



# H.O.P.E. and change for families



## Introduction and summary

This is a report about an extraordinary family centre in Bromyard, Herefordshire. From a small rural playgroup it has developed into an all-purpose centre for the community, providing outstanding education for children, support for families and a huge variety of courses, including adult basic skills and vocational training.

A designated children's centre, H.O.P.E. - holistic opportunities for play and education - has also established itself as a successful social business, acquiring an additional nursery, running a charity shop and opening a High Street "Emporium" - an outlet for crafts and other goods designed and made by parents. Newly opened premises include a business centre for supporting small enterprises and home workers, a fully equipped IT room, workshop space and a community café with a full training kitchen.

These developments are the result of 12 years work by a community group and its founder and CEO, Sheenagh Davis. An independent charity and social enterprise, H.O.P.E. started life as a weekly session for young parents in a disused magistrates court and worked from a number of other temporary premises before securing funding to build its current home. The centre is used by retired people, teenagers and families and H.O.P.E. is also now one of the town's biggest employers.

H.O.P.E. works to break down the barriers which prevent its users from fulfilling "the wonderful promise of all that we can be". In so doing it is challenging structural inequalities which impair children's lives. Its sights are on the long-term, recognising that for some families, undoing damage will take time and resources. It operates as an inclusive community and an extension of family for its members.

Much of this report relates the importance of the centre for its users and the fundamental difference it has made in their lives. Its wider significance, however, is as a vision and possibility for Sure Start as a whole.

H.O.P.E. is both helping children to achieve and supporting families to move out of poverty. While responding to individual needs, the centre is also addressing the economic and social problems which are the source of underachievement. The hallmarks of its approach – all the help and services that families need, support for aspiration and learning throughout life – are ones which, if adopted more widely, could help unlock social mobility.

The first few years of life are a critical period not just for children, but for parents too. Others have argued for the importance of early intervention and its priority within public spending decisions. The experience of H.O.P.E. reinforces this but also suggests that, with creativity, spending on families can generate a large return for the whole community.

## The report

The information in this report is based on the findings of a series of visits to the H.O.P.E. family centre made between September 2010 and May 2011. The report relies on quantitative management data, work plans and financial information supplied by staff and qualitative interviews with parents, staff and supporters. Where parents are quoted, their names have been changed to protect anonymity. The opinions expressed within the report are Capacity's.

## Background

Bromyard is one of five market towns in Herefordshire. Near to the Worcester border, it sits in one of the most sparsely populated parts of the county. Like many rural communities, Bromyard has a high proportion of retired people and some parts of the reach area of the children's centre are among the most deprived in the country in terms of lack of access to services such as post offices, shops and banks.

The area also contains pockets of persistent overall deprivation. Bromyard Central ward and Bromyard Rural wards are in the upper quintile of Herefordshire wards for employment deprivation, with one in six people in Bromyard Central on out of work benefits. Bromyard was badly affected by the 2001 outbreak of foot and mouth disease and much of the land work, which provided a way of life for families, has been eroded.<sup>1</sup>

Typical of many rural areas, Bromyard suffers from a shortage of affordable and decent housing and is polarised into affluent neighbourhoods with high levels of owner occupation and poorer neighbourhoods with high levels of social and private renting. Drugs are an issue - with families re-housed in the area bringing with them established networks and links with drug dealers.

The same polarity exists in relation to lifestyle and income. While Herefordshire is, on the whole, relatively affluent, there are significant inequalities of experience. In Bromyard Central, nearly one in three children live in poverty, which is above the national rate, more than twice the Herefordshire average and ten times the proportion in the most affluent areas of the county.<sup>2</sup>

Rural poverty is often hidden from view. Young people have particular difficulties in accessing social and educational opportunities. Poor transport has been shown not only to reduce children's participation in activities but also to restrict their opportunities and choices in deciding what to do at the end of their compulsory schooling.<sup>3</sup>

Some parts of the reach area are among the most deprived in England in terms of education and skills deprivation. In the most deprived Lower Level Super Output

<sup>1</sup> Bromyard Locality Summary – Herefordshire County Council

<sup>2</sup> HMRC NI 1 (2008)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.atl.org.uk/media-office/media-archive/lack-of-transport-blights-rural-lives.asp>

Areas (LSOA), nearly 40% of people of working age have no qualifications and almost 60% lack a Level 2 Qualification. Since in the same small area, only 36% of young people gain Level 2 at GCSE level, the skills deficit is continually being topped up.<sup>4</sup>

Rural families are one of a number of groups of families less likely to make use of helping services. Lack of private transport is a particular barrier for some families, but rural populations are also more costly to serve because of the higher costs of transport and the unit costs of employing staff in sparse areas. A relatively high proportion of pupils living in Bromyard are identified as having special educational needs and in the most deprived neighbourhood, 39% of households contain at least one person with a limiting long-term illness. Within the reach area, a slightly higher proportion of children aged 0-4 are on the Child Protection Register than in Herefordshire as a whole.

## H.O.P.E.

H.O.P.E. began as a weekly session organised by two parents as a social opportunity for new families coming into the area. It then moved to a church hall to run twice weekly drop-in family group sessions. When parents said they wanted to do more than meet for coffee, the local college was invited to run a course on the importance of play.

Today the centre employs 35 full and part-time staff and 14 volunteers, making the centre one of the largest employers in Bromyard. Around 350 children and their families access the centre on a regular basis. H.O.P.E. works with the voluntary and public sector, Health and Social Care, Jobcentre Plus, Adult and Community Learning, the Citizens Advice Bureau, the police, Women's Aid and has a major stake in local regeneration initiatives.

Throughout a generation of development, the continuing H.O.P.E. themes have been:

- Together – all ages and all the services which families need
- Literacy and learning - as a driver of change
- Mutuality – the families who use H.O.P.E. come from different backgrounds but help each other, creating a community of families

---

<sup>4</sup> ONS

## Raising Skills

The report of the working group on adult basic skills which led to the *Skills for Life* programme, defined basic skills as ‘the ability to read, write and speak English and use mathematics at a level necessary to function and progress at work and in society in general’.<sup>5</sup>

In Hereford, almost one quarter of the population has poor levels of literacy and almost the same proportion has poor numeracy levels.<sup>6</sup> Poor basic skills also have an adverse impact on family life, increasing the likelihood of unemployment or low-paid, work and the capacity of parents to support their children’s learning and to manage their family life.

Parents with very poor literacy may find it difficult to understand written communications, e.g. from schools. Parents with poor numeracy may find it harder to manage money and thus be more vulnerable to debt.

There are particular challenges in delivering basic skills in rural areas. Transport and lack of access to childcare together with the difficulty of attracting viable numbers are key factor. It is also thought that the barrier of stigma attached to help seeking for literacy and numeracy is intensified by the relative lack of anonymity in small communities.<sup>7</sup>

Herefordshire Council has no learning venues of its own and contracts out its adult and community learning to predominantly third sector organisations. H.O.P.E. is one of 21 delivery partners selected for its reach to adults who are income disadvantaged or isolated. The children’s centre is involved in delivering both Family learning and Family Literacy and Numeracy and also Personal and Community Development Learning.

Katherine has been attending courses at H.O.P.E., now working at Entry 2 in Literacy and Level 1 in Numeracy. She’s also taken Yoga, Computers and Work Preparation Courses.

She says her spelling is now better and she finds it easier to manage her money. Of her children she says “I read to them, we take home books from H.O.P.E. and I read to them in the evening, it helps the kids wind down and they listen to me read – it’s time together.”

<sup>5</sup> A FreshStart (DfEE, 1999)

<sup>6</sup> Hereford Economic Assessment 2004

[http://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/docs/business/eidt\\_economic\\_assessment\\_2002\\_to\\_2004.pdf](http://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/docs/business/eidt_economic_assessment_2002_to_2004.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Atkin, C. Rose, A and Shier, R. (2005) Provision of, and learner engagement with, adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL support in rural England: a comparative case study Institute of Education

Literacy and Numeracy have always formed a core part of the work of H.O.P.E. Long before it was designated as a children's centre classes were offered firstly with the 'literacy bus' parked in the town's main car park and then in a garage owned by the CEO's husband. That provision has grown substantially and now includes cooking, yoga and growing food, healthy eating and dental health, first-aid, IT, sewing, art and photography, confidence building and positive change, work skills and ESOL. Many of the courses embed help with basic skills.

Some of the users of H.O.P.E. have poor literacy and or numeracy skills but, taken together, the courses at H.O.P.E. provide most, if not all of the basic capabilities and skills needed for family life. For many, these are skills and capabilities which have not previously been accessible.

A parent who is struggling with money issues might receive help from a debt adviser, or be helped by a family support worker to set up a payment schedule. A numeracy course complements this support but is also a doorway to a future where money can be managed with greater confidence.

Between September 2010 and May 2011, 132 people attended basic skills and other family learning at H.O.P.E. Among those who provided information about prior learning, almost two thirds had no qualifications or were qualified only to Level 1, the minimum functional level.

Within the same group nearly half were unemployed, 15 had learning difficulties and 17 had wider disabilities, including mobility and mental health issues.

Participants are supported to think about and record their learning aims. Individual progress toward those aims is monitored

Maureen has been working on literacy and numeracy for two years. Homeless at 15, she left school without qualifications, but went to college and achieved a Diploma in sports subjects. Her daughter is just 18 months and Maureen is working part-time as a cleaner at the children's centre. She wants eventually to become a P.E. teacher or trainer.

She says – "It's good, not like school. Learning has turned my life around. When I come here, I'm learning. I don't feel depressed."

William is a young dad. His mum, Isabel, attends classes at H.O.P.E. and both are part of a settled Travellers community. William was bullied at school and suffered badly from ADHD. He describes his time in school as "terrible."

William attended H.O.P.E. classes too and can now read more than before. He has a partner and young child. He says, "It's like one big family. They sit and have a conversation with you about the work. They explain it clearly and if you don't understand it, they give you extra support."

and recorded, with achievements regularly celebrated. The underlying theme is one of encouraging parents to aim further and higher and to encourage aspiration.

Literacy and Numeracy courses are free in Herefordshire and full funding for other courses is available to adults who are out of work and on low incomes.

Not all students at H.O.P.E. are parents. People of all ages attend the courses. More than 60 older people attended in the same period, some unemployed, others retired. The oldest learner is 95.

The children's centre also works with Travellers families and several have gained first qualifications as a result. One traveller mum began attending literacy classes at H.O.P.E. and at the time was at Entry Level 1. She has now gone on to achieve her Level 2 Literacy and completed the key skills portfolio. One of her children who left school with no qualifications was inspired by this and now attends the literacy classes with his partner.

A weekly computer drop-in provides access to both skills and the Internet. Spanish classes, Skype, Arts and Crafts provide opportunities for personal learning and development.

Sewing and upholstery classes began when people needed curtains, or couldn't sew name tags in their children's school clothes. Some now make things for the children's centre, e.g. dressing up clothes. Others have gone on to use those skills to become self-employed. The next project to follow is carpentry classes forming the basis for a furniture reclamation and restoration project.

## Supporting Families

Some of the parents who use H.O.P.E. need support to overcome problems which arise not from an isolated event but from persistent neglect or abuse over a number of years. Others need only a limited amount of help or help with a specific issue, like transport or help with breastfeeding.

“Low incomes and expectations and rural isolation are underlying reasons for many of the concerns we see in family life.

H.O.P.E. is a community of families and professionals. As the latter, we are professional in all that we do, but we are not remote.”

Sheenagh Davis – CEO

“The family was a very hard to reach family and professionals had failed to make any headway. There were concerns raised about their parenting ability. Once we had gained their trust we saw another side to both parents. They showed themselves to be loving and reasonably attentive parents. It seemed that a lot of the judgements that had been made about them were as a result of their protective behaviours and their own insecurity. They wanted to learn and were happy to be guided”

Family support worker

At any one time the centre offers intensive one to one family support to nearly 30 families, but is able to help a much greater number through advice, signposting and short-term support.

H.O.P.E. also works closely with Social Services and a number of Looked After Children and children with a protection plan access support from the centre.

Mental health is an issue. Analyses of family support reports and CAF assessments show that emotional health and well-being, parenting skills, housing and children's behaviour are all key areas of need.

Family support workers will act as advocates for families with other agencies. Debt and money issues are frequently a problem for families in an area of low pay and unemployment. H.O.P.E. has also helped families in practical ways, helping them to find furniture, domestic appliances and to make benefit claims.

The model is to offer a family-like environment using a transactional model where boundaries are clearly drawn, but there is an understanding of how the circumstances of families, often challenging, can influence their behaviour and responses.

A core belief is that the key to successful working with families is that of continuity and long-term involvement. The process of change is incremental and measured in terms of small steps, but the staff hold very high aspirations and expectations for families.

## Early Education and Care

The playgroup is at the heart of support for families and better outcomes for children. In a recent inspection by Ofsted, it was judged to provide "exceptional support" for children in their development towards Early Learning Goals, as a result of which children make "outstanding progress". It is a highly inclusive setting with an above average proportion of children with special needs, currently more than 9% of registered children but previously as high as 13.5%.

H.O.P.E. has also acquired a local private nursery which had closed but was needed by working parents in the local area. It operated for a time in temporary premises, as H.O.P.E. *Daycare*, but has now been integrated with the original playgroup within the children's centre's new premises as H.O.P.E. *Early Years* and is open from 8.00am – 6.00pm.

The nursery provision provides jobs for 17 local people and is financially sustainable from fee income.



## Economic Value

Heather was until recently the Charity Shop Manager for H.O.P.E. She worked just 16 hours each week as she has three children and her husband is disabled. When the family first moved to Bromyard, they had no money, no cooker and were at their lowest ebb. H.O.P.E. provided home support and other practical help, including access to childcare and holiday care, the toy library and speech and language therapy for her middle son. Heather's husband was able to access training in Portable Appliance Testing.

Sally attended literacy classes at H.O.P.E. and learned to use a computer. Sally has dyslexia and suffered from depression – now behind her.

She now volunteers in the charity shop. About H.O.P.E., she says “It's helped me move on and get on in my life.”

The charity shop was Heather's idea as she noticed H.O.P.E. was receiving a large amount of donations of children's clothes and thought it would be a good idea to open a shop. A year later the charity shop opened in a small shop in the Market Square, with two rails and some shelves from IKEA. The shop sells children's goods, including push-chairs, car seats, cots and clothes.

Other parents and members of the community help in the shop, which provides a source of fundraised income for the children's centre and work experience for parents.

The charity shop has now moved to larger premises and generates around £15,000 annually in net income. Heather has now moved on to full-time employment in a supermarket and another parent has been given the opportunity for employment in the charity shop.

H.O.P.E. opened a second shop – *The Emporium* – selling handcrafted goods designed and made by local people. This came about partly as an extension of the sewing and craft classes. Sheenagh identified two parents who were particularly good at producing hand-made craft items and bought an old wardrobe, painted it and put it in the reception area of the children's centre.

As more items were sold from the wardrobe the parents were encouraged to take on the charity shop which was moving into larger premises and there are now 26 self-employed people who rent space for their goods in the Emporium. H.O.P.E. receives a small income from the rented space.

Like many rural market towns, Bromyard has seen a decline in local businesses and a loss of services. It is also remote from larger centres of population and

families without cars and on low incomes find it difficult to access services and attend appointments.

H.O.P.E. successfully spearheaded a bid for funding for a £1.3m multi-use facility for Bromyard, providing an extended base for the children's centre, workshops and office space for small businesses and space for multi-agency services.

Part of the Rural Development Programme and led by Herefordshire Council working with the Rural Regeneration Zone (RRZ), funding was secured from Advantage West Midlands.

“I have a job now, as cleaner first thing in the morning and in the evening. For the last 2 weeks, since I got my job – I haven't been depressed because I've got a job. I'm confident about leaving my baby in the childcare here. I don't think I could work elsewhere yet, but maybe part-time then full-time when she is older, I can get a better job.”

Maureen

The new premises also prevented closure of the children's centre's full day care nursery which would have otherwise closed because of the inadequacy and increased costs of their temporary premises.

The 950 square metre facility accommodates a range of agencies and outreach service provision including Age Concern, Adult and Community learning, RELATE, the PCT, police, Business Link and the Rural Hub, serving farmers in the catchment area.

It also provides a place where home workers can meet and will include a community café and healthy eating initiatives offered to the whole community. A training workshop has sewing machines and a spinning wheel for specialist art and textile classes.

Specialist support will also be available to lone parents, those on low incomes, people with low skills levels and economic migrants.

The café includes a training kitchen. A volunteer will run it initially, but discussions are taking place with local colleges about using it for placements and as part of the centre's volunteer programme.

H.O.P.E. uses the services of a Business Development Officer, who also works elsewhere in the area and who is supporting users and tenants with Business Plans and Business Rates.

“All the activities at H.O.P.E. are equally important – it's no good just having family support – if you have no prospects, no qualification to get a job, no money – then you have no purpose and no way to get a job or qualification – then you're just not going anywhere. “

Barbara

## In it together

H.O.P.E. has a large and diverse user group of every age, inclusive of minority ethnic and Eastern European families, incomers to Bromyard and more settled families.

Jan Pearce Higgins is a H.O.P.E. Trustee and local councillor. She has been involved in the centre from the early days. She believes the centre has something to offer everyone – “It is not just here to support those who can’t pay their bills. It’s used and trusted by all families.”

Robert is seventeen. He was bullied at school and left without any qualifications. He also suffered from severe depression for a time. At H.O.P.E., he has achieved Entry 3 in Maths and Entry 2 in Literacy which has enabled him to enrol on a college-based Public Services course which will help him to have a career.

Not everyone in Bromyard uses H.O.P.E. As in many rural communities, there are tensions between age groups, between incomers and those whose families have always lived there and between poorer and more affluent families.

H.O.P.E. has a vision and has been prepared to take on challenges. On occasions, the support and advocacy offered to very needy families has led others to see the centre as a stigmatising place. However, gradually and incrementally, such reservations have been overcome and in 2010, H.O.P.E. was adopted by the Mayor of Bromyard as his own charity.

## Discussion – HOPE for us all?

Across England, other local children’s centres are supporting families with young children. Many offer a combination of services and signpost families to others. Very few, perhaps, have developed a model of service quite as broad as H.O.P.E.

The Government plans to set out its plans on the early years very shortly. However, the requirement on children’s centres to offer full day care has already been relaxed and following the 2010 Spending Review, reductions in funding to local authorities have resulted in some children’s centres being closed and others being amalgamated.

Surveys of public opinion suggest that there is widespread public support for Sure Start. The experience of H.O.P.E. argues for a continuing role for children’s centres in addressing poverty and achievement and the need for more, rather than less help for families.

## Change for families

Family support - in the words of H.O.P.E. parents - is very important but not by itself enough because, without prospects, without a job, families are trapped in poverty and robbed of the purpose and opportunities which work provides.

The recently launched Work Programme is a new approach to delivering employment-related support services, providing tailored help for people who find themselves out of work regardless of the type of benefit they claim.

But many families are currently a long way from the labour market whether because of ill health, a disabled child, limited skills and other persistent challenges. At the same time, services which are supporting those families often operate in isolation from employment support and skills providers.

Children's centres could play a larger and more direct role in supporting families to move towards employment. The inspiration found in H.O.P.E. is in the largeness of its ambitions on behalf of its users. Understanding the social and economic conditions which limit disadvantaged families, it has gone out to create jobs which people can do, backed by training and business support. In so doing it is creating wealth for the community.

## Becoming learning rich

Having poor literacy or numeracy skills is not the result of bad luck nor is it necessarily the result of individual learning difficulties or shortcomings on the part of the individual.

Adults with the poorest skills are likely to have suffered disadvantage as children, more likely not to have had access to pre-school education, more likely not to have had their difficulties recognised at school and less likely to have had any education beyond the school leaving age. As adults they are more likely to be unemployed. As mothers they are more likely to have children early. Their children are likely to have fewer books.<sup>8</sup>

In not addressing parental literacy and numeracy, a trajectory of failure is created for subsequent generations. Yet a national survey by the National Literacy Trust of 500 local providers working with families, found that nearly half rarely or never signpost parents to support for themselves and more than a third rarely or never talk to parents about how they could support their children's literacy. The Trust concluded that "failure to tackle poor literacy is threatening action on child poverty".<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Parsons S and Bynner J (2007) Illuminating disadvantage: Profiling the experiences of adults with Entry level literacy or numeracy over the life course

<sup>9</sup> National Literacy Trust (2011) Local authorities improving life chances: A review of a new approach to raising literacy levels

Through its literacy and numeracy provision, courses on cookery, computers, and employment preparation, self-esteem and confidence building, H.O.P.E. is helping to bridge the gap between the learning rich and the learning poor – a gap which, according to the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, is widening.

In doing this, they are buttressed by research findings which show that adults who have good educational experiences at any age want more, both for themselves and their children; that the higher the level of education they receive, the greater the benefits for children and that the younger their children are, the greater the potential benefit.

There are, however, multiple barriers for parents wishing to address their learning needs, among which are low confidence and lack of transport, childcare and funding. At H.O.P.E., these barriers are overcome by carefully supporting parents to move at their own pace and to learn in a trusted environment. Some learners are starting from a very low base but all are encouraged to move towards the critical Level 2 as a platform for skilled and semi-skilled employment.

Adequate literacy and numeracy are as essential as and complement other parenting skills. Children's centres already have a brief which includes, or potentially includes, further training and education for parents and support to move into employment, but this is not part of the required or core offer. Many provide learning opportunities related to health or diet, aspects of child development or parenting; some work with adult learning providers to provide family learning or *Skills for Life* courses; and a few have established full partnerships with Jobcentre Plus and with training providers. However, this is an area which could and should be part of the children's centre offer.

## The Wonderful Promise

In the last 10 to 15 years there has been a huge number of initiatives to improve attainment and close the gap between low income children and their better-off counterparts. There is currently a policy focus on the intergenerational transmission of poverty and a cross-party consensus on the importance of early intervention.

H.O.P.E. appears to be less a defined intervention than an inclusive community of interlocking relationships and approaches. One decisive factor in its achievements is the vision and drive of those who have led the centre since it began, but its success and longevity can also be understood in other additional terms.

There is, for example, an absence of any tendency to pathologise families; rather there is an understanding that some families face challenges and adversities of which others can only have the barest understanding. Those challenges shape people's lives and reappear in the next generation, perpetuating inequality.

Positive parenting can support good outcomes for children, but there is rather more evidence that poverty and social class are the main determinants of under-achievement.<sup>10</sup> By redressing inequalities in access to skills, employment and knowledge resources H.O.P.E. is creating a step change for families.

The mechanisms by which H.O.P.E. engages and supports children and adults provide a model for wider implementation. Although constituted as a charity, its general approach and organisation lean towards that of a mutual. Its embrace of the whole community helps people to feel less “on the outside” while high expectations encourage users, as one parent puts it, “to get off their bum” and make more of themselves. In so doing adults and children have the opportunity to create a sense of self-worth and a connectedness to others.

Constructing children’s’ centres as communities was the original vision for Sure Start and now, perhaps, an idea whose time has now come.

Margaret Lochrie  
July 2011

---

<sup>10</sup> Raffo,C., Dyson,A. Gunter,H., Hall,D., Jones, L., and Kalambouka,A. (2007) Education and poverty A critical review of theory, policy and practice. Joseph Rowntree Foundation