

First Steps Early Years Group

Horn Drive Community Centre
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Reg charity no: XT24035

FIRST STEPS EARLY YEARS GROUP PROPOSAL TO BELFAST CITY COUNCIL FOR INTERIM FUNDING

This Interim Funding is to enable First Steps to continue to deliver an Early Years development group operating out of Glen Community Centre on two mornings per week from 9.00a.m - 1.00p.m.

This will enable First Steps to provide support to 12 families with children aged 2 and 3 years old with special or additional needs who:

- Require a higher level of support to enable them participate in a group setting
- Experience communication barriers
- Attend the child development clinic
- Are awaiting assessment and diagnosis
- Have complex physical needs
- Have a learning disability
- Global developmental delay
- Display complex behaviour
- Live in a family in crisis e.g. parent who is terminally ill, parent with mental health issues

Research shows that all children benefit from early intervention and support at crucial stages of their development with those children with special needs requiring a higher level of support benefiting most from this approach.

Background

First Steps early Years Group is based in the Lenadoon area of West Belfast which is ranked within the top 10% of most deprived neighbourhoods according to government statistics.

First Steps has been delivering Early Years services in the area over the past 16 years offering early years care and education to preschool children, a parent & toddler group for families and family support to parents.

Additionally the group operates on the interface between the Suffolk (predominantly Unionist) and Lenadoon (predominantly Nationalist) communities, an area which has been a notorious flashpoint for violence and strained community relations.

In recent times the area has seen the development of improved inter – community relations, however there still remains significant work to be undertaken in order for the two communities to continue to improve relationships and experience a stable and lasting peace.

First Steps have welcomed the inclusion of children from the perceived Protestant Suffolk estate attending the group with approximately one third of applications for a place coming from this side of the interface, a significant cross community success given the troubled history of the Suffolk and Lenadoon communities

Building on and developing this relationship, First Steps encourage parental involvement within the group through attending fun days, accompanying their children on trips out and sitting on the Management Committee.

Families and children from all sections of the community attend the group daily. Over the years we have actively included families from minority ethnic backgrounds, including families from the Travelling Community, families whose first language isn't English, families from a variety of Eastern European countries and further afield, families from the Muslim Community and families from the Catholic and Protestant Communities.

Staff employed by First Steps are local people from the Catholic community, Protestant Community and the Muslim Community reflecting diversity of religion and cultures attending the group.

First Steps over-arching mission is to provide a safe, stimulating, enabling environment that optimises children's readiness for school, where opportunities to support and enhance socialising with other children is to the fore. We strive to augment parent's knowledge and skills to support their child's development and provide opportunities for increasing social networks within the community to facilitate children's all-round holistic development.

First Steps ethos is focussed on providing the highest standard of early years care and education to children living in the area of West Belfast regardless of background or ability, based upon their individual needs and ensuring that a child first approach is implemented at all times to ensure that every child has the opportunity to fulfil their potential both in terms of cognitive and personal development. Learning through play is designed to ensure every child coming through our doors is valued for their uniqueness.

Expansion of Service

Over the past 3 years applications for a place within First Steps Early Years group for children in their final preschool year exceeded the capacity in Horn Drive Community Centre.

In order to provide places and accommodate these children, First Steps negotiated with BELB and Belfast City Council to expand and deliver an additional service from Glen Community Centre.

Funding to sustain this group was to enable the group to operate only when PEAGS places were allocated to attend in Glen CC.

Registration of the group allowed 18 children aged 3 & 4 yrs old attend.

8 out of the 18 children were PEAGS placements, resulting in 10 places allocated to children in their penultimate preschool year.

Establishing this group and operating over the past 3 years, enabled the inclusion of a higher number of children with disabilities to attend an Early Years setting, preparing them for school or Nursery.

Unfortunately this year the applications for PEAGS places has reduced and all places can be accommodated in Horn Drive, resulting in the funding for the Glen CC group is no longer applicable.

However the applications to First Steps for a place for children in their penultimate preschool year has dramatically increased with 45 – 50 children registered for a place in the Glen CC with approximately one quarter of these children requiring a higher level of support to attend an early years development group.

Traditionally First Steps have worked for many years offering services, support and inclusion to families with children with Special Needs requiring a higher level of support needs ensuring their needs are met and they positively benefit from the early years experience.

First Steps are seeking interim funding from Belfast City Council to enable them continue to offer a much needed unique early years group in the West Belfast area. This funding would provide 12 families to avail of a service delivering specialist support for their children.

Traditionally preschool children with special needs from this community are escorted outside their own area in busses to avail of an early years placement.

No other early years group operates the same or similar service in the area exclusively for children with special or additional needs in their penultimate preschool year.

Attending a small early years group introduces the children to a learning environment outside their home preparing them for entering nursery school and supporting their all round development by participating in a learning through play programme.

Programme planning and observation meets the individual needs of each child encouraging them to develop at their own pace and level helping them to reach their potential and valuing them for themselves.

A huge barrier to children's development is the inability to communicate and express themselves effectively. Additional support to enhance the children's communication and development will include:

- Music therapy with the input of a trained therapist
- Speech & language development with the input of a trained therapist
- Using the arts as a medium to express themselves
- Sensory play
- Use of makaton and visual signs to aid communication
- Use of symbols and story boards enabling children understand routines
- Key worker higher level of support – adult /child ratio 1:3
- 1:1 support where required

Benefits for parents will include

- Working in partnership with First Steps to help their child participate in the group
- The opportunity for parents to gain confidence leaving their child in an early years setting and in the care of someone other extended family
- Support for parents who are under stress and pressure coping with the reality that their child may have special needs
- Receiving support before, during and after assessment and diagnosis of their child's illness or disability
- Preparing parents for their children entering formal education
- Supporting parental choice during the nursery application process
- Providing parents with the opportunity to return to work
- Providing parents with the opportunity of returning to education
- Offering parents the opportunity to spend quality time with other children
- Signposting families to other groups and agencies for additional support with a variety of issues arising when their child has been diagnosed with special needs

Over the years First Steps have benefitted from the support of Belfast City Council from the use of their Centres to deliver services within the community to the support of Centre staff helping to ensure the safe and smooth operational daily delivery of services, promoting a friendly environment for young children and their families attending First Steps Early Years services.

First Steps hope that Belfast City Council will consider supporting a community group continue to deliver an established and crucial service to children who will benefit from the experience and have the opportunity to develop and learn through play within their own community.

First Steps are seeking £8000.00 for 20 weeks to cover the following operational costs

- Continue to offer an Early Years service out of Glen CC
- Establish a unique Early Years special needs group within the Lenadoon/ Suffolk area
- Offer places to 12 children with special needs
- Support 12 families living in the local area
- 640 staff hours
- Therapists costs
- Insurance
- Consumables & materials

Interim funding would enable First Steps to continue operate the service out of Glen CC while awaiting decisions on applications made to various funders to sustain the continuation of the group.

Thank you for taking time to consider this request and looking forward to hearing your response.

Yours sincerely

Mary Sherlock

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