

# Focus on Family

# Annual Report

## 2021/22

### CHAIRPERSON'S REPORT

Welcome to the Annual General Meeting.

Focus On Family has continued to thrive and provide excellent service to the community throughout the pandemic of Covid-19 and the aftermath. The uncertainty for staff, volunteers, service users, parents and children over the last two years has impacted us all. It has been difficult trying to make long term plans not knowing what Government restrictions would be in place and when. Trying to keep people safe while continuing to meet the ever-evolving needs of our area, and the rise of social isolation due to the pandemic hasn't been easy but we have continued to do all we can, getting back to our full service delivery as soon as we could.

Funders have continued to be flexible, adapting to the needs of communities and emerging issues. I want to thank them for this approach, it is vital and allows us to concentrate on delivering for the community.

Our committed staff, volunteers and Board of Directors are to be commended for the work they do. Their energy and passion to deliver for the people in Ballysally is outstanding, I have never seen a more dedicated team. Thank you to every one of you, Focus On Family wouldn't be the success it is without you.

Thank you to the people who visit our centre, who help shape it and support it. To the parents who entrust us with their children, we do not take that responsibility lightly. We are honoured and privileged to be a part of your children's lives and help nurture them.

And to Brendan Patterson, Project Manager, who is the backbone to the whole organisation. I may have the role of Chairperson, but Brendan is the heart of Focus On Family, he is our greatest asset and I value the tremendous work he does.

Please take your time to peruse this full report which will detail the work Focus On Family has been doing since our last AGM and the impact the organisation has had on so many different people from the area through multiple activities and events.

I am proud to have served as Chairperson for such a forward thinking, person focused organisation and I wish Focus On Family all the best for the future.

*"We cannot seek achievement for ourselves and forget about progress and prosperity for our community...Our ambitions must be broad enough to include the aspirations and needs of others, for their sakes and for our own."* – Cesar Chavez

*Leanne Abernethy, Chairperson*

## PROJECT MANAGER'S REPORT

Having successfully negotiated the many challenges of the last two years, it's great to see our organisation finally returning to our full and varied provision of activities and services. The recent past hasn't been easy for anyone and if we weren't already aware, we, as a team of staff, volunteers, and Directors, were left in no doubt how much of a role we play in the day-to-day supports of local families and children.

It's only when something is gone you truly appreciate what it gave you in the first place and during the time our organisation was restricted due to lockdowns and other measures, we saw the negative impact us not being fully functional had on local people of all ages. There is much to be said about the benefits of people being together and mixing freely and this period has just reaffirmed what a key role Focus on Family plays in providing a safe space and relevant activities that enable the local community to socialise and build relationships.

So, the good news is we have now moved through that phase and are back delivering to pre-2020 levels again. We have a full and varied programme of activities on a weekly basis, and this is supported by our ever-popular childcare services.

We have also added to our team this year with a new Social Enterprise Manager who is busy working to enhance our portfolio with the aim of bringing more sustainable income to our organisation, in addition to offering more local training and employment opportunities.

Hopefully we can now continue to move forward, having come through the strangest and most challenging period in our organisation's history and look to the future with a renewed sense of hope and optimism.

My confidence that the future will be brighter is enhanced every day when I witness first-hand the commitment, skills and passion that is shown by all our volunteers, staff, Directors, and partner organisations – together we can accomplish great things!

*Brendan Patterson, Project Manager*

## Coleraine SureStart Partnership

We have continued our excellent relationship with Coleraine SureStart Partnership, which enables us to provide our 2-Year-Old Programmes, Friday Play Sessions, and Summer Scheme Programmes. This has given vital support to local children and their families and greatly supported early years development and progression across the locality. The entire childcare staff team at Focus on Family & SureStart are gratefully thanked for their tireless work and commitment, especially during the extremely difficult periods of lockdowns and closures.

## Volunteer and Employment Placements

We continue to offer a wide range of volunteer and employment placements through Focus on Family and Millburn Community Association. This year we have added to our significant volunteer team with the addition of new reception and administration placements, and they have fitted in seamlessly to support our existing childcare, reception, building management and cleaning roles. Millburn have further supported this with placements for local people in the Calf Lane Kitchen, Millburn Beauty Salon, and the BITES mobile catering van. All our volunteers and placements are warmly thanked for the amazing contribution they make to our organisation and to support the local community daily.

## Nurturing Programmes

This year saw a major change with Angela Canning retiring from her post. Angela was the first person in NI to be trained in Family Links and went on to provide over 20 years' support to local families through her work with Focus on Family. Angela has been succeeded by Sarah Casey and is being supported by Lyndsey Johnston. Together, our nurturing staff are continuing to offer group support for parents in the form of the Family Links Nurturing Programme, alongside one-to-one support and delivering children's nurturing programmes with indoor activity combined with regular sessions at The Cornfield Project, where the children gain the added benefits of being outdoors in a safe and secure environment.

## Recreational Activity – Various Arts, Crafts & Cookery

We have continued to offer a broad range of recreational programmes – great for getting people of all ages and backgrounds out of the house to socialise and take part in activities that they enjoy. Lockdown really brought home to everyone just how important these sessions are for keeping people connected and energised. We continue to offer mixed arts and crafts, sewing and using sewing machines, costume design, crafting projects, in addition to the ever-popular cookery classes where the group make delicious recipes every week to learn skills and take tasty meals home with them. Special thanks to all our volunteer facilitators who give up their time each week to run the classes and to support others within the community.

## Therapy Programmes

Due to being close-contact activity, these programmes suffered more than most during our periods of lockdown. However, as soon as the restrictions allowed us to restart these activities, we were delighted to be able to offer our range of therapeutic group and individual learning programmes. Group activities in Yoga and Pilates were complemented with specialised therapy programmes teaching participants skills in massage, reflexology, and lymphatic drainage, in addition to the ever-popular Reiki and Crystal Healing Therapies. Last year also saw the delivery of a new programme in Healing Energies which proved very popular and is due to be delivered again this incoming year.

## Essential Skills

This year we delivered Maths, English and ICT and although we had lower numbers than usual, the commitment and effort shown by the participants was second to none. We had many amazing examples of learners who achieved something remarkable this year – older people with no prior experience of using a computer gaining an accredited ICT qualification; learners in their 50's who had never gained a qualification having left school early and gone through life without any formal qualifications going on to gain an accreditation in Maths & English (with a notable boost in confidence to see their achievements recognised with a formal accredited certificate) and several others who required the relevant qualifications to pursue their chosen career paths. A special word of thanks goes to the Northern Regional College who organised the courses and provided tutors in what was an exceptionally demanding year with college closures, staff shortages and lockdowns all regular occurrences.

## The Cornfield Project

This year, The Cornfield has grown from strength to strength as anyone who has visited recently will testify (and if you haven't, where have you been?!!). With the ongoing input of The Cornfield Men's Shed (managed by Be Safe Be Well) and the Millburn Armed Forces Veteran's Club, the site has improved massively over the last 18 months. We now have the Men's Shed, Veteran's Caravan, Cornfield Cottage, new polytunnel, new mud kitchen and picnic area, chicken coop, beehives, and wildflower beds, in addition to the outdoor gym, woodland school, outdoor classroom and other features. This year has also seen some amazing seasonal events with the Winter Wonderland followed by the Easter Fun Day and our next planned Cornfield Fest in July 2022. As always, we welcome the input of all groups and individuals so please contact us anytime to get involved.

## Women's Group

This year saw the completion of our Women's Group with 8 local women progressing through the course and related activities.

## Ballysally Integrated Nurturing Project

We continue to work alongside our key local delivery partners – Ballysally Primary School, Ballysally Presbyterian Church Youth and Community Project & Ballysally Nursery – to provide a collaborative and holistic nurturing support for all local families. It has been great to see relationships continue to grow and flourish, not just amongst the group leaders, but also with those staff delivering services on the ground, and in particular the new staff that have come into the area.

## Aspire Social Enterprise Portfolio

Through the Dormant Accounts Fund, we appointed a new Social Enterprise Manager, Colleen Martin, who has been helping to support our existing portfolio of:

- The Little Wonders childcare service at Focus on Family
- Calf Lane Kitchen, Millburn
- Millburn Beauty Salon
- BITES Van and outside catering
- The Cornfield Project

In addition, Colleen, supported by volunteer Erin, has been busy assessing and implementing new social enterprise ventures and is currently engaged in setting up a new after-schools provision at Millburn Primary School, as well as planning further potential childcare, food, and other services. The overall aim of our entire social enterprise portfolio is to generate long-term, sustainable income and opportunities for our organisations and to benefit the local community

## Aspire Media Studios

Developing on from the Awards for All Community TV Project, we have now established Aspire Media Studios, operating from the Millburn Community Office. This provides space and equipment for anyone with an interest in developing media-based projects and activities, e.g., TV production, music videos and recording, podcasting, radio, space for band performances and recording, etc.

A fabulous new resource and unique in the community-based approach, we welcome input from anyone who would like to be more involved in the ongoing activities and programmes. Currently, a local group are developing a team to generate content to be shown on a digital channel later this year – watch this space!

## Our Funders

Much of the work that we do is only possible due to our funders, and we warmly acknowledge the ongoing support we receive from:

- Dept for Communities – Neighbourhood Renewal
- Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council
- Coleraine SureStart Partnership
- Lottery – Dormant Accounts Fund & Awards for All
- Community Foundation for Northern Ireland
- Children in Need
- Housing Executive
- Covenant Fund
- Halifax Foundation

Focus on Family also wish to acknowledge the flexibility and support received from all funders during the pandemic which gave us all a lot of much-needed breathing space and security.

## Housing Executive

We would also like to express our sincere gratitude to the Housing Executive who continue to make the properties at 11-19 Glenburn Crescent, Coleraine available to us to run our wide and varied services. We are especially thankful to HE for their support with the Girona Project which allowed us to install solar panels and batteries on the building, enabling us to make significant savings on our utility bills.