

# Focus on Family Annual Report 2024/25

## **CHAIRPERSON'S REPORT**

Welcome to our Annual General Meeting.

As I write my final Chairperson's Report, I do so with both pride and a touch of sadness. This marks the end of my time as Chair and Director of Focus on Family, and it has truly been one of the most meaningful journeys of my life.

Together we have faced extraordinary challenges. We stood firm through the Covid-19 pandemic, navigated the uncertainty of political deadlock in Northern Ireland, and supported families during the ongoing cost-of-living crisis. These were not easy times, yet they showed the strength and resilience of this organisation and of the Ballysally community we are privileged to serve.

But it has not only been about challenges - it has also been about progress, growth, and joy. From seeing children thrive in the care of our dedicated team, to celebrating the achievements of our programmes and projects, there have been countless reminders of the difference Focus on Family makes to so many people, every day.

I want to give special thanks to Brendan, our Project Manager, whose vision, leadership, and commitment have ensured Focus on Family continues to flourish. To Kim, our Childcare Manager, who has led her team with such skill and compassion, providing children with the very best start in life. And to every member of staff and every volunteer - thank you. You are the heartbeat of this organisation, and your dedication never goes unnoticed.

I also want to recognise and thank my fellow Directors. Their guidance, wisdom, and steadfast support have been invaluable throughout my time as Chair. It has been an honour to work alongside such a committed and passionate Board.

To our funders and partners, I am deeply grateful for your continued belief in us and in the vital role community organisations play. Without you, much of our work simply would not be possible.

As I step away, I do so with immense pride in all we have achieved together, and with confidence that the future of Focus on Family is bright. I will always carry with me the privilege of having been part of this family, and I wish every success and happiness to those who continue its story.

“Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.” – Helen Keller

With heartfelt thanks -

*Leanne Abernethy, Chairperson*

## **PROJECT MANAGER’S REPORT**

Focus on Family has had a period of consolidation and expansion over the last 18 months, securing ongoing funding and delivery of services, whilst strengthening our offering to the local community with a variety of new and innovative programmes. Within my role it has given me great pleasure to manage such an amazing team of staff and volunteers who deliver the valued impact being made to support our community. We are also delighted to have reached the grand old age of 30, since our launch in 1995, a significant achievement for any local charity!

The SureStart childcare manager and team continue to provide an outstanding service to support early years children and their families – and it is lovely to work in a building where you can hear little people singing and laughing throughout the day!

Our diverse range of courses and programmes for local families and individuals being delivered have included nurturing programmes for parents and children, recreational courses (such as Arts & Crafts, Sewing and Cookery) for people to socialise and participate in activities they enjoy, therapy programmes in Reflexology, Massage, Yoga, Reiki, Crystal and Chakra Healing to enhance health and well-being, Essential

Skills courses in Maths, English & ICT, working with the Men's Shed & Coleraine Armed Forces Club at The Cornfield Project, Aspire Media, and the Ballysally Integrated Nurturing Project, alongside the wide range of other groups that bring their own activities into the centre.

We also benefitted from our social enterprise development and huge thanks goes to Colleen and Erin who led our social enterprises and delivered quality afterschool's provision in Ballysally & Millburn Primary Schools, as well as offering wax-melt and candle-making programmes to support local entrepreneurs.

It is always so refreshing to know that we genuinely have the most committed and passionate staff team here at Focus on Family. From across the organisation and much wider from every single child, parent and individual that they positively impact, their tireless work doesn't go unnoticed.

Our staff are wonderfully complemented by our volunteer team and managed expertly through our Board of Directors. We are blessed to have the most amazing group of volunteers and directors that any organisation could wish for – people from all walks of life who make Focus on Family what it is – a truly diverse and thriving organisation – and we simply couldn't do what we do without our volunteers and directors. We have volunteers in reception, building supervision and maintenance, launderette, childcare, counselling, delivering courses in sewing, cookery, arts & crafts, reiki, supporting nurturing programmes, social enterprise work, media projects, outdoor activity and much more! And our directors work away behind the scenes to ensure the smooth running of the organisation, whilst steering the strategic agenda at the same time.

Our organisation has always been about people and with the directors, staff, and volunteers here, and with the wider community behind us, we will confidently move forward to support all the people that need us!

***Brendan Patterson, Project Manager***

## **Coleraine SureStart Partnership**

Focus on Family continues to be an integral partner of Coleraine SureStart Partnership. SureStart provide funding, support and resources to our organisation which enables us to deliver two 2-Year-Old Programmes, Friday Play Sessions, support for vulnerable children and their families, 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.

Our work with Coleraine SureStart Partnership also enables us to have two in-house SureStart Family Visitors, Marie & Lyndsey, who support local early years children and their families and provide a vital link between our organisation and all that SureStart has to offer.

We are also grateful to Dept for Communities, Neighbourhood Renewal, who provided us with additional funding this year for the regeneration of the back play area – this means a much larger, safer and welcoming space for our SureStart children to enjoy.

## **Volunteer and Employment Placements**

We continue to offer a wide range of volunteer and employment placements through Focus on Family and Millburn Community Development Ltd. This year we have added to our significant volunteer team with the addition of new reception, administration and childcare placements and everyone has fitted in seamlessly to support our existing course provision, childcare, reception, building management and cleaning roles.

Millburn have further supported this with placements for local people in the Calf Lane Kitchen, which has just recently undergone a major refurbishment. 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 Programme**

Sarah & Lyndsey, our nurture staff, supported by excellent volunteers, have had a busy year and a half. Together, they offer ongoing nurturing support through Solihull, Family Links, and children's nurturing programmes. This is delivered as group support for parents 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 – Arts & Crafts, Sewing and Cookery**

Our recreational crafts and cookery programmes are great for helping people to socialise and take part in activities they enjoy. We offer mixed arts and crafts, sewing and using sewing machines, costume design, crafting projects, and our ever-popular cookery classes where the group make delicious recipes every week. 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**

Focus on Family have long been associated with provision of complementary therapies to support local people's health and wellbeing and we were delighted to offer our range of therapeutic group and individual learning programmes once again. Group activities in Yoga 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.

## **Essential Skills**

We continue our partnership with Northern Regional College to deliver Maths, English, and ICT through the Essential Skills Programme. A special word of thanks goes to the Northern Regional College tutors who deliver the courses for the benefit of our local participants and who always go above and beyond to support the diverse needs of our learners.

## **The Cornfield Project**

The Cornfield Project continues to go from strength to strength with the ongoing input of The Cornfield Men's Shed and the Coleraine Armed Forces Veteran's Club. The site continues to evolve with activity including Men's Shed, Veteran's Caravan, Cornfield Cottage, polytunnel, mud kitchens, picnic area, chicken coop, beehives, wildflower beds, outdoor gym, woodland school, outdoor classroom, and other features. We've also hosted some amazing seasonal events with recent Winter Wonderland and Summer Cornfield Festivals. As always, we welcome the input of all groups and individuals so please contact us anytime to get involved.

## **Aspire Media Academy**

The Aspire media team continue to work on a diverse portfolio of projects to produce a wide range of video, social media content and photography footage to support local groups and organisations.

Aspire Media also continually link with other aspects of Focus on Family's work and play an integral role in supporting other projects within our organisation.

## **Social Enterprise Development**

Through funding from the Dormant Accounts Fund, we were fortunate to bring in two new staff members – Colleen and Erin, who were tasked with expanding our social enterprise portfolio.

This resulted in the delivery of two very successful after-schools clubs in Millburn and Ballysally Primary Schools, as well as delivering candle-making courses, with bespoke kits provided, to promote local social enterprise through candle and wax-melt making – and they received very positive feedback from all participants.

## **Counselling**

We have again continued our long and successful partnership with Northern Regional College in supporting counselling trainees with placements. This provides a positive result for all involved, with our organisation benefitting from highly trained and competent trainee counsellors, the local community having access to high-quality talking therapies and the trainee gaining the vital hours of experience that they need to complete their course of study. This year our trainees supported services for adults, as well as working in Ballysally Primary School to support primary age children.

Referrals for anyone aged 18 or over can be made through Focus on Family and clients will be seen relatively quickly for an initial assessment.

## **New Programmes – DIY for Women, Safeguarding, First Aid, Fire Safety**

This year saw the delivery of several new programmes at Focus on Family:

DIY for Women – working in partnership with Women's Tech and funded through HE Community Grants, this programme delivered a range of vital practical DIY skills to a group of local women

Safeguarding – delivered by local expert, Sharon Lyons, and funded by PCSP, this programme took participants through all pertinent aspects relating to safeguarding issues

First Aid – PCSP-funded interactive session to show local people a variety of first aid and life-saving skills

Fire Safety – PCSP-funded practical demonstration of fire safety in the home and workplace, and a special feature on bonfire safety

### **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 – providing collaborative and holistic nurture support for local families. It's 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 in the last 18-month period.

### **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
- National Lottery Fund – Dormant Accounts Fund & Awards for All
- Housing Executive – Community Grant Fund
- Covenant Fund
- Halifax Foundation
- Community Foundation for NI
- Policing & Community Safety Partnerships (PCSP)

### **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, and support us with maintenance, fire safety and other building requirements.