

KIDS TOGETHER BELFAST ANNUAL GENERAL REPORT
APRIL 2022 – MARCH 2023

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Legal and Administration

Management Committee

- Laura Flannigan Chairperson
- Bridgeen McKenna Secretary
- Geraldine O'Neill Treasurer
- Peter Murphy Member
- Clare McConway Member

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Our Purpose

Our purpose is to promote the benefit of the service users who are living with a disability and their family and carers in the Belfast, Lisburn and County Antrim (hereinafter called the 'area of benefit') area without discrimination of age, disability, sexual orientation, nationality, ethnic identity, political or religious opinion, by the provision of advice, information, resources, education, recreational activities and support with the object of improving their conditions of life.

Our History

Kids Together has been working to provide services to children and young people with complex needs and disabilities and support to families since 2005. As we have grown considerably in the last 8 years, we have always pursued to ensure that any new initiative or funding programme remains aligned to our core ethos and focussed on delivering positive outcomes for the children, young people, and families that we work with.

Chairperson Report (Laura Flanagan)

As an organisation Kids Together Belfast (KTB) has navigated through the past 17 years, delivering services, and evolving to meet the growing needs of our service users. This endurance and resilience are symbolic of our commitment to the people that we provide services for.

The Board of KTB are extremely proud of the management and staff for the work and support they give to families of the children and young people throughout this year. It is also a testament to the management and staff that the feedback in evaluations which was glowing from those families supported throughout this year.

KTB continue to flourish and grow. Funding through DOH for Community Mental Health administrated through the Community Foundation NI in April 2022 allowed KTB to address the needs of mental health of families living with disability. The program entails family support, mentoring, Lego-Based Therapy program for children and young people, play therapy and children's counselling. This program supported children and young people with ASD to address their anxiety, mental health, and their social skills. KTB through this funded program and along with other funded programs support some of the most marginalized children and young people in our communities.

A second round of funding through DOH for Community Mental Health administrated through Community Foundation NI in April 2022 allowed KTB to develop a wide range of programs to address parents/carers mental health, this involved walking groups, therapies, and support groups.

Due to the growth and need of KTB Transitional Learning Centre, KTB have opened their third project at their new premises on Springfield Road which can support up to 24 young adults. KTB rented this property until January 2023 when KTB secured a 10-year mortgage from Community Finance Ireland to facilitate the purchase of the Springfield Road building.

KTB took part in the Fair Start pilot program funded by DoE, which support 24 children aged 2-4 who are under achieving. There are 4 pilots across Belfast who work in partnership with Belfast Health and Social Care Trust Speech & Language Therapists, Occupational Therapists from CDC and Education Psychologists from EA. The outcomes from this program for the children were outstanding.

KTB received funding through the DFC to fitout the Hannahstown project with a sensory room and also funding from the RTE Toy Show Appeal for a sensory gym at the Stewartstown Road site.

I also would like on behalf of KTB Board to thank all the funders that has supported us before and throughout the pandemic:

- Department of Communities: Salaries, running costs and equipment.
- BBC Children in Need: Salaries.
- Lottery Community Fund: Salaries, running costs programs.
- BHSCT Early Intervention Team: Family Support.
- BHSCT: Programs and running costs.
- BHSCT Federation of GP: Training.
- CFNI : Salaries, running costs & programmes

- Belfast City Council: Running costs, equipment & programs.
- Pathways: Salaries.
- HSCB Bright Start: Salaries, running costs.
- HSCB Fair play: Salaries.
- HSCB: Equipment.
- EA: Programs and running costs.

See below breakdown of all the individual groups running in Kids Together Belfast.

Rainbow

Rainbow group for 2-3-year olds has been running from 2015 and funded by Early Years – the Organisation's Pathway fund. This fund supports 15 placements and the National Lottery Community Fund supports a further 10 placements. Our Rainbow 3-4 aged group has begun running alongside the 2-3 programme from September 2022 – June 2023. The 2-3 and 3-4 programmes are a part of a Pilot Programme from the Belfast Wide Early Years Partnership. We work alongside health professionals (Speech and Language Therapists and Occupational Therapists) from the Belfast Trust *the Child Development Clinic*, the leading partner Sólás, East Belfast SureStart and Glenbrook SureStart.

KTB have 3 groups of 6 children in each group for the Rainbow Group running weekly with a total of 9 sessions a week. We also provided a summer scheme in July.

Criteria for entry is a diagnosed disability or the child has been referred to the Child Development Clinic for assessment and diagnosis. The child is required to be referred through the Belfast Trust Health and Social Care Services and the child needs to meet the threshold of needing speech and language therapy as well as occupational therapy. There is a parent expectation to be involved with our organisation by attending the stay and plays/make and take sessions and their child's placement is dependant of this.

Sessions include activities from the Rainbow Program, activities that would challenge a child on the autistic spectrum. The SLEAM program is also factored into the daily running of the sessions to promote Speech and Language development through the mediums of Exercise, Art and Music. The daily session remains the same structure for continuity and predictability skills for the children. We implement structured work tasks following the TEACHH method and every day the children will have a group Attention Autism session.

Afterschools

The under 12 afterschools programme currently has 56 children aged 4-12 year old, attending Monday-Saturday in our main building across 2 floors. Kids Together provide 11 under 12 afterschools sessions per week. Between April 2022-March 2023 we provided a total of 668 sessions to our families including 7 weeks of Summer Scheme which had 4 sessions per day 5 days per week.

The over 12's afterschools runs daily on our bottom floor with 24 young people aged 12-18, providing 6 sessions per week Monday-Saturday. Kids Together delivered 323 sessions from April 2022-March 2023 including 7 weeks of Summer Scheme.

Kids Together offer a variety of After school's sessions and programmes from Monday through to Saturday with some programmes starting at 1:30pm and running to 6pm. Our variety of afterschools programmes run on 3 floors and support approximately 34 children and young people per day. The afterschools program supports children and young people with a range of social activities to help encourage development through play and recreation.

In the afterschool's session we aim to support each child in all areas of development through many types of play. These include cognitive, social & emotional, speech & language, fine & gross motor skills and not only reach their own potential, but also have fun and enjoy different experiences. Each session is structured with activities to cover each area of development. We aim to provide an environment where children feel happy, safe and included within their community.

Social Group

Social Group is a program created for children and Young people with ASD and/or moderate learning disabilities. The program is designed to allow children with ASD the chance to socialise with peers who struggle with similar issues such as anxiety, emotional regulation, social communication and social interaction. Social group is made up of 2 age groups.

- Under 12, 6 to 12 years
- 12 + years, 12 – 18 years

Social Group offers tailored activities which will help the children build emotional resilience, develop self confidence and self-esteem skills as well as offering strategies that they can use during times of stress which will in turn help them to function in the community. It also gives the service users a space where they can ultimately be themselves.

These activities include board games, arts & crafts, group games, group discussions, quizzes, movie nights as well as time set aside for daily check in's where the group can talk and process their day as well as get support from peers who are going through the same daily struggles.

Sensory time is vital within the social group, it allows the children within the group time to process their day and regulate emotions in a safe and calm environment.

Youth Group

Kids Together Youth consists of provision to children and young adults ages 12-18 and 18+. Our youth club has consistently evolved over the last number of years.

The young people that attend our youth club are able to access and socialise with their peers in an environment that supports their individual needs and encourages their progression through building on their personal skills, social development, group work and participation in a fun, safe and enjoyable environment.

The aim of the youth club is to encourage the young people to develop life skills through playing games, socialising with peers, participation in activities and promoting independence when suitable. Additionally, depending on the young people in the groups, activities will vary to include: sports, music, table top activities, board games, quizzes, discos, sensory play, outings, trips, arts and crafts and group games such as bowling.

Throughout school holidays and at alternative points in the year we will also run summer schemes and outings with our 12-18 youth including residential. We joined our friends from Sólás and went on a residential in Greenhill in Newcastle this year after a few years of no residential due to Covid Restrictions. It was an amazing success and all the young people loved it!

Our 18+ youth runs similarly and at various points in the year get opportunities to attend local facilities such as the Beechlawns Hotel for the MAC club and 18+ disco for individuals with disabilities. Some of these young adults also attend our TLC programme and will spend the day in TLC getting beautified for the disco including make-up, hair, nails etc.

Our youth also engaged proactively in fighting for their rights this year through protesting at the EA buildings to seek support for our youth provision. It was a great success and we look forward to beginning our EA Youth funding in April 23.

In this year we ran 188 in house evening sessions and 122 outreach support sessions. We supported 3008 placements in house for approximately 100 youth and young adult service users.

Transitional Learning Centre (TLC)

Kids Together Belfast offer a range of programmes from the age of 2-19 years and in September 2018 we developed a Transition Programme for school leavers and those 19+ called TLC (Transitional Learning Centre). The purpose of the TLC group is to ensure young adults with disabilities have an appropriate post-school placement where their needs are met and they have a sense of belonging.

The group works hard to remove barriers to access in the local community, ensuring all of our young people are building skills for life, creating lasting relationships and reducing feelings of isolation.

Our TLC group has gone from strength to strength, we started in 2018 with just 1 service user and now have 48 service users across our 3 TLC sites. This growth represents the need for the service and also the success of both the staff and young people in the group who work so hard to make it successful.

The TLC group delivers a wide range of tailored services for adults with disabilities, including skills building and target setting. Skills are individualised and targeted on the needs of the young adults as well as promoting choice and building on independence, creating a partnership working with the service user, their family, professionals and any other relevant persons. The weeks are packed with outings, activities, skills development and other services.

Each month follows a new theme with lots of opportunities for learning and fun. Throughout this year we have had visits from bugs and beasts, trips to the beach and the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum. We took part in a hockey skills day at Lisnagarvey hockey club and we were invited to lifestyle and performance gym to take part in various workouts to help raise funds to buy defibrillators for the local area. We participated with the KTB fundraiser for Children in Need. We held our very own masquerade ball and Disco for all our 18+ Service Users in the Ballymac Hotel. We completed OCN's in Personal Confidence and Self-esteem with Springboard. This was all whilst completing our daily activities in TLC, doing the shopping, the cleaning, exercising and having lots of fun.

This year we facilitated 48 service users through a mixture of full time and part time placements. We offered 15 sessions per week across out 3 sites April-June and September to March. In the Summer of 2022 we merged groups for the Summer and ran out of 2 sites. In total throughout the year we offered 679 sessions for our young adults in TLC

Group Mentoring

The Group Mentoring project funded by the Community Foundation aimed at children and young people with Autism (ASD) or awaiting diagnosis, who are also grappling with poor mental health. The program is designed to address challenges related to anxiety, emotional regulation, social communication and interaction. The initiative spans 12 weeks and has been instrumental in creating a supportive environment for participants.

The Group Mentoring project was specifically tailored to facilitate socialisation among children with ASD, fostering connections with peers facing similar issues. The initiative was made possible through the generous support of the Community Foundation Fund. The structure of the program includes a staff-to-participant ratio of 2:8 to ensure adequate support for each child. The age groups are divided into 6-12 years and 12-18 years, recognising the unique needs of each developmental stage.

The programme runs over 5 days 2 hours per session. At the end of each cohort we have a celebration event and a family day so that the young people that took part can have their achievements celebrated.

The 12-week programme covers a diverse range of topics critical to the well-being of the participants. These include:

- **What is Mental Health:** Providing a foundational understanding of mental health to empower participants with knowledge.
- **Resilience Building:** Equipping children and young people with tools to bounce back from challenges, fostering a sense of strength.
- **Understanding My Emotions:** Assisting participants in recognising and managing their emotions effectively.
- **Understanding Relationships:** Nurturing skills for building and maintaining positive relationships.
- **My Community and Me:** Encouraging a sense of belonging and understanding within the community.
- **Coping Strategies:** Introducing practical strategies to cope with stressors and challenges.

The primary goal of the Group Mentoring project is to create a safe and supportive space where young people with ASD can develop the skills necessary to navigate a society that may not fully comprehend their unique needs. By addressing mental health, emotional regulation and social interaction, the programme aims to empower participants, enhance their self-esteem, and contribute to their overall well-being.

Throughout the 12 week projects within the time frame, the programme has witnessed notable achievements. Participants have demonstrated improved socialisation, increased emotional regulation and a greater understanding of mental health concepts. The intentional design of the program, including the staff-to-participant ratio, has allowed for personalised support, contributing to the success of the programme.

The Group Mentoring project has proven to be a vital resource for children and young people. The impact on participants' socialisation, emotional regulation and overall well-being underscores the importance of ongoing support for initiatives addressing the unique needs of this demographic.

Counselling Service

Kids Together Belfast' counselling service has catered to 14 Children & Young people from April 22 to March 23. Counselling in the form of 1:1 talking therapy has been crucial this year for improving mental, emotional, and physical health of the children and young people within the service. It has led to improved relationships between siblings, peers and improved overall well-being of each client. These results can be seen via self-report measures such as client questionnaires, parental feedback and observational tools from the therapist. The therapeutic approach used is the eclectic approach which uses both directive and non-directive methods, this is tailored to suit each individual child. Mediums are used in order to help the child feel comfortable within the session and open up to the therapist.

There have been a lot of tools and mediums used throughout the year which are vital in the counselling process. These have been tailored to address specific therapeutic goals for each client. A few examples of these would be the use of therapeutic games facilitating communication, encouraging teamwork and developing problem-solving skills. Visual aids have assisted those in understanding, managing and expressing their emotions. Teaching breathing exercises, mindfulness relaxation and developing personalised toolkits has proved beneficial for many children and young people and challenging negative thoughts has been fundamental. This involved identifying and restructuring negative thought patterns that contribute to emotional distress which has been done through discussions, worksheets and stimulating real-life social scenarios for those suffering with social anxiety. This service has been vital for the family unit and being able to support children and young people through their therapeutic journey has been rewarding both personally and professionally.

Therapeutic Services: 'Play Therapy'

This year, Kids Together have been able to offer Play Therapy support services to 18 children and their families struggling with a range of social, emotional and behavioural issues.

Our Play Therapy intervention supports children aged 4-12 years old, by using a 1:1 integrative, holistic approach which utilises play and other creative modalities including: art, music, drama and sand play to help children process a variety of issues affecting their emotional and psychological wellbeing. Eg: medical issues, family trauma, difficulties with social skills and interaction.

Within the therapeutic session, children are guided by a trained therapist to use the play materials as a means of expression and communication. Landreth (2002) states that during the Play Therapy sessions, *'play becomes the child's language and toys become their words.'*

Intervention Duration

Kids Together Belfast Play Therapy services are offered as 1-hour weekly sessions for a duration of 12 weeks, depending on the referral needs of the child. The family is provided with an initial parental consultation with the therapist. The child's family history and referral issues are discussed and the hopes and expectations for the intervention are outlined.

A parental review meeting takes place at the half-way point of the intervention to evaluate the child's progress and discuss any new or emerging issues or behaviours with the child.

At the end of the 12-week process, a final closing meeting is conducted with the family. An assessment tool, *'Goodman's Strength and Difficulties Questionnaires (SDQ)'* is used 'pre' and 'post' therapy, to evaluate the impact of the intervention and indicate the child's areas of need which may still require additional signposting or further support.

By offering these therapeutic services to our immediate West Belfast community and the surrounding areas, Kids Together are helping to tackle the stark statistics found within the, *'Youth Wellbeing Prevalence Survey' (2020)* which outlined that, *'1 in 8 children in NI are experiencing emotional difficulties'* and that the rate of anxiety and depression in children in NI is 25% higher than the rest of the UK.

A case study from one of the families who have benefitted from our Play Therapy services state that:

'As a parent, I feel the Kids Together service is a vital tool in our community; it offers family support that is much needed to promote the overall mental health and wellbeing of children and families in West Belfast. I would personally like to thank Kids Together for their Play Therapy support for my daughter and family in our time of need. I can only praise and highly recommend the service of the Kids Together team.'

Family Support

By the end of March 2022 Kids Together Belfast had a Family Support Team made up of 5 dedicated members of staff. The service provided a 12-week Home Visiting service to 147 families and an additional 74 families of children within the mentoring projects who received a minimum of 3 home visits during the 12 week programme, that have children/young adults with Sensory, Learning or physical disabilities and/or Autism or awaiting an ASD Diagnosis with 3,634 sessions being carried out.

The team met the numbers of the hub almost half way through the year and in previous years the hub would provide additional monies to provide more services however this wasn't the case which meant we had to stop taking referrals from the Family Support Hubs which shows the reflection of a low number within the

reporting period. Additionally, as part of the Community Fund, we received funding to provide family which we partnered up with the Belfast Trust in the agreement that referrals would mainly come from the Family Support hubs. This was a big stress releaser for the hubs as through the additional funding they were able to access our family support service.

At the beginning of the 12 weeks the family, along with their Support Worker, will carry out a Family star. Throughout the 12 weeks the family and worker will review the Family Star to monitor the progress being made. Together the Family and Support worker will agree on areas of need to work on over the 12 weeks. An example of support provided would be:

- Sleep routines/social stories
- Behavioural management strategies
- Visual aids
- Support in filling out appropriate forms
- Be a listening ear for families
- Liaise with relevant professional
- Signpost to relevant organisations and support services

Our team have a wealth of knowledge when it comes to supporting children and families with Disabilities with a range of experience in day care settings with children with disabilities, personal lived experiences, managing Day Care settings and working with Young Adults with Disabilities to name a few. Using a person-centred approach our team strive to make the families we support feel welcomed, supported, heard and empowering parents with the knowledge to meet their children's needs.

Lego Based Therapy

Lego-Based Therapy project is a transformative programme funded by the Community Foundation, specifically designed for children and young people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or awaiting diagnosis. This 12-week program has proven to be a valuable resource in fostering communication, social interaction, and emotional regulation.

Lego-Based Therapy (LBT) is a structured intervention that utilises the universal appeal of Lego bricks to enhance social and communication skills. The programme, sponsored by the Community Foundation Fund, is tailored for children and young people aged 6-12 years. With a staff-to-participant ratio of 2:6, the program ensures sufficient support for each child, fostering a conducive environment for growth and development.⁴

Lego-Based Therapy Roles

The Lego-Based Therapy sessions are organised into small groups, with each participant assigned a specific role:

- **Builder:** Responsible for constructing the Lego model. This role encourages fine motor skills development, spatial awareness, and collaboration.
- **Supplier:** In charge of providing the necessary Lego pieces to the Builder. This role promotes communication, turn-taking, and understanding the needs of others.
- **Engineer:** Tasked with reading and interpreting the building instructions, facilitating communication, and reinforcing the importance of clear communication within the group.

Program Effects:

The Lego-Based Therapy project has demonstrated several positive effects on participants:

- **Enhanced Communication Skills:** Participants, who initially struggled with communication, showed improvements in expressing their thoughts, ideas, and needs. The structured nature of the Lego activity provided a comfortable platform for communication development.
- **Emotional Regulation:** Children and young people facing emotional overwhelm found the Lego sessions to be a therapeutic outlet. The hands-on nature of the activity, coupled with the supportive group environment, contributed to improved emotional regulation.
- **Social Interaction:** Through the assigned roles and collaborative building process, participants developed essential social skills such as teamwork, turn-taking, and understanding the perspectives of others. Friendships formed during the program extended beyond the Lego sessions.
- **Increased Confidence:** As participants successfully completed Lego projects, a sense of accomplishment and increased self-esteem emerged. The program provided a non-judgmental space where each child's contribution was valued.

The success of the Lego-Based Therapy project warrants consideration for expansion and sustainability. The Lego-Based Therapy project has proven to be a valuable asset for children and young people. The structured approach, coupled with the engaging nature of Lego activities, has contributed to significant positive outcomes in communication, emotional regulation and social interaction.

Parental Support Groups

Parental and Carer Support Programmes

Kids Together Belfast is able to facilitate safe space for parents/carer's who care for children with disabilities, encourage them to provide support and share their personal experiences with each other if they feel comfortable to do so. Many parents/carer's attending the support groups have shared similar feelings of helplessness, social isolation and poor mental health. Since attending the support groups parents have felt less alone in their struggles from having the opportunity to speak to other parents who understand. Even if their children may not have the same disability or their children may not be the same age, parents within these groups have empowered and supported each other by showing a listening ear with no judgement.

Our 12-week mental health programme is a great way to bring parents together over the course of 12 weeks, encourage them to get to know each other and enjoy self-care therapies provided by services within our community. Our 12-week programme involves beauty treatments, a wide range of holistic therapies and team bonding experiences. We also are able to provide free counselling services for any parents and carer's who feel it would be beneficial to them.

Any parent or carer can attend the 12-week programme however we also provide a separate group specifically for "dads" to encourage male carers to come together and support each other. From training provided to our parent co-ordinator by the psychologist Stephen Biddulph, it has been found the importance of the 'fatherhood role' can be unfortunately overlooked and can have a major impact on children's lives.

We want to encourage dads/stepdads/male carer's to also prioritise their mental health and support each other where possible. From Kids Together creating a dad's group we have been able to facilitate a safe space for friendships amongst male carers to grow which inevitably can empower and strengthen the family dynamic as a whole. We aim to promote social inclusion, confidence and boosting self-esteem for the parents who take part in any of our parental support groups.

Some of the programmes so far have involved:

- Reflexology treatments
- Massages/Sport Massage
- Facials
- Beauty treatments such as hair, nail and eyebrow appointments
- Art Therapy
- Breathwork and Meditation Classes
- Action Mental Health Workshops
- Parental workshops provided by STRIVE NI and GamCare
- Goal setting and self-reflection