Evaluation of The Mercers' Company's Better Outcomes for Families and Carers Programme

By Sarah Frost, Kerry Swain and Fiona Weir – March 2022

Part 2: Findings Report – What We Know Now

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the projects taking part in this evaluation for their willingness and enthusiasm.

A special thank you to the projects and individual project leads who participated in the case studies and interviews.

Projects that took part in interviews:

- All Hallows
- Citizens Advice Enfield
- City and Hackney Carers
- Clockhouse Community Centre (Advice Hub)
- Elfrida Rathbone Camden
- Jigsaw4U
- Magpie Dance
- Northumberland Community Bank
- Oasis Community Hub Waterloo (Family Support Programme)
- Project 17
- Quaker Social Action
- The Parent Club
- The Parent House

Projects also involved as case studies:

- A Way Out (Liberty RISE Family Project)
  www.awayout.co.uk
- Baytree Centre
  www.baytreecentre.org
- The Kayaks (The Kids And Young Adults Klub)
  www.thekayaks.co.uk
- St Vincent's Family Project
  www.svfp.org.uk

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1. Introduction

This stand-alone report presents the findings of the deep-dive evaluation of the 37 projects awarded grants by Mercers' Church and Communities programme under the Better Outcomes for Families & Carers priority, funded by Mercers' Charitable Foundation (MCF) and the Charity of Sir Richard Whittington (SRW).

The evaluation was carried out by a team of independent research and evaluation consultants in 2021/22. This report **(Part 2)** presents findings from data gathered through an **online survey** and **in-depth interviews** with project leads, staff, volunteers, partners and a small number of the project beneficiaries and participants themselves. Here, you will find sections on the following:

About the projects

- Approaches, delivery methods and values
- Challenges
- Outcomes and impact
- Working with Mercers'
- Learning, reflections and the future.

The companion report, **'Part 1: Understanding the Landscape: what we need to know about evaluating Mercers'** better outcomes for families & carers projects' can be read separately and presents findings from a rapid review of legislation, policy, 'grey literature' (research published outside of commercial or academic publishing and commonly includes government documents and white papers), academic research and other background information relevant to the evaluation .

Both reports should be read in conjunction with our report **'Part 3: Summary Conclusions and Recommendations'.**

"They really gave me the techniques I needed… I had this one day a week where I could be [me] again… I'd lost myself and they gave 'me' back whilst also teaching me to be a good parent." Beneficiary.

2. Methodology

We used a mixed methodology for this stage of the evaluation, allowing us to capture both quantitative and qualitative primary data from all 35 funded organisations[1]. The different methods we used are described below, along with the numbers of projects engaging in each. The methodology for our rapid review is described separately in the Part 1 report (Section 1.2).

2.1 Thematic Framework

We used a thematic framework to design the survey and interview questions, and for analysis of data (see Table 1). This was informed by the commissioners' requirements, themes and issues that had emerged from the rapid review (Part 1) and by our particular interest in evidencing impact.

Table 1: Thematic framework for data collection and analysis

Theme	Data examples
Information about project activity	• Hours of activity • Numbers of beneficiaries • Types of beneficiaries
Approaches, methods and values	Building positive relationships; Understanding families' andcarers' needs; Asset-based approaches (approaches that recognise and build on people's and communities' strengths and potential) and role of community or peer-led support; Partnership working and collaboration; Giving staff autonomy and flexibility; OTHER
Funding experiences	% of total work funded by MCF and SRW; General perceptions
Challenges and successes	• Challenges/challenging factors Successes/factors affecting success • Effects of COVID-19
Outcomes and impact	Improving children's and young people's health (including physical and mental health); Improving children's and young people's learning/educational outcomes; Improving children and young people's employment outcomes (now or in the future); Reducing children's and young people's offending / contact with criminal justice system; Reducing children's and young people's homelessness; Improving other aspects of children's, young people's and carers' wellbeing; Improving parents'/carers' parenting skills and abilities; Reducing family poverty and deprivation; Improving other outcomes for parents'/carers'; OTHER

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[1]Two organisations (Clockhouse & Enfield CAB) received two lots of funding for the continuation of the same project. These organisations were only asked to answer the survey once.

2.2 Online Survey

We designed an online survey with both open and closed questions, allowing us to gather data on: numbers and types of beneficiaries; hours funded; approaches used; perceptions about the funding; key challenges and successes; and the intended and actual outcomes and impact. The survey allowed us to gather quantifiable data about some aspects of project delivery and project leads' perceptions about their approaches and impact.

The survey was set up in Smartsurvey and a link was emailed to all 35 organisations. An excellent response rate was achieved with 34 out of 35 organisations (97%), completing the survey.

2.3 Interviews

Project leads from 17 projects were invited to take part in small group, in-depth interviews via Zoom. The aim of the interviews was to explore some of the issues raised in the survey, and to gather a better understanding of experiences of delivering the funded projects.

To ensure a good mix of projects, 17 projects were selected taking into account the type of project, region, faith / secular, and stage of delivery (selecting those still in operation or recently ended).

Interviews were semi-structured and guided by a script, designed and approved by Mercers' Grant Managers prior to use.

In total, 13 projects took part in interviews (several were unable due to illness / COVID-19). Interviews took place over five sessions (Four small groups and one individual interview). The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours. All interviews were recorded with participants' prior consent and transcribed for analysis.

2.4 Case Studies

In addition to the projects selected for interview, four projects were invited as case studies. At least two interviews took place for each case study organisation, via Zoom, and we interviewed projects leads, plus other key staff, volunteers, partner organisations and/or beneficiaries, according to what was appropriate and practical for each project.

The separate interview scripts were developed for project leads, staff/volunteers/partners and beneficiaries. All were modelled on the project lead script (see above) but omitted some questions and added others, to ensure they were appropriate for the particular participants. Interviews varied in length from 30 minutes to 1.5 hours.

2.5 Consent / Use of data

Participant information sheets were produced and shared with participants ahead of the interviews. These provided an overview of the evaluation, details about what the interview would entail, how the information they provided would be used, and a statement to make clear that participation was voluntary. Verbal consent to record the interviews was gained at the beginning and written consent to use quotes and snippets from the recordings was obtained at the end or through follow up email / consent forms. To ensure anonymity, and to help give participants' confidence to speak openly, we have not used names in this report. Electronic recordings, transcripts and other data have been stored securely and will be deleted at the end of this project.

2.6 Data Analysis

The data from the online survey was exported from Smartsurvey and analysed in Excel. Graphs, charts and tables have been created to present key data.

The thematic framework (above) was used to analyse the qualitative data obtained via the in-depth interviews. The framework allowed us to collate and present findings from the survey and interviews together. Verbatim quotations have been used to highlight key points.

2.7 Limitations

As with all research and evaluation, there some are limitations to this study The projects are all very different in terms of what they offer, ranging from those delivering regular intense support, through to those providing ad hoc advice services. They were also at different stages of their grant funding - some just getting started, some mid-way and some already ended. Therefore, we cannot make direct comparisons on certain data.

The rapid review informed the framework for data collection and analysis in the fieldwork, particularly shaping questions about priorities and challenges in the survey. However, this led to some potential inconsistencies between the survey and the interview finding, specifically responses relating to one or two themes that the review suggested would be important – e.g., partnerships with schools: in the survey, projects answered that these were important, but then did not mention them spontaneously in interviews.

Some projects received core funding and others were funded for a discrete element of their project or for a specific staff member or intervention, it was difficult for certain project leads to accurately provide numbers and percentages for particular questions in the survey. In addition, when the grant had contributed to a larger 'pot' of funding, project leads were unable to talk confidently about the impact MCF and SRW funding specifically had had. In some cases, they talked about the impact the project as a whole had.

Nonetheless, through using a mixed-method approach and drawing a wide variety of information, we are able to provide a good insight and can provide a rich picture of the difference MCF and SRW investment is making to achieving Better Outcomes for Families & Carers across England.

3. Findings

This is the main section of this report and presents our findings from the online survey and interview data.

3.1 About the Projects

Key findings

Around 18,000 people per year were supported at the time of this evaluation. This includes 4510 parents, 4351 children / young people, 2080 workers (paid and volunteers) and 6963 'other - wider groups'. Volunteers play a vital role in project delivery for many projects. Most projects were supporting parents directly, but most were also supporting children directly or indirectly, and a large percentage were supporting families as a whole or other beneficiary groups. MCF and SRW funding also created an estimated 1,289 full-time equivalent paid roles and 841 full-time equivalent volunteer roles.

In total 37 projects (35 organisations) included in this evaluation, were awarded grants by Mercers' Church and Communities programme (funded by MCF and SRW) under the Better Outcomes for Families & Carers priority. The total amount awarded to the projects was £2,229,328. The amount given to each project differed - the lowest award was £9,546 and the highest £100,000.

3.1.1 Who are the projects working with?

33 projects provided usable data about their beneficiaries and the activities funded by MCF and SRW. The ways in which participants have benefited from the programme are detailed in section 3.4 (outcomes and impact).

Almost all projects were supporting parents directly and indirectly (85.3%) and a similar number were supporting whole families[2] (82.5%), with almost three-quarters working directly with parents (73.5%). Most projects were also supporting children (85.3%) but fewer were providing this support directly (41.2%). Around three-fifths were supporting parent carers (58.8%), and most of this was direct support. Just over one quarter were supporting young carers (26.5%) but most of this was indirect support. Half of projects were supporting staff (55.9%; including paid and voluntary staff), mostly directly. A small proportion (14.7%) were supporting other groups. Projects did not always state who these 'others' were, but some examples included the wider community, professionals and other stakeholders.

Small numbers of projects said they were not yet working with each group but intended to; but on the whole, this work was already underway or completed. Overall, it is clear that projects are more likely to be working with adults than children and young people, which may be because adults are likely to receive less statutory and mainstream support. Figure 1 below shows all the different groups supported both directly and indirectly.

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[2]As highlighted in the Rapid Review - Mercers' recognise that, in principle, 'families' may include households where there are no children (for example parent carers and their disabled children aged 18+) but in practice this happens rarely in the projects they fund.

Figure 1: Groups supported by the funded projects
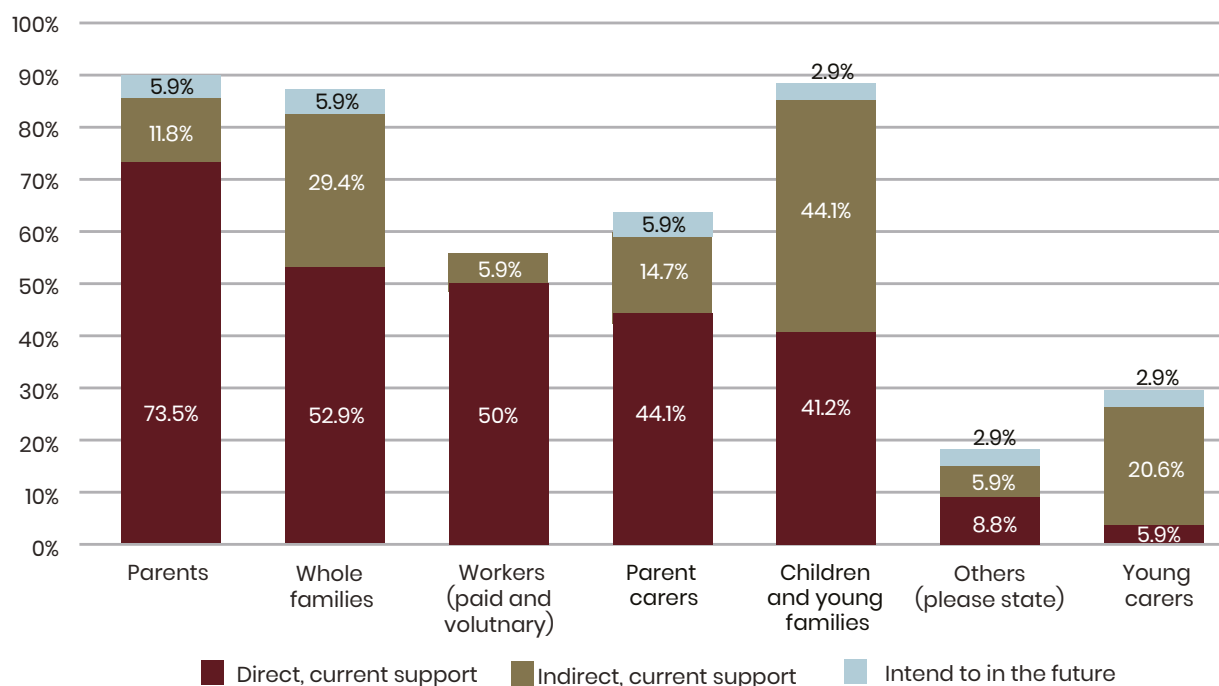
Base: 34 – Better Outcomes for Families & Carers, online survey 2021, multiple response question

The survey also asked projects to report or estimate the numbers of individual people they were currently supporting each year, or intend to support, through MCF and SRW funding. For some projects this was difficult to do, with a couple explaining it was hard to differentiate between the groups and / or between direct and indirect support.

Table 2 shows the data obtained in full. In total, approximately 18,000 people per year were supported through MCF and SRW funding at the time of this evaluation[3]. This includes 4510 parents, 4351 children / young people, 2080 workers (paid staff and volunteers) and 6963 'other - wider groups' (see note above). N.B. We expect that the whole families figure (5047) included parents and children counted elsewhere, so we have excluded this number from the overall total.

Table 2: Number of people by group supported each year by projects (actual and estimate figures along with numbers of projects reporting figures)

	Estimated figures		Actual figures		Number of people combined
	Number of people	*No. of projects reporting*	Number of people	*No. of projects reporting*	
Whole families	2926	*17*	2121	*8*	**5047**
Parents	2695	*12*	1815	*11*	**4510**
Children and young people	2809	*14*	1542	*6*	**4351**
Workers volunteers / paid	468	*4*	1612	*9*	**2080**
Other – wider groups	6835	*6*	128	*2*	**6963**

Base: 33 – Better Outcomes for Families & Carers, online survey 2021, one outlier has been excluded to prevent skewing. Multiple response question. * Due to likelihood of double counting with parents and children and whole families.

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[3]By 33 projects.

13 projects worked with carers and in total, 1045 parent carers and 92 young carers per year benefitted. Example projects supporting carers include:

- In Deep Community Task Force –A community-based project for parents of SEND children
- The Junction Foundation – A project providing whole family support to young carers and families.

The small number of young carers probably reflects the fact that young carers are designated as 'children in need' (if there are no other assessed needs or risks) and will be more likely to be receiving support from mainstream and statutory services. Carers' figures are presented separately in Table 2, and have not been added to the overall figures as there may be some double counting with the parent and children / young people numbers.

Table 3: Number of carers supported each year by projects (actual and estimate figures along with numbers of projects reporting figures)

	Estimated figures		Actual figures		Number of carers combined
	Number of carers estimated	*No. of projects reporting*	Number of carers actual	*No. of projects reporting*	
Parent carers	187	*6*	858	*6*	**1045**
Young carers	83	*3*	9	*2*	**92**

Base: 34 – Better Outcomes for Families & Carers, online survey 2021. Multiple response question.

3.1.2 Projects activities

The projects provide a range of programmes, services and activities for the target beneficiaries. Some projects offered multiple strands. Activities include the following:

Family/carer support and parenting programmes offering for example: parenting advice (e.g. parenting skills, dealing with challenging behaviour); opportunities for parents to meet other families and try out new activities (e.g. music, keep fit and art sessions); healthy eating and cooking groups; creche facilities. Many projects offered elements of all these.

Specialist programmes, provision and services supporting for example: families and carers from particular communities (including migrants and Black and Ethnic Minorities groups); women and children fleeing domestic violence and abuse; families and carers at risk of homelessness; and families and carers facing other challenges (e.g. those with family members in prison, families with female relatives undertaking survival sex work).

Financial advice services and programmes for families and carers living in poverty, providing them with expert advice and access to resources.

Specialist programmes and support for carers (including young carers), for families with children or parents who have learning and /or physical difficulties.

Appendix 1 provides a full list of all 37 projects funded with a brief overview.

3.1.3 Proportion of work funded by Mercers

The organisations ranged from very small and entirely volunteer-led charities, through to large Nationally recognised organisations, and therefore the percentage of project activity or support funded by MCF and SRW varied from <1% through to 100%. The 'mean percentage' of activity funded across the 34 projects surveyed was 30%; the mode (the most common) percentage of project activity funded was between 1-10%, with approximately half of projects being funded between this range. Six

projects said MCF and SRW provided all (100%) of their project funding.

The number of paid staff hours funded by MCF and SRW each year is estimated at 47,704 across 29 (out of 32) projects – approximately 1,289 full-time equivalent (FTE) posts.

Volunteers are evidently hugely important to the work that is funded and contribute greatly to the running of the projects. One project emphasised: "we have learnt that having local volunteers is crucial". One project was entirely run by volunteers. Only 10 projects reported zero volunteer hours. The number of unpaid volunteer hours contributed across the other 21 projects is estimated at 31,128. This is equivalent to a further 841 FTE posts, but of course volunteers often work only a small number of hours, so thousands of individuals are likely to be contributing their time to make the funding go further.

Table 4: Number of staff hours funded and volunteer hours contributed each year

	Total number of hours	Total number of projects reporting hours
Number of hours of paid staff time funded by MCF and SRW each year	47,704	21
Number of hours of unpaid volunteer time contributed to work funded MCF and SRW each year	31,128	29

Base: 32 and 31 projects respectively - Better Outcomes for Families & Carers, online survey 2021. N.B. 2 out of the 34 projects surveyed were unable to provide figures and one outlier has been removed from the volunteer hours to prevent skewing of the data

3.2 Approaches, Delivery Methods and Values

Key findings

The 'core values' cutting across all of the projects are social and community values. The most commonly used approaches were: Building positive relationships; Understanding families' and carers' needs; Asset-based approaches and role of community or peer-led support; Partnership working and collaboration; Giving staff autonomy and flexibility.

The values described by projects (3.2.1) were evidenced in the approaches used (3.2.2). One project said, "I think it's a bit of a two way street... the values and the approaches... really talk to each other".

3.2.1 Values that underpin the organisations and the projects

The 'core values' cutting across all of the projects are social and community values. Common values cited as underpinning the organisations included: trust, acceptance, respect, inclusion, nurturing, non judgmental, passionate, enabling, empowering, generous and hopeful/giving hope. Many of these values identified closely align to The Mercers' Christian ethos although only nine of the 37 funded projects were delivered by faith-based organisations. Although faith was important to these nine, all were clear to state that beneficiaries, staff and volunteers didn't have to be Christian or any other faith to be involved:

"We work with people from a really wide range of faiths and no faiths... [it's about] equality and empowering people to be part of the society they live in... understanding that unless there is an equal basis then it is really hard to participate in society." Project Lead.

One project working specifically with women also cited feminist values, highlighting the need to "challenge social injustice" and promote the rights of women. Other projects were working with children or families/carers with a disability had a focus on social justice "ensuring that we work to support the disabled people progressing in society, strong commitment to social justice as well", another said "we always focus on ability, not disability".

There was a real sense of 'everyone is accepted' and all were keen to make beneficiaries feel welcome and included:

> "Everybody is very important to us… providing that complete respect for each of our users." Project Lead.

Whilst some projects targeted specific needs or groups (e.g. families and carers with autism) the majority of projects were explicitly inclusive and were open to all, "Accepting an individual exactly as they are" and specifically targeting those who are "often invisible", not engaged with other services, and often socially excluded or marginalised.

> "All of our work is guided by the words of our founder Cardinal Basil Hume who said,. 'Every individual must be given every opportunity to live a life in which his or her basic needs are provided for, and in which so far as is reasonably possible, his or her full potential is realised. Each person matters. No human life is ever redundant'." Project Lead.

Linked to inclusivity, being non-judgmental was seen as important in terms of building relationships and enabling and maintaining engagement with many client groups:

> "With financial literacy… there can be a lot of shame and fear, [being non-judgemental] becomes really important in helping people get the most out of [the sessions]." Project Lead.

> "They are putting their trust in us when they tell us things and the last thing they want to see is a judgmental face." Project worker.

Some projects also mentioned the role of hope and love:

> "One of the biggest things is about hope… if you take away all hope… people think I've got nothing left to lose, I'll stop engaging with everybody and really go into that kind of crisis mode. So we're very big on looking at what do they hope – and know anything is possible with the right time scales, the right type of support." Project Lead.
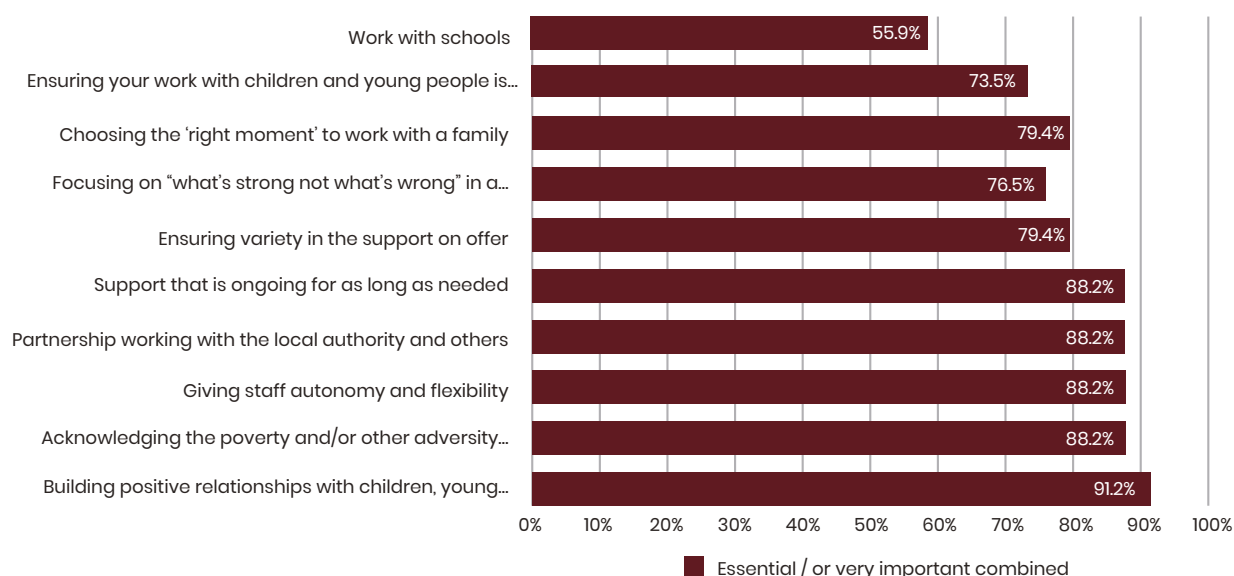
> "We do offer love for all, you know, we don't kind of start with a preconceived idea of what somebody should be or how they should be. We're very inclusive, we're very diverse, we reach out to the community." Project Lead.

3.2.2 Approaches and delivery methods

The categories of approaches that were used in the survey were derived from the Rapid Review. The data from the survey show that all approaches were important to projects to some extent (see Figure 2). In the interviews with projects, we asked projects to explain more about the approaches used and why these were important. Comments about some approaches overlapped, and the five sub-themes below emerged:

1. Building positive relationships, including the importance of trust
2. Understanding families' and carers' needs and meeting specific additional needs
3. Asset-based approaches and role of community or peer-led support
4. Partnership working and collaboration
5. Giving staff autonomy and flexibility.

Figure 2: Importance of approaches used by the projects

Approach	Essential / or very important combined
Work with schools	55.9%
Ensuring your work with children and young people is...	73.5%
Choosing the 'right moment' to work with a family	79.4%
Focusing on "what's strong not what's wrong" in a...	76.5%
Ensuring variety in the support on offer	79.4%
Support that is ongoing for as long as needed	88.2%
Partnership working with the local authority and others	88.2%
Giving staff autonomy and flexibility	88.2%
Acknowledging the poverty and/or other adversity...	88.2%
Building positive relationships with children, young...	91.2%

Base: 34 – Better Outcomes for Families & Carers, online survey 2021

Building positive relationships

Building positive relationships with families, carers and individuals was essential to the success of all projects (rated as essential or very important by 92.2%) and seen as a core strength. For many this was a relationship between a family and a key worker, developed gradually, over time - especially for those who are vulnerable, who may have multiple needs, were mistrustful or who have had challenges engaging with 'services' in the past. Having the skills, sensitivity and awareness to encourage engagement and build relationships in a welcoming, informal environment had enabled projects to engage, "families who don't feel comfortable in other settings":

> "We've designed what we do to include families... who might feel anxious in more formal environments, and be mistrustful of professionals. And... maybe don't want to go to a Children's Centre, because they're worried that they're going to get.... spied on or reported on." Project Lead.

> "Building relationships [is] absolutely critical and crucial to the success of the project, and to delivering positive outcomes... we work with some of the most marginalised, discriminated and isolated clients... it's really important for us to take time out to develop the relationships... with the client, and to develop trust, trust is a huge area." Project Lead.

Developing trust was seen as a core element of effective relationship building. Many of the families and carers supported need to have trust in the workers, and a sense of inclusion and safety which enables them to engage and be open to receiving the help they need. Once trust is established, families and carers may be more likely to accept additional support from other agencies.

> "Families won't engage until they feel safe and welcome." Project Lead.

> "Our community trusts us and we are able to be more effective because of this." Project Lead.

The importance of the project setting or environment in enabling relationships to be built was highlighted. Many described the importance of providing a welcoming, inclusive and non- judgemental environment. A number of projects reporting that they were seen as 'family' or 'community' for some:

> "We talk about 'our house'... how welcoming it is that you come in, you have a cup of tea, and we respect you, we know your name, and we greet you at the gate." Project Lead.

> "It's quite common to hear parents say things like this place feels like family …they feel valued and cared about by our workers and volunteers, but also that they found that sort of sense of being connected with wider community." Project Lead.

Whilst being friendly and welcoming was a clear enabler for engagement, some projects highlighted the need for a balance between this and the need to be 'professional' so families and carers feel reassured that they can trust projects and deliver interventions that 'work' to address their needs.

> "Children and families need to feel reassured by us… they also need to feel that we are professional and have a good track record in delivering interventions that work." Project Lead.

Building relationships takes time, and for many projects, the relationships they built with families and carers were long term. The majority of projects (88.2%) viewed offering ongoing support for as long as was needed as essential or very important. This connection, often consistent, served to solidify the relationships, enabled projects to 'walk the journey' with families and carers at their pace, and see them along a pathway that may lead to accessing other services or volunteering. Projects also saw the need to be consistent and persistent with some client groups as particularly important. There was a recognition that offering time limited services for families and carers can mean they "bounce in and out of support services" or disengage with services all together.

> "Sometimes people / families we are working with are challenging and we wonder whether they should continue to work with them but we always do… even in challenging circumstances." Project Lead.

> "The work that we do takes time… we offer spaces and opportunities for families. Just the fact we are there and available, and being a consistent presence, in a context where perhaps other organisations come and go, is so important and means that we can over time build relationships of trust with families." Project Lead.

Developing positive relationships with families and carers through initial engagement in the activities, and developing these, over time gave projects a thorough understanding of a family's needs, enabling them to provide the right sort of support or signpost or refer to other agencies as appropriate:

> "Once we build positive relationships and get to know families then we can recommend the right programme for the families and that's where we get significant positive changes." Key worker.

Building relationships with the wider community and peers, not just between workers and clients, was also a focus for some projects, recognising the value to be gained from increased social support networks for families and carers who are vulnerable (see asset-based approaches below).

It seems clear that part of the added value of projects being delivered by community organisations rather than statutory agencies, is their ability to spend more time with families/carers and focus on building relationship to fully understanding needs:

> "There are two parts to our ethos, it's the grassroots approach and basis coupled with professional support… In this service it's about listening and giving them [children and young people] a safe space." Key worker.

Whilst being friendly and welcoming was a clear enabler for engagement, some projects highlighted the need for a balance between this and the need to be 'professional' so families and carers feel reassured that they can trust projects and deliver interventions that 'work' to address their needs.

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Understanding families' and carers' needs and meeting specific additional needs

Many families and carers supported by projects were facing multiple challenges and adversity e.g. living in poverty, mental health problems, homelessness, domestic abuse, child with a disability. Being able to identify, acknowledge and explore these challenges and the related impact of these helped projects develop a thorough understanding of the needs of families and carers. This was seen as crucial for all projects, allowing them to best meet the identified needs and offer the appropriate support or signposting. Almost all projects (88.2%) saw this acknowledgment of poverty and adversity as essential or very important.

Notably, trauma-informed working (supporting people in a way that recognise that their needs may be because of a past or ongoing trauma) was seen as a particularly important element of their approach by some projects, who recognised that many families, carers and individuals supported had experienced trauma and multiple challenges. Some projects explicitly worked to explore the impact of past trauma on current behaviours or issues, taking account of individual histories, vulnerabilities and triggers.

Other projects that did not specifically focus on trauma nevertheless worked with individuals, families and carers who have lived through, or are still living with, traumatic experiences including family breakdown; bullying; bereavement, some experiences of illness and disability; domestic abuse; sexual violence, sexual exploitation; child abuse, experiences of war; involuntary migration and homelessness.

Trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences are known to affect wellbeing, in childhood and adult life and sometimes on through generations. Trauma-informed work is therefore increasingly seen[4] as important in family support, even where specific details or experiences are not known.

Having effective communication with families and carers, in terms of actively listening, helped to ensure their situation and related needs were fully understood by project staff. Encouraging age-appropriate communication and honesty is very important for the work they do:

"How we listen, how we actively listen, how we might respond, how we ensure that we've understood all of those things are quite important to us as an organisation." Project Lead.

"You have to let people live their lives... you've got to be open minded, so that's my biggest challenge... I have to listen and learn from them as well." Project worker

For some projects, having a local, community setting was important in understanding the families and carers they were working with: "we really understand the groups and communities we are working with."

Working holistically was seen as important in understanding needs as well as contributing to building relationships and trust – i.e. understanding the whole person or family and their related issues rather than addressing single, stand-alone problems. This way of working also enabled projects to provide families and carers with a single point of contact without having to refer to other agencies.

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[4]See for example: https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/trauma/effects-of-trauma/ and https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/insights/documents/ABS-Insight-4-Trauma-Informed-Practice-FINAL.pdf

> "[Holistic working] means we can work with a family on their practical needs - e.g. debt, food insecurity - reducing the pressure they're experiencing, and helping parents to engage with positive change more widely." Project Lead.

> "The holistic nature of the way we work… is that when you start tackling.. all those in one area, they have an impact on other areas as well… You have other organisations who might be more specialist, for example, and giving one particular thing benefits advice, for example, but because you're not addressing the things that it relates to, perhaps the overall effect, it's not so long term." Project Lead.

Many projects also sought to work with the whole family in some way- even though the focus may be on one particular member: "We try and look at the whole family and see what their needs are". One project aimed to find new ways of bringing families and carers together to do things:

> "[Previously] parents would be doing things either for or to their children. And this provided an opportunity for them to do things with each other." Project Lead.

> "We teach the mums…we encourage the mums to bring their daughters to the after-school activities, which are absolutely brilliant." Project worker.

In the survey, almost three quarters (73.5%) of projects identified 'ensuring the work was age appropriate' as essential or very important, but in fact projects did not talk about this. Some projects talked about their role in meeting specific additional needs related to gender, ethnicity or disability.

The value and importance of a women-only environment was mentioned by one project:

> "The fact that it is a Women's Centre - it does make a difference, because there are women for whom it's not easy for them to go into an environment where it's mixed…[we are] small enough for us to get to know the students well and it's a secure environment." Project Lead.

> "Women who want to be with other women because it's much more nurturing environment, and we understand each other and we're able to help." Project Lead.

Other projects were also working predominantly with women - effectively 'women-only by default'. But support which is women-only accidentally rather than by design may fail to reach some women for whom this is a real necessity, including victims of male violence (including rape, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, so-called 'honour-based' violence and domestic abuse) and those who need women-only spaces for cultural or religious reasons. No projects mentioned any need for men-only or other 'safe' spaces, which may nevertheless also be important for some people. One project plans more work with fathers in future.

Some projects work specifically with parents/carers from black, Asian and other minority ethnic communities:

> "Our inclusive and tailored activities are designed to meet the needs of BAME families/carers Including families/carers from disadvantaged background, helping them break down barriers that prevent them from accessing services available, integrate and be part of the community, live fulfilling lives as equal members of society, making Inclusion and diversity a reality". Project Lead.

Two projects talked about working specifically with parent-carers of disabled children. One was a peer led project, where support for parent-carers was given by other parent-carers; the other was a more 'traditional' carers service with paid staff. Both offer obvious benefits.

Two projects talked specifically about working with adults and children with learning disabilities. None talked specifically about working with physically disabled people.

Asset-based approaches and role of community or peer-led support

Many projects described their work as asset based – that is, valuing, building on and nurturing each individual's existing 'strengths' rather than focusing on their needs or deficits. Strengths could include individual factors such as knowledge, skills and experience as well as their social and community networks.

Asset based approaches were seen as essential or very important to three quarters of projects (76.5%), although there were some different interpretations of the concept. For some it was about building on the lived experiences, skills and knowledge families and carers have; and identifying areas where they could develop or benefit from additional support:

> " You're building on stuff that people have already got going on and feel confident to do and doing a bit more of it…I don't think you can get people to move forward without, productively - particularly with this group of families - without having an asset-based approach and recognising where people's strengths are." Project Lead.

> "We help people to find a way forward to resolve their problems… using their skills, their knowledge, their capabilities, and empowering them, encouraging them and showing them the way." Project Lead.

For other projects, asset-based approaches meant seeing the families and carers as experts in their own experiences; they saw the potential to learn from these families and carers, drawing on their lived experience. In one volunteer-led project, all volunteers were people with lived experience:

> "We're not just telling people how it is - we know how it is because we've been in that position…we become experts by lived experience. And that makes a huge difference." Project Lead.

> "We believe that carers are best placed to make the decisions about what they want to need to improve their situation." Project Lead.

> "People living in poverty are the real poverty experts." Key worker.

While projects inevitably focused on their beneficiaries' assets, they were themselves 'experts by experience', with very strong skills and understanding about families' and carers' needs.

For a number of projects working with people's strengths was about working alongside families, carers and clients, enabling and empowering and working with them - not delivering 'to' them:

> "We're not a rescue service, that's completely the wrong approach, because that doesn't bring about the lasting change … You've got to come alongside and they will do the work – they just need the opportunity, the right open doors, to be able to do the work alongside and get that little bit of a helping hand." Project Lead.

Some projects also aimed to increase participants' awareness of and access to community assets such as social networks and community resources – providing increased opportunities for informal and peer support and strengthening community ties. Some provided activities that left space for families and carers to develop relationships with others in similar situation, enabling peer support:

> "The most important factor in this project is carers knowing that they are not alone and that they have access to a support network of other people in the community with similar experiences." Project Lead.

> "The families…genuinely become friends and support one another even when they've moved on." Key worker.

Several projects highlighted the specific importance of engagement and co-production and identified different ways for families and carers to be involved in projects. Some sought to involve project participants indecision making and in planning and running projects. Others had ideas for co-production activity in future, for example by involving local residents in delivering the projects. Some recognised that this work can be challenging and expressed a desire to learn more about how to work more meaningfully with people with lived experience.

> "Having a bit of involvement in the meal planning or the actual doing it themselves...so people are in the driving seat." Project Lead.

> "I would have liked for local residents to play some part in and actually running the projects. A lot of what we do is obviously evidence based, but I think local participation adds that legitimacy as well. And if people feel a sense of ownership in moving things forward in their local community it's more powerful." Project Lead.

There were some examples of former clients coming back to volunteer or securing paid employment within the organisations. Having volunteers and staff with 'lived experience', who were able to empathise and engage effectively with the clients was seen as a real asset to the projects.

Partnership working and collaboration

In order to meet the different and varied needs of families and carers, some projects were working in partnership with other community organisations or public sector organisations. In interviews projects did not talk about partnership working as often as we would hope; however, in the survey the majority of projects (88.2%) identified partnership working with the Local Authority and others as essential or very important; and around half (55.9%) saw work with schools as essential or very important. For some, this collaboration was essential to the project's success and enabled best use of limited resources:

> "Working in partnership... that's really, really important to us, we do a lot of partnership working... At a time when resources are sort of quite limited, I think it's really important to work together as much as we can with other voluntary sector organisations and statutory services to just to make sure we, you know, we've got the best offer possible." Project Lead.

Forging relationships and partnerships with other organisations and providers also helped enable a more joined up approach. Collaboration and partnership working with other, sometimes specialist, agencies meant projects had a range of signposting and referral routes for families and carers, and enabled projects to ensure a more diverse range of support. For some it also increased the range of families and carers they were able to engage.

> "Working with trusted local partners who are able to provide access to the families with whom we are working." Project Lead.

> "We know the local area really well... We make it our business to keep maintaining that knowledge and work in partnership with other organisations." Key worker.

One project highlighted how their partnership working had strengthened during the pandemic:

> "I think our existing partnerships have strengthened during the pandemic... We're also becoming more and more embedded... It means we are in contact with cohorts of women who we might not otherwise have been in touch with." Project Lead.

Although a few projects worked with schools, this wasn't as central to their approach as the rapid review had suggested it might be (see also section on limitations above). This may be because voluntary sector organisations work with schools less often than statutory agencies, or it may simply be because more of these projects were working directly with parents. A small number of projects had done work in or with schools including delivering sessions in school – although these had to stop due to COVID-19. Another has an ongoing arrangement with a local school to use their premises for their Saturday Club. While one project worked closely with two academies for their community hub.

Resource and funding pressures may also prevent projects from doing as much partnership working as they would like.

Giving staff autonomy and flexibility

Autonomy and flexibility of staff was a key feature and seen as a strength of many projects. 88.2% of projects saw this as essential or very important and many projects talked about the value in the flexible nature of their approach – adjusting this to meet children's, families' and carers' needs. There were many examples of where having a flexible worker enabled families and carers to feel more in control, to set their own goals, to choose which aspects to work on, to come back as often and for as long as was needed. One project described the offer they made as, "like an elastic band", while another described their approach as "agile".

> "We are a good at kind of 'seat of the pants' creative approach [to meeting needs]." Project Lead.

Four out of five projects said that ensuring variety (79.4%) and choosing the right moment to work with families (79.4%) was essential or very important to their approach. Much of the work was bespoke, personalised and centred around the specific needs of the family or individual, which enabled the project to "meet the individual where they are at rather than offer one form of support work".

> "It's very personalised… Every person.. is given an initial goal setting… we look at their particular situation and basically support them how best it serves them. We're very much led by what women want to focus on and where women want to set their own goals." Project Lead.

> "A principle for us is to work effectively by tailoring what we do to, to the needs of the people we're doing it with." Project Lead.

The importance of having a strong staff team with the right skills and attitudes was seen as a core part of this flexible approach and being able to meet the needs of families and carers:

> "Our team of staff - they are all incredibly dedicated to enhancing the lives of people with learning disabilities, placing them at the heart of the organisation." Project Lead.

> "Skilled, compassionate and committed staff members who build long-term trusting relationships with families." Project Lead.

3.3 Success and Challenges

Key findings

The ongoing impact of COVID-19 continues to present a number of challenges for projects including; impact on staff and volunteers and having to adapt delivery methods.

Other challenges faced were: rising needs of families and carers, and responding to complex and multiple needs; funding (both general funding shortage and funding cuts); finding and retaining volunteers and staff with the right attitudes and skills; barriers to engagement; wider structural and systemic issues; and attitude of statutory agencies.

3.3.1 Successes

Most of the successes cited by projects were either outputs (what projects have done), approaches or values (the way they work) or outcomes (changes brought about). These are mostly described in other sections of this report (see sections 3.2 and 3.4) but some examples are included below.

Examples of successes

- Enabling children and their mothers to escape violence and abuse through working with organisations to provide safe accommodation

- Working directly with parents in Camden to work in partnership to reduce the various challenges they are facing in terms of their children accessing education and services

- Helping parents increase their self confidence and employability by supporting them into employment and other family positive activities.

- Making available a small loan easily accessible and repaid by the receipt of Child Benefit payment

- We issued 519 food bank vouchers to clients during Sept 2020 and Sept 2021 this was a critical period as the COVID-19 pandemic spread in the UK. It was good that we were able to help and support residents at this time of need.

"One of our volunteers, she was doing a healthy food project, and putting that online and it's around people who suffer from diabetes and is helping change certain elements around traditional foods to make it less dangerous for people suffering with diabetes. And so we've supported her into starting her own business, and she's managed to get a small business grant, and she's going out independently, so yeah, we are really stoked about that". Project Lead.

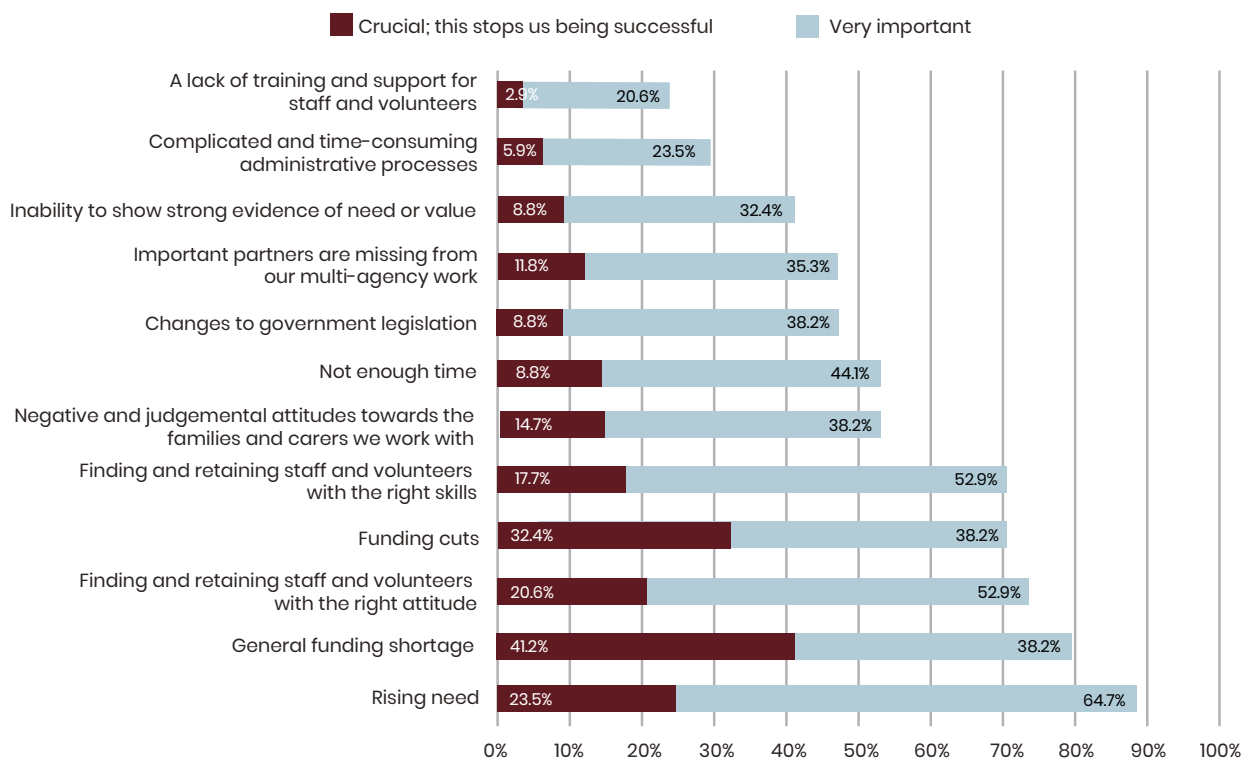### 3.3.1 Key challenges faced by projects

Almost all of the challenges faced by projects were related to the impact of COVID-19 (see Section 3.3.3). The survey found that the biggest challenges facing projects were:

- Rising need of families and carers

- Finding and retaining volunteers and staff with the right attitudes and skills

- Funding (both general funding shortage and funding cuts).

Other challenges highlighted by projects were; responding to increasingly complex needs; barriers to engagement; wider structural and systemic issues, attitude of statutory agencies.

There were some other challenges confirmed in the survey which projects did not mention spontaneously interviews: these were administrative processes, problems showing need and absent partners (see also limitations section above).

Figure 3 Challenges limiting or preventing project success

Legend: ■ Crucial; this stops us being successful ■ Very important

Challenge	Crucial	Very important
A lack of training and support for staff and volunteers	2.9%	20.6%
Complicated and time-consuming administrative processes	5.9%	23.5%
Inability to show strong evidence of need or value	8.8%	32.4%
Important partners are missing from our multi-agency work	11.8%	35.3%
Changes to government legislation	8.8%	38.2%
Not enough time	8.8%	44.1%
Negative and judgemental attitudes towards the families and carers we work with	14.7%	38.2%
Finding and retaining staff and volunteers with the right skills	17.7%	52.9%
Funding cuts	32.4%	38.2%
Finding and retaining staff and volunteers with the right attitude	20.6%	52.9%
General funding shortage	41.2%	38.2%
Rising need	23.5%	64.7%

Base: 34 – Better Outcomes for Families & Carers, online survey 2021

Almost all projects (88.2%) saw the rising needs of families and carers as a challenge that limited their success. Projects have seen the needs of families and carers increase and become increasingly complex, requiring increased capacity that wasn't always available:

> "The main challenge is just the complexity of the issues ...dealing with real crises and crises that multiply - financial issues, employment issues and an impact on family well-being and stability, housing... it's just awful... it's a huge crisis... These are really big issues are not issues that are easy to fix." Project Lead.

This increased demand was only partly attributed to the impact of COVID-19. Need is 'always on the increase' but capacity has always been a big issue: over half the projects (52.9%) also identified that not having enough time was a challenge for them.

Projects identified a number of barriers to engagement for some families and carers who are not accessing voluntary or statutory services, which presented a challenge in terms of reach. Sporadic engagement was also an issue in some projects dealing with people with multiple complex needs who may not turn up for various reasons e.g. caring responsibilities, home-schooling, self-isolation, changing working arrangements, mental health challenges and work coming up at short notice (low income work may mean work is sporadic).

"Families have ingrained habits e.g. using a doorstep lender, family and friends to borrow from. Making them aware of what we do and gaining their trust is a continuous challenge." Project Lead.

For one project working with the families and carers of survival sex workers, getting clients engaged was challenging from the start:

"Building up the caseload was quite difficult. And that was for a number of reasons, because a lot of the women do lead chaotic lifestyles, and they weren't in touch with their parents or their families. It's very isolating, they lost all of those social networks and social structures. And it took a little bit of time to kind of get people to kind of come to the service." Project Lead.

For another, understanding the reasons why some families and carers may not engage with other services was key to overcoming potential barriers to engagement:

"We start from a position of trying to understand, right, why are these people not going to stuff already, and then...try to make something that's easy to access... there's kind of no obligation to get involved in the activities... it's not a formally structured class, we're not sort of coming from an angle of like, you know, 'you're not feeding your kid properly' and that's why we're doing an intervention with you, it's more kind of like, look, you know, we're doing a meal, you want to get involved, sort of thing. And so that sort of soft... approach is... something that's important, and that is to do with the relational approach... understanding how people might feel about us." Project Lead.

Wider structural and systemic issues affecting families and carers presented further challenges to projects, which have been exacerbated but not created by COVID-19. For example, a lack of suitable housing, changes in welfare benefits, energy price increases, food and fuel poverty. A large majority of projects (79.4%) cited funding shortages and funding cuts (70.6%) as a key challenge. Changes to Government legislation was seen as a challenge by around half of the projects (47%).

"Lots of people already excluded from mainstream welfare, and already homeless or in quite serious situations and with no safety net. So COVID-19 hit most of our clients really hard. A lot more people with no access to funds ended up facing destitution than then have previously been the case. So we also saw quite a significant demand for services, especially frontline service." Project Lead.

"Universal credit and energy price increases are going to be significant for our clients." Project Lead.

"The housing situation in general, is such a challenge...you can't believe the conditions that people are living in. And yet, their priority on the Housing Register is just not even, you know, they might have a kid with autism and ADHD, who's bouncing around the house... But that's not a priority, that's a social need. It's not a health need. So, you know, they don't get in the medical banding, that's such a challenge, because people come to us and they...want and hope and expect that we can... kind of change things for them and that the system is just, it's not allowing for that at all." Project Lead.

Negative and judgemental attitudes towards families and carers was seen as a challenge by over half (52.9%) of projects. Some projects referred specifically to the attitudes and expectations of statutory agencies as being a challenge for them. There was a sense that many in statutory agencies did not have a good understanding of the needs of families and carers, and how best to engage them.

"It's frustrating sometimes when we hear statutory agencies, partners and funders talk about, you know, building resilience. Actually, a lot of the people we work with are more resilient than I would think you and I are because they are faced so much trauma, challenge, obstacles and discrimination in their life." Project Lead.

"The challenges have come mainly, from many professionals. I mean, you know, there are times when you'd go along to a meeting and… sometimes [be] met with disdain or disinterest in what you have to say." Project Lead.

3.3.3 Effects of COVID-19

Most of the challenges described above related to the impact of COVID-19. All-but-one projects said they had been affected, with more than two-thirds saying COVID-19 had significantly affected delivery of their work, and almost a third more saying it had affected them to some extent. Just one said it was too early to tell - according to when the funding was awarded, and the nature of their service provision. Figure 4 shows the responses.

Figure 4 Extent to which COVID-19 has affected project delivery
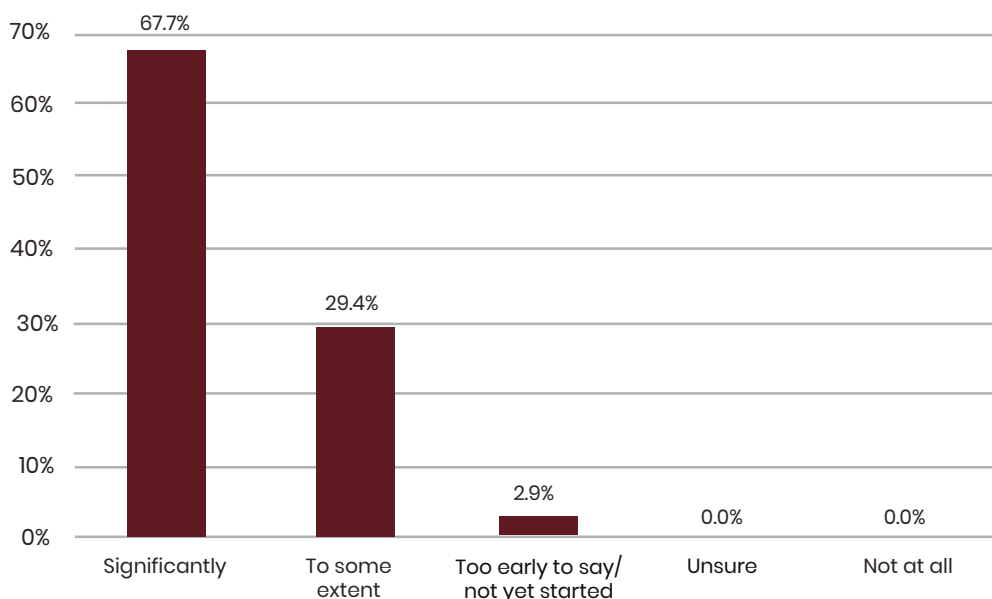
Base: 34 – Better Outcomes for Families & Carers, online survey 2021

Most significantly, venues were closed and the availability of volunteers and staff was affected. In light of these challenges, all the projects have had to change the way in which they work to some degree, to ensure continued delivery (as far as possible) and to maintain the safety of their staff, volunteers and beneficiaries. Much of the work moved online and some projects did more outdoor work in the community. Many talked about the need to flex and adapt to continue to meet the needs of families and carers:

"It was a lot about adjusting our own mindset to think well, how can we get this to work…and providing a good enough service, something that will help." Project Lead.

The pandemic meant that more families and carers were presenting with urgent needs (see also above) and so projects responses became more crisis led and reactive, responding to the immediate and practical needs of families and carers as best they could:

"Everybody has gone into panic mode, especially the poorest people…and therefore we've been very reactive." Project Lead.

"I can't even begin to explain how chaotic it was… a desperate situation during COVID-19. We had all sorts of people- people that have never, ever claimed benefits before suddenly desperate for food because they're on furlough… lots of low paid people… And it wasn't like they needed advice because there wasn't any advice you could actually give… But they were really desperate for food." Project Lead.

Projects had to prioritise families and carers in most need, and some had to work more intensively with a smaller number, resulting in an increased workload for staff (for example, having several sessions a week with a family instead of one):

> "Although you are supporting fewer people your work doubles… how you make them not dependent on you is very challenging, it was hard work and very rewarding but we helped a lot of families through the COVID-19 times." Key Worker.

> "for families we did late night phone check ins, online. We did food deliveries, to isolating families. We made applications to charitable organisations for material goods like beds and fridges, etc… we still carried out doorstep safeguarding visits, but obviously was social distance just to get an eye on the children and check that they were doing all right… So yeah, we just changed the way we worked to work around the challenges." Project Lead.

The inability to meet face to face with clients was challenging in terms of building relationships, trust and rapport.

> "They're much better with a face to face interaction, especially when they're just hungry, and they just need food. So the last thing they're gonna do is like,…Oh, let me get some advice, as well. So that's why having that face to face thing whilst they're there… it was really difficult to keep them engaged." Project Lead.

This shift to digital provision presented challenges in terms of digital exclusion, with many families and carers lacking access to technology, data, and/or the skills and confidence to engage online. This was especially challenging for people who were homeless or living in poverty.

> "We used to see all clients face to face so that was kind of a big change for us to move to a remote way of working and talking to people over the phone instead or on Zoom." Project Lead.

Projects identified some challenges of returning to face-to-face delivery, with some people feeling reluctant or anxious about engaging in 'in person' activities.

> "Some people are anxious about [coming back to groups] they've kind of been conditioned to stay in for good reasons and worry about it.…and you can kind of get into a sort of slightly sort of depressive cycle of kind of not doing things… even though that's the good thing to do." Project Lead.

> "You're encouraging people to wear masks and things like that…and [to] social distance…it's quite anxiety provoking to kind of try and manage a group situation when actually people aren't very compliant, to be honest with their stuff." Project Lead.

Almost three quarters of projects said that finding staff and volunteers with the right skills (70.6%) and attitudes (73.5%) had been a challenge for them. Several have had reduced resources due to staff and volunteers being unwell or having to self-isolate or be shielding. The availability of volunteers has also been affected both through lockdown restrictions and because many volunteers are older and therefore more likely to be shielding. The impact of furlough also meant it was more difficult to find people who have the capacity to engage in volunteering.

> "Prior to the pandemic we had many dance students attending University in London who may have paid work in the hospitality sector and could then offer time to volunteer to support our activities. As a consequence of COVID-19, there are less students as some have not moved but stayed home and accessed education remotely. Secondly, with paid work more difficult to secure, people are less likely to volunteer." Project Lead.

A lack of training and support for staff was identified as a challenge for around I in 4 projects (23.5%). Projects highlighted issues related to increased staff turnover and staff well-being and the importance of self-care. Maintaining boundaries around home working was a challenge for some staff who found it, "very hard to detach yourself from work at times". In the face of increasing demands, a related challenge for some staff was trying not to take too much on;

> "We've had quite a lot of staff turnover, a lot of the staff have been extremely exhausted, especially those dealing with the women.. and working remotely has been a challenge for all of us, and putting boundaries and all that… the situation has been quite exhausting." Project Lead.

> "…the long term mental health impact of COVID-19 on our team, especially on volunteers. I think people are tired. They're worn out and it's hard… people are really long term tired…it's been a long 18 months of constantly being creative and trying to put personal things aside to support others… staff, and volunteer well being is a challenge right now." Project Lead.

COVID-19 had also impacted on funding and applying for funding.

> "Many funders have now turned towards funding COVID-19 related activities and this is making it difficult to find funding for this [other] type of work." Project Lead.

Whilst most of the effects of COVID-19 had presented challenges for projects, some identified a benefit associated with the increased reliance on technology for virtual delivery during the pandemic. This had had advantages for some projects in terms of increased reach and reduced costs. For one project it accelerated their plans to build technology into their delivery model.

> "It has meant that we've been able to drop …all our geographical restrictions… allowing us to extend our reach." Project Lead.

> "It's allowed us… to reach more people more easily, and leaving us the time to for the staff and the volunteers to spend the time with the people that really need the help. So someone who genuinely hasn't got a digital option that needs talking through things and everything, we can spend that time with them [face to face]. And we found that really helpful for us to keep us grounded." Project Lead.

> "Working remotely has been easier than we thought, and for some clients it makes the service more accessible as they do not have to travel or find childcare…we have been able to extend their reach." Project Lead.

3.4 Outcomes and Impact

Key findings

All projects reported that they were achieving multiple outcomes. The most frequent project outcomes were improving parents'/carers' parenting skills and abilities (83.9% of projects had met or were working towards this outcome) and improving other outcomes for parents/carers (84.8%). Three quarters of all projects had already or plan to reduce family poverty or deprivation (74.2%). Overall, projects were more likely to be achieving outcomes for parents/carers than for children. Direct evidence from participants was limited, but people clearly benefit from the projects and are positive about them. Many projects find it difficult to describe and evidence their outcomes; but nevertheless, findings show that the Better Outcomes for Families & Carers Programme is making a valuable difference to people's lives.

We asked projects various questions about the outcomes they were achieving[5]. We defined 'outcomes' as "the differences you make to people's lives", and included this definition whenever we used the term.

The findings presented in this section are a synthesis of survey responses from project leads and interviews with selected project leads, key workers and participants/beneficiaries.

Importantly, we found that many projects lacked clear understanding and/or robust evidence about their outcomes and impact. In many cases, they talked about project activities and stakeholder perspectives instead (see also section 3.4.3 below). However, by using standardised outcome categories and looking for themes across different projects, we were able to analyse data and come to valuable conclusions about the impact of the programme as a whole.

3.4.1 Main outcomes reported by the projects themselves

We asked projects which of the following types of outcomes they were achieving with their funding from MCF and SRW:

- Improving children's and young people's health (including physical and mental health)

- Improving children's and young people's learning/educational outcomes

- Improving children and young people's employment outcomes (now or in the future)

- Reducing children's and young people's offending / contact with criminal justice system

- Reducing children's and young people's homelessness

- Improving other aspects of children's and young people's wellbeing

- Improving parents'/carers' parenting skills and abilities

- Reducing family poverty and deprivation

- Improving other outcomes for parents'/carers.

A summary of their responses can be seen in Figure 5 below. The following points are especially notable:

- All projects reported they were achieving multiple outcomes

- Projects were more likely to be achieving outcomes for parents/carers than for children. This is likely to be because there is some statutory and mainstream service support for children but much less for parents, carers and families, so VCF organisations such as these projects 'fill the gaps'

- The most frequent project outcomes were improving parents'/carers' parenting skills and abilities (83.9% of projects met/working towards this outcome) and improving other outcomes for parents/carers (84.8%)

- The least frequent project outcomes were reducing children's and young people's offending behaviour (30% of projects met/working towards this outcome) and reducing children's and young people's homelessness (35.5%). This is likely to be because these needs are recognised as more serious and are therefore more likely to be addressed by statutory and mainstream services

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[5] *Note on outcomes methodology and analysis:* We asked projects about their outcomes and impact in both the survey and the interviews, gaining both qualitative and quantitative data. We used the literature review (Part 1, section 3.2) to identify outcomes most commonly achieved by 'Early Help' projects, and created outcome categories for the survey which we used in the survey design. Projects were also able to comment freely about the outcomes they were achieving in both survey and interviews.

- Three quarters of all projects already or plan to reduce family poverty or deprivation (74.2%)

- More than two-thirds of all projects already or plan to: improve children's/young people's health (71.9%); improve other aspects of children's/young people's wellbeing (69.7%); or improve children's/young people's learning or educational achievement (64.5%)

- Over half of all projects said they had already achieved outcomes with parents, carers and whole families.

Figure 5: Outcomes Mercers' does or will help the projects to achieve
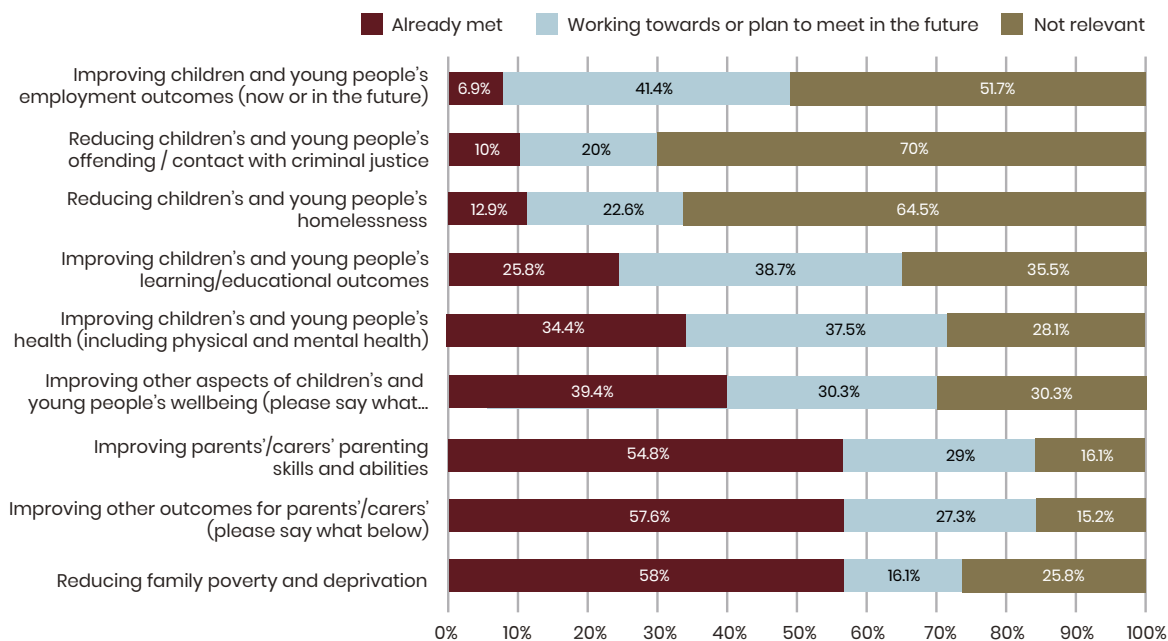
Base: 33 (1 skipped this question) – Better Outcomes for Families & Carers, online survey 2021

3.4.2 A rich picture of projects meeting individual needs and changing lives

Underneath these headings, projects describe[6] a huge range of specific outcomes that meet the needs of particular groups of children, young people, parents, carers and families, including:

- Women and children escape violence

- Children recover emotionally from domestic abuse

- Family conflict is reduced

- Families function better

- Families are more stable

- Families/carers get respite breaks

- Families regularise their immigration status and move out of destitution

- Children and parents are better connected socially

- Children able to play and learn together

- Reduced social isolation

- Housing situation improved

- Women/mothers improve self-confidence

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[6]Where projects described their activities rather than their outcomes, we reframed their descriptions to focus on changes for participants/beneficiaries. See also section 3.4.3.

- Women/mothers improve their financial stability
- Improved language skills
- Disabled people are more independent
- Disabled people able to take risks and have adventures
- Parents of disabled children more assertive and better able to deal with system challenges
- Parent carers are less stressed and anxious
- BAME families/carers feel less isolated and marginalised
- BAME families/carers feel empowered to navigate the system
- Participants increase mutual trust through shared cultural experiences
- Women have improved sexual and reproductive health
- Women whose children have been removed into care better understand the reasons
- Parents gain a better understanding of child development
- Parents and carers know their rights
- People have better resilience.

This variety emphasises that projects and beneficiaries are unique, and therefore there are all sorts of differences made to people's lives. Some of the most meaningful differences may be completely unique, which is why we include examples and quotations in this section.

Many projects emphasised that outcomes are inter-related and often 'soft' – i.e. to do with relationships and feelings, rather than more measurable practical or physical needs.

> "We believe that the outcomes of the support we provide families is helping them feel less isolated, less marginalised, empowered with knowledge and skills to navigate the system with minimum support, more connected with professionals, improved confidence to join mainstream support groups, feel confident to join networking events, workshops, and forums; forming a stronger and inclusive network of families from all circles of the community; improved physical, emotional and mental health including traumas families are experiencing from the COVID-19." Project Lead.

Reducing family poverty and deprivation

More projects said they had already met this outcome than any other (58.1%). A further 16.1% were working towards achieving it in future. Survey and interview comments showed that they were doing this through a range of activities including providing: access to housing and money; help to manage money; debt advice; running and sign-posting to food banks; running cooking and other food projects; support to women to increase their financial stability. Some projects work with specific groups, for example aiming to reduce poverty and homelessness amongst migrant families and carers.

Poverty is recognised as a 'driver' of other problems for families/carers, and this is likely to be why most project prioritise addressing it. Projects underlined the value of anti-poverty work and its impact on other outcomes:

> "Poverty is a massive driver of a lot of the wider challenges we see families experiencing, including poor mental health, low school attainment and attendance, etc." Project Lead.

This connection between poverty and other outcomes means that projects often work 'holistically'. One project talked about the importance of community hubs for enabling 'joined-up' support:

> "The community hubs are developing and providing holistic support for the whole family. [We're] working specifically with communities that are deprived… The fact that we can work holistically and in various ways with families and young people, through our schools, advice work, family support, community activity, food bank, etc., it also means we can work with a family on their practical needs [like debt, food insecurity], reducing the pressure they're experiencing, and helping parents to engage with positive change more widely." Project Lead.

Food poverty is a specific priority for some projects, and is also recognised as being linked with many other problems:

> "Food insecurity is a major thing in a lot of people's lives… It just made us, as advisors and staff, realise that there is a really fine balance that we maybe don't always appreciate - that tipping point between poverty and lack, and not just loss of the salary, just means a huge difference [that] affects everything, housing, everything. And when people are already on the brink, it just really tipped them over with their mental health." Project Lead.

One project talked about how their advisors had helped families and carers to claim benefits that they were entitled to, thus *preventing* serious poverty-related impacts:

> "They [advisors] recovered huge amounts of Universal Credit for example… There's been some real breakthrough moments for some of those people… They saved people from possible evictions and landlord issues." Project Lead.

Improving parents' and carers' parenting skills and abilities

More than half of projects (54.8%) said they had already achieved this outcome and almost a third more (29%) were working towards it. Skills and knowledge training includes: general parenting courses; specific training to help parents manage behaviour they find challenging; information and advice about SEN; and training and confidence-building aimed at empowering families and carers.

> "It's helped parents understand who they are, and helped them gain their confidence, helped them become more resilient." Project Lead.

Although projects stated the outcomes that they were achieving (e.g. "parents achieve positive changes in their family relationships") it was difficult to assess the nature or extent of such changes. Parenting training and support is very varied, and we did not know which tools or programmes the projects were using. Comparing and assessing different approaches to improving parents' and carers' parenting skills is beyond the scope of this project. However, we found some anecdotal evidence that parents valued the parenting support – see below.

Improving other outcomes for parents and carers

Almost three in five projects (57.6%) said they had already achieved this outcome and more than a quarter more (27.3%) were working towards it. The example 'other outcomes' given were very diverse, including improving physical and mental health; helping parents have a voice through advocacy; help dealing with trauma and difficult emotions; reducing social isolation; building and strengthening family and social connections; cooking skills; sexual and reproductive health; support following domestic violence; support with addiction; and immigration support.

Several projects pointed out how families' and carers' needs can often be complex and interwoven; sometimes helping with one thing can lead to recognising support is needed with something else too. When successful, this kind of holistic approach appears to be very powerful.

"I think we're quite tenacious as workers… we're unpicking very complex, very deep, very personal journeys that people have been on …and sometimes that can be quite overwhelming, you know, you're dealing with a lifetime of trauma, you're not starting with somebody that says, 'I need help with benefits' all of the time, you're going right back once you get into the nitty gritty of things, and to be quite tenacious, and to advocate for people, and to say..we're here to listen, and we can support you …. And being there with them throughout the whole journey is really really powerful." Key worker.

"The project is vital for the women that we support, because they really have no one nowhere else to go…we are, I think the only place where they feel comfortable, where they know us, where they can access a lot of different resources, and where no one is going to leave you alone. I mean, even if we cannot help you with whatever, we will make sure that you receive that help. So we don't just tell you, 'Oh, go to this domestic violence service' we will be with you." Key worker.

"The most important thing that they'll report back is, 'You were there when I needed somebody just to sit and have a cup of tea with and you were there, you just sat and listened.'" Project Lead.

Improving children's and young people's health

Almost three-quarters of projects (71.9%) said that they were improving children's and young people's (CYP) physical and/or mental health. Over a third (34.4%) said they had already achieved this outcome, and even more (37.5%) were working towards it.

Projects aimed to improve various aspects of CYP's health, including physical health in general, health through exercise, healthy eating and emotional and/or mental health. One project ran exercise and play sessions for children with special educational needs, and also provided counselling.

Some projects work with specific groups of children and young people:

"[We support] children's emotional health and wellbeing, including recovering from the legacy of domestic abuse and processing emotions." Project Lead, survey

One project emphasised the close relationship between CYP's health and their parents'/carers':

"Our work is centred around providing spaces and facilities where children and young people can flourish and have access to support. Our after school provided a safe space, and working with other partners, we were able to offer activities that promoted healthy eating and living… It helped children and young people but it was a real support to parents who enjoyed the social interaction and the support with their children." Project Lead.

Improving children's and young people's learning, educational and employment outcomes

Two-thirds of projects (64.5%) said they were improving children's and young people's **learning and educational outcomes**. However, only a quarter (25.8%) said they had already achieved this outcome; others were working towards it.

Almost half of projects (47.3%) said they were improving CYP's **employment outcomes** now or in the future. However, only two projects (6.9%) said they had already met this outcome; most (a further 41.4%) were working towards it.

Projects support children and young people with additional needs and vulnerabilities (level/tier 2+) rather than with all children. Some work with specific groups, such as children with autism or other special educational needs, children who have experienced domestic violence or young carers:

> "Our work supporting young carers can help to improve their learning and employment outcomes should they choose to work in care related roles in the future." Project Lead.

Since schools provide formal learning, projects tended to provide informal learning opportunities, including social learning:

> "We aim... for children to benefit socially from meeting, playing and learning together". Project Lead.

Projects reported that some of the work that supports children's learning and educational outcomes is carried out with parents, rather than directly with children themselves. Some work is supporting parents to navigate education systems effectively; some is engaging parents/carers directly in CYP's learning, which is known[7] to improve CYP's own learning outcomes:

> "Parents/carers increase engagement in children's learning and development." Project Lead.

> "We work in partnership with parents to help reduce the various challenges they are facing in terms of their children accessing education and services." Project Lead.

> "We have lots of great examples of where the coaches have worked alongside the women to fight a particular challenge, for example... education, children's needs." Project Lead.

Improving educational outcomes for children also has an effect as they grow into adulthood. Particularly, since adults with learning disabilities do not generally get support unless they have a formal diagnosis, ensuring that this happens while a child is still at school can have a life-long effect. As one project leader put it:

> "It's made the difference between getting the support that you would need as an autistic child with an education health care plan over the age of 25, or not." Project Lead.

Reducing children's and young people's homelessness and offending behaviours

More than a third of projects said they were working to reduce children's homelessness, either now (12.9%) or in future (22.6%).

Almost a third of projects said they were working to reduce CYP's offending behaviours and/or contact with the criminal justice system, now (10%) or in the future (20%).

However, very few projects actually commented about these aspects of their work, leading us to conclude that these are mostly identified as potential, indirect or assumed outcomes, rather than evidenced ones. This may be because CYP experiencing homelessness and/or offending are more likely to be supported by statutory services than these VCFOs. The comments below are the only relevant quotations found in the survey and interview data.

> "[We] help to reduce poverty and homelessness amongst migrant families." Project Lead.

> "Research shows that children living with abusive fathers are more likely to be unemployed or enter the criminal justice system so helping them to break free of the abuse will improve these life outcomes." Project Lead.

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[7]Desforges, C. and Abouchaar, A. (2003) The impact of parental involvement, parental support and family education on pupil achievement and adjustment: A literature review, Department for Education and Skills.

Improving other aspects of children's and young people's wellbeing

Around seven in ten projects (70.7%) said they were working to improve other aspects of CYP's wellbeing, either now (39.4%) or in the future (30.3%). However, there are few examples in the data collected, which perhaps suggests that projects make the (reasonable) assumption that improving other outcomes for children will inevitably improve their wellbeing too.

Projects that have an explicit focus on CYP's wellbeing seem to support those who have had particular adverse experiences, such as domestic abuse, being taken into care and being born during the pandemic:

> "Children's emotional health and wellbeing included recovering from the legacy of domestic abuse and processing emotions." Project Lead.

> "Improving other aspects of children's and young people's wellbeing [through] improving contact with their children for women whose children have been removed from their care." Project Lead.

> "We have a sense of community, so this is a space for families so not only receiving the individual support but also a place for families to come and socialise, especially with the pandemic because most of the families at the end of the day are very much isolated and lonely – especially children born during the pandemic." Key worker.

3.4.3 Beneficiaries'/participants' views about impact and outcomes

We asked project leads what their participants and beneficiaries said about the work they did. Project leads' comments suggest people appreciate the work and feel they benefit. Some of these benefits are clearly tangible and practical outcomes:

> "We do a survey every year, and we normally have about 30 people who've used the service. And, like 97% said that they felt that we helped them to progress." Project Lead.

> "We show how to run a house – so basic household finances – not high level finance – and it's the difference it makes to our families… People talk about 'peace of mind' about 'being equipped', about 'things they didn't know.'" Project Lead.

> "[Families] found that sort of sense of being connected with wider community." Project Lead.

A few project leads provided direct feedback and quotations from the people they supported which was unanimously positive. Direct comments included:

> "Gives my children learning experiences and social opportunities that I can't give them on my own." Parent beneficiary.

> "I will continue to use this service as I still struggle with my mental health some days, but I am a better more stable person from accessing this project and working with [named keyworker]." Parent beneficiary.

> "I feel like Someone since I started coming here." Parent beneficiary

> "You helped us find a way to cope as a family.". Parent beneficiary

> "I feel like I can give my children a better future." Parent beneficiary.

We were also able to speak directly to 9 project beneficiaries/participants in 4 separate conversations, including one single parent, four women (3 parents), one couple and one mother-daughter pair (there was also a second adult daughter and a young granddaughter in this family, who were project beneficiaries, but not interviewed). Since this is a small number of individuals out of the estimated total of more than 33,500 beneficiaries, their views cannot be taken to be representative, so we have chosen to present three examples here as individual mini profiles. We have not used names.

In the words of A and C, parents of two autistic children

About peer support from other parents: "I've gained knowledge from those parents... who were in my shoes when I started."

About counselling for the children: "The counsellor has really helped them through [the pandemic] to understand the world around them, maybe when we've really struggled as well... I feel like we've actually got our kids back with us.. A lot of the time they were very emotional, very anxious, wondering. [Our son] was asking when, who was going to die, and when they were going to die, because he'd lost that many people throughout the isolation period that were quite close to him."

In the words of E and J, a mother and adult daughter

J, on family relationships: "I feel like since the diagnosis, this awareness has come about, we probably have a better relationship... I think because now we all understand... And we're forgiving each other rather than getting frustrated. And that's sort of how I feel. Like it's changed since then. But if we hadn't have had this diagnosis, I think we would have continued getting really frustrated."

E, on the information and support she has had about her other daughter's special educational needs: "It just answered so many questions... [It's] just like... putting that jigsaw together. So there's a lot of things are making sense and now that we've got this awareness, it's helping us in that situation."

In the words of S, a single mother

About the lunch club: "I started the drop-in sessions, which was amazing. It did wonders for me to see other mums and fathers, just coming in, having similar struggles... Money is tight, but [the project] would supply lunches as well for the kids and teach me how to eat healthy."

About the parenting class: "I've never been to a [parenting] class like that... You know when they say tearing the layers of an onion off, oh my god, it literally was like that... Once you do that class there is no hiding you have to open up... I wouldn't be as confident as I am now... I feel I know my own worth now...I would still be walking around with the heavy feeling on my shoulders."

About how her child benefitted: "[She] built her own relationships with [named staff] and other kids and then she started asking to come in... I don't think [she] would be half as articulate as she is if it wasn't for this time in here."

3.4.4 Projects' ability to measure and describe their impact and outcomes

VCF organisations often find it hard to evidence their outcomes and impacts. We noticed an improvement in projects' ability to talk about and evidence outcomes (compared with our last evaluation of the Homelessness projects) but there are still issues and challenges.

One project explicitly recognised these challenges and commented:

"Our model of early intervention in the early years is designed to improve outcomes in education, criminal justice, etc, although of course it's impossible for us to measure the impact!" Project Lead.

Projects often expressed their achievements as *activities* rather than *outcomes*, focusing on what *they do* rather than *what changes for beneficiaries.* For example, descriptions like "providing advocacy" or "financial education – guidance and signposting". Unfortunately, these descriptions *assume success* that is not necessarily measurable or evidenced.

Furthermore, some organisations responded to our question about how they measured their outcomes and impact by telling us how they measured their *outputs*:

> "I found it quite easy to measure because we were sort of, you know, our organisation is based on those outputs. So we have budgets and KPIs and everything". Project Lead.

There may be many reasons for this focus on activity, including: misunderstanding about what 'outcomes' are; the challenges of measuring prevention (particularly, how do you measure something that hasn't happened?); the fact that many changes take a long time to be seen and VCFOs are rarely able to follow up on their work years later; and the feelings of hopelessness or frustration expressed in the quotation above.

It is possible, and in our view important, to *improve* evidence about outcomes by re-framing descriptions and measures. This is worth doing because otherwise, it is not possible to be sure what projects are actually achieving. Re-framed descriptions focus on the *change for beneficiaries* rather than project activities. For example: "providing advocacy" becomes "people's voices and needs are heard"; "financial education – guidance and signposting" becomes "people have increased financial stability" and "improving a parent's sense of social connection" becomes "parents feel more socially connected".

This kind of reframing helps projects to think more effectively about impact and success. For example, if the description is "providing advocacy", then you are likely to draw on measures of activity like the number of hours and people supported. Once that has been reframed to "people's needs and voices are heard", then you are much more likely to consider how many people, where their voices were heard, what happened as a result. Understanding of the project's real impact is much improved.

Fortunately, a few projects clearly understood their impact and outcomes and were confident about explaining how they measure them, using established tools such as SWEMWBS (a wellbeing scale) and outcome stars:

> "We are an evidenced based organisation... we use the outcomes star to measure impact". Project Lead.

These organisations were happy with existing grant monitoring arrangements, and confident about measuring their own outcomes:

> "I wouldn't expect someone to fund us tens of thousands of pounds and then also teach us how to use it. I feel it's our responsibility". Project Lead.

3.5 Working with Mercers'

Key findings

Project leads praised Mercers' for their flexibility and understanding of their individual projects' needs. They valued the personal style of working – the regular communication and in particular the site visits that had been feasible prior to COVID-19. A couple of project leads would have welcomed more guidance particularly in terms of setting out their outcome framework and the level of detail required. But in the main, Mercers' application process and annual reporting was also seen as straightforward, less onerous and more meaningful than some other funders.

3.5.1 The working relationship

The survey asked respondents about their experiences of working with the Mercers' Company. The responses were overwhelmingly positive - almost 90% reported their experience had been excellent and a further 9% said it was good. Only one project felt it was too early to tell.

Figure 6: Experiences of working with Mercers'
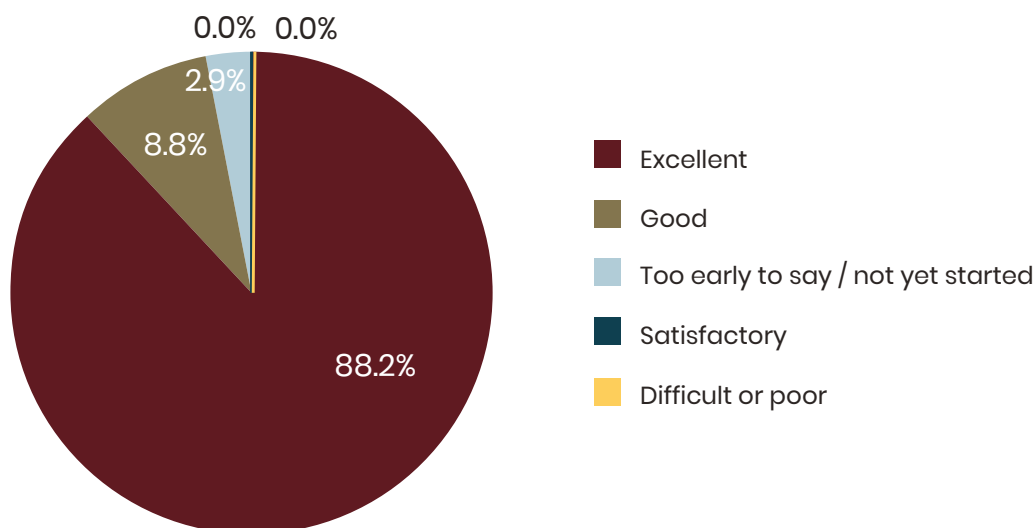
Base: 34 - Better Outcomes for Families & Carers, online survey 2021

Supporting comments were provided within the survey and this was discussed further within the depth interviews. A number of project leads said how flexible and supportive the Grant Managers had been, particularly in relation to some of the challenges they'd faced due to COVID-19, allowing them to change their project plan or delay the delivery phase.

> "We changed it [project plan] to be more realistic [because of COVID-19] but what was great was they were still willing to fund us... they were prepared to allow us to do that and be flexible". Project Lead.

Most project leads had developed a good working relationship with their Grant Manager over the funding period. The liked how they had taken time to really get to know them and their projects, some via in-person visits or through regular communication, which they particularly valued. They also felt this was different to their experiences of working with some other funders. Those that hadn't received visits said they would welcome them once the COVID-19 restrictions have eased further.

> "They were very keen in the first introductory meeting which in those days was face to face to find out what our ambitions were...I can't say anything negative" Project Lead.

> "I found the whole process really, really positive. Mercers' as a funder are very engaging, they really like to have open conversations" Project Lead.

3.5.2 Perceptions of the funding, the application process and reporting requirements

Project leads were asked how important the funding had been and what they would have done had they not been awarded the grant. The funding had been crucial to a number of the projects, without which they perhaps would have not gone ahead or would have been scaled back.

"We are clear to say this initiative would have not got off the ground if we did not have this level of support or backing." Project Lead.

Some explained they would have looked for alternative funding, but reported how difficult and competitive the landscape had become over recent years (in some instances as a result of COVID-19). Others said that the process for applying for grants was often complex and time consuming.

"If we hadn't been able to run these activities through Mercers... I don't want to think about it... so many sectors, you know, they've suffered, but I think if you've got arts, and it's disability, you're always going to be right at the very back of the queue." Project Lead.

One project had applied to Mercers specifically because of the faith connections.

"It's nice to apply for a funder that has some form of faith emphasis as you feel freer to be able to talk about some of those values." Project Lead..

Mercers' application process along with annual reporting requirements were deemed by the majority of project leads to be less onerous and more meaningful than some other funders. They liked the opportunity to be able to really highlight the individuality of their projects and show the impact they were having using qualitative data and evidence as well as quantitative data and statistics.

"... with Mercers' it was qualitative, so they really wanted to hear about how we were going to do it and use stories - painting a picture of how you were going to support individuals which is always reassuring." Project Lead.

"By using both stories and numbers, the stories illuminate and illustrate but you need numbers as well to show scale. The Mercers' process captures both of those aspects with plenty of opportunities to talk about successes and challenges and it's not too prescriptive so enables organisations to use their own methods." Project Lead.

A couple of project leads suggested **more guidance would have been useful** from Mercers' when designing their project plans and outcomes framework as they had spent a lot of time providing quite detailed information which they felt perhaps hadn't been necessary. Advice on the level of detail would have reduced the amount of time they'd spent on collecting and reporting on data.

"So, I've got lots of outcomes that I need to measure [for the organisation as a whole] but it's the key ones I should have just concentrated on. Because it does take time and energy to report on all the other things." Project Lead.

"I probably did a mass-load of very detailed project planning... I had no steer of what was necessary or not, I spent a lot of time doing that... so clarity on what it is they would actually like to see or hear." Project Lead.

3.6 Key learning, reflections and the future

Key findings

Much of the learning resulted from projects experiences during the pandemic and related to the changing needs of families and carers. There was a desire to sustain projects post MCF and SRW funding.

3.6.1 Learning from delivering the project and how this can be used in the future

The majority of the learning for projects during the grant funding period was related to the impact of COVID-19 (as already discussed in section 3.3.2). The dramatically different ways projects had to work during the pandemic also helped them to

learn. While the pandemic brought many additional pressures which constrained some projects' ability to reflect, it also provided some projects with time and an opportunity to review their delivery. Several projects adapted their delivery models during this time and found new ways of working, which they plan to maintain in the future.

> "There are lots of things we would never even thought of doing that we did and that have completely changed how we approach the future." Project Lead.

3.6.2 Other learning that wasn't related to the pandemic

Other areas of learning included; the value of outdoor therapeutic activities (e.g. walk and talk) and the ability to continue to deliver approaches without access to a physical venue; the importance and value of staff teams and how resilient they are. One stated they had learned to have more empathy with the people and families/ carers they support.

> "… we've learned to be more empathetic with the people and what they're going through. And thankful that people are still in a job…during [lockdown].. we were able to keep our advisor in a job and not furlough her because she was helping people…she did say that, I appreciate the fact that I could have actually been on the other side as well." Project Lead.

Many projects had increased their understanding about the needs of the people they support and how best to work with them. Specific examples were; learning about cultural sensitivities; more awareness and dialogue on domestic violence; learning about autism and diagnosis; the importance of building self- esteem, and how resilient people can be.

> "I've learned how resilient people are. …I've learned how to encourage and incorporate self-esteem in everything that we do, and not take anything for granted. Our clients really lead the way and they're amazing people." Keyworker

Many had learned about the need for flexibility and adaptability to deal with families' and carers' changing needs and situations. One project said that they had learned about the importance of giving people space:

> "… just allowing some of the families just to be… having a cup of tea, and a chat with a family where they're free to kind of lead the conversation and just be – whereby it's not part of a structured kind of support plan. Just allowing them to be is so important… we sometimes need to step back, because we can be too focused about… measurement and meeting this type of part of the support plan. And sometimes the families who work with can feel like they've been assessed to death." Project Lead.

3.6.3 Value in sharing learning across other projects

When asked whether they would share learning with the other projects funded by Mercers' under this programme. All project leads were keen to hear about the evaluation results. Most said they would like to know about the other funded projects and were happy to share learning and information about their work, providing it was relevant, of mutual benefit, and not too demanding. Several saw value in connecting with projects similar to themselves and would value a brief overview of other projects to help identify opportunities to link and forge connections with others.

Most projects said they would welcome the opportunity to meet with other projects, recognising the value gained from open conversations, sharing of approaches, and opportunities for mutual support. There was recognition that there can be value in learning from projects doing quite different things and those with similar approaches.

"Even if it's something vastly different that they are doing, there's still learning that can be taken from that…there might be similar challenges, similar issues. So there is something very special, in terms of coming together, celebrating what's working, what's not… I always think there's something to be gleaned." Project Lead.

"Different organisations always have different ways of approaching things. And it would be really fascinating to learn from other projects." Project Lead.

Projects expressed some caveats and concerns around shared learning events, including; the amount of time and energy needed; ensuring a clear purpose and focus; and being clear about benefits to projects.

Most projects expressed a preference for online events, due to time and costs. Suggestions for the focus of these events were: case studies from projects; facilitated discussion around common themes; webinars or short bite-sized 'inspiration sessions'. The timing of events was considered important, with one project suggesting that it would be helpful to connect with others during the delivery phase rather than waiting for the projects to finish. Another suggested some peer support during the proposal stage would be beneficial.

3.6.4 The future: sustainability, threats and opportunities

Most projects had been operating before receiving MCF and SRW funding, and all were hopeful they would continue once the grant ended. The needs of targeted groups were seen to be increasing, so the need for the work delivered by projects and demands were not likely to reduce any time soon.

Sourcing future funding was crucial to the survival of all projects, although finding funding was often a challenge, particularly as competition for funds is likely to increase in the future.

"It's made us all aware these issues are not going away and more funding is going to be required… if the impact of COVID-19 continues, the less well-off seem to be disproportionately affected." Project Lead.

"It's all dependent on, on funding. I mean, the very existence of the charity, and it's tough. Getting money at the minute… I think the strike rate for funding applications is much lower than I've experienced in previous periods." Project Lead.

One project lead highlighted an issue they'd experienced, which was a result of them operating an inclusive (open to all) project. They felt this had prevented some of their funding bids being successful, because they were not focussing on specific communities or protected characteristics.

Another project mentioned that being awarded less than they had applied for from Mercers' had significantly affected the outcomes they were able to deliver.

In terms of future funding, many projects felt uncertain about the future. Some project leads were applying for or had already sourced and secured other funding from a range of other funders. Some were also exploring different ways to obtain financing, such as fundraising events.

Most projects felt having received MCF and SRW funding has helped (or will help) leverage other funding, giving them credibility when bidding to other organisations.

"We can now demonstrate our successes better – so ultimately, it may help leverage more funding from elsewhere." Project Lead.

"This initiative would have not got off the ground if we did not have this level of support [from Mercers]… We think it's made the local authority look at this initiative and think it's worth expanding." Project Lead.

"...you're really seeing this catch 22 situation when you seek funding...people need to know that you need the funding but at the same time, they don't want to fund an organisation that's about to go under any minute. So they need you to have a secure income stream and yet not have a completely secure... to be able to just show that we've got three years worth of funding from Mercers is reassuring to them to say, okay, there are gaps, but you're, you're worth putting money into for us." Project Lead.

For some, being able to share the learning and work from MCF and SRW funded project has strengthened other bids enabling them to secure funding for other projects too (e.g. one project leveraged funding, for a counselling project to run alongside the family support programme, another was given some additional emergency support money from the council to help with additional grants for white goods and furniture).

Some projects had established or sought to create partnerships with other organisations and agencies. These partnerships served multiple potential purposes, including generation of income (e.g., through room hire), growth and expanding reach (e.g. through community outreach) achieving self-sustainability.

"It's broadened our horizons, thinking about who we can work with, which gives more opportunities to our dancers, and also more exposure, about the positive side of having a learning disability." Project Lead.

Examples of how the learning from projects has been used to influence practice and policy include, research and insight from one project was shared at a local COVID-19 resilience board and led to provision of additional support for people accessing the food bank; another helped one family win a SEN tribunal, which ended up becoming case law; a third has influenced statutory agencies by sharing good practice in working with their particular client group. One project stated that they had learnt that they are good at what they do through this project which had "vindicated our decision to make this project a strategic priority and not give up on it":

"We will keep going and hope some way Mercers will extend the funding somehow. It has been reassuring that we design projects effectively and launch and deliver them despite what barriers are put in our way - including COVID-19. This type of work is really needed and underutilised." Project Lead.

"Across the Country ...We were hoping [pre-COVID-19] to take this model and share it with other organisations." Project Lead.

Now turn to Part 3 to see our summary conclusions and recommendations

Appendix 1: Overview of the funded projects

Grantee Name	Grant Amount	Date of Award	Term Months	Area Served	Faith / secular	Activity and target group
Harrow Carers	81,000.00	01/07/2021	36	Harrow, London	Secular	Funding for a full time engagement officer, to help raise awareness of Harrow Carers and the support it can offers to carers who are currently not engaged with the charity – with the aim to support 750 more disadvantaged carers in Harrow
The Junction Foundation	90,000.00	01/07/2021	36	North East	Secular	Whole family support to young carers and families, through trusted adult approaches, providing navigation through systems, a trusted key contact and peer support opportunities.
Markfield Project	62,979.00	01/07/2021	36	Haringey, London	Secular	An accredited 13-week parenting programme ('Strengthening Families Strengthening Communities'), running three courses per year, especially tailored for parents of children with disabilities.
New Hope North East	75,000.00	01/07/2021	36	North East	Secular	Funding for core costs as it transitions from being volunteer led with sessional paid workers to employed staff including Project Coordinator and Children's Activities Lead to allow development of effective management approach that meet support/needs of families-carers.
Westminster Roman Catholic Diocese Trustee	84,000.00	01/07/2021	36	Hounslow / Barnet, London	Faith	Funding to help increase reach and support more carers to cope with the emotional, financial and physical demands of caring for an adult with learning disabilities.

Clockhouse Community Centre	70,000.00	20/04/2021	24	Greenwich, London	Secular	Funding to support Clockhouse Advice Hub, which provides expert support and assistance to some of the most disadvantaged families in Greenwich. The Centre also provides advice and advocacy support for people experiencing domestic violence and or abuse.
Clockhouse Community Centre	70,000.00	30/01/2019	24	Greenwich, London	Secular	**N.B. This is a second time this has been funded.** Funding for the continuation of the Advice Hub
Elfrida Rathbone Camden	40,000.00	27/01/2021	24	Camden, London	Secular	Contribution towards a Families Manager to support families with multiple and complex needs, who have requested help but are not eligible for, or cannot access, statutory services.
Parent Club	20,000.00	27/01/2021	24	Hackney, London	Secular	Funding towards the delivery of weekly 'Kitchen Club' sessions for families living in temporary accommodation in Hackney. Delivered from the Round Chapel Clapton Park United Reform Church
All Hallows Church Bow	67,933.00	02/07/2020	36	Tower Hamlets, London	Faith	Funding towards the core costs of Fern Street Family Centre to enable them to offer a whole family programme of advice, support, learning and play activities for young children and their parents/carers.
St Vincent's Family Project	48,240.00	02/07/2020	36	Westminster, London	Faith	Funding to contribute to the delivery of its parenting programmes for vulnerable families in South Westminster. Through enabling families to learn parenting skills they will be more able to navigate their way out of poverty and social isolation
Barnet Community Projects	45,000.00	29/04/2020	36	Barnet, London	Secular	Activities and support services for families, children and young people on the Dollis Valley Estate and surrounding areas. Helping them to access the support and opportunities that they need, to improve their financial, physical and mental health.

Enfield Citizens Advice Bureaux Services #1	28,000.00	6/6/2018	24	Enfield, London	Secular	'The Church and CAB Working Together to Tackle Food Poverty' – Enfield CAB in partnership with Jubilee Church providing to provide and advocacy to people using the food bank and helping to break the cycle of deprivation.
Enfield Citizens Advice Bureaux Services #2	28,000.00	29/04/2020	24	Enfield, London	Secular	**N.B. This is a second time this has been funded.** This funding allows the project to continue to fund a fully trained adviser at the food bank twice a week, to undertake emergency work and book follow up appointments for those with more complex cases.
Magpie Dance	60,000.00	29/04/2020	36	Bromley, London	Secular	To support the development of a new family and peer support programme for people with a range of learning disabilities who are aged 8+. The work includes family fun dance activities, skills development workshops, theatre trips and addresses transport issues enabling participants and their families to participate together.
Oasis Community Hub Waterloo	71,863.00	29/04/2020	24	Southwalk, London	Faith	Funding for Oasis Family Support Programme – which provides tailored support and positive pathways, enabling local families experiencing poverty to become independent including advice and advocacy services, family activities, crisis support, drop in clinics at schools and sign posting to other relevant services
The Parent House (TPH)	60,000.00	29/04/2020	36	Islington, London	Secular	Core funding to enable the Parent House to sustain a variety of activities that support, connect and empower deprived families. This includes a proven set of courses and programmes that have helped parents move on in a variety of new directions.
City and Hackney Carers Centre	42,400.00	29/01/2020	24	Hackney, London	Secular	Support towards a Parent Carer Project to support families of children with disabilities and additional needs. Courses, workshops and information will be designed and provided to meet needs identified .

Quaker Social Action	60,000.00	29/01/2020	36	London	Faith	Funding towards Made of Money programme - which supports families facing poverty to improve their financial confidence and capability. This is done through a mixture of group work, one to one support and access to digital resources. They also provide training, coaching and resources that help build the skills for financial confidence.
St Christopher's Hospice	85,458.00	08/10/2019	36	Lewisham, London	Secular	Funding towards Coach4Care, an innovative volunteer scheme which provides support to carers through coaching provided by ex-carers, who have lived experience of similar challenges. The ex-carers receive training that enables them to use their previous care experience and couple this with new coaching skills.
Baytree Centre	75,000.00	08/10/2019	36	London	Secular	Coaching for women facing poverty to develop skills and knowledge to break the cycle of poverty for them and their families. Women will participate in a variety of classes and workshops to meet their individual and family needs.
In Deep Community Task Force	16,000.00	08/10/2019	24	Westminster, London	Secular	A community based project for parents of SEND (Special Educational Needs Disabilities) children. In-Deep seeks to tackle the isolation and loneliness that carers of SEND children face. It helps bring carers together, enabling them to share their experiences with others facing similar situations, realising that they are not alone.
The Kids And Young Adults Klub (The Kayaks)	27,000.00	08/10/2019	36	North East	Secular	Funding to support fitness sessions for the parents/carers of children with special needs ran by the Special needs support group (KAYAKS).
Mind in Harrow	77,900.00	08/10/2019	24	London	Secular	Community-led project empowering the Somali community and key health workers to understand and deal with mental ill-health.
Support Through Court	45,000.00	08/10/2019	36	London	Secular	Support Central Family Court (CFC) service which assists unrepresented and disadvantaged families to better access justice in the family courts.

Jigsaw4u	75,000.00	04/07/2019	36	Sutton & Merton, London	Secular	Support towards a community based project working with the whole family – where a parent or sibling is in prison. A dedicated project worker will liaise with the family to develop a programme of 1 to 1 support and group work to meet the emotional, developmental and social needs identified.
North East Autism Society	90,000.00	04/07/2019	36	North East	Secular	Support for the Family Development Service of a charity that provides services for those with autism and neurodiverse conditions. A menu of support is provided including: Outreach, Workshops, Partnership working and online support.
Project Seventeen	75,000.00	04/07/2019	36	London	Secular	Funding towards their work in reducing homelessness and severe poverty among migrant families excluded from mainstream services through the provision of specialist advice and advocacy.
Northumberland Community Bank	90,000.00	28/03/2019	33	North East	Secular	Funding to recruit a Relationship and Implementation Manager to help more people in their communities manage their money better, supporting them to build financial resilience by offering relevant and appropriate financial products and services.
Mission Initiative Newcastle East (MINE)	9,546.00	30/01/2019	12	North East	Faith	MINE run youth activities across four parishes (including St. Michael's Church Centre), led by a qualified youth worker. Through their experience MINE identified in order to bring about real change it needs to also work with parents. This funding has enabled a trial after school club for children and their parents.
A Way Out: Liberty RISE Family project	63,659.00	30/01/2019	36	North East	Faith	Funding to support the families of women involved in survival sex work. The families have been supported to help learn to identify and manage risk, and to develop communication strategies to include problem solving, boundary setting and self-care.

Cardinal Hume Centre	40,000.00	17/10/2018	12	Westminster, London	Faith	The redevelopment of the Cardinal Hume Centre's Family Centre, Employment and Training Centre, Gateway, Advice Centre and Immigration Service. The Centre works to support homeless young people, families in need and individuals facing challenges to lead more fulfilling lives.
Estuary Homes	100,000.00	17/10/2018	12	Lincolnshire	Secular	Provision of Safe Homes for families fleeing violence and abuse and providing ongoing holistic support to the families enabling women and families to live safely and recover after domestic abuse.
Norfolk Family Mediation Service (Norfolk)	10,000.00	17/10/2018	12	Norfolk	Secular	Support towards core costs of running the mediation service - which helps separated couples make decisions and build new futures for themselves and their families.
Ormiston Children and Families Trust	50,000.00	17/10/2018	24	Norfolk	Secular	Mpower Norfolk - building stronger more resilient women, able to cope and support each other. Helping women get the right support; for example, safe housing, parenting courses, counselling, or self-esteem courses.
Southwark Diocesan WelCare	95,350.00	17/10/2018	24	Lambeth, London	Faith	Support towards Inner London Child & Family Support Service - providing additional capacity and expertise via a family support worker. Welcare's delivery model combines a social worker and family support worker which enables them to support families with more complex and challenging needs ..
Resources for Autism	100,000.00	04/07/2018	36	London	Secular	Reach Out Family Support project provides parents and siblings who are carers with respite whilst enabling the person with autism to achieve a chosen goal, which can be life changing for them and their families, helping to reduce isolation and increase well-being for the whole family.

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