"It's all about what is best for us." (Beneficiary)

There was a general consensus that a "good proportion" of the project is based on what local people say is needed.

"[Working collectively] is the backbone of it...there's a need and we quietly fill that need. The parents intermingle, sit around and brew up; they feel it's their place now." (Project staff)

"They tell us what they want through the steerage group. They are more

outspoken, Mothers up and talking." (Project staff)

"Very often things come out in session...without their input and suggestions we wouldn't have it working the way it works, they feel part of it." (Project staff)

"You have to listen, take on board and act on their request, which is what empowers them." (Project staff)

From the parents' point of view, the project team are receptive to requests - although they were keen to point out that they did not think much needed to change (aside from a request for the project to open in school holidays and particularly the summer holidays when it is much missed).

Of note however, is that not all parents know of the steerage group, which is made up predominantly of people who attend the Tuesday sessions. Telling other parents about its function and how to get involved might be beneficial for parents who want to take on more responsibility and learn from their experiences, as well as for the project.

Finally, positive outcomes are evident amongst the wider community. The project has brought a sense of community among people who would not normally speak to each other.

"The biggest achievement is that is has brought the community together". People coming have grown in numbers and confidence. "We feel part of it as well; we're not on the outside looking in." (Project staff)

"On the community side, I can't stress enough how it's built up relationships between people and reduced isolation." (Project staff)



What has worked well?

- ➔ The variety of activities on offer: The wide range of informal and focussed activities brought in to the project on parents' requests was clearly a key factor in the project's success.
- ➔ Freedom of choice: Informally and as part of structured activities, parents are able to choose whether they engage and for how long. Both parents and the project team spoke of how important it is for parents to decide how to engage and not to feel pressured to take part. This freedom of choice appears to have had a positive impact on levels of engagement and associated learning from the experiences.
- ➔ Employing a local team who know the area and the people: From the start, the project founders wanted to recruit local people to run the group. The play leaders are "well known and loved in the area" and have children at the neighbouring school. Frequently, the familiar

and collective elements of working with the community were considered to be vital to the project's success.

What are the challenges and how have these been overcome?

- ➔ Keeping within geographic boundaries: The project has proved so successful, with ever greater numbers attending regularly, that it has been impossible to limit participation to just those parents who live within the specified geographic boundaries. The project team does not want to restrict parents as they can see the benefits of having parents of different age ranges and backgrounds who have diverse ideas and expectations of what they would like to see happen. They see mothers becoming empowered by being amongst a generational mix.
- ➔ Income generation: At application stage, the project wanted to charge parents £2 per family per session. In response to the Trust's concerns about affordability they introduced voluntary contributions instead. Parents contribute when they can, and up to summer 2015 the project had raised £1,000 to be re-invested in activities and to support charities of their choice. However, this figure would have been greater if a fixed charge had been brought in and as a result the project has had to manage expectations regarding the possibilities this additional income can bring.
- ➔ Safeguarding: After concerns were raised about a child protection issue that proved to

be unfounded, the project team had to address safeguarding issues sensitively by talking to people and displaying information around the Hall.

The future

The plans to formalise the partnership with the neighbouring primary school offer an exciting step forward, with significant potential to help facilitate longer term outcomes (supported by plans to track the children's progress from the playgroup and compare it with the progress of children who did not attend).

However, the project is actively seeking additional funding from this and other grant funded programmes and without this there are concerns about whether it can continue.

"If it closed it would have a massive impact...parents would be more isolated, they wouldn't have the structure which is important for moving on to nursery and the children would lose social skills." (Partner)

