



The Centre
for Effective
Services

One Family

Case Study

September 2023



Case Study - One Family

This case study showcases the work of One Family, which provides community education and support to lone parents throughout Ireland.

The research was funded by the Bechaire Fund, a charitable fund operating under the umbrella of Community Foundation Ireland (CFI). One of the Fund's objectives is to support education initiatives with a view to affording access to and the benefits of education to children.

In Ireland, households headed by a lone parent with low levels of completed education are amongst those at greatest risk of poverty, facing economic and social disadvantage that have potential lifelong adverse consequences for children. Community education programmes potentially offer 'second chance' return to education opportunities to lone parents and a progression for lone parents to improved mental health and wellbeing, further education, and employment. The Bechaire Fund appointed the Centre for Effective Services (CES) to conduct qualitative research, through case studies, to explore the impact on lone parents and their children from participating in community education programmes across Ireland.

The research was conducted by the CES team over a seven-month period during the second half of 2022 and early 2023.

Thirty people contributed to this case study, including members of the One Family management team (3), community education tutors/facilitators and family support workers (4), and a sample of community education participants (23), past and present, all of whom had experienced parenting alone. Participants generously shared the stories of the ways in which their participation in community education has transformed their lives.

The stories contain recurring themes for appreciation of shared learning and support with evidence of positive feelings around parenting and strengthened capacity to parent, and for some, progression to further and higher education, and employment. There are also themes of enhanced mental health and wellbeing, with a deeper sense of self, personal agency, connection, and belonging, and for some greater capacity to be involved in their local community and society.

1. The Story of One Family

One Family is a national organisation that provides information, education, support, and development opportunities, both online and in person, for people parenting alone and sharing parenting.

One Family was founded as Cherish in 1972 as a self-help group of unmarried mothers¹ that supported and lobbied for the rights of people parenting alone and their children. The name One Family was adopted in recognition of the varied forms of one-parent families. The organisation supports all types and all members of one-parent families, respecting the realities of family life, to effect positive change and achieve equality and social inclusion for all one-parent families in Ireland.

¹ For learners who have come to Ireland from other countries.



One Family has a longstanding and renowned reputation for advocating on behalf of people parenting alone and their families. In 2023, One Family celebrated fifty years of service by supporting, influencing policy, and advocating for one parent families in Ireland. On the United Nations International Day of Families in May 2023, One Family reiterated the call for support to back the change of Article 41.3 of the Constitution on the definition of the family.

One Family offers a range of community education programmes supporting people with life skills, parenting skills, mental health and wellbeing, and skills for paid employment. This first began in 2002, when the organisation began to offer classes focused on computer skills, with classes run weekly and a free creche available for participants. Parenting education and support have always been a feature of One Family/ Cherish, and this was formalised as parenting programmes, in the early 2000's.

Around 2010, One Family evolved further in response to changing needs, moving away from providing computer courses and purposefully began to focus attention on course content specific to the needs of one-parent families. One Family provides a range of specialised courses for lone parents, focused on parenting alone and sharing parenting after separation, and employability skills in preparation for progression to further education or paid employment. The organisation also has a national Information and Support Helpline and offers personal counselling and therapy for parents and children.

Parenting Service

One Family has made significant digital advancements in recent years and offers online services, including parenting courses that are, flexible, self-paced, and accessible to participants from all over Ireland. The content includes managing parenting stress, communication skills, parenting toddlers and primary school children, parenting teenagers, and parenting post separation. One Family also offers creative therapy, through play and art and parent mentoring on a one-to-one basis with parents. This creates a safe space, and through deeper work, parents are provided the opportunity to explore aspects of themselves and areas of parenting to improve child and family well-being. The Parent Mentors are graduates of University College Cork (UCC) and are accredited by the Irish Association of Relationship Mentors (IARM).

Programmes Service

One Family's Programmes service offers two employability programmes which are specifically designed for those parenting alone or sharing parenting. These specialist bridging programmes are currently available for lone parents who are distant from the labour market and in receipt of social welfare, with targeted outreach to those eligible to take part. The service aims to develop and provide a range of best practice programmes that empower lone parents and give them the confidence, skills, and support they need to progress in education and employment.

- New Steps is a 6-week, part-time personal development programme that is free to participants. New Steps can be taken as a stand-alone programme or as an introductory course into the New Futures Employability Programme.
- The New Futures Employability Programme is a free, 17 week, part-time personal and career development programme specifically designed for those parenting alone or sharing parenting and explores both Personal & Interpersonal Development and Career Planning. It incorporates three essential elements: facilitated training in a group setting, intensive one to one key working support, and wraparound supports, including counselling, parent mentoring, mock interviews, childcare, and travel subsidies.



Having delivered in-person programmes since 2006, One Family commenced delivery of New Steps and New Futures via online delivery in September 2020. From September 2021, they further enhanced and adapted the programme for online delivery to include facilitated Zoom classes, a purpose-built online learning platform, and online wraparound supports and key working. The organisation also developed a laptop loan scheme to facilitate learner participation. One Family intends to offer the option of in-person, facilitated Zoom classes, and/or self-directed online learning in future iterations of the programmes.

In 2019 and again in 2023, the New Futures Employability Programme won the Special Recognition STAR Award for an European Social Fund (ESF) Initiative for making an outstanding contribution to adult learning. The STAR Awards are an initiative by AONTAS as part of the annual Adult Learners' Festival to acknowledge the fantastic work undertaken by adult learning initiatives throughout Ireland.

Outcomes and Impact

Based on One Family's data, 75-90% of participants in the New Futures programme progressed to further education or employment in the period 2017-2020. The pandemic impacted progression, and in 2021 and 2022, 66% and 73%, respectively, progressed to education or employment. On average, 80% of participants reported significant improvement in confidence, self-esteem, action planning skills, self-efficacy, and communication skills. These indicators are all tracked and measured using One Family's evaluation tools.

Funding

The New Futures Programme (QQI Level 4) is currently supported through funding received under the Employment and Social Innovation Programme (EaSI) 2014-2020 in partnership with the Department of Social Protection. From 2022-2024, One Family will deliver New Futures to sixty lone parents under this project.

The sixth and final group of parents participating in New Futures under the ESF Programme for Employability, Inclusion, and Learning (PEIL) 2014-2020 was completed in June 2022. One Family has supported 142 lone parents since 2017 with the support of this funding.

In 2006, funding from the Equality for Women Measure (EWM) allowed One Family to develop, pilot, and evaluate a manualised employability programme called New Futures. Further iterations of New Futures funded by EWM, the Department of Social Protection, and Erasmus+ have enabled innovations in how the programme is delivered.

One Family has relied almost entirely on EU funding for the New Futures Programme since 2017. Two consecutive projects funded under the European Social Fund Programme for Employability, Inclusion, and Learning (PEIL), over a five-year period finished in 2022. Additional funding was secured until 2024 from the Employment and Social Innovation Programme (EaSI) and the Department of Social Protection.

The City of Dublin Education and Training Board is the main source of funding for parenting courses. This must be applied for each year in line with the aims and objectives of SOLAS. This funding covers tutor and administrator hours in addition to communications and administrative costs.



The One Family Programmes and Parenting services also receive a small annual fund from the HSE Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme, which contributes towards service management, administration, and overheads rather than direct programme delivery.

The relationship with the funders is very important to ensure the continued availability of supports for families, and commitments made in funding applications, and subsequent service level agreements and contracts must be met. One Family would like to secure multi-annual funding from the government to support the ongoing delivery of their employability programmes and parenting courses. This would mean that they could be made available to all lone parents who need them.

2. Methodology

The Director of Parenting and Professional Development and the Programme and Information Manager at One Family shared information about the research and its purpose with colleagues. They identified community education participants, both past and present, who were lone parents and invited them to participate in the research through a series of focus groups and interviews. The CES researchers met with a sample of current community education participants and a sample of past participants. The methodology was qualitative, appreciative, and participatory and involved a series of online focus groups that were approximately 90 minutes long. The focus groups were semi-structured, designed to encourage participants to share their journey and experiences of community education, including the benefits, enablers, and ripple effects on their children and families.

All research participants were briefed about the research and assured that their personal details would be kept safe and confidential. All gave their consent to participate.

The contribution of all participants to this research is appreciated. All received a one4all voucher, funded by the Beachaire Fund, as a token of appreciation for their involvement.

3. Current Community Education Participants

People who were participating in community education, provided by One Family, at the time of this research were invited to attend an online focus group on 22nd September 2022. This coincided with the start of their community education journey, participating in the New Futures Programmes. A follow up focus group with the same sample was held online on 2nd February 2023.

This section sets out the results of a thematic analysis of the stories shared by participants during the focus groups. A selection of anonymized quotes portrays the voices of participants.

Profile of Participants

A total of eleven women attended the first focus group, and eight returned to the follow up focus group in February 2023. The women ranged in age from their early twenties to their late thirties. The majority were Irish, and all were dialling in online from other counties around Ireland. All were lone parents, caring for young children of primary school age. All were out of work for several years whilst caring for their children.



Awareness of and referral into One Family

The main way that the participants found out about New Futures and were encouraged to attend the programme was through communication from the Department of Social Protection (DSP). A letter was developed by DSP and One Family explaining the employability programmes and supports offered by One Family. The letter was targeted at lone parents living in the Northeast of Ireland who were in receipt of One-Parent Family Payment or Jobseeker's Transitional Payment. DSP then shared the names of parents who expressed an interest in participating.

'There are a lot of things you receive from Department of Social Protection. I did not know what I wanted to do, so this letter (from the DSP) was an answer to a lot of prayers. I am hoping I get the motivation to get work or further study. I had heard about the course because I did a course with One Family in 2015, but I didn't see the New Futures course as something I could do back then.'

Starting Point

Participants shared the starting point of their community education journey and what had stirred them to begin. The women were attracted by the ways in which community education fits with their lives as lone parents. This includes the timing of courses and classes purposely scheduled within the school day and school terms, as well as the understanding and flexibility that are offered to lone parents by One Family. The opportunity to attend online was noted as an attractor in terms of the accessibility of the programme, particularly for those who live in rural Ireland and/or find it difficult to leave home and/or access childcare.

One woman described feelings of isolation and a need for connection with others that drew her to seek support from One Family.

'I wanted to get a step out into the world of work. Being alone with kids, you feel isolated, or you are doing a lot of things on your own.'



Another woman said that she was drawn in knowing that the programme was delivered by One Family, as she felt reassured that the organisation understands lone parents and the reality of their lives. This, coupled with the emphasis on practical support with interview techniques, career guidance, and CV preparation, were important features for participants.

'Because it was with One Family when I looked at the content and the personal development focus of the course, I thought it would be more helpful because they work with lone parents and are aware of the challenges and issues that come with parenting alone.'

'I was attracted by the opportunity to gain confidence to do an interview. And if it doesn't work out, to be able to bounce back.'

All the women had been out of work for several years and were apprehensive and experiencing some anxiety about finding and returning to employment. The challenges of returning to employment were discussed, including access to quality and affordable childcare, the cost of transport, concerns about finding part-time work and/or work that would fit around family life, and the realities of being a lone parent.

'When the letter came in, it was a blessing and it was what I was looking for - directions, CV skills, interview skills.'

'I want to be pushed in the right direction and to move forward.'

Enablers

Participants were invited to reflect on the different types of support that enabled their engagement with the New Futures Programme. The main enablers that facilitate participation in community education are the support and encouragement from the team within One Family and their renowned understanding of the reality of parenting alone.

'I valued the support from facilitators and knowing the group were sharing a similar experience.'

The group discussed how their motivation and self-confidence had dipped while they were at home caring for their children. Some hesitancy and self-doubt, as well as a realistic sense of the challenges they face as people parenting alone were noted in the discussion. Participants expressed appreciation for the support, information, and guidance from One Family. They welcomed the



accessibility and flexibility that online learning brings to lone parents. All noticed the psychology of the group in supporting and learning from each other, the power of peer support as an encourager, and the facilitation and personal development components of the course.

'Every piece of the course was important, but the biggest part was the power of the group. We were facilitated in the group as opposed to lectured, and we were allowed to share our experiences. We could learn from each other and come to realisations ourselves.'

'Even just being with the group has given me confidence. I was so nervous starting the course and in the group. Listening to everyone else, the tips, and the knowledge. You know that you are not on your own.'

One person, who had experienced significant difficulty accessing education in the past due to a lack of childcare and transport, welcomed online education.

'Online education makes things possible that were not possible for me before.'

The provision of laptops and IT support were also noted as vital enablers for their participation and their future prospects.

'I have mastered the laptop; I have lost my fear of computers.'

Two members of the group indicated that they had benefitted from the personal counselling offered by One Family, and others expressed interest in availing of this in the future. There was a strong sense of appreciation and gratitude for the programme and the fact that it was free.

'The fact that the course is free is a big benefit we're not working and the fact we have access to all these resources is great. The course has given us our individuality back; you almost forget who you were before kids.'



Impact on Lone Parents

Eight of the original eleven participants attended a second follow up focus group in February 2023, coinciding with the end of the New Futures Programmes. Participants were asked to reflect on the difference that participating in community education has made to their lives over the five months since they began their journey.

All expressed appreciation for their experience of community education and gratitude to the tutors/facilitators, and key workers within One Family. All cited examples of the positive impact that community education has had on their lives. From a psychological perspective, this included a noticeable positive shift in motivation and self-confidence, particularly for those who have had their confidence shattered by a difficult life experience.

'The course provided a routine that I needed, and it changed my perspective on my future. I have a more positive outlook on a future rather than thinking I don't have a future at all. I have the momentum now to push forward.'

All described changes in their sense of self and personal agency. This seemed particularly strong for those who had experienced difficult relationships and separation from a partner.

'The personal development module was of great benefit; I feel I needed another month; it was hard emotionally. I could barely speak at the start, and now I can voice my views.'

'I am putting myself first; I feel a positive shift in my sense of self and my self-esteem.'

One woman shared how she had experienced the power of the group and how the peer support had impacted her and her self-confidence. Others noted the benefits of gaining practical information about services and supports, including parenting and relationships. The combined impact of content, process, and wrap around supports were apparent.

'It is lots of little steps towards transformation.'

All reported that they have concrete plans for progression post-course, including job searching, applying for places in further or higher education, and clarity about their next steps as regards their careers and life plans.

'I was so stuck before this course; now I feel freer and able to make decisions and plan for my future, I have courage to move forward.'



Ripple Effect

Participants were invited to share the difference they believe attending One Family and participating in community education have made to the lives of their children. Participants said they noticed an improved quality of family life and communication with their children. They reported acquiring new skills and self-confidence in the way they relate to their children, and they are experiencing enhanced self-awareness around this.

'The parent mentoring has helped hugely. I have a different connection now and know how to deal better with the challenges that arise, the children notice this, and it has changed mine and the kids' lives.'

All were invigorated by their community education experience, and this energy has extended into their relationships and discussions with their children. Participants described it as something to discuss, a focus to their days, and the joy of their children seeing them in a different way.

'My children ask about how the course has gone each day when they get out of school, and they ask me about getting a job and talk about all the different jobs I could have; they want me to work in a toy shop, which we laugh about; we have great fun in the car talking about this, and I am surprised and delighted by this.'

One woman described how her child became interested in education and attending school, which he had not been prior to her attending the course. She shared that because she has studied at home and completed the course online, this has shown her child a new routine and expanded his understanding of education and its value.

'My child is very happy that I did the course and was delighted when I got the certificate. He sees the importance now of school, as he did not like it before. He is in a good routine now and knows he must go to school.'

Another woman shared how she realised that it was possible for her to work and/or study from home, even with her children in the house. Her participation in New Futures has granted her this realisation and a sense of possibility that she had not felt before.

'My children have learnt to work around me and to be respectful and quiet when I was studying online. I know now that it would be possible for me to work from home and have them here with me if needed.'



4. Past Participants

Past participants in community education at One Family were invited to participate in the research through a focus group. This section sets out the results of the thematic analysis of the stories shared during the focus group. A selection of anonymized quotes portrays the voices of the participants.

Profile of Participants

Twelve past participants in community education attended the focus group online on 11th October 2022. Two participants were male, and the remaining ten were female. All were parenting alone with children of primary school age.

Awareness of and referral into One Family

The main way that participants became aware of One Family was through their own online searches; some received a text/communication from the Department of Social Protection, and others through word of mouth within their family or community.

Attractors

Participants shared what initially attracted them to community education with One Family. Responses included the accessibility, timing, and flexibility of the courses.

'The timing (during school hours) of the programme and being online made it possible for me to participate in community education.'

Some participants joined the New Futures Employability Programme following a period of unemployment; others joined following separation from their spouses or partners. One woman shared that she was prompted by a desire to return to education and needed a starting point. Another had been out of work for a while due to illness and was seeking support to return to employment.

'I started spiralling due to anxiety during the pandemic; I knew I needed support, so I approached One Family.'

The majority of participants had completed the New Futures Employability Programme and the Family Communications: Parenting When Separated course. The majority became involved with One Family in recent years, and one participant shared that she had been receiving support from One Family for over fifteen years.

Enablers

The participants recalled a range of factors that enabled their participation and completion of community education through the New Futures Programme. The dominant theme was their experience with the wraparound support, which has already been mentioned as a hallmark of community education.



Participants described the encouragement and support they received, including key working, parenting support, mentoring, and coaching, and peer to peer support. The personal development component of the programme and one to one access to career guidance and personal counselling were noted and appreciated.

'I was introduced to a parenting coach. I didn't expect the course to have the huge emphasis on personal development.'

'The key working sessions were an opportunity to highlight what stood out, and we discussed wherever we had challenges.'

Other supports that were valued included the One Family Information and Support Helpline, family outings, play therapy for children, and the constant emphasis on family, whatever its form.

'The course was specifically catered for parents (and lone parents) because it was when the kids were in school.'

'One Family helped with information, support, and direction with community services and day outs and trips for people parenting alone.'

The option to participate online in community education was vital for some participants, particularly those who live in rural Ireland and are experiencing isolation.

'The fact that it was online was helpful, especially with the fact that I live in rural Ireland. One Family completely understand the challenges of parenting alone. So, with every service I accessed, I saw that level of understanding that was embedded into it.'



Trust in the reputation of One Family and the organisation's accumulated knowledge and understanding of lone parents was a distinct enabler for many.

'Being run by One Family was very important because they completely understand what it's like to be a lone parent, and that foundation of understanding runs through everything. The person on reception, and the trainer/tutor, and the key worker they all get it.'

Impact

Participants were asked to reflect on the difference that participating in community education with One Family has made in their lives.

All participants described a positive impact across many aspects of their lives. These included a sense of personal development, improved communication capability, a positive impact on familial relationships, as well as educational, social, and economic development.

'One Family showed me that there is always help out there... just find the right person and ask. On a practical level, it has led to an income increase for my family. So, we were able to go for holidays for the first time.'

Many reported experiencing an increase in their self-worth, self-belief, and confidence and shared the transformative impact of their participation in community education.

'I feel like I got a part of myself back.'

'It was completely life changing. Being in a group with women going through similar experiences was so good.'

'I felt listened to and treated as an equal parent, even as a man (as most men would not know how to access these supports and services). The communication piece was so helpful for me, and the key working and peer-to-peer support.'



For some, the impact was an increase in earning power as they developed new skills and advanced in their education and/or career. Others reported a sense of direction, motivation, and clarity about their next steps. Two spoke directly about the positive impact on their quality of life, mental health, and sense of wellbeing.

'I initially just wanted a course for skill and knowledge acquisition, but the course was so much more: personal development and career planning.'

'I wasn't doing anything for a long time, and community education opened my mind.'

'I had no self-belief before New Futures, and when I met other women like me, I came out like another person. I felt much stronger and started to discover myself.'

Participants shared how they have continued their community education with other organisations to further progress towards their desired careers. Examples include the Women@Work programme with Business in the Community Ireland. Four reported that they have progressed onto further and higher education in more formal educational institutions, including degree programmes in computers, social policy, and social science.

'I found the course very helpful and supporting; it has steered me onto the right path.'

Participants described how they have a greater appreciation for social issues and are more involved and active in society since their community education experience. One person gave the example of serving on the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality (2020-2021) and feeling good about giving back and supporting the work of One Family.

'The understanding and compassion that goes alongside it- listening to other people in the group helps you gain understanding and compassion for yourself and others.'

'The way that One Family give lone parents a voice- in policy and support- is so great. They put the lone parents in mind.'



Ripple Effect

Participants were invited to reflect on the difference they believe coming to One Family has made to the lives of their children. The theme of role modelling, life skills, and showing the way to their children was strong in the discussion, with ripple effects on mood, motivation to learn, and play.

'It was great for my children to see me try to help myself and better myself... They are now talking about going to college and what they want to study.'

'I feel that I gave my child a good example by studying and doing courses. This benefited mine and my child's mental health.'

People shared stories of improved and more amicable communications, even in situations with a history of separation. Many noted that it was a significant motivator for their children to watch and witness their parents work hard to achieve something for themselves.

'I am a better listener; our bond is better because I am happier, and it has spread to my daughter.'

'The play therapy helped with the kids. The parenting support helped me to stop being so critical of my own parenting. The kids are more adventurous in general. They have adopted a language about looking after themselves.'

Participant Feedback on the research process

Participants were invited to give their feedback on their experience contributing to the research. Overall, it was considered a positive experience. Participants welcomed the opportunity to contribute and were eager to share their expectations of how the research would inform policy. There was a consensus that aspects of community education, including content (core life skills and personal development) and process (group work and support), can and should be applicable to the wider society, particularly young people. There was a call for community education programmes and related services for lone parents to be made more accessible for people in rural settings, and advertising demographics should include fathers who are parenting alone. Participants reiterated the value of one-to-one support, personal development, and career planning and believe that this should be more widely advertised to be accessible.



5. Staff Perspective

The CES researchers facilitated a consultation with One Family community education tutors, key workers, and family support workers over Zoom on 21st November 2022. Four staff members participated in the focus group, sharing their perspectives on the distinctive features, values, and practice of community education. The discussion included the benefits and barriers that participants encounter and their vision for the future of community education.

This section sets out the views of staff.

Community education distinctive features, values, and practice

The distinctive features of community education were highlighted. The main features are the absolute focus on the participant, their needs, and their life situation. This includes acknowledging the barriers to access, particularly for lone parents, and working collaboratively and purposefully to overcome them. The **role of the key worker**² is vital for paying careful attention to participants and supporting lone parents to engage and complete their courses, particularly at vulnerable moments when they are at risk of dropping out. This support is provided in small, discrete, and meaningful one to one exchanges.

'If a lone parent misses a few classes or are finding it difficult, they begin to think about dropping out. In such incidents, the keyworker is there to provide them with the opportunity to talk, offer reassurance, and encourage the person to continue. Some people are nervous about joining a group setting, so the key worker can talk with them and reassure them.'

'These tiny interactions are very important.'

Community education is designed to respond to the needs of participants in terms of both the content, the course structure, and wraparound supports. For example, classes are scheduled after school drop-off, there are no classes scheduled during school holidays, and online courses include the option to borrow a laptop and receive technical support and financial support for internet costs. Any challenges that arise for individuals are addressed as far as possible, with staff available to provide support throughout the course and beyond.

² A key worker is a named/dedicated contact person in mental health or social care who helps coordinate a person's care across the systems and services, including mental health, social welfare, education and financial/resources.



'The connection and relationship are different in community education to that offered in formal education. We offer that one-to-one support and wraparound supports. Through the course content, we get to know the family better, and that helps to identify and figure out the needs and additional supports that lone parents need.'

Many of One Family's courses are delivered online, and there is always an option for participants to engage with a course online rather than in person. This enhances the accessibility of the courses to people all over Ireland and beyond. In addition, there is a culture of accepting that children sometimes join their parents online, which could otherwise be embarrassing or ostracising for parents.

Participants are supported if they miss a class, for example, when a child is sick, or a situation arises that requires attention. The tutor or another staff member is available to update them on the content and prepare them to join the next class. At the same time, tutors believe that it is important to strike a balance between flexibility and affirming the value of participation. Staff support participants to return even when they have missed many classes, providing reassurance that it is acceptable and good to re-join a class.

Community education is distinctive in that it supports participants in situating themselves in the reality of their own life experience, their community, and wider society. This comes about in part through the community that forms in the classroom and the course content, which includes a strong personal development component. The power of peer learning through shared experience, peer support, and the psychology of the group are central.

There is flexibility in the delivery of community education to respond to the range of needs that arise for lone parents. Examples include therapeutic support in the form of counselling or financial support in the form of bus fares and food vouchers.

'If someone is worried and have huge life events unravelling, if we can support them in these other parts of life, this frees up their headspace to engage in the course. It's all connected.'

According to the staff, community education offers a blend of topics and learning experiences that cannot be accessed elsewhere in the system. Although many of the courses are unaccredited, the New Futures Employability Programme was accredited at QQI Level 4 between 2012 and 2022. The administrative and resource challenges of maintaining this accreditation became untenable, and so the programme is no longer accredited.

It was also recognised that many participants already had a qualification higher than QQI Level 4 when starting the programme or progressed on to complete an education course at a higher level.



Qualities of community education tutors and facilitators

The role of the tutor/facilitator is central to community education. All tutors/facilitators at One Family have third level qualifications relevant to their role. In terms of competencies and qualities, the tutors/facilitators shared those that they believe are vital to the role. These include approachability, empathy, interpersonal and communication skills, a sense of humour, facilitation skills, and an ability to work well with groups. Being aware and competent to work with the psychology of the group is vital, as is the capacity to draw in the lived experiences of participants in a way that is respectful and celebratory.

'Placing the lived experiences of participants at the centre, and celebrating these experiences, and bringing them to the centre of the learning. Understanding that each lived experiences is a source of learning and important for participants to see and realise their value.'

The tutors/facilitators are acutely aware of the dynamics of the group, the diversity of individuals, and the varied experiences that they bring. The importance of creating a safe space and being open and free of judgement was noted, as was the courage and capacity to work with the immediacy of what arises in the session. These qualities are necessary given the humanity of the situation and the possibility for strong emotions, associated with previous trauma, to surface.

'Being able to create a safe space where participants feel comfortable to participate, active listening and making the sessions interesting and relevant to the participants by encouraging discussions between themselves and reflections from their lived experiences.'

'Some participants may have previous poor experiences with formal education, so it's important to be approachable, to be interested and curious about participants' lives, but also to have boundaries. We are not therapists, so it is important to draw boundaries.'



'We never know what a group is going to bring. It is important to keep ourselves in check because we are dealing with different cultures, backgrounds, upbringing. Balancing all the different dimensions of a group. There is always someone that is louder or quieter in a group, and it is important to balance this and ensure everyone's voice is heard.'

Continuous Professional Development (CPD) and regular supervision are important to support tutors and facilitators in staying up to date and equipped to respond to issues as they arise. The tutors/facilitators are committed to ongoing CPD and have participated in a range of programmes and workshops to strengthen their knowledge and competence. Examples include specific skills training in facilitation, child protection, intercultural awareness, domestic abuse, and conflict resolution, as well as courses provided by Parenting Northern Ireland, Parenting under Pressure (PUP), and Salesforce training.

Benefits to lone parents

The staff believe, based on their experience, that the **main benefit to lone parents participating in community education is that it is life-changing and transformative.** The holistic nature of community education and the specific supports offered by One Family enable lone parents to complete their journey and progress in terms of career, personal, and family life.

Challenges

The staff drew attention to several challenges that they are encountering, including the importance of core staff to attend to the growing volume of work and the non-contact time necessary to research, prepare, and respond to the needs of participants.

The main challenges noted for lone parents are poverty and accessing quality childcare to facilitate employment and participation in society.

'To provide all sorts of courses in all sorts of ways accessible to lone parents. Support from the state so that housing or childcare is not an obstacle. More inclusion and communication, involving all parts of society and individuals.'



6. Management Perspective

The CES researchers facilitated a focus group with the management team within One Family on 14th September 2022. This included the Director of Parenting and Professional Development, the Programmes and Information Manager, and the New Futures Programme Coordinator. The purpose of the consultation was to discuss community education in practice, its meaning, ethos, the design and development of programmes, accreditation, supports, and impact of community education. The challenges associated with delivering community education were also considered.

Terminology and unique features of community education

The management highlighted the distinctive features of community education, which are its accessibility, ethos of inclusion, and flexibility to be participant-led and involve and encourage people through a range of wraparound supports. Based on One Family's many years of experience delivering community education, the evidence indicates that many participants are caught in unexpected and sometimes traumatic life situations. The reality is that participants may have previous work experience and/or educational qualifications, but they are experiencing a particular dilemma or life challenges that stall their progress. The focus of community education is on the process, content, and support rather than the qualification per se, and it holds lone parents firmly and safely as they get back on track.

'Community education can be a steppingstone for some, and yet for many, it is actually a huge leap – it all depends on the starting point.'

One Family is a member of the AONTAS community education network, and while familiar with the term community education and its meaning, they tend to use the term adult education in practice in the everyday when they refer to their programmes and courses. That said, the distinctive features of community education are integrated into their way of working.

'Community education is a place to learn and develop skills and does not have to involve a piece of paper. Community education is within the community. It is more inclusive; there are less entry requirements.'

One Family sees community education as offering a variant of universal support at a time in a lone parent's life as different things happen and different needs arise.

'Community education is responsive to diversity and needed even more in contemporary Ireland than ever before.'



Enablers and progression to employment

One Family listens to the needs of lone parents and the reality of their lives. Programmes are always scheduled in advance, with some flexibility to change in response to demand. Sessions are carefully timed to facilitate participation, peer support, and learning, and there are plenty of breaks for people to be comfortable.

Parenting courses run in tandem with the school calendar so that parents can access them while their children are in school. There are no classes during the month of December for Christmas or during mid-terms and summer holidays. Parents can opt into online parenting courses.

Funding is provided for participant travel expenses, where needed, and oftentimes food is sourced through a free food sharing provider.

The New Futures Employability Programme is an example of community education in practice. It was developed in response to identified needs, with a specific focus on personal development and career development for lone parents and parenting in parallel. One Family works to maximise easy access, a key consideration when designing the programme for lone parents. The sessions are carefully timed to accommodate a parent doing school drop-offs, travelling back and forth to their home, and logging on to the computer to attend an online class.

Tracking and Monitoring

In terms of monitoring community education, One Family uses the Salesforce software system and tracks their work with participants using a range of measures and metrics. This includes progression to education, trainings, and/or employment using a Progression Log and Participant Tracker, and the development of employability skills (e.g., action planning and goal setting) measured using the New Futures Start and End Point Learning Outcomes Survey. The organisation also monitors the development of interpersonal skills, communication, personal resilience, and shifts in self-confidence and self-esteem through start and end point outcomes surveys.

Quality Staff

There are seven Parenting Programme facilitators and one New Futures facilitator on the One Family team. Parenting facilitators are salaried staff employed as qualified family support workers. This is a recent change and is considered a great improvement on previous contractual arrangements. In practice, this means that One Family can provide necessary support through team meetings, supervision, and protected time for planning and reflection. It also enables a direct line for participants to other One Family services and supports, such as key working and one to one support. These vital links are not possible with contract staff.

One Family continues to rely on contract staff for outreach work in community centres. All contract staff are well known to One Family and receive the same supervision and support as salaried staff. One Family believes that skilled and experienced facilitators are key to successful community education. One Family pays careful attention to the recruitment and selection of their facilitators, ensuring that they align with One Family's vision and values. It is necessary that facilitators possess knowledge and understanding of lone parenting and the ability to build and nurture relationships. The core skills necessary for success are group psychology and facilitation, communication skills, the ability to respond appropriately with empathy in the moment, and the capacity to connect with courage and humanity and support a diverse range of participants are crucial.



Impact

One Family believes community education is a gateway for lone parents to move out of their current challenging situation.

'Every lone parent who engages is stuck in some way. They were not always that way, and they will not always be that way – community education supports them through.'

Community education gives lone parents an opportunity to rediscover themselves and to remember who they were or are aside from being a parent.

'All parents are motivated towards self-development and to experience positive change, even if at the time they do not know what that change will be.'

Community education provides parents with the time and resources to take incremental steps towards making a change. It brings people together and provides participants with a sense that they are contributing to society, initially by contributing to the course. Community education supports personal agency and builds social capital. It ultimately benefits children as well. The impact comes from a combination of factors, and every contribution has a ripple effect. A key component is personal development, which supports personal agency as well as career development.

Challenges

The management drew attention to several challenges that One Family is encountering and noticing in the context of contemporary community education provision. The biggest challenge is the accessibility and affordability of childcare. Despite this, One Family's records show that there are examples of lone parents who have gone into jobs even though they continue to face the childcare barrier. One Family believes there is a need for more flexibility in further and higher education and employment so that progression to new opportunities after community education is proactively encouraged and made possible.

7. Conclusion

The overall message arising from this case study is the transformative power of community education in terms of the impact that it has on the lives of lone parents who engage and advance on the journey. The journey is incremental and at the learners' pace, evoking feelings of safety, personal growth, and agency as the learning experience evolves. The wide range of wraparound supports offered by One Family and online provision, coupled with the organisation's unique understanding of parenting and families, are central success determinants of the community education experience.



The effects of participation in community education can be seen across a range of policy domains, including family support, personal development, education, employability, and health and wellbeing. Attention is drawn to the holistic nature of community education and its subtle power to draw people in and gently activate, ignite motivation, and support personal development and progression.

The results of this research portray One Family as a national organisation and, in effect, a community of lone parents rather than a geographic or local community. The results show how One Family attracts and holds participants during their community education experience, building their capacity and confidence through a range of purposefully designed programmes and supports. The findings indicate that the majority of participants progress to further education and/or employment and experience feelings of personal development and self confidence that ripple through their families.

The reputation of One Family nationwide and digital access to community education are key to attracting lone parents to return to education. The power of the wraparound supports, tutor and key worker qualities, competence and dedication, group cohesion, peer to peer support, and the ethos of family support are evident.

'One Family completely understands the challenges of parenting alone. You see it in all their services.'





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