

Oasis Youth Centre – Living in Safety & Stability

Oasis Youth Centre is the youth programme of 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. It also delivers Mental health and wellbeing programmes and a breakfast club.

Oasis has 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.

Oasis receives 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 noticed that recently a lot of newcomers are young people arriving in the region, are young people aged around 14-16, 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.

Oasis has identified gaining access to housing, particularly appropriate housing as a challenge for children, young people and their families. They shared examples of how parents who have migrated to Northern Ireland may house share with others as they gain employment and work before the rest of their family move over. However, Oasis share that once the children and

young people move to Northern Ireland they find themselves sharing a house with other people and other families who have recently been involved in the house share. Oasis explains the complications for accessing a house, especially before the rest of the family arrive in Northern Ireland causing this in-between stage difficult and frustrating as they can find themselves house sharing with too many people, being placed in a house which is outside of Portadown (where the parents have secured employment) or even worse, without a house.

Oasis staff continue to share how within some cultures and circumstances, there may be 10 or 11 people living in the same house and this raises concerns and challenges of ensuring that everyone has a bed to sleep in, making sure everyone is fed and clothed properly as well. One staff member alludes to how this reality creates fear amongst children, young people and their families, sharing of a time they were delivering a food package to a family and the residents were scared of answering the door because they weren't sure of who it was going to be as there were quite a lot of their family living in the house together.

The staff member continues to suggest the fear experienced by children and young people who feel they that they may be being watched and judged by those that live around them as they have a lot of people living in their home and asks the question do children and young people who share this experience feel safe at home?

Another staff member discusses how some of the families that Oasis work with live or are placed in certain areas of the town that are constantly having issues with the local community as they are often in contentious areas. They explain how newcomer families have little understanding of the context of Northern Ireland and the issues that have gone on for years and yet in some cases, find themselves in the middle of it and no doubt experience fear where they live, especially during the more contentious periods of the year. A staff member adds how this can reflect on the school that a child or young person who has recently arrived to the region may attend. Many newcomer children, young people and their families do not understand the segregated school system in Northern Ireland and when applying for places within a local school, they will not consider the particular street or place where they live as they will gladly take a position in whatever school. However, for some children and young people living in certain areas of the town and wearing a school uniform that is not associated with that area could be endangering the child without them having any knowledge of this issue. It is so often the case that their circumstances dictate where they live and attend school rather than their cultural or religious background.

Oasis staff shared examples of how members of their youth centre have experienced racism and hate crime both at school and in their communities. One staff member highlights that it is quite often indirect racism without people necessarily being aware that it is racism, i.e. comments made to children and young people because they look different and have different characteristics. They shared of one example of how a newcomer young person made a comment to a young person from Northern Ireland, calling them Chinese because of how they thought their eyes looked. The response was to challenge this behaviour and conclude that it is not acceptable to say certain things to people which could be hurtful and inappropriate.

Oasis staff believe that schools are becoming increasingly accepting towards diversity and teaching and encouraging children and young people to be more accepting of different

ethnicities, languages and backgrounds however, they acknowledge that racism and sectarianism continue to exist.

Within Oasis, staff believe that children and young people, including those that have recently arrived in the region feel safe and this is reflected in their membership with young people returning and membership growing. Through the programmes delivered, Oasis aims to educate children and young people of other cultures and celebrate holidays and events associated with different cultures such as Polish Mother's Day and Portuguese Freedom Day. They believe that education and celebration of the different cultures is important in reducing the problems, stigmas and discrimination towards newcomer children and young people. Through these informative programmes and celebrations, Oasis creates a culture of acceptance so that members know that when they come through the doors that there is no room for racism, bullying or sectarianism and if it does take place then it is challenged immediately and they recognise that children and young people learn from these experiences.

Oasis is located quite centrally in the town of Portadown and recognises this as a strength when working with young people from different communities as it is not perceived to be in a single identity area of the community. Oasis recognises how this also benefits young people and families who have recently arrived in the region as many members of those communities do not drive. Therefore, Oasis is within a reasonable walking distance making it convenient for members to attend by walking or from travelling by bus.

Oasis Staff share of how taking time to educate young people in their programmes has been hugely successful. In their cross community programmes such as the BOSS project and Fusion, participants learn about different cultures and therefore build an understanding and tolerance towards them and learn how to be more welcoming. During these programmes they learn about various cultures that are living in their community such as Indian, Polish, Chinese, Ulster Scots and Irish through food and music workshops, storytelling, social action and informal education that is engaging and relevant.

One specific area that Oasis have highlighted regarding the safety and stability challenges of children and young people who have recently arrived in the region is the educational achievement gap and the barriers to education. This is a major challenge for those young people aged between 14 and 17 who are arriving with no GCSE qualification or plans to attend school to achieve any qualifications. Therefore, Oasis have engineered pathways that young people can attend projects at the youth centre and gain qualifications such as an OCN level 2 in qualifications in Employability Skills and Personal Success and Wellbeing which are both GCSE qualifications. The transferable skills that they will also learn by participating in projects that include qualifications in Oasis are also very beneficial such as communication skills, teamwork, organisation skills and leadership. As Oasis prioritise involving young people in decision making and funding applications through projects such as their Youth Forum, young people are gaining skills in risk assessment, evaluation and budgeting. Oasis regularly creates opportunities for young people to volunteer within their centre and holiday programmes to help them gain experience in using these skills and to gain valuable experience to include on their CV or job application forms. Oasis believe that these opportunities to learn and achieve qualifications and gaining experience through volunteering are positive steps in the right direction in enabling children and young people who have recently arrived in the region to

live in safety and stability as they become more informed about the community around them and also more employable as a result of their learning and experience.