

Oasis Youth Centre – Health & Wellbeing

Oasis Youth Centre is the youth programme of the Community Intercultural Programme (CIP) in Portadown. Oasis was formed in 2010 as an integral part of Community Intercultural Programme's services to support members of the new communities and was created to assist the integration of young people from diverse ethnic cultures and communities.

Oasis provides a wide range of services for children and young people and channels them through personal development, health and wellbeing initiatives and cross community projects aimed at tackling isolation and social exclusion. Approximately 240 children and young people from around 12 different cultures participate in projects every week and the Oasis programme is now considered a model of good practice, unique in Northern Ireland.

Oasis provides provision primarily for BAME children and young people working with primary 1 up to 18-19 year olds and even up to 24 year olds depending on the programme. Oasis delivers after school programmes and drop-ins, personal development programmes, inclusion programmes around healthy living, sports, art and drama, training programmes and volunteering opportunities. They also deliver mental health and wellbeing programmes and breakfast club.

Over holiday periods such as Summer, Halloween, Christmas and Easter, Oasis deliver programmes that would ensure that children are receiving healthy meals despite being off school.

Oasis work in partnership with organisations such as Scotch Street Youth and Community Centre delivering the Step Out programme which supports young people who have been impacted through COVID-19 into returning to youth services and other provision. They also work in partnership with Youth Link, who delivered their Peace IV project Transform in Oasis Youth Centre.

Oasis receive funding from BBC Children in Need, Newcomer programme funding through Education Authority, Rank Foundation, The National Lottery and other funding streams such as the Housing Executive. Local businesses such as Almac Pharmaceutical help support Oasis to deliver their holiday hunger programmes and after school provision to ensure children and young people have healthy food and snacks during these programmes.

Oasis have a large Polish community within its membership and other nationalities include Portuguese, Lithuanian, Latvian, British, Irish, Chinese, Syrian, Egyptian, Romanian, South African, Hungarian and members from East Timor.

Community Intercultural Programme works with families from these nationalities plus a growing community of Bulgarians and a large community of Romanians.

One challenge to the health and wellbeing of newcomer children and young people is having access to food and security, confirmed by the work completed with the Food Foundation. Poverty, socio-economic deprivation is significant for newcomer families in this area. As soon

as they arrive, they rarely walk straight into a job, nor do they receive any benefits to which they are entitled quickly. Oasis have recognised this need and have been delivering weekly food packs to the Portuguese community and also for some of their member's families including those that are from the area as they are struggling with access to food and importantly, nutritious food.

Oasis ensures that at every programme they deliver, there is some sort of snack or food available, usually during the break time. As mentioned, they supply food and snacks such as fruit skewers, pancakes, mini pizzas and healthy wraps during their after school programmes to primary school children.

The food packs were a response to the impact of COVID-19 as people were isolating and many newcomers were not working due to isolation and being on 0 hour contracts. Oasis receive food from Fair Share on a weekly basis and was able to provide food packs during the pandemic and continues to do so now as the need for them has not decreased.

Oasis have noticed another health and wellbeing challenge as having poor mental health which was not helped by the impact of COVID-19. Oasis have conducted research with members and their parents about the impact of the pandemic and they have found that it had negative implications on mental health and social skills.

Communication for newcomer families can be a challenge and this impacts their ability to navigate through the place in which they are now living, it can impact their ability to make friends, it can impact their education and the support they receive from their parents and they may also not completely understand their homework. The language barrier also impacts these families as they are unsure where to get information or support. For example, a service may exist to support a family however, as they have newly arrived and may not understand the language yet, they do not know about it, nor do they know where to find out about it. One Oasis Staff member who is speaking from their own personal experience from arriving into Portadown as a newcomer explains how this experience can leave you feeling very lonely.

Oasis have noticed that recently a lot of newcomers arriving in the region are young people aged 14-16 year who should be studying for their GCSE's. However, they are not able to get into school easily, depending on the time they arrive in the region and possibly because they cannot speak English. Therefore, they are left at home as they cannot get employment as they cannot speak English and are not able to obtain any qualifications. This also means that they cannot make friends and socialise as they're not attending school or social activities. This in turn can affect the whole family as you have someone who is not in school as they have not been accepted in for the academic year and they feel like they are stuck. This can impact the mental health and wellbeing on the individual and family as they feel trapped and pressure to contribute to the family so they can afford food.

The response to this particular challenge from Community Intercultural Programme and Oasis has been to support in any way in which they can from food packs, advocating on their behalf to the schools and arranging meetings, hosting English classes and supporting them with documentation. CIP signposts children and young people towards Oasis who offers them spaces in their programmes and drop-ins in order to support their personal development and help them to feel welcome, however they note that the language barrier is difficult. They

often provide a tour around the centre while discussing what programmes Oasis offers for newcomer children and young people.

In response to these challenges, Oasis provides food for breakfast club and brunch club and during the Gets Active Programme. They identified that children who were recipients of free school meals were going hungry during the holiday periods. The response to this was to create a holiday programme which would encourage participants to get active through fun and inclusive games and during Gets Active, participants would receive breakfast and lunch. Despite the challenges that COVID presented Oasis persevered by delivering food packs containing breakfast, lunch and snacks, art bundles and delivered sessions online via zoom. Oasis recognised that even though the Gets Active programme may only be 3 weeks during the Summer and a few days during Halloween and Easter, it allowed children the opportunity to engage in a fun programme and be fed. This is also important for parents, as they will be able to rely on Oasis in supporting them to feed their children during this period.

Parental feedback from the Gets Active programme included that the programme allowed children to experience things that their parents would not be able to provide for them and also that the parents may not have known the location of the park that their child know can have access to. Parental consultations facilitated by the children and young people's strategic partnership and family hub are key in assisting the Gets Active programme to not only be a young person focused programme but also to consider the family as a whole and how to support the families involved. These consultations allow Oasis to ensure that the Gets Active Programme is addressing the needs of the children, young people and families involved.

Oasis carries out regular evaluations with children, young people and parents in order to listen to the needs of the children, young people and families, so that they can deliver programmes that will support them. Oasis would meet regularly with their volunteers to discuss any emerging needs so that they are equipped in responding to them and best supporting their participants.

Over the last year and a half, one aspect that has worked very well is the collaboration with the main staff of CIP and the youth workers from Oasis. Through the pandemic these relationships developed through the work that was happening and the amount of referrals and the support that CIP and Oasis could offer families, children and young people. This worked well in terms of the food packages that Oasis was able to supply as CIP would often send families in need to Oasis who could then support them through the food packages and also engage with the children and young people of the family. Likewise, those children and young people that Oasis were working with who were identified as needing support could be referred to CIP from Oasis, ensuring the family as a whole was getting the support it needed. A large part of work was around the EU settlement and this opened opportunities of collaboration as many newcomer families, children and young people were engaging with CIP and Oasis.

Another area of work that has worked well is the partnership work, which has been key over the years. Partnership work that does not duplicate what we deliver but working with partners to deliver to a high standard. One example is the partnership with Youth Link NI who deliver their PEACE IV programme Transform in Oasis. This has been a project that various groups of young people have been involved in over the past three years who can benefit from

group support, volunteering, mentoring, incentive payments, a range of experiences and gain an OCN level 2 qualification. Many of the participants would have been members already within Oasis however, Oasis has also benefited from having new members join because of the Transform Project. Participants and staff on the project have assisted in volunteering on programmes and holiday schemes.

Oasis also delivers partnership work with Scotch Street Youth and Community Centre, a nearby, rural youth centre located just outside of Portadown. Being able to collaborate in delivering programmes together and sharing expertise and good practice has been really effective and beneficial to Oasis. This partnership also opens doors for specific funding which, due to its success, Oasis is now able to deliver the project Step Out in partnership with SSYCC.

An area of delivery which has worked well and has been successful is the Oasis Youth Forum, particularly over the last six months as it has been very active. Participants have been fantastic in designing, developing, delivering programmes and being involved throughout the funding application process. Participants have showed an interest and Oasis is creating opportunities for them to get involved and thrive. Participants recognise that this is an important role which holds responsibility and are accountable in ensuring that the voice of the members of Oasis are listened to and heard. This assists Oasis to then cater for the needs of the children and young people effectively. Participants of the youth forum also have opportunities to facilitate on programmes and help encourage other young people to join the programmes and opportunities provided by Oasis. One example shared was that a youth forum member helped design workshops for the BOSS Project which is delivered in partnership with SSYCC

How Oasis handled working over lockdown has been an aspect of work which has worked very well. In many of their online sessions they were able to include more of the family, whether it be siblings, parents or guardians. A comparison was made to pre-lockdown when parents would leave their child off at a holiday scheme for example, however the work and sessions that have occurred during lockdown have opened opportunities to include parents and get to know them better. An example of this is during the cook-a-long workshops via zoom is seeing the parents get involved, not taking over but engaging in the sessions and working with their child and following the instructions to cook and prepare the meal. This is inclusive work that helps equip not only the child or young person but helps strengthen and benefit the family unit.

One area of learning has been to increase time spent with parents and to plan and organise family days to incorporate the family unit and get to know them and support them better. Oasis recognise that forming relationships with parents of newcomer children and young people can be difficult, as they would often just drop their children off at the door and leave, if they come to the centre and at all. However, Oasis have intentionally had a staff member or volunteer on welcome duty who has time to chat with parents or at least make them feel welcome with a smile and a wave as sometimes the language barrier can prove to be an obstacle.

Oasis believe that having an open, relaxed, welcoming culture is needed, especially when working with newcomer children and young people. Being aware of the experiences that the newcomer children, young people and their families have been through to get to Northern Ireland is also important, understanding that there may be reasons to why certain cultures do not engage as much as others and how some cultures could display a fear factor to stay in

their own cultural group. For example, newcomer children and young people from East Timor can often present timid behaviour by not wanting to get into trouble and show signs of fear by not engaging with other young people outside of their own cultural group. They shared that a larger group of children and young people along with their families from East Timor meet at CIP and within this gathering where they are more familiar with each other that you can noticeably see the differences from this context to how the young people engaged in Oasis which had many different cultures present.

It is important to understand that a reason for this may be because they have experienced the violence or conflict growing up in East Timor. In comparison, Oasis shared one example regarding a young person who newly arrived in the region from a Brazilian background who settled in easily and engaged well with staff and the other young people in the centre who were from a range of cultures and backgrounds. A reason for this could be because of the cultural diversity and openness in the area of Brazil in which this young person has come from, meaning that they were already comfortable with those from different backgrounds.

Oasis highlighted how effective and meaningful being friendly can be to children, young people and families that have recently arrived in the region. For those coming in and leaving the youth centre, Oasis staff and volunteers welcome them and are conscious of smiling, waving and giving a thumbs up. They find this useful when engaging with parents who may be collecting their child from the centre, who may have limited English.

Oasis would sometimes use translators to engage with newcomer children and young people or translate forms for them to take home to their parents in order to sign up more easily to programmes and trips. They would also often send a text out to parents so that they would be able to translate the message if necessary.

One Oasis staff member emphasises the importance of being patient when working and forming a relationship with children and young people who have recently arrived in the region. It is not easy for them to make the first step and sign up to programmes and projects as other young people but do not give up on them as they possibly only need a little more consistency and support.

Recognising that everyone has a story, including the children and young people that have recently arrived in the region. They may have come as a family in search of a better life or to escape danger and violence. Regularly putting yourself in their shoes helps build patience and an understanding of some of the challenges that they face and encourage you to support them as best you can.

Another piece of advice would be to do research on the cultural background to help inform your practice and if it possible and applicable to conduct a consultation event to discover the needs so that you are not just assuming them.

Oasis have found that having a universal resource has been helpful in engaging with and addressing the health and wellbeing challenges of children and young people who have recently arrived in the region. For example, a sports project relates to so many young people including sports such as football, basketball, athletics and dance. A project like this which is universal, inclusive and helps create a space and opportunity to make friends through communication, teamwork and having fun.