

# Stepping Stones for Families'

## Family Wellbeing Service

An evaluation: 2016-2019



May 2019



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# Executive summary

## Background

The Stepping Stones for Families' 'Family Wellbeing Service' is funded by the National Lottery Community Fund to deliver holistic support to the parents of pre-school children attending nurseries in the north west and north east of Glasgow. Parents are referred to the Service for support on a range of issues including poverty, social isolation, poor mental or physical health, addictions, and parenting.

A qualitative evaluation of the impact of the Service was undertaken between October and December 2018 with 30 parents using the Service, eight members of Stepping Stones staff, Stepping Stones CEO, and 19 members of staff at the nurseries hosting the Service.

## Key findings

### ***Impact of the Service on parenting skills, resilience, parent/child and family relationships of parents who engaged with the Service***

The Service has a clear positive impact on parenting skills and resilience, parent/ child and family relationships. Parents who engage with the Service have a greater range of skills and techniques for managing their children's behaviour, and are more confident as parents. They are also having more fun outside and inside the home with their children, often as a family. As a result, and because of improvements to child behaviour and parental wellbeing, relationships between parents and children have improved and parents have improved attachment to their children.

There is less direct evidence of improvement to parents' relationships with partners and other family members, but it is clear that in some cases the ability of the Service to provide a listening ear and advice across family relationships has led to the improvement of key family relationships, or the avoidance of breakdown in those relationships. Family relationships have also improved through better joint bonding with children, and improvements to parental mental health.

### ***Impacts of the Service on parental, physical, mental and emotional health and wellbeing***

Parents are happier, and to some extent, healthier, as a result of their engagement with the Service. They are less anxious, less stressed and in some cases, less depressed than they were, matched for some parents by improvements to their physical health. These impacts are both the direct result of specific health focused interventions with parents, and the indirect result of the other changes in their lives.

Some of the most striking impacts of the Service are on parents' social confidence and social isolation. Previously socially isolated parents so lacking in confidence that they would not look nursery staff in the eye, or take their children out to local attractions, shopping centres, or other children's birthday parties, have been able to join social and friendship networks, as well as engage with their child's nursery.

### ***Impacts of the Service on children's confidence and capacity to learn***

Children's behaviour is considered to have improved; children appear happier, calmer, are more likely to attend nursery and engage more effectively when they do attend. Children are also viewed, in some instances, as being more appropriately clothed, better fed and generally healthier. Nursery staff and Family Wellbeing Workers were clear that the Service has resolved some child protection issues and prevented others from worsening.

### ***Perceived added value of the Family Wellbeing Service model***

The key elements of the Service are: direct inputs to build parenting skills; provision of social activities/engagement drawing people in; provision of social activities courses/ classes; holiday activities; problem-solving on practical issues; advocacy and advice; accompanying/ walking with parents figuratively and literally; and providing a listening ear, a safety net and reassurance.

The evidence from the interviews suggests that there are no particular elements of the approach that can be identified as being more important than the others. Particular elements of the Service are important for different parents at different times. The different elements of the Service hang together as a whole – they each have their impact and importance, and the Service would be weaker without any one of them.

Furthermore, as much as the practical elements within it, the qualities of the Service generate its added value. The ability of the Service to make a long-term commitment to parents to act with their interests at heart, to treat them as being of value, and to provide skilled, calm and committed staff to work with them in a friendly, welcoming, and non-judgemental way across whatever issues they present, are key to its contribution to the lives of parents and their children.

### ***Potential reasons families decline the offer of engagement with the Service***

This was not a question that was easy to explore directly with parents as parents that participated in the research were engaged with the Service. There did not appear to be any major aspects of the Service that discouraged engagement per se. However, feedback from parents, nursery staff and Family Wellbeing Workers indicated that a potential barrier to engagement, in some instances, could be parental anxiety about the independence of the service from the nursery and, more importantly, from social work. Also some staff observed that certain parents felt they already had too many agencies involved in their lives.

### ***Involvement of families in decisions that affect them by the Service***

For most of the parents interviewed, engagement with the Service has not encompassed involvement in formal goal setting and planning.

However, the Service has directly supported some parents to engage with other services, including with the nursery itself and with social work. This has assisted with parental involvement in decisions that affect them.

Even more clearly, the increases in confidence reported by parents has enabled them to better engage with other services, which should be the basis for better involvement in decisions that affect them.

The evidence also suggests something stronger, that the range of improvements families have experienced have contributed to parents feeling more in control of their lives, and hence in a better position to take appropriate decisions for them in their family.

# 1. Introduction

This report is a qualitative evaluation of the impact of the Stepping Stones for Families' Family Wellbeing Service, based on the perspectives of three key sets of stakeholders; the parents using the Service; staff in the eight nurseries where the Service is based; and Stepping Stones for Families (SSfF) senior staff and Family Wellbeing Workers involved in the delivery of the Service itself.

The Family Wellbeing Service (FWS; the Service) offers holistic support to parents of children attending nurseries in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the north west and north east of Glasgow, which can continue from point of engagement into the early period of their child's entry into primary school. The Service broadly follows a three stage model, beginning with a 'foundation' level focused on building relationships between parents and staff, and on supporting parents to recognise their existing skills. The 'life skills' level follows, building on those skills through individual and group sessions. Some parents proceed to the 'dynamic growth' level, taking up opportunities which may include employment and/ or training.

Referrals are made to the Service through nursery staff and through parents' direct engagement with Family Wellbeing Workers. Families on the cusp of/ at risk of experiencing chaos or increased social work intervention are targeted.

The Service is currently approaching the end of five years funding provided by the National Lottery Community Fund.

The research brief set out six questions to be answered in the evaluation:

1. What impact has the Family Wellbeing Service had on the parenting skills, resilience, parent/ child and family relationships of parents of pre-school children and families who engage with the Service?
2. What impact has the Family Wellbeing Service had on parental, physical, mental and emotional health and wellbeing?
3. What impact has the Family Wellbeing Service had on the confidence and capacity to learn amongst children of the parents who have engaged with the Service?
4. Are there particular aspects of the Family Wellbeing Service model or approach that are important to the planned outcomes, and how do they add value?
5. For families who have not taken up the offer of engagement with the Family Wellbeing Service, what are their main reasons?
6. How has the Family Wellbeing Service involved families in decisions that affect them?

The report has been structured as follows:

- Two initial sections:
  - Section 2 describes the methodology followed to collate the findings underpinning the report.
  - Section 3 gives an overview of parent, nursery staff and SSfF staff perspectives on the issues affecting parents, setting out the challenges with which the Service tries to engage and provide support, and the context in which it must work. Some of the findings here are relevant to research question 5.

- Section 4 explores one of the key practical aspects of the Service, the process and experience of engagement and referral, and the foundation on which referral of parents is based, looking at staff's views on the strength of the working relationships between nurseries and the Service.
- Sections 5-9 capture key impacts of the Service on parents, and set out the majority of the evidence in relation to research questions 1, 2, 4 and 6. They explore the strength of those impacts, and the elements of the Service that are key to their delivery:
  - Sections 5 and 6 draw out evidence of two of the areas of impact identified as amongst the strongest by staff and parents that also impact in turn on parenting roles and parental health and wellbeing; the resolution of practical issues that parents face; and improvements to social confidence and reductions in feelings of social isolation.
  - Sections 7 and 8 then capture the impact of the Service on parents in their parenting role and on their relationships with their children, and on their health and wellbeing and other relationships, exploring both direct impact and the result of the impacts discussed in sections 5 and 6.
  - Section 9 focuses on further aspects of the Service's impact: parental engagement in employment, training and social activities, reflecting on delivery of the ambition of the Service to help people achieve 'dynamic growth'.
- Section 10 draws together the evidence of how changes in parents' lives delivered by the Service cascade their impact down to their children, and is the key section focused on research question 3.
- Sections 11 and 12 set out evidence in relation to question 4, the former exploring how the Service is delivered and the staff delivering the Service as key to the delivery of its impact; the latter capturing the perspectives of parents, nursery and SSfF staff on the added value delivered by the Service.
- Section 13 outlines the views on the future of the project of parents, nursery and SSfF staff.
- Section 14 summarises answers to the research questions, offers some additional reflections on the delivery of the Service, and sets out some key questions for its future.



## 2. Methodology

This project was delivered through:

- A review of relevant project documentation, including the project bid to the National Lottery Community Fund, and a small selection of literature provided by Glasgow Centre for Population Health.
- A survey issued to staff at nurseries hosting a Family Wellbeing Worker.
- Semi-structured interviews and focus groups with parents.
- Semi-structured interviews with nursery and Stepping Stones for Families staff.

### Parent interviews and focus groups

Thirty parents participated in the study through semi-structured interviews and two focus groups held at nurseries. Interviewees and participants were recruited through Family Wellbeing Workers. The aide memoire for interviews can be found in Appendix 1.

The vast majority of the parents were mothers, with a small number of fathers involved in the research. None of those who participated were any other sort of familial or non-familial carer for the child attending nursery. Two were from asylum seeker/ refugee backgrounds.

### Staff interviews

Semi-structured interviews (n=28) were carried out with:

- Two senior members of staff at Stepping Stones for Families.
- Seven Family Wellbeing Workers.
- Eight head teachers at the nurseries hosting the Family Wellbeing Service.
- Eleven other staff at nurseries hosting the Family Wellbeing Service, a mix of frontline childcare development officers, deputy head teachers and team leaders.

### Survey

A survey was issued to nursery staff in electronic/ online and paper format. A total of 32 responses were received, four electronically and 28 in hard copy. The latter were entered electronically by the research team. The results from the survey are reported separately.

### 3. Challenges faced by parents

This section covers parental, nursery and SSfF staff perspectives on the issues faced by parents with which the Service engages and or/ which set the context in which it works, in particular:

- Social isolation and lack of confidence.
- Parental wellbeing.
- Child wellbeing.
- The impact of deprivation and poverty.
- The specific issues facing migrant/ refugee/ asylum seeker families.

This section also provides some insight into the reasons why parents might not engage with the Service (research question 5).

#### Social isolation and lack of confidence

Almost all of the parents interviewed talked about feeling socially isolated, with nursery and SSfF staff also very aware of this as an issue. It was striking that these feelings of social isolation were present in parents with partners as well as those without.

Feelings of isolation were felt to have been triggered by a range of different circumstances. Parents reported that they had lost friends when they became mothers, with their time and energy focused on their children, leaving them neither energy nor opportunity to maintain social networks. For some this had been driven by giving up work to care for a child and the associated loss of workplace social interaction. Parents referred to managing to keep in contact with their friends via social media but rarely managing to meet them. One parent who had escaped domestic violence reported avoiding contact with friends from her previous life.

There were a number of parents who reported being separated by distance from their family. Even parents whose wider families lived in other parts of Glasgow found distance to be a barrier to accessing emotional and practical support. Where families were estranged, parents could also find themselves emotionally isolated.

Bereavement, in particular the loss of their own parents, was also reported as leading to feelings of isolation.

For some parents, social *confidence* was a major issue very much linked to feelings of isolation. Some spoke of avoiding contact with people, including with other parents and with nursery staff, because they were not confident in social situations. These issues could clearly reach the point of becoming significant mental health problems:

*“I struggled to leave the house by myself. I was always looking behind me as if I was worried that someone was watching me. I always had to have my make-up on, I didn’t want to be looked at and that was like a barrier between me and the world.”*

Nursery staff consistently identified parents as lacking the confidence to fully engage with them, for example, by avoiding eye contact or using/ pretending to use their mobile to avoid interaction. Some parents painted a similar picture, suggesting that when dropping their children at nursery they were in and out of nursery as quickly as possible. Both nursery staff and parents saw this lack of confidence as affecting parents’ willingness to seek help or support.

Many parents reported lacking confidence in their parenting skills. They were often concerned that they were bad or inadequate parents in some way. This left some feeling that they were responsible for the problematic behaviour of their children. Others were concerned that they could be jeopardising their children's futures through their perceived lack of parenting skills.

The impact of this lack of confidence in parenting, along with fears about their children's behaviour, left many parents fearing judgement by others. For some parents this led to their being reluctant to take their children out, except to nursery, avoiding trips or social gatherings such as classmates' birthday parties, thereby exacerbating their social isolation. These anxieties appeared heightened when children had additional support needs. More general social anxieties also led to parents' reluctance to take their children outside the home:

*"I was worried about things. I was imagining all sorts of things going wrong all the time. I think it was that that split me up from my partner.....I was really nervous before the trip, I was thinking that I was going to be there in front of hundreds of people, I was imagining things like my boy climbing a tree and not coming down."*

For parents from migrant backgrounds, and sometimes even for parents who had moved within the city or from other parts of Scotland, social isolation and lack of confidence also appeared to be associated with being unaware of the facilities available in the local area, how to get about using public transport, and for the former group, other key aspects of day-to-day life in Scotland.

Nursery staff suggested that for migrants such problems could be compounded by language barriers. Nursery staff also suggested that some parents from migrant communities faced prejudice in the communities in which they had come to live, reporting that the resultant fear had left some parents isolated in their own homes.

## **Parental wellbeing**

Parents consistently spoke of the difficulties they had experienced, or were experiencing, with their own mental health and wellbeing. They frequently referred to having anxiety and depression, including pre and post-natal depression.

Some specifically identified a mutually reinforcing relationship between their health and their confidence. Poor mental health, particularly when so often connected to a profound lack of confidence, appeared to heighten parents' concerns that their children were missing out on positive and nurturing attention at home, and /or on social and learning opportunities outside the home.

A common theme amongst parents was the loss of their own identity after becoming a parent. For some of those parents this had led to them not looking after themselves properly, not seeking appropriate support, and in some cases not adhering to treatment programmes for health conditions:

*"I think I couldn't see life outside of my child. I don't think I've been good at looking after myself."*

SSfF staff identified the impact of parents' own negative childhood experiences on their mental health and on their own parenting. Nursery staff also identified care-experienced parents as facing particular challenges.

Other issues identified by staff were:

- parents experiencing substance misuse issues, or disclosing historic problems with substance misuse;
- partner/ former partner, who is also the child's parent, with a substance misuse issue;
- parent experiencing domestic violence.

A few parents reported that they had significant physical health problems that impacted on their day-to-day life, including their willingness to engage in activity outside the home. Some of these parents felt that their children had developed an understanding of their health issues and a responsiveness and sensitivity to them that was not desirable or age appropriate; a situation which led to a sense of guilt.

One frontline worker saw many of these issues being drawn out by the Family Wellbeing Worker:

*"She helps tease out these problems. You wouldn't even know they were there if it weren't for that."*

### **Child wellbeing and child protection**

Parents reported a range of concerns about their child's or children's health. A small number of parents reported that their child was autistic or had Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or Global Development Disorder. Nursery staff concurred that some of the children using their nurseries had additional support needs which increased the likelihood of referral to the Family Support Service.

These diagnoses could relate to children at nursery and/ or older siblings; a small number of parents were dealing with the challenges of more than one child with learning disabilities. Parents did report older children experiencing mental health issues, including depression and anxiety.

It was clear that having a child or children with particular support needs often created an additional pressure on parents. Many spoke of being desperate to do what was best for their child, but as not feeling they had the parenting skills or financial resources to do so. Parents spoke of not feeling able to leave the home or that their nursery was the only place they could take their child.

Nursery staff referred to a number of children at their nursery being on the Child Protection Register. They explained that this was generally associated with neglect and suggested that such neglect was often intertwined both with poverty, and with mental health issues faced by parents.

### **Impact of deprivation and poverty**

Interviews with professionals had a significant focus on the direct impact of deprivation and poverty on parents' lives, and on that poverty as a main driver of the problems parents faced, from poor mental health to a lack of confidence.

A striking number of nursery and SSfF staff referenced parents facing severe poverty or destitution. There were concerns that some of these children sometimes go hungry, particularly during periods when the nursery is closed, and children do not have access to the food the nursery provides. There were also reports from staff of children coming to nursery in inadequate clothing, particularly during periods of cold weather. Poverty was seen as creating stigma for parents:

*"It's a constant area of concern. And it's more difficult because parents have their pride and don't want to admit to being poor."*

Family Wellbeing Workers had responded by referring parents to foodbanks, to baby banks (organisations providing basic equipment for babies/ young children), or to organisations who could provide appropriate children's clothing. However, staff also noted that some parents were reluctant to access these types of community based support resources because of a sense of shame.

Parents reported issues around financial hardship, though to a lesser extent, and doing so much more in the context of facing financial pressures at Christmas and when needing to replace household goods. They also spoke of the cost of days out and their wish to ensure that their children did not feel left out compared to other children.

Some parents did refer to struggling to pay for their gas and electricity. Triggers for hardship identified by parents included having to give up work to care for their child.

Both parents and staff reported that dealing with the benefits system was a challenge for many. SSfF staff also reported parents struggling with debts, including to high cost lenders.

Other issues touched upon in staff interviews included housing problems, homelessness, and the risk of becoming homeless.

### **Literacy and other skills**

Nursery staff identified literacy as an issue having a significant impact on some parents. Parents with migrant, refugee, or asylum seeker status were noted as facing issues in relation to having English as a second language.

### **Different challenges for migrant, refugee, or asylum seeking parents**

Differences were noted in the range of issues facing migrant, refugee, or asylum seeking parents set against those from the host community. The former were reported by staff to be less likely to be experiencing chaos or addiction issues and less likely to have mental health problems, although some were affected by issues associated with trauma in their country of origin. Staff also reported that the former tended to face fewer parenting challenges in terms of skills and resilience, although the Service has to be mindful of differences in cultural ideas about parenting.

## 4. Staff relationships and referrals to the project

This section explores the process and experience of identification of parents, their referral and engagement; and the foundation on which referral is based, looking at staff views on the strength of the working relationships between nurseries and the Service.

### Relationships between nursery and Stepping Stones staff

Family Wellbeing workers are employed by Stepping Stones for Families and located in eight council nurseries across Glasgow. They are part of the nursery team but not employed by the local authority.

Relationships between nurseries and the Service were generally seen as being very positive, with a number of nursery staff effusive in their description of their engagement with the Family Wellbeing Worker with whom they worked. Family Wellbeing Workers were reported as being *'an integral part of the jigsaw'* or as being like a co-worker *'not like someone who comes in and doesn't know what's going on'*.

The closest relationships were reported to be between senior nursery staff and Family Wellbeing Workers; perhaps a function of the extent of day-to-day contact between them. Relationships between Family Wellbeing Workers and nursery staff were also said to be very positive, although the nursery staff would like the Workers to be in closer proximity.

Relationships between senior nursery staff and the senior Stepping Stones staff were again seen as being very positive:

*"It feels like the relationship is natural. It doesn't feel like we have to be too formal, and we don't really need to work at it. We trust each other's judgement, we don't tell the other person how to do things."*

There was some more mixed feedback from nursery staff on their relationships with Family Wellbeing Workers. Where feedback was mixed, however, nursery staff were generally clear that problems had been a natural consequence of Family Wellbeing Worker turnover or absence, and felt confident that they were on their way to building or rebuilding more positive relationships with the Service. Nursery staff reported that on the few occasions they had raised concerns about particular Family Wellbeing Workers not being right for the role, these had been responded to.

SSFF managers felt that some problems in the relationships between senior nursery staff and Family Wellbeing Workers had arisen because the latter, particularly if from childcare backgrounds, had occasionally been treated as activities organisers by some Nursery Heads. Where it had arisen, this issue had been resolved, partly by broadening the mix of professional backgrounds of workers.

Nursery staff and Family Wellbeing Workers consistently mentioned the trust between the two staff groups. They felt able to share information with each other and were confident that parent confidentiality would be respected. Communication and information sharing was seen as being very effective, with both groups keeping each other fully informed and being able to agree joint ways forward in working with families.

There was a slightly different perspective on information sharing from senior Stepping Stones staff, who suggested that feedback to nursery staff on families' progress would not involve the sharing of personal information, except when there were child protection issues.

In terms of practical engagement, nursery staff referred to engaging with Family Wellbeing Workers at regular meetings, informally within their office, which was sometimes shared with SSfF staff, on the 'floor' of the nursery, and at the door, as Family Wellbeing Workers made themselves available to meet and welcome parents to the nursery. This practical engagement was seen as the basis for a 'natural' relationship between nursery staff and Family Wellbeing Workers.

The Family Wellbeing Service Manager reported useful quarterly meetings with the Nursery Heads to review the operation of the Service, and being in contact in between as and when needed.

## **Referrals**

The majority of formal referrals are routed through Nursery Heads or their deputies. Senior nursery staff felt that they had the overview of parents' circumstances and a strong enough relationship themselves with parents to ensure an effective basis for referrals. Nursery Heads felt that the formal referral process was quick, easy and simple.

Referrals were also made more informally: senior nursery staff simply speaking to Family Wellbeing Workers, suggesting they make contact with a parent, with a formal referral then following when necessary.

Nursery staff acknowledged that SSfF might have a preference for formal referrals. Family Wellbeing Workers did confirm that it could be slower to develop relationships with parents in the absence of the information accompanying a formal referral.

The referral process was generally viewed positively, building on the good relationships between nursery staff and Family Wellbeing Workers described above.

Nursery staff were confident that they were referring parents to appropriate support that would make a difference. They expressed a high regard for the professional expertise of the Family Wellbeing Workers and trust in their professional judgement.

## ***Identifying and engaging***

Some nurseries reported using their formal reviews of child progress to identify families who might benefit from the Service, with those reviews being carried out on a bi-monthly or six-monthly basis. Weekly review sessions were also reported as being used to identify possible referrals.

Family Wellbeing Workers reported engaging with parents directly as they drop off/ collect their children, at events they had organised within the nursery, such as drop in 'Tea, Talk and Toast sessions' or at taster sessions. Family Wellbeing Workers reported putting in considerable effort to make themselves available to parents.

Some nursery staff commented that making taster sessions open to all parents reduced the risk of stigma being attached to engaging with SSfF. They also noted that where parents did start engagement directly with the Service, the Family Wellbeing Workers would let them know that this had begun.

Nursery staff were appreciative of the effectiveness of the informal engagement approach:

*"It's how she starts a conversation. She is really good at that. She will stop by when I'm talking to a parent. She will put the kettle on, and mums get chatting to her, then they come into sessions, and before you know it, they are off on courses."*

Interviews with parents suggested that they felt engagement with the Service had occurred informally, regardless of whether a referral between the nursery and the Service had actually prompted that engagement.

Parents' reported first engagement with the Service had come about in a number of ways, such as:

- Asking about things to do during school holidays and being directed to the Stepping Stones holiday programme.
- Being invited to a coffee morning by the Family Wellbeing Worker, which supported a parent with social interaction.
- Simply chatting to the Family Wellbeing Worker without any particular agenda.
- Being invited to get involved in arts and crafts and cookery sessions.

*"She popped in to the nursery to say hello. I just thought that she was the wee arts and crafts woman. She was lovely and easy to talk to."*

One parent reported additional effort being made to engage with her. When she had not come back to the Service after attending an initial session, the Family Wellbeing Worker came and see her in her home, prompting her to get her involved again.

### ***Appropriateness of referrals***

Both nursery and Stepping Stones staff felt that the majority of referrals they had made or received were appropriate; they were for parents who could benefit from the Service.

Nursery Heads felt they had a clear idea of which parents should be referred, focusing on those facing specific challenges that could affect their family's wellbeing, and on families where preventative support could avoid problems escalating. One Nursery Head noted that she would sometimes make multiple referrals, to social work and health visitors for their formal engagement, and to the Service, to provide complementary parenting support.

Nursery staff reported that some parents were reluctant to be referred to the Service because they already had engagement with a range of other agencies and did not feel able to cope with any more.

Stepping Stones staff suggested that there had been a few occasions when parents may have been referred to them because nursery staff were not sure what else to do for them, sometimes despite those parents already being in contact with a number of other support services. Even in such circumstances, staff felt there was generally something they could offer, if only being a listening ear or sounding board.



*“There are some times when staff pass people on to me to ease their burden, even when the parent is already getting support from a number of places. It can be difficult to work out where I fit alongside that other support, whether there is a role for me. Perhaps people just need a rant, so I let them come in and do that, and act as a sounding board, and that helps them progress.”*

They also suggested that a small number of parents did engage with them solely for compliance purposes, i.e. as part of demonstrating to social workers that they were engaging as requested with other support services.

### ***Numbers of referrals***

Despite considerable efforts from Stepping Stones and nursery staff, some nurseries had not generated the expected number of referrals to the Service. In part, this was about the impact of a changing cohort, as children move on from nursery. The Service reported withdrawing from one smaller nursery where those natural fluctuations had resulted in there being no referrals to the Service.

One Family Wellbeing Worker spoke of the low number of referrals in the nursery where she was based. This nursery was serving a largely working parent population where opportunities for direct parental engagement during the working week are consequently lower. Although many parents there were reported to have benefited from short-term support, the nursery had only seen longer-term support provided to three parents over the 18 month period in which the Family Wellbeing Worker was in post.

## 5. Practical support

This section focuses on the practical support provided by the Service and the practical impacts of that support, which in turn impact on parents' role as parents and their health and wellbeing (research questions 1 and 2).

Staff reported that Family Wellbeing Workers had made referrals to various services such as foodbanks and those providing clothing and necessary baby equipment which parents would otherwise not have been able to afford.

Nursery staff felt that the sympathetic way that Family Wellbeing Workers dealt with these issues reduced the barriers to people seeking help. Family Wellbeing Workers themselves felt that they were able to convey to parents that many others were in the same situation as them.

The impact of these referrals was seen as going beyond the immediate resolution of issues. Parents were seen as being healthier because they were not going without food. Children were able to attend nursery because they had appropriate clothing.

Stepping Stones staff were also reported, by both staff and parents using the Service, to be acting as advice workers or advocates in other ways, including:

- Helping parents to apply for benefits, in particular for the Scottish Welfare Fund, or for disability benefits on behalf of their children, the latter often when parents were struggling to cope with a new diagnosis.
- Chasing progress on benefit claims.
- Accompanying parents to, or preparing them for benefit tribunals, often in relation to disability benefits being claimed for their children.
- Helping parents to apply for grants from charitable trusts, for example to provide a new carpet, or a new freezer without which a parent was doing expensive daily shops.
- Helping parents access a mobility car and accompanying them on a couple of drives to give them the confidence to use it.
- Helping asylum seeking families access their bus passes.
- Accompanying parents with health problems to reviews of their employment situation.
- Pushing social landlords to resolve repairs to parents' accommodation.
- Supporting a parent to meet with a social landlord to seek alternative accommodation closer to the nursery and social networks.
- Helping parents move on from/ escape from unsuitable housing situations.
- Helping asylum seeking families settle their children into a new school after being moved to another part of the city.

Nursery staff felt that the knowledge and expertise of the Family Wellbeing Workers, along with their independence from the nursery, meant they were well placed to help with a broad range of practical problems.

The resolution of benefit issues made an important contribution to dealing with the chaotic situations facing some families. Nursery staff felt that the range of support provided to parents

around financial issues stopped those financial problems from worsening. This could mean that issues could be resolved much more simply and quickly.

*“That can be something as simple as a parent having the money to sort out proper footwear, not shoes that are falling off.... We were dealing with child whose shoes were falling apart. It might have looked like neglect, but it wasn’t, it was a lack of cash.”*

One Family Wellbeing Worker was clear about the important role of practical support in establishing their credibility with parents as the basis for being trusted to hear about and help with other problems they were facing.

Some of the practical interventions were reported to be focused on developing parents’ skills and changing their perceptions. Staff and parents referred to work on budgeting that had helped them to plan their finances better for Christmas, and work to shift attitudes to spending, including encouraging parents not to feel the social pressure to buy their child too many presents that would then remain unused.

*“The Family Wellbeing Workers often identify needs and practical responses.... Sometimes it can be simple things, group sessions on budgeting for Christmas, or a session making bows and clasps for hair which can save money.”*

Many parents touched upon the cost of events and days out with their children. The provision of free social activities by the Service, particularly during school holidays, has supported parents on a limited budget. The broader impact of the holiday programme on parents is covered in section 6.

*“It’s difficult to get the money to go out. The Service has got us tickets to the Sea Life Centre. It’s really important because going out is so expensive.”*

## 6. Building confidence and reducing social isolation

Section 6 draws out the Service's impact and work on specific aspects of parental wellbeing (research question 2), and as a result their skills and resilience (research question 1), focussing on building parents' social confidence and networks, confidence to engage with the nursery attended by their child and to engage with other services.

### Increasing social confidence

Parents consistently reported that the Service had helped them to overcome confidence barriers that kept them socially isolated. Some parents referred to work with the Service as having led to positive changes in their personality, as 'bringing them back to their old selves', through giving them the confidence to engage with others.

Parents referred to taking their children to local activities, soft play centres, local parks, children's farms, and to birthday parties of their child's friends when they previously would have felt unable to do so.

For some, the impact on their confidence stemmed primarily from the experience of participating with their children in summer trips, often going somewhere that they could return to again as a family. One parent reported feeling confident enough to revisit Balloch, despite having been very nervous in advance of this trip with SSfF. For this parent, now feeling able to visit the local shopping centre with her son was an even greater achievement.

Parents reported that these experiences, often in combination with techniques they had learnt through a parenting programme (see section 7), increased their confidence in dealing with the behaviour of their child in public. They had stopped being as concerned about coping with their child misbehaving and were less concerned about the judgment of others.

One parent spoke of her children being 'runners'. She felt that the work done with the Family Wellbeing Worker, both on parenting techniques and to bolster her confidence as a parent, had meant that she was not as worried about their behaviour, nor about how other people would react.

*"My confidence has grown. I can take the kids out, and I'm not worried about them kicking off. I'll deal with it myself without worrying about others, without getting flustered. I've learned to deal with it and not worry about anyone else."*

Nursery staff similarly reflected on the importance of both the summer programme of activities and more direct confidence building work.

### Reducing social isolation

Nursery staff and Family Wellbeing Workers felt that this was one of the most critical aspects of the Service. They were clear about the success of the Service in impacting on parents' social and friendship networks, observing that they were aware of some parents continuing to meet as friends after their children had left the nursery. Some were supporting each other through shared care of each other's children. One Family Wellbeing Worker suggested that some of the friendships forged by parents at the nursery would last a lifetime. Staff were clear that the simple act of making friends and building social networks were effective in reducing the confidence barriers that create parents' social isolation.

Many parents referred to building friendships with other parents using the Service and the nursery. Others felt that they were on the way to making friends, or that they had both made

some close friendships and built a wider range of people who they could chat to if they met with them, in the words of one parent:

*“If I see them at the supermarket, I can go for a coffee with them.”*

One parent’s child had received a place at a nursery that required a complex journey by public transport to attend, meaning she stayed in the nursery’s family room whilst her daughter was there. For her, the activities provided by the Service gave her an excuse and opportunity to talk to other parents, and a reason for the other parents to be there alongside her.

Parents felt a strong sense of connection and belonging to the Service, to the social groups/ classes they organise, and, often through those, to the nursery itself. For many the Service and the nursery were at the heart of their social and community life, and were places where they felt both safe and comfortable.

The friendship, companionship and mutual support between the mothers participating in the two focus groups, many of whom were used to being involved in group sessions, was very clear. The trust between participants was such that they felt able to talk about highly personal issues in front of the others, with mutual support and reassurance being provided on a couple of occasions when emotions ran high.

These impacts did not appear to be incidental/ accidental. It was clear that Family Wellbeing Workers gave significant consideration to getting the mix of people right within the social groups they organised.

Some of these groups could be quite simple in focus and intent, parents and Family Wellbeing Workers referred to organising walking groups providing the opportunity to chat alongside getting fit. Others, such as cookery, beauty classes or alternative therapies might be fun, provide friendship opportunities, and also be a small step to developing skills and interests that might expand career horizons.

Parents also referred to the simple benefit of being able to talk with other parents in the same situation as themselves, of being moved from believing that they were the only one facing their particular problems to realising that the challenges they faced were not unique.

This impact was seen on both the mothers and fathers who were interviewed. One of the fathers felt that, although he would not describe the people at the nursery and at the men’s group to which he had been referred as friends, he valued the time spent with adults, and with other fathers:

*“It was spending time with adults, that was good. My family live over in the Gorbals, my cousins came over every now and then, but not often. Even if the people you were with, you wouldn’t drink with them in the pub, you still have that thing in common of kids.”*

## **Engagement with nursery**

Nursery staff consistently reported that their relationship with parents was transformed, from a situation in which parents would avoid social or even eye contact, to one where they were happy to stop and talk. Nursery staff felt that the trust and positive relationship developed between the Family Wellbeing Worker and parents often led the latter to transfer that trust and positivity to their relationship with them.

One Deputy Head captured the transformation quite simply:

*“When they come in and say good morning, that’s when you notice the difference.”*

Even though some conversations with parents could be primarily about when they would next be able to meet with the Family Wellbeing Worker, nursery staff appreciated the opportunity to engage.

Parents echoed this experience of being more confident in their dealings with the nursery. This included feeling more able to ask for help from the nursery with the issues they were facing, and more able to talk about their need for support:

*“I’ll approach someone if I need to talk. I’ll go for help if I need it, I won’t let it get so bad I start screaming.”*

For some, this increased confidence continued beyond the time their child had left nursery, and had enabled them to engage with their school about their children’s needs and to pick up problems with them.

### **Engagement with social work**

In general, parents spoke of feeling more confident engaging with social work services. This is an important outcome, given the sense across interviews with parents and staff that for some engagement had previously been frustrating, unwelcome, and even frightening. A fear of social workers as professionals with the power to remove children was touched upon.

Parents explained and evidenced this outcome in different ways. Some suggested that their greater confidence that they were good parents, doing their best for their children, enabled them to stay calm in potentially stressful situations. Parents also spoke of both being more willing to challenge decisions they disagreed with, and being more willing to ask for support when they needed it.

Sometimes the support from the Family Wellbeing Worker to deal with social work had been direct, with the Family Wellbeing Worker accompanying parents to meetings with social workers, and/ or preparing them for such.

### **Impact on migrant/ refugee/ asylum seeker families**

Parents and nursery staff saw the Service impacting in a number of ways on social confidence and the ability to access services for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

For those who had not felt safe leaving their home due to fear of harassment, or experiencing prejudice, the nursery and the Service had provided a haven. Activities and group sessions had provided an opportunity to get to know other local parents, with cookery classes providing an opportunity for them to share their culture with others and make friends whilst doing so.

Migrant, refugee or asylum seeking parents also reported feeling better able to access other services or facilities, such as libraries, sports centres and public transport as a result of trips or visits in the company of their Family Wellbeing Worker.

## 7. The parenting role

Section 7 focuses on research question 1, capturing the direct and indirect impact and work of the Family Wellbeing Service on:

- Building parental skills and resilience.
- Building parents' confidence in their parenting.
- Building parents' attachment to/ bond with their children.

### Building parenting skills

Almost all of the parents interviewed felt that they had developed their parenting skills as a result of their engagement with the Service.

Parents reported, and staff observed:

- Increased ability to deal with crises, tantrums and difficult behaviour, and to cope when children's emotions are running high.
- Improved routines, structure and setting of boundaries.
- Improved ability to provide appropriate discipline and to make clear to children the consequences of their behaviour.

One asylum seeking parent captured this change:

*"I can cope better with my son, he is quite emotional. I can think about making sure there are consequences when they misbehave, and how to reward good behaviour. I have ways of handling every situation. Things are different where I come from, people smack their children there, I was able to think about that. I'm much calmer now, I don't expect everything to be done straight away."*

Parents reflected that engagement with the Service had enhanced their ability to understand what was driving or acting as a trigger for the behaviour of their child, rather than blaming themselves or their child. Examples of this included recognising their child's tiredness as affecting their behaviour, and realising that certain types of behaviour were about their child simply seeking to communicate with them:

*"Speaking to [the worker] helped you see it from the other angle. You got a sense of some of what was going wrong just being about them being tired and not having enough sleep."*

At the core of all the Family Wellbeing Workers' work on parenting, whether within specific parenting programmes or less formal engagement, was a focus on supporting parents to reflect on what they are doing as parents, and to develop their response accordingly. This could extend to include reflections on their own early experiences with their parents:

*"I was working with the father to look at how his own experience with his parents changed the way he views things. We've given him the skills to look at what he has been doing, to be more self-aware. He's shifted from being critical of his son, from treating him differently to his daughter to treating them both more gently, and being more positive about his son."*

The role of specific parenting programmes in building skills was consistently highlighted by parents, in particular the Positive Parenting Programme (Triple P). The prevalence of children with additional support needs amongst the parents interviewed is highlighted in section 4. There appeared to be a particularly significant impact of the Triple P programme on parents of children with additional support needs.

Parents who had been through the programme talked about learning techniques which they had been able to use to good effect with their children, in providing structure and discipline, avoiding and defusing conflict: not responding immediately to some poor behaviours, learning to use 'time out' or 'the naughty step' and the withdrawal of fun activities such as television watching, for example.

Parents also felt that introduction of routines, at bedtime especially, supported by Triple P had made a particular difference. Combined with a more consistent approach to discipline, some noted that they had seen a very positive difference in their child.

Parents consistently referred to the Family Wellbeing Workers tailoring the programme to meet the needs of each individual child as being the foundation of its success.

Some parents had undertaken Triple P or another course as one-to-one sessions, including in their home, with their Family Wellbeing Worker; others had done so in group sessions. One parent, under time and emotional pressure after an autism diagnosis, reported working through relevant Triple P literature, provided by her Family Wellbeing Worker.

Parents who had been involved in a group approach to Triple P, appreciated the opportunity to engage with others, as captured by one mother:

*"The groups are great, you can give each other tips on parenting strategies that have worked for certain things like getting them to bed, routines, tantrums."*

Parents also valued less formal inputs targeted at building their parenting skills. Stepping Stones staff were clear that not all parents want to take a formal approach.

These less formal inputs most commonly involved Family Wellbeing Workers providing tips that drew on their knowledge and sometimes their personal experience, but also on suggestions from other parents during group sessions.

Many tips related to small but important issues, particularly for parents with children with additional support needs. Parents reported receiving useful ideas for getting their children out of their car in the morning or getting them to use their buggy.

Other tips related to routines, in particular bedtime routines, such as not giving children fizzy drinks before bed, or reducing pre-bedtime TV watching/ use of gaming consoles/ electronic devices.

## **Confidence and resilience building**

Parents consistently referred to the impact of the Service on their parenting confidence, resilience and ability to cope. Family Wellbeing Workers backed up this picture, though they were clear that changes in parents' confidence could be gradual and relevant work might be interrupted by dealing with other issues, such as a parental mental health.

Family Wellbeing Workers felt that although change could be slow, it was generally sustained. One captured this by suggesting that the Service often took people from a one to a five on a resilience



scale, and that even when they were rocked by difficult life events, they would never fall back to where they had been.

One of the key aspects of the 'foundation level' within the model underpinning the Service is helping people recognise their own skills as parents and realise that they are a good parent. Parents suggested that the Triple P programme had reassured them that they were already using a positive and nurturing approach.

The peer support element of the Service appears to have had a similar impact, with parents reporting that they took significant reassurance from being around other parents who were experiencing the same type of parenting challenges as them:

*"Knowing you are not the only one is a huge thing when you feel like you are not doing well at anything."*

Being able to talk to both the Family Wellbeing Worker and other parents could also provide a critical emotional safety net for parents experiencing difficulties, who might otherwise have struggled to cope.

Being able to talk to their Family Wellbeing Worker appears to have played a crucial role in increasing parents' confidence, with workers providing reassurance and reiterating positive messages about how they are doing. For some parents this reassurance appeared to be more important than their work with Triple P. This was the case for one older parent:

*"It has been a long time since I have been a mum, it's as much about reassurance as anything."*

One further theme emerged from interviews with parents. Many felt that they were not living up to expectations as parents; their own, those of other family members or other people. A number spoke of feeling very responsible for their child and at the same time feeling judged by others, and of their deep fear of being thought bad parents. One parent from a difficult family situation felt as if some of her relatives wanted her to fail.

For these parents, working with the Service had given them permission to be less harsh on themselves, and to come to an understanding that their child's behaviour was not just, or even primarily, about them.

## **Bonding with children**

Family Wellbeing Workers and nursery workers felt that the Service had enabled parents to bond better with their children.

A small number of parents spoke directly of increased emotional bonding with their child. One parent suggested that whilst she had been experiencing depression, she had struggled to show her children love, and that she had never felt that she had time for them. Another captured the change in her own attitude and behaviour, and her relationship with her son:

*"I've let my barriers down. I can show him the affection he needs. I used to drop him off at his dad's and disappear. His dad used to look after him much more, now it's me he stays with most of the time."*

Improved bonding was seen as stemming from improved parental wellbeing, parental skills and confidence, and increased family time together. The activities programme involving whole families, parenting courses and tips, and one-to-one emotional support, were all identified as elements of the programme that impacted on attachment.

The opportunities to spend time together provided by holiday programmes and some of the courses delivered in the nursery were seen as key. Having fun together was seen by parents as having a very positive impact on their relationship with their children, and sometimes with their partner:

*“Their dad came along too, we all went out as a family. I never thought I’d be able to take the kids out in this way. Their dad has come along and enjoyed it. It’s just been fun, it’s been great.”*

One parent spoke of her older child not having had the opportunity for these types of experiences when she was younger, but as enjoying those she now had alongside her younger sibling. Another was grateful for the way that trips and events were designed to be accessible to children with additional support needs. Parents also reported being grateful for the opportunity to choose trips. Some parents, including mothers of sons, felt that the group activities they had taken part in had been well designed to give them ideas for engagement in fun activities and bonding with their children.

## 8. Parental health and wellbeing, and broader family relationships

This section focuses on research question 2, the impact of the Service on parental health and wellbeing, and on one aspect of research question 1, family relationships.

It focuses on parent and staff perspectives on changes to parental health and wellbeing and relationships, some of which are the result of work discussed in sections 5-7, and discusses some of the work directly targeted at delivering those changes.

### Mental health and wellbeing

Parents reported significant impacts on their own health and wellbeing. Many referred simply to being a lot happier; others to feeling more like their 'old self'.

Nursery staff reported that parents were sometimes more relaxed, others reported instances of parents beginning to look after themselves better.

Parents often identified the key aspect of the Service impacting on their health and wellbeing as being the opportunity to talk about their problems with someone they trusted. One parent described her Family Wellbeing Worker in vivid terms as being her '*emotional crutch*' when she felt there was no one else to listen:

*"I'd be super-mum until half seven and then I'd unravel. Then I'd come in the next day and dump it all on [the worker]."*

Others spoke of their Family Wellbeing Worker as helping them to deal with negative thoughts.

It was clear that both the fathers interviewed were wholly comfortable with confiding in a female worker, one being clear that he was not sure that he would have been able to do so with a male worker.

Nursery staff and Stepping Stones supported this picture, highlighting the importance of parents having a place of safety where they could feel comfortable and able to talk about their problems. Providing parents with the opportunity to have a rant or a cry, and not feel alone, was an aspect of the Service they felt was important.

For other parents, being involved with the project acted as a motivation for them to get out and about, which in turn had positive impacts on their mental health.

Parents also referred to more specific inputs targeted at their health and wellbeing, with stress management courses run by the Family Wellbeing Worker mentioned frequently. These had enabled parents to learn techniques for managing stressful and difficult situations.

The group aspect of much of this work was seen as positive, providing the opportunity for peer support and social interaction. One of the focus groups identified the ability to talk about mental health challenges in this context as an important part of their personal development:

*"You're taught not to talk about these things, but we can do that here, we can speak with people we trust."*

Parents had also been referred by Family Wellbeing Workers to counselling services. For one asylum seeking mother the counselling that she had received, alongside other support around parenting and social interaction, had led her out of a 'dark place' and 'put her back on her feet'.

### **Physical health and wellbeing**

Nursery staff reported direct impacts on parents' physical health. Some attributed this to parents eating better, in some cases because they had been referred to foodbanks. In other cases, they felt parents had picked up healthy eating messages and developed their cookery skills. One worker spoke of seeing the wellbeing of a parent improve week by week, to the point where she 'seemed to have a glow about her'.

A few parents also spoke of being better able to deal with their own long-term health conditions. One parent reported better engagement with their medication programme. Some had also felt the benefit of doing more physical exercise as part of a walking group organised by the Family Wellbeing Worker:

*"I feel less stressed. I didn't feel tired when I came back from the walking because my stress had been lifted from me."*

One parent was now attending a gym after a Family Wellbeing Worker arranged free membership.

### **Other family relationships**

One parent reported becoming closer to her sister who was also using the Service:

*"It's brought me closer to my sister. I now see her three to four times a week, I used to only see her every couple of months. We hadn't fallen out, we were just busy with kids. I wouldn't want to bother her because her kids have autism."*

A small number of parents reported positive impacts on their relationship with their partner. One father felt he must have been difficult to live with whilst depressed. He thought that talking to his Family Wellbeing Worker had improved his mental wellbeing, and had improved his relationship with his partner, someone he described as his 'rock'.

Another father felt that the opportunity to talk about his relationship with his ex-partner had helped him cope with the difficulties between them, including legal matters. He felt that there would have been no one else he could have talked to, and that his parents would have been dismissive and judgemental about his ex-partner in a way that he would have found destructive:

*"They would just have ... said she was a waste of space."*

One parent was involved in a complex family situation, which included the bullying of her mother by other family members. She was clear that the advice of her Family Wellbeing Worker had helped her negotiate these circumstances successfully. In particular, the Family Wellbeing Worker helped her think through what she wanted to happen.

Parents also spoke of now being able to talk with other parents about difficulties with their partners/ ex-partners. Family Wellbeing Workers also spoke of picking up these issues with parents, and also talking with some about their fears of not being able to find a happy relationship in the future.

Finally, Stepping Stones staff spoke of mothers being helped to leave violent relationships, in part through the practical and emotional assistance provided by the Family Wellbeing Worker.

## 9. Increasing involvement and dynamic growth

The third phase of the model underpinning the Service is the 'Dynamic Growth' phase, at which point parents have become empowered enough to seek and possibly access employment, training and volunteering opportunities.

This section focuses on research question 6, exploring the impact and work of the Service in relation to; building parents' wider life skills; parents' involvement in the life of the nursery and community and practical advice and assistance given by Family Wellbeing Workers about employment, training and other opportunities.

### **Building wider life skills**

Parents, Stepping Stones and nursery staff reported that the Service has had direct impacts on parents' life skills, supporting them to move towards jobs and training opportunities.

A number of parents spoke of the Service developing their confidence to start thinking and planning their own education and/ or work futures. They were often at relatively early stages in this process, but some had already taken up opportunities that they had been linked to. Others were considering their options for when their child had moved up to primary school. Some parents had been supported to overcome a lack of confidence around exploring educational opportunities, for example with Family Wellbeing Workers accompanying them to college open days.

Nursery staff reported that for some parents, the courses run by the Service had been a first step towards taking up employment, getting on to college courses, or becoming volunteers. The range of courses offered had included first aid, beauty therapy, food hygiene and cookery. Some of these courses are delivered by staff from local colleges, again creating links into possible future training opportunities, with parents aware that the skills learnt on these could be useful when seeking employment in the future. Parents also reported feeling more confident about their ability to learn as a result of these sessions.

One nursery team leader reported seeing some parents develop leadership skills over the course of their engagement with the project that would stand them in good stead for accessing future employment.

Parents did not highlight literacy as an issue in interviews, and none reported receiving help with their literacy. However, nursery staff were aware of what they described as 'quiet work' being done by Family Wellbeing Workers to improve parental literacy.

### **Support to access training or work opportunities**

There were a number of examples of parents making significant strides around training or employment including:

- One mother who had been put in touch with a college community outreach programme. Having enjoyed the courses she took, she progressed to studying community development at university.
- One father took up a volunteering opportunity which led to contact with a local community development worker, sessional work and a course at university.

This significant progress was matched by the case of a parent starting from a situation described by a Nursery Head as involving addiction, family chaos, financial problems and a reluctance to

engage with services. This parent was reported as having begun to talk about having a career and getting involved in the life of the nursery:

*“[The Family Wellbeing Worker] got to know her very well. She supported her across all the issues that she had. She gave her practical help, she took her to the foodbank and got her benefits sorted. It was a very high level of support at the start. You could see her wellbeing improve on a weekly basis. She’s made so much progress, she is talking about having a career. She was so far from that initially.”*

For the father mentioned above, the name of the organisation, Stepping Stones, made perfect sense. He felt he had been able to take a number of small steps, which had ultimately led him to a much better place. Other parents also picked up the theme, referring to taking a series of baby steps that ‘get you where you want to go’.

A member of nursery staff captured a similar idea, noting that informal conversations with a Family Wellbeing Worker often lead to engagement in courses, and even exploring training or employment opportunities.

A number of parents referred to being supported to access or consider childcare courses. Staff referred to a small number of parents who are already working in the field. A consistent theme with nursery staff and Family Wellbeing Workers was that the Scottish Government’s expansion of childcare<sup>1</sup> should provide parents with significant opportunities. This can be seen as further evidence of improved parenting skills.

Parents and staff reported a variety of practical support being provided to parents in relation to jobs and training opportunities. This support included:

- Providing basic information about available courses.
- Encouraging parents to consider and explore their employment and training options, including for when their children move to primary school.
- Arranging childcare for parents taking college courses.
- Helping parents to consider changes in direction, for example from manual work towards office work.
- Exploring options to pick up self-employment again.
- Helping to prepare for job interviews.

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<sup>1</sup> See: A Blueprint for 2020: The Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare in Scotland. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/publication/2017/03/blueprint-2020-expansion-early-learning-childcare-scotland-2017-18-action/documents/00515637-pdf/00515637-pdf/govscot%3Adocument>

The Service had also supported a small number of parents to stay in work or deal with redundancy. One Family Wellbeing Worker had supported a parent through a disciplinary tribunal at work. Although the parent had moved on from that job, she saw the support provided as invaluable in securing the best possible practical and psychological outcome, and as the main reason that she had remained in employment. In another case, the Family Wellbeing Worker supported a parent who had had to leave work because of their health to make sure their best interests were served in the redundancy process, and subsequently helped them explore possible alternative work opportunities.

### **Increased involvement in nursery and community life**

Parents consistently mentioned becoming more involved with the nursery, and in the life of their community more generally as a result of engagement in the Service e.g. fundraising, making crafts for a Christmas Fayre, and volunteering with cultural diversity sessions/activities.

Nursery staff reported that even parents in the most difficult circumstances had increased their engagement with nursery, such as talking with staff, becoming enthusiastic about the wider activities taking place in the nursery, and also taking part.

Stepping Stones staff reported parents moving from depression and non-engagement to involvement in community activities, in the case of one father becoming involved in running a local football team.

The project appears to have left a legacy of formal involvement amongst some parents. One parent reported that her Family Wellbeing Worker had supported the setting up of a school council in her nursery in which she and other parents had become involved. Some of this activity appeared not to have been sustained, but it was reported to have proved worthwhile whilst it was ongoing, and to have enhanced parents' social networks.

This picture of involvement was confirmed by nursery staff, who reported engagement from parents not only in fun activities, but also in parents' groups, some of which they were aware had continued to meet, at least for a while, once children had moved on.

## 10. The impact on children

This section focuses on research question 3, exploring how the impact of the Service on parents' lives covered in sections 5-9 impacts in turn on their children, in particular on:

- attendance at and engagement with nursery.
- behaviour and learning.
- health and wellbeing.
- child protection and safeguarding.

The cascading nature of the impact of the Service on children was captured by one Deputy Head:

*“We see the impact on mum, and that feeds right through to the children. Mum is happier, and the children are happier, and start displaying more positive behaviours.”*

Other nursery staff referred to the impact of children resulting from a virtuous circle as improvements to parental health, confidence and skills, change children's behaviour, impact on parental wellbeing in turn, reinforcing the improvements to children's behaviour.

### **Child attendance and engagement at nursery**

Nursery staff and Family Wellbeing Workers were clear that the Service has a positive impact on attendance; in a context in which attendance at nursery is voluntary, and where parental attitudes, health and wellbeing, resilience, skills and financial circumstances may impact on attendance and engagement.

Nursery staff reported that the Service had dealt directly with financial barriers to attendance. Referrals to clothing banks and for charitable grants had ensured that their children were able to attend nursery in appropriate clothing or footwear. Such practical difficulties may otherwise have been interpreted as neglectful or due to lack of knowledge, and thereby have raised child protection concerns.

Nursery and Stepping Stones staff recounted examples of the Service overcoming through their support work barriers to nursery attendance arising from parents feeling shame and personal embarrassment at their perceived 'failures', and being afraid of exposing themselves to judgement or criticism by others.

Successful work on child attendance was also reported. Some Family Wellbeing Workers visited parents in their home to encourage them to bring their children to nursery, overcoming parental fear, lack of confidence or practical barriers to them doing so.

Parents spoke of another reason for their children attending nursery more frequently as a result of their engagement; suggesting that the activities provided by the Service push them to get moving even on days where they are struggling. Parents also reported that children were more willing to attend nursery, some looking forward to doing so. Going to nursery had, in many cases, become a more positive experience for both parent and child.



## **Child health and wellbeing**

Parents often reported that their children simply seemed happier. A number tied this improvement to taking part in holiday programmes, and/ or to the increased family time they were spending together because their social confidence had increased. Nursery staff also reflected that they were seeing happier children. Overall, this change was to be providing the basis for other developments that are sought with children; making them more prepared to learn, and better able to play and engage with other children.

Nursery staff also noticed improvements in the way that children presented at nursery. One senior nursery staff member reported that sometimes children were cleaner when they arrived, or that it was clear that parents had begun to take more care with their child's appearance.

One Nursery Head reported a mother who was engaging with the Service improving her management of her son's health condition.

However, the Service could not be expected to problem solve in all cases: some children were reported to continue to experience difficulties after leaving nursery. One parent spoke of her son being in contact with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAHMS) due to a range of behavioural issues, including problems with his eating.

## **Child behaviour and learning**

Parents spoke of significant improvements in child behaviour. These were frequently described in relation to the support they had been given in parenting skills and techniques. Some felt that they could actually measure the improvement in their children's behaviour as a result. One parent, for example, spoke of her son's behaviour being problematic once or twice per week rather than every day, as had previously been the case.

These changes in behaviour often impact on children's interaction with their parents, one referring to their child calming down after a tantrum and apologising to her, something she put down to the impact of the Triple P programme she had undertaken.

A number of parents spoke of being supported by Family Wellbeing Workers, working alongside nursery staff, to deal with issues their children were having with being parted from them when they dropped them off, issues which they had found distressing.

Parents observed improvements to their children's social skills, with their children more willing to join in activities with others. Parents also noted specifically the impact of the summer holiday programme on social skills, one parent saying that her son interacted better with other children because of his experiences on that programme.

It was generally clear to parents that many of the changes in the behaviour of their children were not solely the consequence of the support provided by the Service but were also the result of the work of the nursery. One parent with a child with autism also referred to the specific support provided to her by a specialist charity through play sessions.

Nursery staff and Family Wellbeing Workers were clear that increased attendance at nursery in itself gave the opportunity to positively influence children's behaviour and engagement in learning.

Nursery staff were clear about the impact on children's behaviour, including settling into the nursery and engagement in learning, delivered through the Service's impact on parental health and wellbeing, consistency of parenting, increased parental self-esteem and more settled family

environment. Some nursery staff noted resultant improvements in speech, in engagement with other children and in confidence.

Nursery staff did report that progress on child behaviour can take time. One Nursery Head referred to observing a child's behaviour initially worsen after having consistent boundaries set for the first time:

*“There have been differences in the child's behaviour. It took a dip at the start because he wasn't used to boundaries and mum having the strength and confidence to persist. He kicked off a bit when the boundaries were set, only because he was dealing with something he had not had to deal with before....Mum has been able to be strong and fair. The young boy has learned to read, it's clear that there is an open and loving relationship there now. He's seen his confidence increase because he feels secure, his speech is improved and he's better engaged with other children. He has the confidence to be engaged.”*

Family Wellbeing Workers gave examples of the breadth and complexity of the assistance they have provided in tackling and resolving children's behavioural issues:

- A two-year-old boy, whose mother was being physically and emotionally abused by her partner in a coercive control relationship, suddenly began exhibiting aggressive and physically violent behaviour towards staff and other children in the playroom. Stepping Stones' engagement with the mother over some weeks allowed the Family Wellbeing Worker to build the mother's trust to the point where she could confide in the worker about the relationship, and was subsequently put in touch with Women's Aid, helped to escape the relationship and safely resettled elsewhere with her child. With on-going support, it was reported that the boy's behaviour had returned to being 'fine, placid and happy' and his attendance at nursery had improved.
- Staff at one nursery were concerned about a mother having unreasonably high expectations of her child, and through engagement with the Family Wellbeing Worker, they were able to persuade her to enrol in a Triple P parenting course which helped her to moderate her expectations and cultivate a more positive and realistic relationship with her child, ultimately resulting in the child being happier and more settled in the nursery.

## **Child protection**

A number of nursery staff were clear that engagement with the Service had helped in having children removed from the Child Protection Register, with a case of an older child being reunited with her family. Such impacts had, on occasion, been achieved in situations where parents had initially been very hard to engage. Even where the Service was not the only intervention impacting on decisions on child protection, it was thought to be as playing a critical role.

One senior nursery staff member reported on the role played by a Family Wellbeing Worker in facilitating supervised family contact between a mother, a grandmother who was caring for her children, and the children; something she felt had been essential to their wellbeing in a situation where the children's welfare was paramount.

## 11. Qualities of the Service

This section focuses on research question 4, complementing the foregoing sections' exploration of what the Service does, with an exploration of how the way that it is delivered, its specific qualities and features, and the qualities of the people who work within it, deliver its impact and added value.

### Features of the Service

Nursery staff felt that the Service was flexible, all-encompassing, person-centred, preventative, and designed to address any issue impacting on parents and families in pursuit of its objectives.

Interviews with Stepping Stones staff captured key elements of the way in which they delivered the Service to achieve its objectives:

- Effective engagement with parents is about making themselves as visible as possible, in as welcoming a way as possible.
- The Service consciously allows engagement to develop in different ways, through different phases rather than through set paths.
- The focus is not on simply trying to resolve parents' challenges, but on supporting them to reflect on their experiences, think about where they want to get to as parents, identify solutions and ways forward, and put them into practice.
- The Service has a core focus on building parents' capacity.
- The Service will work across a range of issues directly, and will work in partnership with other agencies, and assist parents to familiarise themselves with and access other services.
- Contact can be as intense as necessary, and can be for as long as necessary. There is no time limit, the Service is not about inputs for six weeks, after which things are presumed to be dealt with. It is not about 'quick fixes'.
- That acknowledged, the Service will provide short inputs on specific issues when needed.
- Parents can come back to the Service even after a case has closed. This extends to parents receiving support for a period after their child has entered primary school.
- Above all, the Service is designed to ensure that parents know they have someone who is on their side.

### Qualities of the workers

Parents painted a very positive picture of the qualities of the Family Wellbeing Workers.

The qualities most frequently mentioned were their kindness, friendliness and their approachability. *"She is just lovely, so easy to talk to"* and *"she is just kind and understanding"* were typical comments.

Family Wellbeing Workers were seen as being reliable and available; *"when you need them they are always there, you can always go and get help"*. Alongside this they were seen as always being responsive when they were contacted.

Family Wellbeing Workers were also seen as emotionally intelligent; for one mother, her Family Wellbeing Worker's ability to know when to say nothing was a critical strength of the Service that she had received. For that parent, this was part of the worker being *"absolutely on the ball, all the*

time". Another parent captured the naturalness of her engagement with the worker, based on her skills and personality:

*"There is nothing forced when you are chatting to her, she is a people person".*

Other parents felt that Family Wellbeing Workers understood their issues, in part because they had been through the challenges of being parents themselves.

The calmness of Family Wellbeing Workers was also noted by parents. This could be in terms of their general demeanour or in relation to a specific aspect of their behaviour: *"She has a very soothing voice"*.

More than anything parents very much appreciated the effort that Family Wellbeing Workers were prepared to make on their behalf, suggesting that nothing was too much bother for them.

The impact of all these attributes was captured by one mother in her late 20s:

*"She is like my second mum. I've told her things that I have never told anyone else."*

Feedback from nursery staff was similarly very positive. Staff consistently spoke of Family Wellbeing Workers being non-judgemental and approachable. That approachability was observed alongside professionalism, with one Nursery Head clear that Family Wellbeing Workers did not overstep the mark in terms of their engagement with parents and families, and suggesting that the Service was *"beautifully balanced"* in this respect.

The skills of Family Wellbeing workers were very much appreciated by nursery staff. They referred to Family Wellbeing Workers as having a very good way of talking to parents, being approachable and welcoming, rather than overbearing, and avoiding stigmatising parents in any way. One team leader felt that the Family Wellbeing Worker in her nursery was able to approach and engage with the young mums that they worked with in a way that she was not, partly due to the worker being of a similar age to the young mums.

Other staff phrased this set of skills in terms of Family Wellbeing Workers' empathy, emotional intelligence and a level-headed ability to generate a sense of calm when dealing with difficult issues.

Staff also felt the Family Wellbeing Worker's understanding of the issues facing families was critical; they are able both to identify and engage with parents about their problems, and support them to access the appropriate support within the broader community.

Some focused on the 'can-do' nature and flexibility of the workers. Nursery staff felt that workers were prepared to be hands on, and to 'do what it takes' to build the engagement and relationships on which the Service could make a difference. It was felt that this allowed the Service to be tailored to the specific needs of parents, and to be all encompassing, providing help ranging from minor assistance by signposting to advice services to major interventions helping women escape damaging situations of coercive control and dangerous and violent relationships.

Workers were seen as making a difference because they were prepared to go and engage with parents where they were, figuratively and literally, including in their home. Flexibility was also seen in terms of workers' willingness to juggle the days they were present in nurseries, something that was valued in the context of their only being present for a limited number of days in a week.

Flexibility was seen as, on occasion, involving Family Wellbeing Workers going beyond the call of duty. For example, one Family Wellbeing Worker had health promotion materials translated into the first language of an asylum seeking parent.

Nursery staff also appreciated that Family Wellbeing Workers worked alongside them to contribute to the life of the nursery, engaging with children 'on the floor' when that was appropriate, and being a source of expertise that staff could tap into.

Some nursery staff suggested that the way the Service operates does create a risk; the efficacy of the Service is highly dependent upon having the right member of staff in the Family Wellbeing Worker role, with the right mix of skills.

## 12. Views on added value

This section focuses on research question 4, reflecting on the added value delivered by the Service, exploring:

- Parents' views on what would have happened without their engagement with the Service, and how they would otherwise have responded to the challenges they were facing.
- Staff views on the impact on parents if they did not have access to the Service.
- Nursery staff's views on their capacity to respond to parents' needs if they could not refer to the Service.

The section also provides some insight into the reasons why parents might not engage with the Service (research question 5).

### Parent views

Parents were generally very clear that without the Service they would not be in such a positive position. Two parents saw their alternative future in particularly stark terms, one suggesting that without her engagement with the Service she might have completed suicide; another suggesting that without the 'someone to talk to' provided by Stepping Stones she would probably have found herself in the care of psychiatric services.

Others felt that they would have been much more socially isolated without the Service and the friendships they had built there. One parent felt she would have continued to come in and out of the nursery without having any real engagement with anybody else. Another captured her sense of how her life would have been without engagement in the social activity provided by the Service:

*"I would have been in the house, just in those four walls, watching Jeremy Kyle. The groups get me out of the house, even if I'm having a s\*\*t day."*

Parents felt that their mental health and wellbeing would have been put at risk by the lack of someone to confide in about their problems. Most of those parents felt they would have 'got by' in terms of their health, wellbeing and ability to cope, but that they would have been more stressed and unhappier.

Parents felt that they would not have been able to deal with other services if they had not engaged with the Family Wellbeing Service. This included one parent who felt she would have been left short of income because the Service supported her to face the benefit tribunal at which she successfully claimed Disability Living Allowance for her son.

Other parents described their alternative future in terms of missing out on the positive changes that the Service had enabled them to make. One parent felt that without the first step of engaging with Stepping Stones he would not have started on a path that led from volunteering to studying community development at university. Others felt that they would not have been moved to start college courses or apply for jobs without the support that they were given.

One parent's gave a clear sense of the empowering way in which the Service works:

*"I don't like to think I couldn't have managed myself. I hope things would have got better even without the Service, I don't like to think about where I was....The Service got me part of the way, and the nursery, but it was me that had to get up and go. I'm strong in myself, I'm just grateful they were there to help."*

Significantly, some parents were clear that they would not have sought the type of support provided by the Service from the nursery itself. Despite generally being positive about the nursery their children attended, they had experienced some conflict with nursery staff, which had affected the trust between them.

For a handful of parents this conflict had involved child protection concerns; one parent reported being accused of grabbing her child outside nursery in a situation that had later been acknowledged as being one of mistaken identity; another had been questioned about a bruise on her child, and felt she had been criticised and treated with suspicion by the nursery for not explaining what had caused it.

### **Staff views on impact on families**

Feedback from nursery staff supported the views of parents that there would be a negative impact on parents' lives if the Service were not available to them. Some were clear that particular children's life chances would have been reduced had their parents not had the support of a Family Wellbeing Worker.

Others focused on child protection issues, with one Nursery Head clear that some of the children attending her nursery would be on the Child Protection Register were it not for the input of the Service. Stepping Stones staff also felt that more children would be on the Child Protection Register, or would be known to social work, without support from the Service.

Some Stepping Stones staff reported feedback from social workers suggesting that the Service had stopped parents from going down a slippery slope/ spiralling towards greater difficulties and chaos. Others echoed the feedback of parents that they would be more at risk of social isolation and experiencing mental health problems.

### **Nursery staff views on losing the Family Wellbeing Service**

Nursery staff were clear that they would work hard to respond to the broader issues faced by parents if the Family Wellbeing Service were not in place, and that they would want, as far as possible, to mitigate the impact of such a loss, but would struggle to do so.

Staff reported that they did not have the time or capacity to focus on the support to families on offer from the Service. One Nursery Head commented that:

*"You can't provide everything that parents might need, you've got to meet the needs of other parents and children at the same time. So having somebody who has that as their dedicated role is ultimately the best thing, because they can provide more time and more activities and strategies and connection to other agencies. Let's be honest, if we could do it all and be there to help their families right through it, we would, but ultimately this job is really about looking after the children."*

Nursery staff were also clear that their focus had to be 'on the floor' engaging with children. They also echoed Stepping Stones' rationale for the Service; that its focus on the whole family differentiated it from the nurseries' own work, which was inevitably primarily focused on the children. This also echoed the feedback from parents.

Stepping Stones staff felt that the particular skill sets, for example in dealing with mental health issues, brought to the work by Family Wellbeing Workers, over and above those relating to childcare, complemented, and were not replicated by, the skills amongst nursery staff. Nursery staff also suggested that Family Wellbeing Workers bring an in-depth knowledge of the services in

their local community and embeddedness in local networks of provision that they could not emulate themselves.

Some nursery staff explored in more depth the gaps in service provision that they felt would arise were the Service not to be there:

- Some felt that they would struggle to break down barriers to interaction with parents.
- Some felt that they would still try to deliver group work at the nursery but would not be able to support parents' engagement in that work in the same way.
- Some felt that they would inevitably be slower to respond to issues raised by parents and would not be able to support progress as effectively, suggesting that the Family Wellbeing Service often acts as first responder to wider issues impacting on parents.
- Some suggested that they would turn to health visitors for more support, although they acknowledged the pressures on health visitor teams that are subject to cutbacks, one suggesting that the Family Wellbeing Service was currently providing some of the support usually delivered by health visitors.
- Some felt that any alternative provision would mean them referring to an organisation with whom they did not have such a trusting relationship that had been built up over time: *"We would be referring parents to people we didn't know. The relationship we have with Stepping Stones matters"*.

One Nursery Head reported that the Service had been withdrawn from her nursery due to lack of referrals. Families were now referred to a children's charity operating in the same building. She felt that despite this proximity, she had not been able to replicate with that organisation the positive relationship she had had with Stepping Stones staff.

One Deputy Head made clear that the loss of the Service would run directly counter to her nursery's commitment to putting the family at the heart of their work with the child.



### 13. Views on the future of the Service

This section reflects on the views of parents, nursery and Stepping Stones staff about the future of the Service.

The very high levels of positivity about the Service from parents meant that they suggested only a limited range of ideas for improvement, almost all of which focus on either increasing the number of parents who could engage with the Service, or increasing the availability of the Service after the transition of children to primary school.

The current lack of proper family support for parents whose children had made the transition to primary school was a consistent theme from parents who were no longer officially engaged with the Service. (Some did have occasional informal contact from their Family Wellbeing Worker, in one case when the worker had moved on to another role). There was agreement, echoed in staff feedback, that the development of a formal follow-on service was highly desirable.

For nursery staff, the predominant message was simply stated. They wanted the Service to continue, and would consider it a very significant loss both to parents and themselves if it did not. They would like to be able to have the worker based at their nursery for an increased number of hours per week. In the words of one Nursery Head:

*“I’m not greedy, I don’t want them five days a week, but an extra day would be great.”*

Increased presence in the nursery was seen as being desirable both in terms of Family Wellbeing Workers having more time to work with individual parents and being able to work with more parents.

A small number of nursery staff felt that there was work to be done developing their relationships with Family Wellbeing Workers as the basis for increased and more accurate referrals, particularly where the latter were new to their role, but foresaw no particular difficulty in achieving this.

A number of Stepping Stones staff raised the issue of physical accommodation in nurseries, highlighting that some lack the family room which in other nurseries is so important to facilitating engagement with parents. Finding solutions to this problem was seen as challenging, with options being talked about including peripatetic work. Family Wellbeing Workers were used to delivering some aspects off-site, but reported challenges in finding private spaces, and a reluctance from parents to access some other community venues.

Stepping Stones staff also explored potential changes and developments relating to:

- Increased community-based and peripatetic work, even where nurseries do not have physical constraints.
- Increased work to engage with families whose children are not engaging with nurseries.
- Increased referrals coming through health visitors, possibly as part of a move to get to families when their children are younger.
- Improved capturing of impact through the implementation of the new recording system brought in this financial year.

## 14. Reflections and conclusions

This section returns to the six questions set out in the introduction, and offers some broader reflections on the Service, and how it might develop in the future.

### **1. What impact has the Family Wellbeing Service had on the parenting skills, resilience, parent/ child and family relationships of parents of pre-school children and families who engage with the Service?**

It is clear that the Service has had a major impact on parenting skills and resilience, and parent/ child and family relationships.

Those impacts are reported consistently by parents, and observed by nursery staff. Parents appear to have a greater range of skills and techniques for managing the behaviour of their children, and to be more confident as parents. They also appear to be having more fun outside and inside the home with their children, often as a family. As a result, and due to improvements to child behaviour and parental wellbeing, relationships between parents and children appear to have improved. In particular, parents appear to have improved attachment to their children.

There is less direct evidence of improvement to parents' relationships with partners and other family members but it is clear that, in some cases, the ability of the Service to provide a listening ear and advice across family relationships has led to the improvement of key family relationships, or the avoidance of breakdown in those relationships. Family relationships have also improved through better joint bonding with children, and improvements to parental mental health.

### **2. What impact has the Family Wellbeing Service had on parental, physical, mental and emotional health and wellbeing?**

At its most simple, parents report being happier and, to some extent, healthier, as a result of their engagement with the Service. They are less anxious, less stressed and, in some cases, less depressed than they were. For some parents, also observed by nursery staff and Family Wellbeing Workers, there has also been an impact on physical health.

Again, these impacts appear to be both the direct result of specific health-focused interventions with parents, from stress management classes to advice about managing medication and walking groups to encourage exercise, and the indirect result of the other changes in their lives.

Perhaps the most striking health and wellbeing outcomes delivered by the project were to be found on parents' social confidence and social isolation. The researchers spoke with, and staff reported, many parents who had gone from being socially isolated and so lacking in confidence that they would not take their children out, to being integrated into social and friendship networks, and able to engage more closely with nurseries.

### **3. What impact has the Family Wellbeing Service had on the confidence and capacity to learn amongst children of the parents who have engaged with the Service?**

Most of the feedback relating to the impact of the Service on children relates to observed improvements in child behaviour, child attendance and engagement at nursery, child health and wellbeing and child protection. Children are seen as behaving better, as being calmer, more likely to attend nursery and better engaged when they do attend. Children are also seen as healthier, and even presenting as cleaner. Nursery staff and Family Wellbeing Workers were clear that the Service has resolved some child protection issues, and prevented others from worsening.

These improvements can be seen as being founded on the range of other impacts discussed in the report, and in turn as the basis for the reasonable judgement that children's confidence and capacity to learn must have been impacted by the Service. That latter judgement is also backed by some feedback on such direct impact.

### **4. Are there particular aspects of the Family Wellbeing Service model or approach that are important to the planned outcomes, and how do they add value?**

It was difficult to explore this directly with parents and with nursery staff, as most did not explicitly compare the impact of the different elements of the Service.

The key elements of the Service can be listed: direct inputs building parenting skills, social activities/ engagement drawing people in, social activities courses/ classes, holiday activities, holistic problem solving on practical issues; advocacy and advice role work, accompanying/ walking with parents figuratively and literally, and providing a listening ear, a safety net and reassurance.

However, reflecting on the evidence, it appears that there are no particular elements of the approach that can be identified as being *more important than the others*.

The different elements of the Service are important for different parents at different times, and the different elements of the Service hang together as a whole. They all have their impact, and all have their importance, and the Service would be weaker without any one of them.

Furthermore, as much as the practical elements within it, it is the qualities of the Service that generate its added value. The ability of the Service to make a long-term commitment to parents to act with their interests at heart, to treat them as being of value, and to provide skilled, calm and committed staff to work with them in a friendly, welcoming, and non-judgemental way across whatever issues they present, are key to its contribution to the lives of parents and their children.

### **5. For families who have not taken up the offer of engagement with the Family Wellbeing Service, what are their main reasons?**

Again, this was not a question that was easy to explore directly with parents as all of those interviewed engaged with the Service without any concerns. There do not appear to be any aspects of the Service that discourage engagement. It was also the case that the offer of engagement appeared generally to be so informal that any non-engagement would be just that, rather than explicit rejection of the Service.

However, some parents did identify that the extent of their social isolation at the start of their engagement with the Service had been such that they had previously avoided much contact with anyone connected to the nursery. A key aspect of the support provided to some parents had been their Family Wellbeing Worker's preparedness to meet them in their own home.

Feedback from parents, nursery staff and Family Wellbeing Workers also hinted at a reason why some parents might not engage. Where parents do not understand that the Service is independent from the nursery, and more importantly, that it is not associated with social work, there is a possibility that some will not engage for fear of intrusiveness. There was also a sense from some staff feedback that some parents feel that they already have too many agencies involved in their lives.

## **6. How has the Family Wellbeing Service involved families in decisions that affect them?**

For most of the parents interviewed, engagement with the Service has not encompassed involvement in formal goal setting and planning. However, the Family Wellbeing Service has directly supported some parents to engage with other services, including with the nursery itself and with social work, which has assisted with their involvement in decisions that affect them.

Even more clearly, the increases in confidence reported by parents have enabled them to better engage with other services, which should be the basis for better involvement in decisions affecting them.

The evidence also suggests something stronger: all the improvements that parents have experienced have contributed to them feeling more in control of their lives, and hence in a better position to make appropriate decisions for them in their family.

### **Four further reflections**

1. The researchers were struck by the strength and universality of positivity about the Service in feedback from parents and staff. There are challenges for the Service, in particular where nurseries lack physical space, and sometimes the number of referrals coming through are lower than intended, reducing the impact the Service aspires to have, but the overall feedback on the Service was excellent.
2. The researchers are clear that the success of the Service is dependent on trust in two sets of relationships, between the nurseries and Stepping Stones staff, and between Family Wellbeing Workers and parents. That trust has clearly been established effectively and is the basis for effective referral relationships.
3. At one level, the model for the Service is simple, and describable as being encompassed by the implicit instruction to Family Wellbeing Workers 'to go and do what works to help parents in their lives'. But the model is also sophisticated, reflecting learning across the period of the project, and is delivered by highly skilled staff taking nuanced and difficult judgments about how best to support people in complex situations, and undertaking complex tasks as they do so.
4. One last aspect of the Service and challenges facing parents must be remarked on. Researchers were struck by how often staff returned to discuss issues of severe poverty and destitution, of parents lacking the financial resources to feed and clothe their children. There must be fear that continuing austerity and the ongoing squeeze on the incomes of families with children, particularly those with disabled children, will make such issues ever more common, placing more pressures on families, and demanding a response from nursery and child support services that are themselves under pressure.

## The future of the Service

The researchers believe that the evidence in this report establishes that the Family Wellbeing Service is an effective intervention that clearly delivers its intended impact. They believe that the evidence suggests strongly that the Service has a preventative impact, and as such delivers system benefits in terms of significant returns on the investment made in it. They believe that the moves made by the Service to establish the level of those returns are welcome.

The researchers believe that the demands on the existing Service will grow, both as the work of nurseries expands with the implementation of Blueprint for 2020, and as the social consequences of ongoing austerity and increasing poverty are felt ever more deeply by families.

They believe that there is a strong case for consideration to be given to regard the Service as a necessary core investment alongside nursery provision in communities where there are significant numbers of disadvantaged parents who are at risk of beginning or deepening engagement with social work.

That investment should be long-term. The initial aspirations for the Service to roll out around the city, working with different nurseries and developing their practice before moving on, have not proved achievable. Nursery staff are clear that they cannot meet the broader needs of parents in the way that Family Wellbeing Workers can, and there is no sense that that will change in the future.

If an expanded investment is made in the Service, there are three issues to which the Service will need to give further consideration.

Firstly, there is a need to keep under review the effectiveness of the Service's targeting of parents on the cusp of crisis. If the Service is to maximize its impact, there may be further improvements possible to generate more referrals, and possibly better referrals.

Secondly, there is some hard thinking needed about the potential value of a peripatetic service, possibly one mechanism to reach more children. Given our findings about the importance of the value of the relationship between nursery staff and the Family Wellbeing Workers, the researchers believe that any shift to a peripatetic service should be *additional* to existing nursery-based services, to ensure that that core relationship is not weakened.

Finally, the management of the transition from nursery school to primary school is clearly a challenge for parents, despite the ambition of Stepping Stones for their support to families to continue on for a while once children have entered primary school. Thinking needs to be given to the level of funding required to deliver this support properly, and some of the feedback from parents about the contrast between the support available to them through the Service, and the support available to them once their child is at primary school, suggests a further policy response may be required to meet the needs of parents with older children.

# Appendix 1: Aide Memoire for Parent Interviews

## Initial Questions.

Tell me about your current home situation:

- Partner.
- Number and age of children.
- Health.
- Employment/ training.
- Housing.

## Engagement with Nursery

- How did you first come into contact with the nursery?
- What services have they been providing you with/ what support have they been giving you?

## First Engagement with Family Wellbeing Service.

- We will cover this in more detail below but tell me what was happening in your family at the time of engaging with the Family Wellbeing Service.
- Did you refer yourself to the service, or were you referred by someone else?
- If you referred yourself
  - How did you find out about the service?
  - What help were you looking for?
- If you were referred by someone else:
  - How did they tell you about the service?
  - What help did they want you to get?
- Had you heard about the service on a previous occasion/ had you heard about it a while ago?
- If so, was there anything that stopped you from engaging?

## Actions Undertaken/ Quality of Service

- How long have you been getting help from the Family Wellbeing Service?
- What support has the Family Wellbeing Service given you?
- How has that developed over time?
- How would you describe the quality of the service that you got from the Family Wellbeing Service, and the quality of the support workers?

## Impact on Parenting Skills/ Resilience.

- How were you finding being a parent when you first engaged with the Service?
- Was there anything you were finding particularly challenging/stressful?
- How are you finding being a parent now? Do you feel anything has changed in your parenting?
- How would you describe the change?
- Has the Service helped things change?
- Which aspect of it?
- Has anything else helped those things change?

### **Impact on Relationships.**

- How were your family relationships at the time you first engaged with the Service?
  - How were your relationships with your children?
  - How were your relationships with your partner and other members of your family?
- How are those relationships now?
  - How are your relationships with your children?
  - How are your relationships with your partner and other members of your family?
- How would you describe the change?
- Has the Service helped things change?
- Any aspect of it in particular?
- Has anything/ anyone else helped those things change?

### **Impact on Your Children.**

- How were your children doing at the time you first engaged with the Service?
  - How well were they learning?
  - How well were they engaging with the nursery?
  - How was their attendance?
  - How confident were they in their learning?
- How are they doing now?
  - How well are they learning?
  - How well are they engaging with the nursery?
  - How is their attendance?
  - How confident are they in their learning?
- How would you describe the change?
- Has the Service helped things change?
- Any aspect of it in particular?
- Has anything else helped those things change?

### **Impact on Your Wellbeing.**

- How would you describe your health and wellbeing at the time you first engaged with the Service?
  - Physical health/ wellbeing?
  - Mental health and wellbeing?
  - Emotional health and wellbeing
- How would you describe your confidence at the time you first engaged with the Service?
- How would you describe your health and wellbeing now?
  - Physical health/ wellbeing?
  - Mental health and wellbeing?
  - Emotional health and wellbeing
- How would you describe your confidence now?
- How would you describe the change?
- Has the Service helped things change?
- Any aspect of it in particular?
- Has anything else helped those things change?

### **Involvement/ Other Impacts**

- Have you become more involved in the
  - Nursery.
  - Community?
  - If so how?
- Has the Service helped change that?
- Any aspect of it in particular?
- Has anything else helped those things change?
- Has anything else changed in your life since you first engaged with the Service?
  - Potential prompt around employment, housing, money.
- How would you describe those changes?
- Has the Service helped those things change?
- Any aspect of it in particular?
- Has anything else helped those things change?

### **Additionality**

- What do you think would have happened if you hadn't accessed support from the Service?
- What would you have tried to do instead?
- Who would you have got help from?
- Do you think you would have managed to deal with the challenges you faced?

### **Final Questions**

- Would you recommend the service to other parents/ carers in your situation?
- Do you have anything else you would like to say about the service?