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

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

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## Summary

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# 1. Summary Findings – 'Understanding the Landscape'

**A rapid review of relevant policy and research found that the Early Help 'landscape' is very complex for children, families and carers needing additional support in England.**

**Children in need and in care have poorer outcomes than other children, including in education, health, offending, employment and homelessness. However, evidence about 'what works' when supporting families and carers is not as strong as it should be.**

Review findings suggest that the following methods and approaches work best to support better outcomes for families and carers:

- Use whole system approaches
- Build positive relationships
- Give staff autonomy and flexibility
- Acknowledge adversity
- Use asset-based approaches (approaches that recognise and build on people's and communities' strengths and potential) and community- or peer-led support
- Ensure variety in the support offer through partnership working
- Work through schools
- Ensure work is age-appropriate and timely.

Part 1 also includes other findings about research, legislation and policy, understanding different families' and carers' needs, and issues that affect how impact can be measured.



## **37 projects in 35 organisations received funding to support Better Outcomes for Families & Carers.**

Funding was awarded by Mercers' Charitable Foundation (MCF) and the Charity of Sir Richard Whittington (SRW), through the Mercers' Church and Communities programme. Independent researchers evaluated the programme to find out about its impact and outcomes.

They used a mix of methods, including a review of policy and research, a survey and interviews with projects. This is a summary of their findings. More details can be found in the full evaluation report, Parts 1-3.

## 2. Summary Findings – What We Know Now

**Part 2 of the evaluation focused on the projects themselves, and included a review of project monitoring information (all), a survey for projects (34 out of 35 organisations), and interviews (18 project leads and 19 other individuals).**

### About the Projects and the Families and Carers they Support

Around 18,000 people are supported each year. This includes 4510 parents, 4351 children / young people, 2080 workers (paid and volunteers) and 6963 'other - wider groups'. The majority of projects were supporting parents directly, but many were also supporting children, families and carers as a whole, directly or indirectly.

The projects provide a range of services and activities, including:

- Family support and parenting programmes
- Specialist programmes, provision and services
- Financial advice services and programmes
- Specialist programmes and support for carers (including parent carers and young carers).



“I feel like Someone since I started coming here.”  
Parent

Volunteers play a vital role in project delivery for most projects. The time contributed by volunteers was equivalent to approximately 841 full-time posts. 1289 full-time equivalent paid jobs were created with this support.

The percentage of organisational activity funded by MCF and SRW varied from <1% through to 100%, with most receiving under 10% of their total funds from MCF/SRW.

### Approaches, Delivery Methods and Values

The core values for all projects are social and community values. Projects said their work depends on trust, acceptance, respect, inclusion, being nurturing, non judgmental, passionate, enabling, empowering, generous and hopeful.

Projects described the approaches and methods that made them effective. These are also ones that the Part 1 review had identified as effective:

- Building positive relationships – especially building trust with families and carers
- Understanding families ‘and carers’ needs and meeting specific additional needs – especially responding to experiences of poverty, exclusion and trauma



- Using asset-based/strengths-based approaches – especially, seeing families and carers as ‘experts in their own lives’, building on existing strengths, using person-centred approaches and developing peer- and community-support
- Partnership working and collaboration – especially to ensure a more joined-up approach, offer a wider range of support and more referral routes for families and carers
- Giving staff autonomy and flexibility to respond to families’ and carers’ circumstances and needs.

“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

## Outcomes and Impact

All projects are achieving positive outcomes for families and carers. Overall, projects were more likely to be directly achieving outcomes for parents or carers than for children.\*

The most frequent project outcomes are:

- Improving parents’/carers’ parenting skills and abilities
- Improving other outcomes for parents/carers
- Reducing family poverty and deprivation.

Projects described a huge range of specific outcomes that meet the needs of particular groups of children, young people, parents, carers and families (see infographic over page). This variety emphasises that projects and beneficiaries are unique, and therefore there are all sorts of positive differences made to people’s lives.

Many projects emphasised that their outcomes are interrelated. Success depends on relationships and feelings, building confidence and empowerment were particularly highlighted. While other asset-based and relational methods and approaches are also used.

Many projects find it difficult to describe and evidence their outcomes, for a variety of reasons; but nevertheless, the evaluation was able to show the programme is making a valuable difference to people’s lives.

*“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, etcetera, also means we can work with a family on their practical needs, reducing the pressure they’re experiencing, and helping parents to engage with positive change more widely.”*

Project Lead

\*This is due to the way in which the projects have chosen to report against Mercers’ funding priorities.



# Outcomes and Impact



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The Mercers' Better Outcomes for Families and Carers funding helps projects to make a real difference to the lives of children, young people and their families.

## Who Benefits?

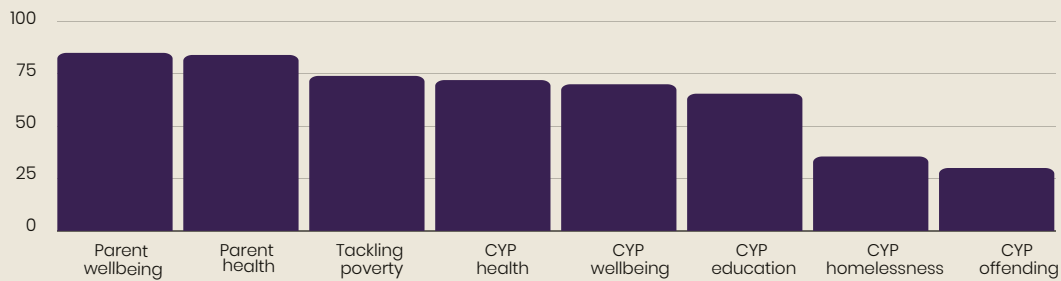
Around **18,000 people** each year, including:

- 4,510** identified parents
- 4,351** identified children and young people
- 1,045** parent-carers
- 2,080** staff and volunteers
- 6,963** others, including the wider community



## What Outcomes are Projects Achieving?

Projects do work that affects many different areas of families' lives...



Key outcome areas and % of projects working towards this (CYP = children and young people)

### Some outcomes for whole families

- Conflict is reduced;
- Families function better;
- Families are more stable;
- Immigration status is regularised;
- Families move out of poverty;
- Families are socially connected;
- Housing situation improves;
- Families feel less isolated and/or marginalised;
- Women and children escape violence.

### Some outcomes for parents and carers

- Less stressed and anxious;
- Get respite breaks;
- Improve language skills;
- Improve self-confidence;
- Improve financial stability;
- Become more independent;
- Parents/carers of disabled children are more assertive and better able to deal with school and assessment systems.

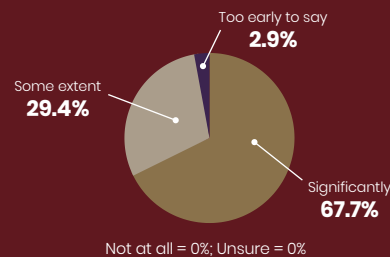
### Some outcomes for children and young people

- Able to play and learn with others;
- Recover emotionally from domestic abuse;
- Able to recover better from trauma and loss.

"You helped us find a way to cope as a family"

"I feel like we've got our kids back"

### To what extent is Covid affecting what projects are achieving?



The funding also helped create 1,289 full-time equivalent paid jobs and 841 FTE volunteer roles.

Evaluation of The Mercers' Better Outcomes for Families and Carers funding – Winter 2021/22 – by Fiona Weir, Kerry Swain and Sarah Frost

Outcomes analysis based on survey data from 33 projects. A total of 37 projects in 35 different organisations were funded. See full report for more information.



## Other Findings

### Challenges

The ongoing impact of COVID-19 presents 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.



### Working with Mercers'

Projects value Mercers' funding approach. They appreciate the flexibility, the genuine efforts made to understand individual projects' needs and the personal style of working. The application process and annual reporting are also seen as straightforward and more meaningful than some other funders.

### Learning, reflections and the future

Projects learned a lot from their experiences during the pandemic and also about the changing needs of families and carers, and the need to adapt their provision. Many projects plan to maintain these new ways of working in the future.



# 3. Summary Conclusions and Recommendations

## General Conclusions

All projects are delivering work which is making a difference to the lives of children, young people, and their families and carers. The work is both valued and valuable – it is appreciated by beneficiaries and has impacts that address important needs, including deep-seated social problems such as poverty. Project activities and approaches are appropriate, effective and broadly consistent with the evidence base discovered in the rapid review.



Projects have strong values and principles – particularly a strong focus on social and community values – which the review did not predict (probably because prior research has focused primarily on statutory and mainstream services, and the funded projects are delivered by voluntary, community and faith organisations). Projects clearly connected their outcomes with their asset-based and relational methods and approaches, seeing these as crucial to their success.

Projects' values and principles reflect the Mercers' own, and help to ensure that the programme priorities are delivered. The Mercers' approach to grant management is appreciated and seen positively.

COVID-19 and related pandemic restrictions affected all projects, changing the ways that they worked and often limiting their reach and impact. We judge that most would have been able to do more, under more normal circumstances.

Projects were able to confirm general areas of impact and outcome themes, but they were not always able to show or articulate clearly what specific outcomes had been achieved. In some cases, this was because projects were in their early stages; but in other cases it was because they were not clear about differences between activities and outputs (what they were doing) and outcomes (what change these achieved). Following analysis, we found a huge range of specific outcomes described by projects. This variety emphasises that projects and beneficiaries are unique, and therefore there are all sorts of positive differences made to people's lives.

The full value and impact of the programme cannot yet be assessed because of these gaps in understanding and because projects are at different stages of delivery. For some, this evaluation looked back at what they had done over the past year or so; for others who have just begun, this research establishes a 'benchmark' that could be used to measure achievements at a later date. Overall, the members of the Church and Communities Committee can feel very satisfied with this work.



# 4. Opportunities and Recommendations

## **The findings of this evaluation present a number of opportunities for The Mercers' Company:**

1. Continue to fund projects whose approaches are evidence-based and effective, and whose outcomes are impactful, using the evidence from this evaluation (including the rapid review and fieldwork findings) to inform investment decisions.
2. Continue to fund in a flexible and supportive way, allowing projects to adapt their delivery and project plans in response to changing needs, including the ongoing impacts of COVID-19.
3. Explicitly seek to fund more projects that use asset-based approaches, focusing on 'what's strong not what's wrong' in families and with carers. Consider targeting some funding specifically at peer support, 'parents as experts' and volunteer-led work, which are impactful and cost-effective.
4. Consider explicitly seeking to fund projects using trauma-informed approaches.
5. Consider targeting more funding towards projects that work in specific, tailored ways with families and carers that need specific, tailored support – notably projects that provide women-only spaces. Consider exploring with projects whether there may be any unmet or under-met needs, such as more work with men or disabled people (see also eight).
6. Consider encouraging projects to work in partnership with each other and with agencies such as local authorities and schools. Provide some additional funding for the extra time this takes.
7. Reflect on the findings related to the proportion of funding awarded compared with each organisation's overall budget. Specifically, reflect on whether funders are comfortable contributing small amounts to larger organisations, or whether they might prefer targeting more funding at smaller, community-led organisations.
8. See projects as 'experts by experience' on effective approaches and emerging issues affecting families and carers (such as food and fuel poverty). Consider seeking and using insights from projects deliberately to help shape future funding priorities and further improve the overall impact of the funding under the better outcomes for families and carers priority of the Mercers' Church and Communities programme.
9. Support projects to identify, articulate and better understand their intended and actual impacts and outcomes (and the differences between their outcomes and their activities and outputs), so that evidence about impact can be further improved. Mercers' may wish to consider (a) providing further training and/or resources for this, and/or (b) co-developing tools with projects that specifically enable them to tell their own stories and articulate their outcomes and impacts, for example through case studies and theories of change.
10. Share the evaluation report with all the projects funded, to support learning and celebrate achievements.
11. Consider further opportunities for facilitating shared learning between funded projects and with other providers in the children, families and carers sector, to promote the value in the successful approaches used. Particularly, consider hosting a learning event to share findings and develop insight, which would: connect projects to support peer learning; extend and diversify the type and range of future funding applicants; and increase cross-sector strategic links and potential for partnership working.



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