



**The Sunshine Centre and the pandemic.  
March 23<sup>rd</sup> – September 30<sup>th</sup> 2020**

*Moving forward together with children & families in the community*



## March 23rd 2020 – Lockdown announced

**These messages became our mantra as we changed the way we worked to support the children, families and community members.**

The Sunshine Centre has remained open throughout the pandemic, for many months being the only voluntary agency available to the local community. We adapted our working practice to address the needs of children and families. As time went on, we found ourselves supporting the elderly, adults with learning difficulties, people with poor mental health, pregnant women, new parents, other vulnerable adults and children as well as those self-isolating and shielding.

Childcare remained open for children of front-line workers and vulnerable children, both those who previously used our services but also some who were not on our roll. We cared for an average of 21 children per week leading up to the 1<sup>st</sup> of June. From the 1<sup>st</sup> June we welcomed back more children, an average of 40 individual children attended throughout that week.

Our initial plans were to ensure:

- there was enough food and essential items available to families
- those children who were not eligible to attend childcare received activity bags containing essentials such as books, crayons, glue stick and paper; all things which our experience tells us many of our children's homes are lacking.
- families' emotional health was supported with at least a weekly telephone call.
- the community knew we were available for advice and support.

It soon became clear that we had underestimated the unmet need and the support required. The demand for food and essential items was far more than we had anticipated. We received requests from professionals and families for help with children's clothing, nappies, milk, eggs, infant formula, toilet rolls and personal hygiene items. Additionally, parents-to-be requested items for their new-borns. We had estimated producing 30 food parcels a week; this rapidly increased to 80 and then 90.

Some “food parcels plus” (extra items added) were delivered by volunteers, others were collected from our established isolation area.

After two to three weeks we faced another challenge. Parents’ safeguarding conferences and meetings now had to take place virtually. Many of our families do not have internet access at home or own a computer, their only communication device being a mobile phone. We used a gratefully received grant to upgrade the PC in our community living room (renamed isolation room 2) to make it available for parents to use to attend the meetings. Parents were now able to see and hear the professionals taking part in meetings. This computer is now used for parents to access Family Group Conferencing meetings, Child Protection Conferences, Child In Need meetings, Drug and Alcohol counselling sessions and Court procedures.

Early Year’s Practitioners kept in touch with those children not eligible to attend childcare by using *Tapestry*, an online learning journal which helps staff and families celebrate their children’s learning and development. It weaves the child ‘s story of how they are growing and developing. Families shared photographs and comments on how they had used the activity bags and what they had made or done. **110** children were seen or contacted weekly this way.

**20** Families received additional support with at least a weekly telephone call or virtual meeting. Once we had established the second isolation room, we became able to hold socially distanced face to face meetings. This work was crucial to reduce isolation and support individuals’ and families’ mental health. The food parcel and activity bag collections also allowed time and space to check in with families.

The original plan for activity packs for early year’s children soon required adapting to ‘Family activity packs’. We included ideas for siblings and family games and activities. Idea sheets were inserted describing activities to do with items in the bag and how they could have fun together with items they already have or could easily collect.

We also used the activity bags to deliver important messages about caring for themselves, staying safe and encouraging learning and development. For example, “Magical Maths” was included as a family game.

Saplings, our ante-natal group in partnership with the community midwives continued in a different format. We were able to use the community room and the computer for individuals to continue to access psychotherapy support.

The community room became a safe- haven for a young person fleeing domestic abuse when all other avenues were closed to them.

Childcare attendees joined in building a bug hotel with volunteers on-line from the Discovery Channel. The children spent many hours looking for bugs, checking if their hotel had attracted any visitors and collecting food just in case!



The main hall of The Sunshine Centre was transformed into a warehouse, storing food, essential supplies for families and educational activity packs for children and families.



Ready for collection. Week 4

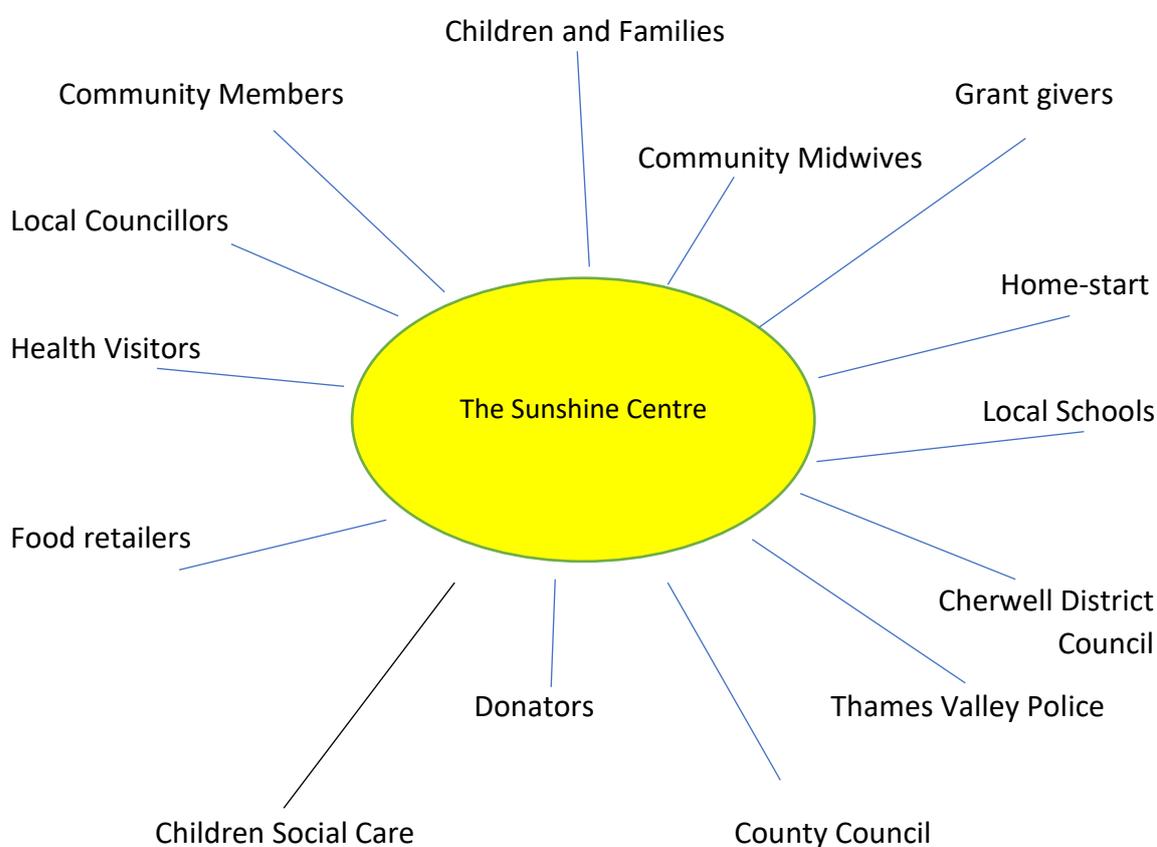


And some for emergencies!

Staff and volunteers worked hard to ensure that no one went without food or activities and that children were given opportunities to learn during this very abnormal time. It has been a steep learning curve, re-engineering our administrative and organisational skills to running a distribution centre. Social distancing, PPE and hand sanitizing has been a challenge but is now the new norm, adhered to by our staff and the families using our services.

This change in service provision was made possible by generous grant givers, volunteer support, supermarket donations and the positive spirit of the community we work with.

**We all worked together.**



Everyone played an important role. Neighbours looked out for neighbours. Friends collected items for friends. Volunteers collected and delivered food parcels, activity packs, clothes and essential items on a weekly basis.

## What did we achieve from April 2020 to September 2020?



**45** Welcome Baby Boxes provided

**501** Activity Packs assembled, collected or delivered during this period.



## What did we learn?

This period has been difficult for families and community members. People were resourceful and supported each other when they could. One senior member of the community told us how she collected five pastries from us and shared them with her neighbours. They all stood in their own gardens with their elevenes and had a 'chat'. Although this may sound a small intervention the impact was significant; they felt less isolated, they checked on each other and most importantly I am told they had a laugh!

A survey of parents showed us how young children were struggling during lock down. They described their children as 'sad', 'miserable' 'angry' 'temperamental' 'missing their peer group' 'fearful' 'anxious' 'asking for school/nursery/childcare'.

Families say that the activity bags gave them quality family time, something they rarely had. The children were not on tablets or watching the television, they used their gardens and parks when allowed.

We engaged with more volunteers who took on amazing roles, delivering food parcels, activity packs, collecting food, taking clothing parcels, essential items such as bedding and toys for children. A plea for nappies resulting in one person buying a pack with her weekly shopping and donating them.

Collecting the food parcels and activity packs became a vehicle for parents to talk about their struggles, disclosing domestic abuse situations and seeking support safely.

This period also consolidated our thoughts on the lack of services for fathers who are perpetrators of abuse. A grant from Cherwell District Council and local County Councillors paid for training five members of staff to deliver the accredited 17-week Caring Dad's programme.

## Comments from children, families and community members

### Food Parcels



'We want you to know that we really appreciate the help. I am a carer, but my hours have been reduced. We are not taking advantage. Thank so much '

'It has been a real life saver during lockdown. Thank you'

'Thank you for the food parcels. I made rice and chicken dish using the rice, onions, sweetcorn and chilli. I also oven baked some chopped potatoes and served it with salad where the lettuce was home grown. Thank so much for the food parcels I quite like a surprise box to see what I can make from it. Lol! '

**You saved my life!**

### Activity/Family Packs.

'The activity bag cheered L up so much, thank you all '

'J especially loves the texture book, touching the different objects and it is now one of her favourite books'

*T loved her Wonky Donkey book which daddy had to read many times. It even went to bed with her*

'R was very happy with his activity pack and used the scissors to cut paper'

*'We hadf lots of fun today making a sticker picture and a funny face plate'*

'J' J spent a very long time in the garden exploring with his magnifying glass'

'K was very proud of what he made with his brother from the activity pack. Thank you'

One family sent a message saying:

'The Sunshine Centre is the only organisation that has reached out to us during this time'

## **Moving Forward**

Covid -19 remains with us. Although we have stopped providing food parcels, we have begun to establish a Community Pantry. We now have a small chiller and shelves in our isolation area. Our service users can access this support freely. We are only in our infancy with this project, recognising the need to obtain more cupboard food and fresh goods. We are working with partners to move this project forward. Volunteers are available to deliver food to anyone in crisis or in self-isolation.

One single mum during the lock down period discovered a passion for cooking. She sent us regular pictures of what she had made for her children and herself from her food parcel. We are working with her to put her inventions into a recipe book. We hope to involve this imaginative mum in some cookery demonstrations.

We are now offering nurturing groups for young children to support their mental health alongside support for their parents. We have applied for funding to support this work.

The Freedom Course (Domestic Abuse) and parenting courses are now delivered in small socially distanced groups; which has resulted in some services being offered more frequently, for example 3 groups of 3 parents per week as opposed to one group of 9 prior to lockdown.

All our children are back in childcare and we currently have 125 on roll.

It became apparent to us during the first lock down how desperate it was to support fathers who are perpetrators of domestic violence. After researching the support offered by other Local Authorities, the Caring Dads programme was identified. 5 staff have trained to deliver this programme, funded by local county councillors and Cherwell District Council. We are linking with a multi-agency group to share the ethos of the programme and enable appropriate referrals to be made. January will see the programme launched. This will be the first support service for dads in Oxfordshire apart from the probation service.

Spooky Family Fun and Winter Wishes to bring the community together safely are very much in our thoughts.

We continue to seek funding to secure The Sunshine Centre.

## **Conclusion**

We have been and still are in unprecedented times. Working with the community and partner agencies we have adapted to the needs of our local community and throughout Banbury. We are immensely grateful for the donations and grants we have received to enable this work. Trustees, staff, volunteers, funders and community members have all worked incredibly hard together and we are proud that our organisation, started by the community for the community has been able to remain open during these challenging times providing vital services.

Victoria Prentice MP awarded The Sunshine Centre the 'Unsung Hero' reward.

*When we least expect it,  
life sets us a challenge to  
test our courage and willingness to change;  
at such a moment,  
there is no point in pretending  
that nothing has happened or  
in saying that we are not ready.  
The challenge will not wait.  
Life does not look back.*

Paulo Coelho

The corona virus as most certainly challenged us all. Thank you everyone for all the support you have given. We have started the journey together and we will continue together. Which way our journey takes us is yet to be seen.

*Jill Edge MA.*

*Centre Manager*