



THE  
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COMPANY

# The Kayaks

Supporting children with special educational needs and their families in South Tyneside

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## CASE STUDY

Prepared by Fiona Weir for The Mercers' Company, 2022

# The Kayaks

Kayaks provide a safe place where both children and adults can relax and “just be themselves” without fear of judgement.

## In a Nutshell

The Kayaks support autistic children and adults, their families and carers, and those with other special educational needs (SEN). They run a Saturday activity session for families in a local school, mid-week sessions for parents, and provide other information and support, particularly with getting a diagnosis or SEN plan. It is entirely run by volunteers, many of them themselves on the autistic spectrum.



## Making a Difference

Most of the families supported by Kayaks have a child with autism or another SEN. Their needs are all individual but there are some common themes: families say Kayaks provide a safe place where both children and adults can relax and “just be themselves” without fear of judgement; and that the support has helped them to accept their difference, as well as to learn more about their SEN, their needs and their rights.

The Kayaks have remarkable success in supporting families to get a correct diagnosis, which leads to more appropriate support, particularly ensuring children have their special educational needs met in school. One case went to tribunal: “That’s really



tangible. It’s a big deal. It ended up becoming case law” – Project Lead. An additional emergency COVID grant from Mercers’ Charitable Foundation provided counselling for children during the pandemic, and helped them cope with loss, bereavement, fear and confusion: “The counsellor has really helped them through it, to understand the world around them... I feel like we’ve actually got our kids back.”

“I have ‘masked’ all my life and I’ve had anxiety all my life... Now, knowing that I’ve got support, I’ve accepted us for who we are... It’s given me an added confidence.”

**Beneficiary**

“Everybody that we’ve worked with who’s come from Kayaks speaks very highly of them. There’s not been one person that’s had a bad word to say. They just feel extremely supported.”

**Delivery Partner**

“I suppose the strapline would be ‘We look after our own’ – and we do... We provide services for any family in the North-East affected by disabilities or special educational needs.”

**Project Lead**

## How Mercers' Support Helps

The Kayaks were awarded £27,000 over three years from Mercers' Charitable Foundation (MCF) starting from October 2019. They also received an additional emergency COVID grant for £4,800 from MCF. The Project Lead valued Mercers' unique approach:

"It was thorough, but personable at the same time. It was different, because I've never been visited by a representative of a philanthropic organisation before... It felt as though we were being taken seriously."

"We realised we weren't actually alone. We've built friendships from going there. It's just a bit of a lifeline for the kids because they can be themselves and they can socialise."

Parent

## How the Work is Done

Kayaks have no paid staff and all their work is done by volunteers. These are mostly parents of children with autism or another special educational need, who act as peer supporters for other families, as they look for information or seek help with getting diagnosed and understanding the system. Some volunteers have autism or another SEN themselves.

Non-judgmental peer support and understanding gained through lived experience are at the heart of The Kayaks' approach: "There's no judgement there. Anybody's welcome... It works out that the families support each other as well." - Delivery Partner.



## The grant awarded by Mercers' Charitable Foundation supports about 70% of The Kayaks' current work, particularly:

- **Two mid-week drop-in sessions for parents to prevent loneliness and isolation**
- **One-to-one advice, information and support by appointment, including support in formal diagnosis and dispute processes**
- **Counselling for children and occasionally adults.**

Four volunteers run the drop-in sessions for parents and many more are involved in the Saturday Club. But Chairperson Malcolm is The Kayaks' project lead, and his passion and expertise are recognised by everyone: "Malcolm is a man of knowledge... We could ring him any time and we know he would be there. We know we've always got someone who can support us... There's not a lot of services out there can offer any support." - Parent.

## COVID-19 and Other Challenges

COVID-19 had a huge impact on The Kayaks. They closed their Saturday Club for children and families, their drop-in sessions for parents and all other face-to-face support, and everything moved online. The physical fitness project they had planned to do with parents had to be abandoned altogether. This affected participants badly: "People's support networks and mechanism had been taken away... People began to struggle

and their mental health suffered” – Project Lead. So, with Mercers’ support, Kayaks diverted funding to pay for vital counselling, which helped autistic children and some adults cope with the pandemic.

## The Future

Everyone involved in The Kayaks is determined to see the work continue, and they are certain their support will continue to be needed. However, the Project Lead worries about rising demand, succession planning and what might be possible in future: “I think once you started something like this, it becomes an expectation. People become used to the idea that you’re there.... New people come forward. And I think the statutory services rely on Kayaks for certain things... So it has to continue, because if it wasn’t for a group like ours, you’d have some fragmented families who... would be at the end of their tethers”.

“I think it’s given them hope. Whereas before, you know, some positions might be described as hopeless. It’s enabled people who don’t know what they don’t know, to learn a bit more about the kinds of things that affect their lives... And I think for people to be well informed, it means that it’s more difficult for others to patronise them. They know exactly what their rights are. They know exactly the various bits of legislation that we give them to freely use.”

**Project Lead**

“So if Malcolm wasn’t there? They’d probably think I was just being a hypochondriac... I’ve been through various places and no one’s picked up on it. Even when I’ve said I’m struggling with things, no-one’s noticed.”

**Beneficiary**



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