



**Fife
Gingerbread**

Service User Evaluation

September 2023

Final report



A Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR) and Binks Hub report

Emma Davidson · Lisa Howard

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express thanks to the members of staff within Fife Gingerbread for their kind and welcoming support during the project.

Very special thanks go to the family members who gave up their time to share their Fife Gingerbread journey. Without their contribution this evaluation report would not have been possible.

Contents

Executive Summary and Recommendations	i
1 Introduction and methodology	1
2 Overview of the Early Years Team	4
3 Engage: starting to work with Fife Gingerbread	9
4 Support: Developing and implementing the support plan	13
5 Progress: Outcomes and future plans	20
6 Conclusions and recommendations	25
Appendix A: Research Tools	31

Executive Summary and Recommendations

About Fife Gingerbread

Fife Gingerbread is a voluntary sector organisation that provides one-to-one and group support, advice, and information to lone parents and families in need in Fife. The Fife Gingerbread Early Years Team, working in partnership with the members of the Collective, provides early intervention support with the aim of improving outcomes for children and preventing escalating need or risk.

The Evaluation

This evaluation was commissioned to enable Fife Gingerbread to understand 1) how its Early Years service is being delivered, 2) to determine what elements are helping families the most, and 3) what aspects of the service could be improved upon. The evaluation was conducted by Dr. Emma Davidson and Dr. Lisa Howard, researchers based at the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships and the Binks Hub at the University of Edinburgh. It took place between August and October 2023, and used a methodology consisting of two workshops with staff, a survey of 39 parent service users and 15 in-depth interviews with parent service users.

Key Achievements

Fife Gingerbread has a committed, passionate, and creative team of Early Years support workers who are delivering a high quality, highly valued service to families in need. A holistic, trauma-informed approach sets Fife Gingerbread apart from other family support agencies, and is a key strength in winning the trust and engagement of families to bring about change in the areas of life they are struggling with.

Recommendations

The report discussed the structural barriers relating to poverty and isolation which are beyond the scope and capability of the Early Years service. However, we have identified some aspects of the service that could be improved upon or developed to build on the strengths of the service, to minimise risks, and to further improve outcomes for families.

Regarding service user satisfaction and engagement, the families in the study asked for better communication, a change to the composition and location of some of the groups, and improvements to worker and volunteer coverage and availability.

In relation to the goals of the Early Years service to bring about empowerment and independence, we found that there is some way to go to in achieving these outcomes for many families. We recommend that Fife Gingerbread examines further approaches to expectations setting with families, and in particular, around the degree to which one worker can provide the family with support long term. Making better use of Outcome Star to manage expectations around support input and outcomes is one strategy. Coaching for parents to empower them and build confidence in forming new and supportive friendships could more sustainably address social isolation. We also recommend a clearer focus on endings and exits for families by implementing a clearer set of guidelines for staff, and more staff training.

Further examine of gender within the service provision would be beneficial. While finances may not allow additional male workers, possible areas to examine include mapping current services across Fife working with Dads and / or a recruitment drive for male volunteers. A greater understanding of both the level and nature of needs for Dad's across Fife would be beneficial. Developing the offering of employability services would extend the service more firmly into the 'Work' outcome star and potentially better meet the needs, hopes and dreams of the Dads using the service.

And finally, we recommend capturing and managing data in a more systematic way to understand trends in demand, referral sources, family compositions, and to strengthen evidence for funding applications.

1 Introduction and methodology

- 1.1 Fife Gingerbread is a voluntary sector organisation that provides one-to-one and group support, advice, and information to lone parents and families in need in Fife. Fife Gingerbread's overall aim is to empower lone parents and families through a range of projects that promote wellbeing, reliance and new opportunities. Through this work it is hoped that parents will have the capacity to better navigate structural and social barriers such as poverty, isolation, and poor mental health.
- 1.2 Fife Gingerbread have a dedicated Early Years Team. They provide early intervention support with the aim of improving outcomes for children and preventing escalating needs or risks. It is hoped that with the support of the service families will not require statutory intervention. The service works as part of the Early Years Collective, a scheme in partnership with The Cottage (Kirkcaldy) and six region-wide Home Start projects. The Fife Gingerbread Early Years Team provides holistic and flexible support, enabling parents to better understand their child's needs and develop stronger bonds with their children. The objectives of the Early Years Team reflects that of Fife Gingerbread as a whole, giving their focus to empowering families and building their resilience and capabilities.

Evaluation aims and objectives

- 1.3 The Early Years Collaborative has been operating for three years, and a service re-commissioning by Fife Council is expected in late 2023. It is an opportune time to reflect on the Fife Gingerbread Early Years programme and the difference it is making to the lives of families in Fife. To do this, Fife Gingerbread commissioned Emma Davidson and Lisa Howard, researchers based at the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships and the Binks Hub at the University of Edinburgh to conduct an evaluation of service user experiences and outcomes. It was expected that the evaluation would provide a deeper understanding of how the Gingerbread service is being delivered, and what elements are helping families most. The evaluation should give not only give insight into what works, but also what aspects of service delivery are less successful, and how these can be improved.
- 1.4 The evaluation took place between August-October 2023, and focused on the following specific questions:
 - What approaches and methods are being used to produce change in families and their circumstances?
 - What difference do Fife Gingerbread Support workers want to make in the lives of the families they work with?
 - What are the views and experiences of families working with the project, and what support is making the biggest difference to them?
 - How have families current and future lives changed as a result of their involvement in the project?
 - What improvements can be made to increase the success and impact of the Early Years Team?

Evaluation methodology

- 1.5 Our approach to evaluation acknowledges that projects and programmes working to make changes in people's lives do not occur in a vacuum. Central to this approach is the explicit recognition that Fife Gingerbread is embedded in a complex policy context, and is operating across a diverse local authority area. This is especially true in the context of ongoing cuts to public services, and the widening cost of living crisis. For families themselves – especially those living in challenging circumstances – structural factors can impact on the decision and choices they make. Often these choices might not appear 'logical' – for example, they may turn down an offer of support, or disengage with a service. Such outcomes do not always reflect a poor service, but rather can be a consequence of the pressures that wider structural inequalities place upon them and their ability to access and engage in support (for example, poor housing conditions, poor social infrastructure, and inaccessible community services). To address this, our approach focuses on the unique contribution that Fife Gingerbread is making to families in Fife (and, in turn, recognises the impossibility of attributing a specific social impact to a specific intervention).
- 1.6 To begin the project, we facilitated a workshop with the Fife Gingerbread Early Years Team. The aim of this workshop was to understand, from the perspective of the staff, what 'success' within the project looked like. To do this we discussed their understanding of what the project was doing and why; the outcomes (short, medium, and long-term) they wanted to achieve; and any challenges or barriers to success. Although we did not have resources to create and test a comprehensive theory of change, through the discussion we were able to construct a powerful contribution story for the project. This is illustrated in Figure 1.1 below.

Fife Gingerbread Early Years Service Contribution Story

What does the programme do?

- Part of a collective with 6 Home Start Projects, The Cottage (Kirkcaldy)
- Early intervention support
- Non-statutory, whole-family support, preventing further intervention from social services at a later date

Who with?

- The Early Years Team works with families living in Fife where there is a 0-8-year-old living at home and where there are identified wellbeing concerns
- Regular 'allocations meetings' between the three partnership organisations
- Referring agencies: Health visitors; social workers; Women's Aid; schools; self-referrals

What we do and with what

- Support for parenting
- Creative methods, such as vision boards, to identify strengths and goals
- Outdoor wellbeing activities
- Mindfulness, self-care, and confidence building
- Advice on housing, tenancy issues
- Family routines
- Finances and budgeting
- Buddying up and volunteers
- Support and advice to access mental and physical health services
- Social and support groups
- Signposting and support to attend other services and organisations

Barriers, challenges, and future risks:

Staff turnover, funding insecurities, rurality and size of Fife; poor public transport; pandemic and lockdown and mental health impact on families and children; cost of living crisis; housing conditions and availability across Fife.

Overarching goal:

**Better today's
and brighter tomorrows
for Fife's lone parents and
families in need**

Supporting vulnerable families to give their children the best possible start in life through early intervention, a holistic whole family approach and partnership working.

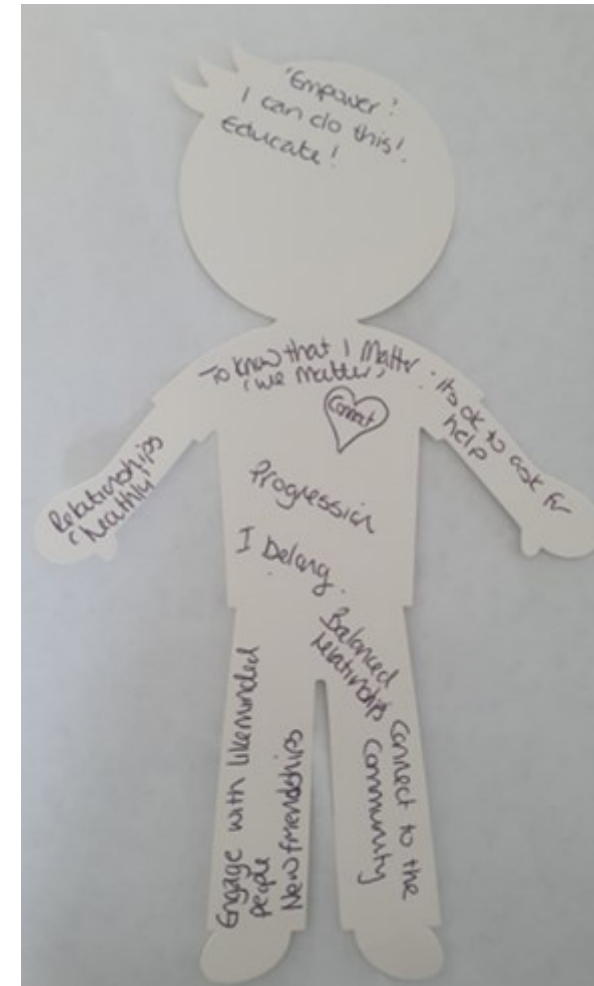
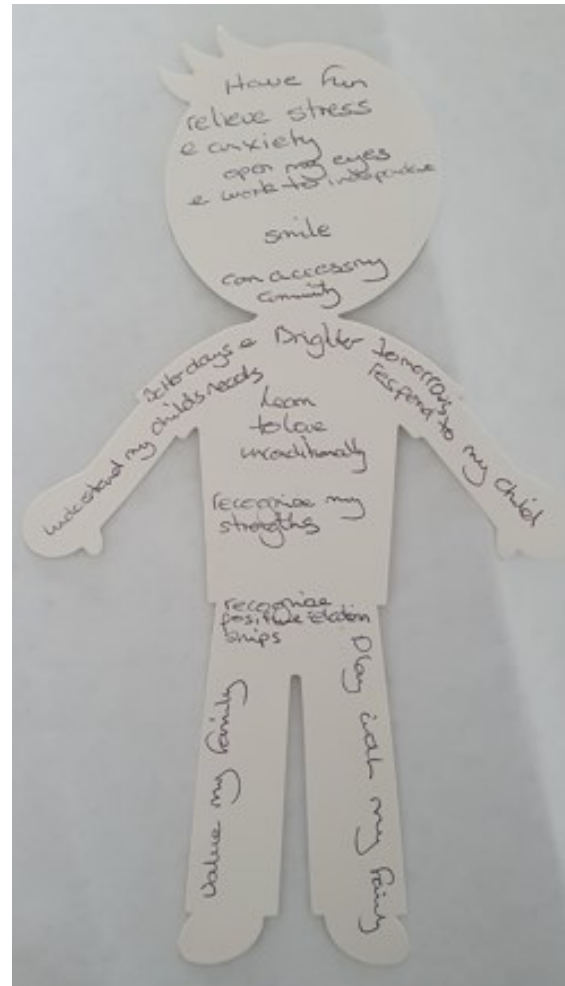
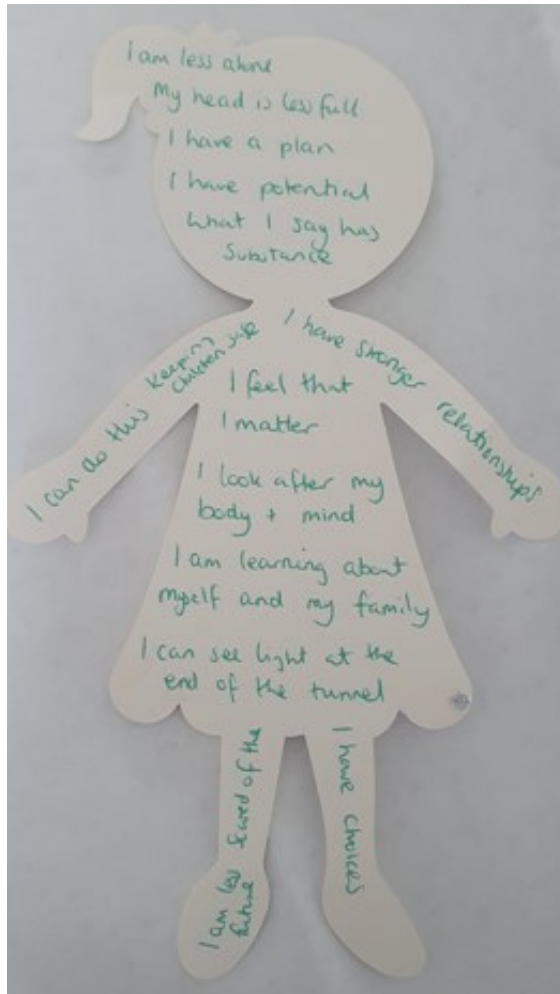
The difference we play a part in making

- Improved mental health
- Better stress and anxiety management
- Greater confidence and self-esteem
- Better connected to emotions
- Better relationships with children and other people
- Being able to accept help
- Reduced isolation
- Having confidence to go to groups
- Increased number of connections to local people and organisations
- Feeling seen and heard
- Greater knowledge and understanding of child development
- Better opportunities and choices for parents

What does success look like?

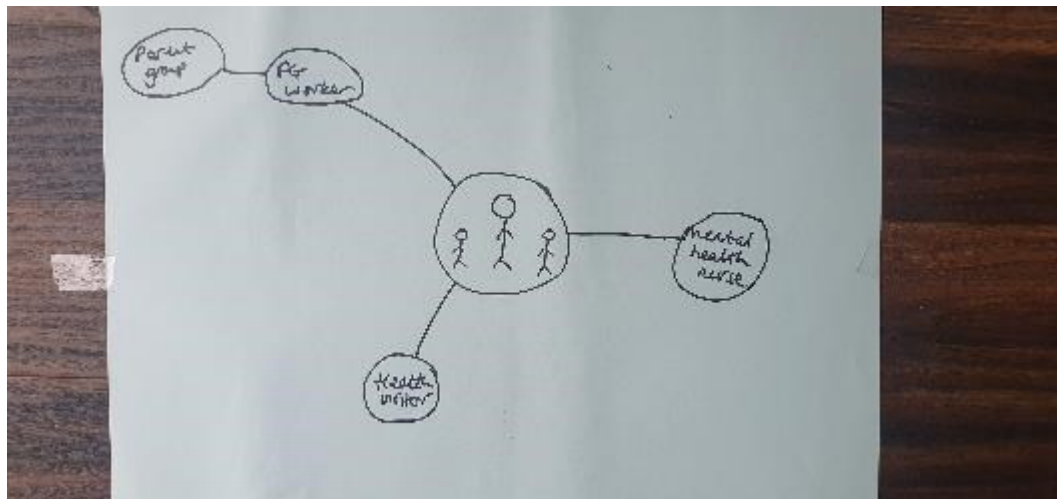
- Families with have better days and brighter tomorrows
- Families are proud of their progress, and know that they are valued and that they matter
- Families can say 'I am strong enough to do this myself'
- Families recognise positive relationships and are able to maintain boundaries
- Families are independent and confident, and are equipped with the tools needed to access local services independently
- Children feel safe, secure, loved, and have their developmental needs met
- Parents can manage their emotions and know where to get support if things get difficult
- Families feel part of a community
- Families have a positive future

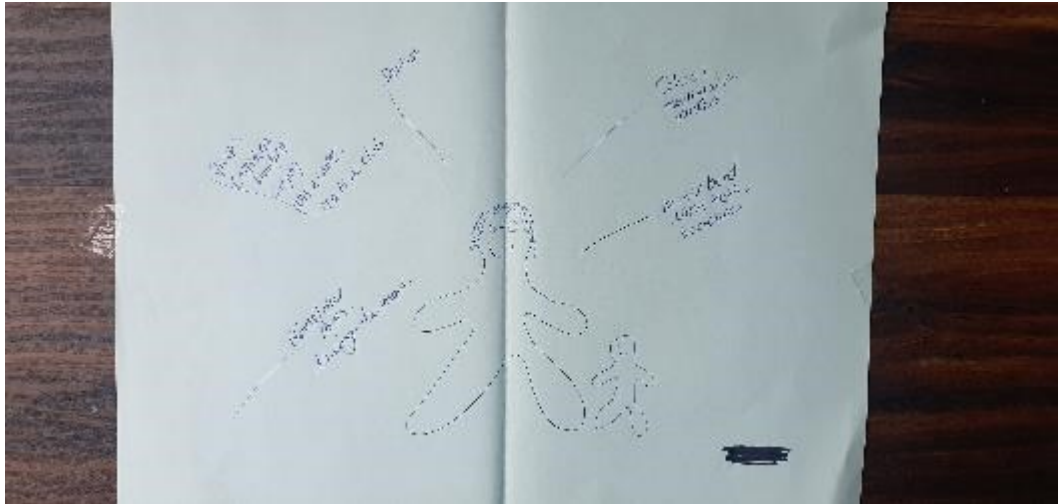
Figure 1.2: Images from staff workshop (what difference are we playing a part in making)



- 1.7 The evaluation did not have resources to conduct a full pluralistic evaluation (in other words, it did not fully evaluate multiple perspectives on the project). Rather, it devoted the resources available to collecting and listening to the voices and experiences of families themselves. The two methods of data collection employed were parent interviews and a survey. The workshop outputs were used to inform all aspects of the data collection, including developing interview schedules for interviews and the survey. This ensured staff were involved in study, and the specific process of prioritising key topics for investigation.
- 1.8 A total of 15 qualitative interviews were conducted with parents. Recruitment of parent participants was through key workers, who are known and trusted by parents and provided information on what the research was for, and what it involved. Recruited parents came from families that were considered stable, with no needs or vulnerabilities that might have affected their ability to consent or risked their psychological wellbeing during the interview. The interviews were conversational, although all followed a semi-structured interview schedule (see appendix A).
- 1.9 Relational maps were employed to allow participants to visually reflect on the connections and support they had before and after accessing support from Fife Gingerbread. Examples of these maps are shown below.
- 1.10 We also reached out to families through a short survey which families could complete online or in writing. A total of 39 surveys were collected. There was some overlap in the two data sources since at least 10 of the interviewees also completed a survey.

Figure 1.3: Relational maps used in interviews





Limitations

- 1.11 Unfortunately, given the limitations of time and scope of the research, we did not include any interviews with families who had left the service, nor did we talk to those who were just starting their engagement with Fife Gingerbread. It is acknowledged that the views represented in this evaluation report are from those whose support is established and ongoing. It is also important to note that the interviewees were identified and contacted by support staff. This means that there is a potential for bias in the sampling of participants. However, the evaluation team found that staff were keen for us to talk to a broad array of families. The survey was introduced to collect a wider range of perspectives, and overall we believe that the participants successfully reflect a wide range of experiences.
- 1.12 Having completed data collection, we held a second workshop in which staff re-visited the findings from the first session, and actively engaged in data analysis. Working with the researchers, staff were provided with anonymised data from the family interviews and extracts from the survey. Together, we examined the data, identified key themes, and considered their meaning and the ways they could be interpreted. By drawing on staff expertise and their close understanding of families and the local context, this process provided an additional layer of data. This has helped us to better understand the data, and ensure recommendations are appropriate and meaningful to those delivering the service.

Ethics

- 1.13 The University of Edinburgh's School of Social and Political Science gave ethical approval for the evaluation. An information sheet about the evaluation was provided and an informed consent form was signed by all participants (see appendix 1). The consent form included details about confidentiality, child protection and data management.

Report structure

- 1.14 In the staff workshop a key theme was around the pathway that families took through the project, moving from engage – support – progress. This idea has been used to structure the report, along with the other emergent themes of community, friendships, and relationships.

- 1.15 The report follows in short sections that follow the journey through the service. Section two provides an overview of the Fife Gingerbread service, and the wider context in which the service is delivered. Sections three, four, five and six look at the different stages of the Fife Gingerbread journey. In the final chapter, we look explicitly at the overall project outcomes and present our comments, recommendations and questions for further reflection.

2 Overview of the Early Years Team

Key Points

Fife Gingerbread has over thirty years of experience of providing one-to-one and group support, advice, and information to lone parents and families.

The current Early Years Team was launched in 2021 as part of the 'Early Years Collective' with The Cottage (Kirkcaldy) and Home-Start. There are 10 staff and a project manager, as well as volunteers.

Families follow a flexible support 'pathway' that moves at their pace: from 'engage', 'support' to 'progress'.

The Outcome Stars tool is an evidence based on-line tool used to set goals, monitor progress and celebrate successes.

There is evidence of increasing inequalities in the localities where Fife Gingerbread is working. Twenty three per cent of children under 16 in Fife are living in relative poverty before housing costs, although this rises to over a third in some wards.

The Early Years Collective

- 2.1 Fife Gingerbread has over thirty years of experience of providing one-to-one and group support, advice, and information to lone parents and families. The overall aim of the organisation is to empower lone parents and families through a range of projects that promote wellbeing and opportunities, and provide parents with the capacity and resilience to navigate barriers such as poverty, isolation, and poor mental health.
- 2.2 In 2021, Fife Gingerbread, The Cottage (Kirkcaldy) and Home-Start launched the 'Early Years Collective'. Part of a new Children Services commissioning process by Fife Council, the initiative was a collaborative approach to family support. It reflected Fife Council's commitment to early intervention, and an agreed policy commitment to identifying and addressing indicators of vulnerability before they lead to breakdown, crisis, and statutory measures. By working in partnership, the aim was to get families the right support, at the right time, from the most appropriate early years' service to meet their needs.
- 2.3 As illustrated in Figure 2.1, the Collective aim was to deliver 'whole family support'. Rather than working with specific members or concentrating on a single issue (like parenting skills), this approach focuses on tackling the multiple issues experienced. Families have access to a range of support mechanisms, from individual meetings, group work, advocacy, and signposting. Each seeks to support families with the issues they face, and in different domains of their life (support with parenting, child development and making sustainable connections within local communities). The overarching aim is to give all children in Fife the best start in life.

Figure 2.1: Early Years Collective Approach



Source: The Early Years Collective, Information Leaflet

- 2.4 Each member of the Collective sources funding from different sources, although Fife Council (as commissioner of the service) funds the largest proportion. The funding for Fife Gingerbread’s Early Years Team during financial year 2022/23 is from Fife Council, RS McDonald, Robertson Trust, Volant, Cashback for communities and Children in Need.

About Fife Gingerbread Early Years team

- 2.5 Fife Gingerbread Early Years Team is delivered through a staff of 10 dedicated Fife Gingerbread support workers, a project manager, and a team of volunteers. Like the Collective, it applies a whole family, systems-thinking approach to support families to overcome the complex barriers facing them. The support provided is holistic and flexible to the needs of individual families.
- 2.6 Families working with Gingerbread move through a support 'pathway', from 'engage', to 'support' then 'progress'. The 'engage' phase is when families are beginning to work with Gingerbread, and workers are establishing trust. Support Workers spend time to get parents to engage so that they can build a relationship with them that is healthy professional respectful and built on trust. This is key to the success of the support.
- 2.7 Within the first few one-to-one family meetings, workers begin to use the Outcomes Star tool. This is a person-centred, strengths-based tool for measuring and supporting change when working with people, and provides focus and structure for goals setting with parents. A review of the Outcome Star progression is normally carried out at the six weeks stage, and thereafter every 3 months, with small steps forward being recognised and celebrated.
- 2.8 During the 'support' phase parents are fully engaged in their action plan and are managing any issues well. Families move into the 'progress' category once they feel valued, empowered, and connected to their communities.

- 2.9 Families can be supported by a range of different support workers, depending on individual need and circumstances:
- **Fife Teen Parent Project Support Workers** support parents up to 25 years through specialist support in areas such as mental health, attachment, play and child development.
 - **Family Approach Support Workers** support parents over 25 with children aged 0-8 years at home by focusing on their child’s development and wellbeing.
 - **Dad & Me Support Worker** works with fathers to help them to create a lasting attachment with their child.
 - **Fife Gingerbread Volunteers** create opportunities in communities to help families come together, create friendships and share experiences through group work and individual support.
 - **Family Learning Opportunities** young families to come together for peer support, learning and development.
- 2.10 The team work with other partners, including Starcatchers Play & Explore, an art-based programme for parents and their children using art forms (the funding focus for this partnership is on young parents who have had some form of trauma) and Mellow Parenting, a well-established 14 week relationship program with a focus upon attachment. The Early Years Team can also draw on the services and expertise of other projects within Fife Gingerbread, for example Employability Workers.
- 2.11 Activities and initiatives include (but are not restricted to): parent and child groups such as swimming; soft play; Team Time Club; Andy Man’s Club; Mellow Dads; housing and money advice; advocacy; listening; provision of a volunteer buddy; day trips; food vouchers; help with furniture and other household items; outdoor activities for wellbeing; and signposting to other services. Workers also have the flexibility and capacity to generate and share new ideas for groups and activities between the team.

Why Fife Gingerbread is important in Fife

- 2.12 The overall aim of the organisation is to empower lone parents and families to navigate barriers such as poverty, isolation, and poor mental health. These are issues becoming increasingly damaging in the Fife context, with evidence of widening inequalities and gaps in opportunities.
- 2.13 Based on the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation¹, Fife (as at 2020) has 97 datazones in the 20% most deprived for Scotland. Fife’s most deprived areas are concentrated in Mid Fife, across the Levenmouth, Kirkcaldy, Cowdenbeath and Glenrothes areas. Fife has seen increasing concentrations of deprivation since 2016. The Council’s ‘Tackling Poverty Annual Report 2022-23’ highlights the difficulties unemployed people face – especially in
-

¹ The statistics consider “multiple deprivation” and do not focus solely on income and employment. Factors taken into account also include access to services, health, quality of education, crime and housing.

North East Fife - in affording essential travel, poor mental health and wellbeing from social isolation, difficulties in accessing health services and a reliance on more expensive food retailers because of a lack of money to use public transport.

- 2.14 The Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) most recent data gives insight into the Fife socio-economic context. 23% of children (under 16) in Fife are living in relative poverty before housing costs, while 19% live in absolute poverty. This is above the average in Scotland at 21% and 17%, respectively. While absolute poverty has only shifted a small amount since 2015 (2.3%), relative poverty increased in Fife from 16.1% to 23.2% between 2015/16 and 2021/22.
- 2.15 While large parts of Fife might be considered to have high levels of deprivation, this does not hold true for every part. Indeed many parts of Fife are extremely affluent, illustrating significant inequalities in experience and opportunities. Child poverty, for example, remains highest in the Glenrothes and Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath Constituencies, and lower in the North East Fife constituency.

Figure 2.2: Poverty in Fife, Westminster Parliamentary Constituency

Westminster Parliamentary Constituency	Relative poverty		Absolute poverty	
	Number	%	Number	%
Dunfermline and West Fife	3,755	20.2%	3,018	16.3%
Glenrothes (includes Levenmouth)	4,568	28.1%	3,600	22.1%
Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath	4,724	26.7%	3,746	21.2%
North East Fife	1,750	15.7%	1,404	12.6%
Fife	14,796	23.2%	11,773	18.5%
Scotland	189,178	20.8%	150,051	16.5%

Source: Know Fife (2023), *Children in low-income families –2021/2022 local area statistics*, 24 March 2023. Available at:

https://know.fife.scot/data/assets/pdf_file/0021/462108/Fife-Findings-Children-in-low-income-families-2022.pdf

- 2.16 At a ward level similar spatial and social inequalities between localities are revealed. Relative child poverty is highest in Kirkcaldy Central (35.9%), Buckhaven, Methil and Wemyss Villages (34.4%), Lochgelly, Cardenden and Benarty (33.3%). This falls to only 11% in St Andrews, Tay Bridgehead 12.7% in Howe of Fife and 14.3% in Inverkeithing and Dalgety Bay.
- 2.17 The Council’s ‘Tackling Poverty Annual Report 2022-23’ highlights the difficulties facing families in Fife. Fife Council’s new Low-Income Family Tracker (LIFT) enables monitoring of households with low incomes. As at March 2023, it identified a total of 5,386 low-income lone parent households, 1,692 families with three or more children, and 2,404 families with a disabled adult or child. The report also notes that Food Bank use is

increasing. Data for 2022/23 shows that over 18,000 beneficiaries received food parcels from the Trussell Trust Fife Network. This compares to approximately 15,000 in 2021/22².

² Tackling Poverty Annual Report 2022-23, Fife Council. Available at: https://know.fife.scot/_data/assets/pdf_file/0032/507992/Tackling-Poverty-Annual-Report-2022-23-final-draft.pdf

3 Engage: starting to work with Fife Gingerbread



- 3.1 This chapter of the report looks at the 'engage' phase of the project. This is when families are beginning to work with Gingerbread, and workers are establishing trust. Time is spent with the parents with the aim of building a relationship that is healthy, professional, and respectful.

Key Points

Referrals had come predominantly from health workers and social workers, followed by a smaller number of self-referrals

Primary motivations for accepting help were to address mental health and social isolation

For new service users, health and social workers had provided limited information on Fife Gingerbread. Despite this, parents felt the referral was consensual

Workers deploy a flexible, accessible, and non-judgmental approach

The activities in the support plan are designed to empower the parent

Parents told us that addressing 'how I feel' and 'friends and community', both relating to social isolation, were their top priorities

Parents were mostly very happy with the frequency of worker contact they have

Who is the Early Years Team working with?

- 3.2 The Early Years Collective engages with families living in Fife where there is a 0–8-year-old living at home *and* where there are identified wellbeing concerns surrounding the child(ren) (this is Stage 2 of the well-being pathway). Families supported by the service should have a clearly identified need for additional support, as well as support from a Named Person.
- 3.3 To access the service, referrers (including self-referrals) are asked to complete a shared referral form. Referrals for support are triaged to ensure, in the first instance, that the eligibility criteria are met. Referrals are then brought to regular Allocations Meetings. In these meetings managers from the Collective work together to identify and agree which organisation is best placed to meet the immediate needs of the family, and allocate responsibility for engaging the family.
- 3.4 The Early Years Team have had around 300 new referrals to the project since April 2021. The majority came from health services (typically health visitors), following by social work, and self-referrals. Other types of referrals come from education, housing, and Third sector.

Drivers into the project

- 3.5 The families working with the Early Years Team often faced complex challenges that affected their ability to look after themselves and their children. Fife Gingerbread's own

data shows that of the 127 families being supported (as at October 2023), 52 mentioned mental health as a reason for referrals. Notably, this was frequently mentioned alongside other complex issues including chronic health condition, homelessness, unemployment and learning disabilities. Twenty-seven reported being a victim of domestic abuse, while 34 were teenage parents, many of who reported several barriers including homelessness, issues related to employability and mental health. The prevalence of mental health issues correspond to the evaluation data collected. For example, parental mental health was the main driver for referral in both the interviews (all) and the surveys (72%).

Figure 3.1: Reason for seeking support (word cloud based on survey responses)



- 3.6 The evaluation data found that declining mental health was often connected to a critical life event (such as the birth of a child or leaving an abusive relationship), and resultant feelings of isolation and lack of ‘community’:

The main reason (for referral) was isolation. I knew nobody here. I had just came out of a toxic relationship and needed a fresh start (survey response)

I was referred by my family nurse as I was a pregnant teen parent, it was for mental health and isolation (survey response)

My family nurse referred me about 11 months ago, when my son was about 4 months old. I was going through a difficult time, my parents had split. I had my son when I was age 20. My parents cut contact with me. It impacted my mental health (interview)

- 3.7 Financial struggles because of low household income were experienced by all of the parents we interviewed. Often, caring responsibilities and/or ill health had led to unemployment and the families' subsequent money worries.

My husband used to work but had to give up because of illness. We're proud people and hate being unable to work (interview)

I previously worked as a packer in a warehouse. I left employment after taking custody of my son (interview)

I was very stressed [at the point of the referral], I was only receiving Universal Credit, but then had food to pay. I wasn't receiving any child support because it was all going to my kids' mum (interview)

How did families feel about the referral process?

- 3.8 We talked to parents about their experience of the referral process. Of the fifteen parents interviewed for the project, six had been referred through health visitors, four from social workers, and one from Women's Aid. Three had self-referred, either because they had worked with Fife Gingerbread in the past, or had sought alternative support after being unhappy with the service of another organisation in the Early Years collective. Interestingly, there was evidence of repeat users, with one interviewee having experienced a setback in their mental health and social isolation after the birth of another child and being referred a second time by their health worker.

- 3.9 Six of the interviewees had some previous knowledge or experience of the service, suggesting that Fife Gingerbread is known locally. Nonetheless, the majority did not understand why they had been referred to the project, and received minimal information from the referral agency. Only one parent felt that they had received detailed information about what the service could offer before being referred. For the majority of parents, it was not until first contact with the support worker that they received a comprehensive account of how Fife Gingerbread could help.

- 3.10 Despite new users not knowing a great deal about Fife Gingerbread, this did not appear to present them with concerns or worry. The majority felt they had full choice in whether to participate. Only two of those interviewed felt that health or social workers were strongly steering them to use the service.

- 3.11 Most said they were unconcerned about the process, which suggests that the referral was made at a point when they were ready and willing to accept the offer of help. It was also clear in the responses that parents had a strong desire to prioritise their children's needs and tackle isolation, motivating their willingness to accept support:

I had no concerns, even though I'm an anxious person. I just knew it could benefit my child (interview)

I wanted to make friends and find people that went through a similar situation (survey)

[I was seeking help] to get my child involved in activities due to my mental health (survey)

- 3.12 Only one Mum did expressed hesitation about the referral, although this was related to the very specific needs of her child:

I was hesitant only because I have a disability, and I need to do things a certain way with my son. I've been judged by other mums in the past about how I parent, such as how I lift him (interview)

How do Fife Gingerbread engage with parents?

- 3.13 Once a family is referred to the project, the most suitable worker is allocated (depending on age, and nature of needs). After an initial phone or text exchange, a home visit is conducted during which workers try not to rush or appear intrusive to prevent parents losing trust in Fife Gingerbread. Several parents had highlighted the effectiveness of this approach by contrasting it to their lack of trust in other people and agencies:

Everyone is so friendly at FG. It's been a hard thing for me to trust people again (interview)

My worker has been really nice from the beginning. She's a bubbly person, she makes you feel comfortable. I can trust her. It's great to have someone to talk to (interview)

We've built a relationship, I feel confident in [worker] that she can support me. It takes me a long time to open up and trust someone (interview).

- 3.14 While the initial visits are designed to allow the worker and parent to get to know each other, and develop trust, over time they aim to co-create a plan of action that is fully inclusive of the parents' wishes. From the workers perspective, the aim is to identify and validate the parents' strengths and capabilities, to fully understand the family's unique circumstances, and to empower the parent(s) to identify routes to progression and take ownership of the plan of action. The relationship between the Fife Gingerbread worker and the parent is a crucial part of offering the very best support. Workers emphasised that they aim to be flexible, plain-talking, and non-judgmental to enable parents to open up emotionally and communicate what help they need.

4 Support: Developing and implementing the support plan



- 4.1 During the 'support' phase, parents are expected to be fully engaged in their support plan, and managing issues well. In this chapter we look at how plans are created, the type of support being provided, and parents' views and experiences of the difference the plan was making.

Key Points

Parents felt fully included in their support plan, and valued the variety and breadth of help offered

'How I feel' and 'friends and community' were the top Outcome Star areas that parents wanted help with

Parents were highly satisfied with the outcomes of the support they had received from FG

We were told of improvements in parents' relationship with their children and with other agencies, but the response was mixed for their relationships with other parents

Relationships with workers was reported as close, trusting, and rewarding, though we found evidence of some parents being over-attached

Creating a support plan

- 4.2 Support workers outlined several core elements of creating a support plan. First, and most crucially, there should be no agenda or assumptions about what support is required. Instead, workers use a non-judgmental approach that prioritises listening to parents' views about the type of support they need. The importance of hard listening, and its role in helping parents engage in the project, is reflected in the views of both interviewed parents and survey respondents:

I'm always listened to, no matter the subject (survey)

[when talking to worker] I always feel relaxed, and listened to (survey)

[we] sat down together [with their worker], to decide what I wanted going forward (interview)

[the worker] explained all the sorts of things they could help with, but she said we could just see how things go for us, we could decide as and when what sorts of things we wanted help with (interview)

Once I met [the worker], I felt like I could be myself (interview)

- 4.3 Second was giving parents a meaningful choice in creating and revising their support plan. All of the interviewed parents said they were fully involved, without being pushed or forced into doing anything they did not want to do. One parent noted that they never felt rushed, and were given time to think about the offer of support. Another said that "It was

made clear that I could pull out at any time. No sense of coercion". When asked to rate (out of 10) the extent to which were their opinions considered in the plan, all interviewees gave the highest mark, either 9 or 10.

- 4.4 Third, support workers were noted that they were able to draw on a broad range of activities and groups, social and economic support services, information, and advice to offer to families in need. Activities and initiatives mentioned include (but are not restricted to): parent and child groups such as swimming; soft play; Team Time Club; Andy Man's Club; Mellow Dads; housing and money advice; advocacy; listening; provision of a volunteer buddy; day trips; food vouchers; help with furniture and other household items; outdoor activities for wellbeing; and signposting to other services. Workers also have the flexibility and capacity to generate and share new ideas for groups and activities between the team.
- 4.5 Being able to access such a wider range of activities allowed workers to provide holistic and creative solutions to the many issues identified on referral, including social isolation and mental ill health, family routines and financial troubles. Workers also noted, however, that it can be time-consuming to maintain knowledge of all the services available locally. Often such knowledge depends on a relationship with a worker in another service. One worker commented that this can mean that a relationship with another local service is lost if a contact moves to another post or retires. Staff also noted that wider local services are under financial pressure, and this can impact on the range of community services available.
- 4.6 Finally, workers discussed Outcome Star, and its role in helping them build user-led support plans. Workers agreed that the tool was effective and easy to use. Not only did it align to their holistic approach, it enabled them to give prominence to parents' perspectives and priorities.

Type and frequency of contact

- 4.7 Parents were asked about the type of support they have received from the service to date. The vast majority of those interviewed were receiving some form of one-to-one contact. This was variously in the form of home visits, texts, and phone calls. Meetings were also held in coffee shops, libraries, or outdoors (for example, going for a walk on the beach). This was also true for those responding to the survey. Most saw their worker at individual meetings – 56% reported individual meetings (either in person or on the phone), while a further 33% took part both individual meetings and groups.
- 4.8 For the majority of parents interviewed, organised groups, such as playgroups, swimming, and art groups, were an important part of the support received from Fife Gingerbread. Playgroups and activities for children were especially valued for the opportunities they provided for children to socialise, to meet other parents, and to provide some structure to times outside the school term. For example, one Mum commented that groups were "very helpful during the school holidays when me and my daughter would otherwise just be sitting at home doing nothing because of money and social isolation". Another told us about the range of activities that Fife Gingerbread help them access, including Bookbug, swimming, softplay and days out, noted that they would "be struggling without Fife Gingerbread's help!".
- 4.9 Three of the parents interviewed had made friends with other parents at the groups and had continued to meet with them outside the group. It would appear that this type of

connection was relatively rare. For most, groups were seen as central to their children's social development, but not necessarily important or helpful for making new connections with other parents (we discuss this further in paragraph 5.8).

- 4.10 Those replying to the survey generally reported seeing their worker once a week (46%) or once a fortnight (21%). This was similar to those interviewed, who noted that visits in the initial phase of support tended to be fairly frequent, often weekly, with contact gradually becoming less frequent over time.
- 4.11 Most parents (both the survey and in interviews) felt that the amount of support was meeting their needs. Frequency of meetings did vary significantly across parent interviews, likely reflecting the different stages of support. One, for example, talked about seeing their worker "almost every day", while another said that visits were "once per fortnight, this feels about right for me". Interesting, several parents spoke about the accessibility of their worker, noting that they were always available if needed. As Mum commented "She's always on the end of the phone when I need her". It was also clear that frequency of contact would fluctuate around the parent's specific emotional needs; one Mum told us she gets help "whenever I need it", such as for anxiety around engaging with other organisations.
- 4.12 This was not the experience of all those involved in the research. Four interviewed parents said they'd like to see their worker more often. One told us:

I only see her occasionally at the [name of group] when I can get there. I'd like more contact from her, once a week ideally. She does message me, don't get me wrong, but it's not the same as seeing someone. Because I struggle to speak to people I don't know that well so I rely more on my worker coming to my house (interview)

- 4.13 Similar comments were made by those who replied to the survey (although bear in mind the anonymised survey comments may have been made by those interviewed, and therefore do not represent unique responses):

The contact so far has been very sporadic with no rhyme nor reason to it (survey respondent)

I haven't heard from my worker in over four months she's just taken me off her radar without telling me (survey respondent)

Honestly I wish I seen my worker more as im never sure what's going on with fife gingerbread and feel I am slightly left in the dark (survey respondent)

Figure 4.1: How often do you see or speak to your Fife Gingerbread worker?

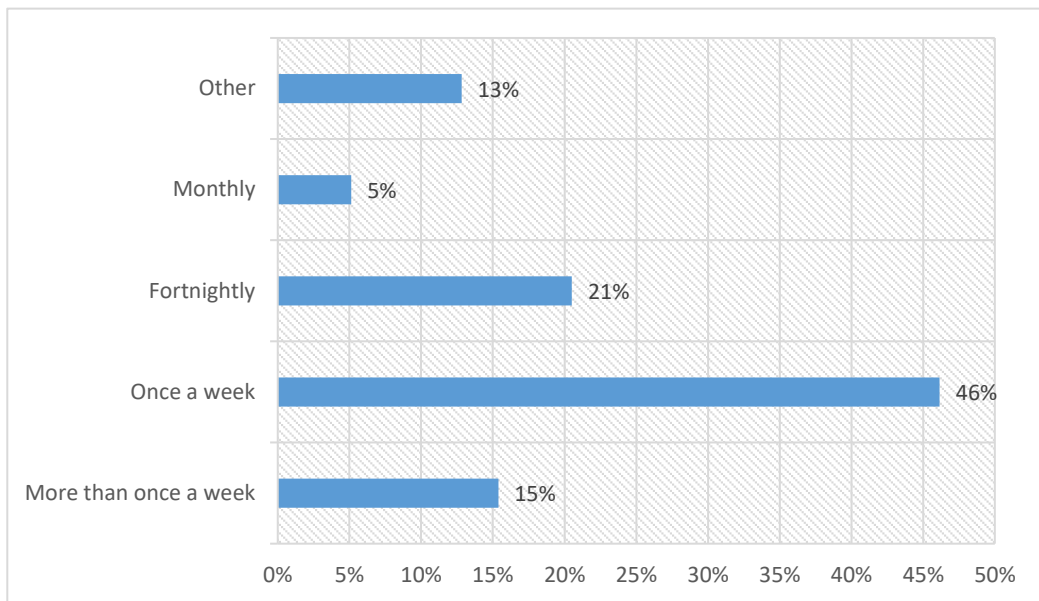
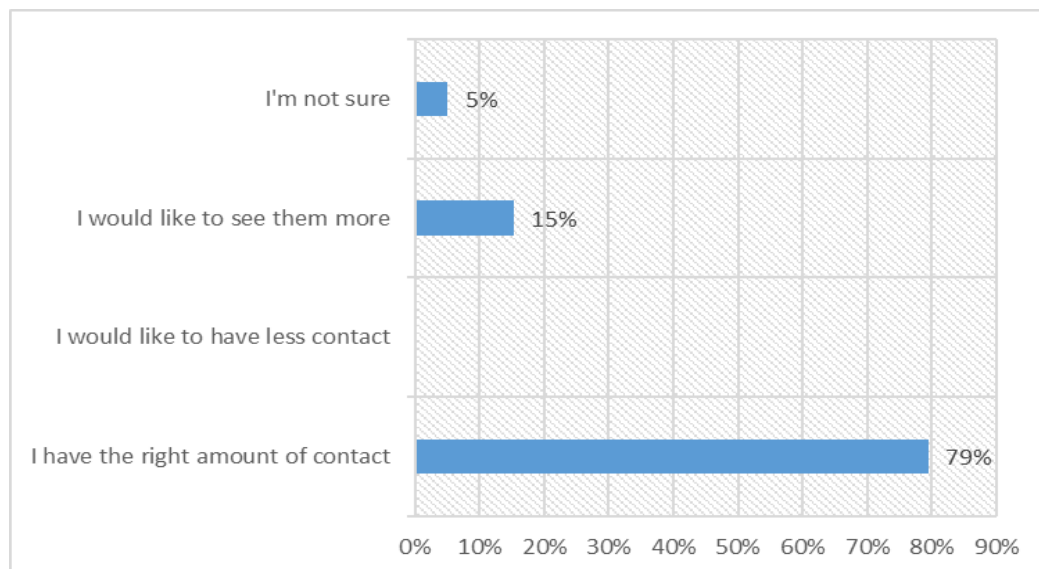


Figure 4.2: Do you have enough contact with your Fife Gingerbread worker?

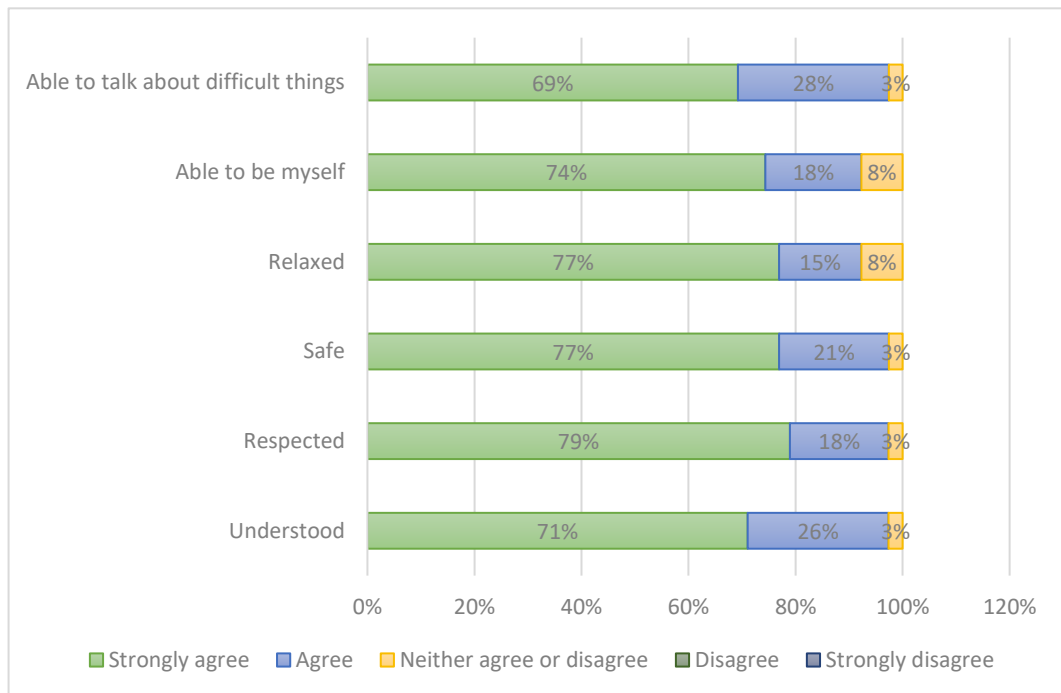


4.14 It is clear that for a minority of parents, contact with their workers has not been consistent over time. This, according to workers, is likely the result of high turnover of staff experienced in the past year. It is interesting to note that the significance of the frequency of worker contact is not clear cut, because it was not always cited by parents as an area for Fife Gingerbread to improve upon. This may be in part due to an awareness of, and sensitivity to, their worker's workload; one Mum explained "I think at the beginning when I met [worker name] and she had to take on more workload, and there was that big gap. Maybe if I'd been able to see her more often, we might be in a different spot now, but I understand they're very busy". Similarly, a Dad told us "He comes less and less now, but I don't blame him, given how much of Fife he has to cover".

Relationships with worker

- 4.15 As noted, workers consider building a strong, trusting but professional relationship as central to the support they offer. Parents in the survey clear demonstrated these attributes in the support received. Parent’s overwhelmingly described feeling understood, respected, safe, relaxed and able to be themselves around their worker

Figure 4.3: When I am working with my Fife Gingerbread worker I feel



- 4.16 We asked interviewees how they felt about their worker, and how confident they felt that their worker will make a lasting improvement in their lives. There was overwhelming positivity about the quality of support being provided. In the survey, words and phrases used to describe support workers included (amongst others) “amazing”, “life saver”, “great support”, “absolutely lovely” and “very understanding”.
- 4.17 Within the interviews, marks given out of ten for the workers were mostly 10s and 9s, with effusive statements such as “She’s brilliant” and “I feel heard”, “I feel I can trust her”, “She doesn’t judge me”, “she’s always praising me and pushing me to do stuff”, and “He’s chilled and laid back, and easy to talk to”. Confidence in ongoing progression was expressed with equally high marks, with comments centred on workers encouraging them to do things outside their comfort zones, at the same time as having their difficult backgrounds acknowledged and understood. One Mum rated her worker with this reason: “10 out of 10. It’s because she knows about my difficult past and how this affects me now”. One Dad felt his prospects had greatly improved because his worker had helped him get a part time job around his childcare commitments, feeling that “100% I would not have been able to get this job without my worker”.
- 4.18 However, we found a paradox in these reported strong personal relationships with workers. There are implications for Fife Gingerbread in enabling workers to manage their professional boundaries, as well as issues of over-attachment if workers leave the organisation. For example, one Dad told us, “Contact started weekly - now it’s a case of if I need him, just message and he will get back to me. So, I really feel like he is always

there, and always available". One of the Mums said "I'll never forgive her if she leaves (chuckles). Because we've built a relationship, I feel confident in her that she can support me. It takes me a long time to open up and trust someone". Further illustrating dependency on one worker, another Mum told us:

She's been my worker from day one; a year ago. I felt so comfortable with her from the beginning. I never ever feel like that with anyone else. I can phone her, and she'll always get back to me. I was at the point of suicide and she talked me down. (interview)

- 4.19 One Mum had already felt disgruntled by a change in workers, and when asked whether there was anything unhelpful about the service, she told us "Staff (worker) turnover, because it takes a while to form the bond, and you need to maintain that stability". Similarly, another Mum said, "The change of worker is a big thing, there was a 3-4 week gap in support between workers, then you have to start all over again building a relationship".

Parents' expectations and experiences of support provided

- 4.20 In both the survey and the interviews, we asked parents about the type of support that they wanted from Fife Gingerbread. The 'most wanted' form of support was 'how I feel', a finding in line with the high levels of mental health reported both by parents and workers. Support with 'friends and community' was also common, not surprising given the relationship between mental health, social isolation and lack of community. 'Home and money' was the third most common form of support wanted. Direct support with children was mentioned less frequently, which is interesting given its significance as a driver for parents seeking help. This suggests that parents see their own emotional and mental health as being a critical first step to better supporting their children's development.
- 4.21 Within the interviews, the categories 'how I feel' and 'friends and community' were overwhelmingly given the greatest priority, although this did appear to vary by gender (this requires a caveat given we involved only 4 Dads in the project). Within the small sample of Dads, 'work', employability and financial stability were given far greater priority. One Dad, for example, did not give any importance to friendships or communities, noting that he already had his own friendship group. Another noted that he planned to attend a group, but this was related to his addressing his own mental health, not making new friends. All Dads spoke about the importance of getting back to work (albeit in a form that could fit around childcare responsibilities). Conversely, for Mums, work and employability were rarely mentioned. Rather, discussions about depression and mental ill health were most common, alongside social isolation. These were mentioned as specific and important reasons for accepting the referral, with opportunities for their children to play with other children and for them to meet other parents cited as primary motivations for participating in the programme.
- 4.22 Through the survey (see Figures 4.4. and 4.5) we were able to compare parents' initial views on the support they felt they needed, with the support they actually received. There are several notable points. First, is that most people wanted help with 'how they feel'. Positively, in most cases, this support was received. Second, less people received support with 'friends and family' than originally expected (61% said it was support they wanted a lot of, yet only 53% reporting receiving 'a lot' of this type of support). Third is that despite support with children (across all domains) generally being given less priority, this was where much of the support provided was actually focused.

Figure 4.4: What sort of support did you want when you were initially referred to Fife Gingerbread?

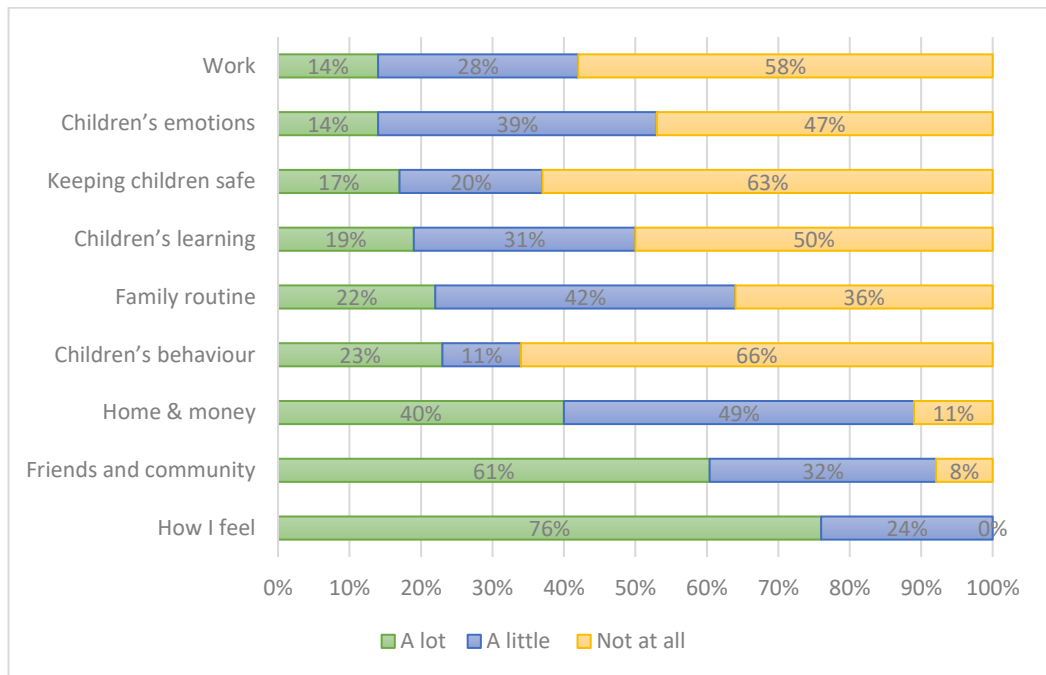
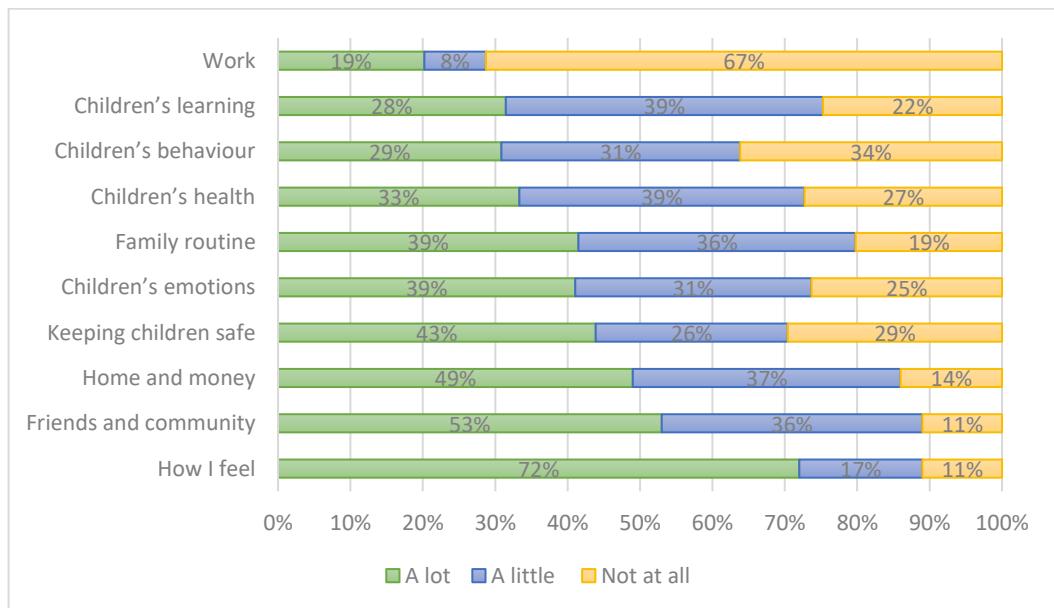


Figure 4.5: What sort of support have you received?



4.23 As shown in Figs. 4.4 and 4.5, the biggest difference between support desired and support received was in 'my children's emotions' (14% of parents desired support in this area, while 39% reported improvements in this area), and 'keeping my children safe' (17% of parents desired support, 43% reported improvements).

5 Progress: Outcomes and future plans



- 5.1 Families move into the 'progress' category once they feel valued empowered and connected to their communities. In this chapter, we look at the impact that Fife Gingerbread has had on families and the progress they are making. We also reflect on exits, endings and future plans.

Key Points

Relationships with the workers was reported as close, trusting, and rewarding, though we found evidence of some parents being over attached to their worker

The Early Years service was highly rated for its holistic, family approach, and for its lack of judgement and time pressure

Fife Gingerbread was compared very favourably to the support of other agencies and organisations

Suggestions for service improvement centred on the themes of communication, parent group criteria and location, and worker/buddy availability

Several parents see FG as a safety net that will enable their goals beyond the Early Years support plan

What difference has Fife Gingerbread made?

- 5.2 At a general level, there was a great deal of positivity and gratitude for the programme. We asked the interviewed parents to reflect on and rate the service provided by Fife Gingerbread, and they gave very high scores of 8, 9 and 10 out of 10.

Mental health

- 5.3 Those parents who came from a low starting point relative to their mental health were especially positive about the service; one Mum told us “I give Fife Gingerbread 10 out of 10 because my confidence is already improving, which then helps with everything else. Before, I just wouldn't even leave the house!”. Another Mum said “It's opened my eyes to what things we can do as a family. How I feel has improved, depression has improved, I feel like I'm no longer alone”. This confident outlook resonated with another Mum, who said:

They're always there for me, I feel totally supported. They've got your best interests at heart. It's like a breath of fresh air. I used to feel like there was no way out of this. FG are slowly building my confidence (interview).

My worker has been amazing and helped bring me on and changing my mindset finding the inner me and the goals I want to set in life (survey respondent)

- 5.4 Another Mum explained, “I feel better about the future; I no longer need to be on antidepressants”. One Dad told us:

I don't think I could have done many of the things I have done without the worker. I would very likely be sleeping all day, up all night. I don't think I would have bothered registering with the GP. I only registered with the mental health nurse because of the worker ...I wouldn't have made it along to the food bank - I wouldn't have even thought about doing that (interview).

Advocacy and practical help

- 5.5 Parents praised the project for their advocacy support, helping them express with views and have their voices heard. Examples shared included attending meetings with their child’s school, supporting them at multi-agency meetings and helping them make and understand phone calls and letters about benefits or housing. Three of the parents reported their worker advocating for them with Fife Council for the common problem of damp and mouldy conditions in their rented accommodation. This was recognised in particular because of parents’ own ignored complaints and attempts at getting re-housed; one Mum experiencing these issues stated that Fife Gingerbread were “our voice when we can’t stand up”.
- 5.6 This advocacy was echoed in the account of one Dad who had been trying in vain to apply for Personal Independence Payments:

He [worker] helped a lot. This process took over a year and eventually I finally got it. He gave me letters of support. I couldn't have managed this process without them. (interview)

Figure 5.1: Word cloud of interviewee’s answers to the question ‘What is the Best thing about Fife Gingerbread?’



- 5.7 More mundane but highly valued forms of practical help were also cited by interviewees, such as job application forms and help in registering with a GP, or more domestic matters: “I told her I'm not keen on cooking, so she came round and showed me how to cook a simple but healthy meal”. Another Mum mentioned help with bills and essential household items and was grateful for the help of Fife Gingerbread because of a gap in support from other agencies: “Fife Gingerbread have been helpful because we were losing support from our social worker (partner is a care leaver) because they were satisfied that we were on top of things”.

Making community connections

- 5.8 As noted earlier, parents made a connection between reduced social isolation and improvements in their mental health. Following support from Fife Gingerbread, several Mums reported an improvement in their confidence to “get myself out there” and be more proactive in social situations. However, there was still some way to go with improving the prospects of maintaining social connections independent of Fife Gingerbread; one Mum told us “I still struggle to communicate with other parents”, while another said that “The groups have helped me get out. But some of the other mums have not been my cup of tea”. Three of the Mums we interviewed found that the groups did not help them to overcome their lack of confidence in speaking to people they did not know, with one finding groups “a bit too cliquey, I feel left out”. Four parents reported a low turnout of other parents at groups, which was recognised by one Mum as down to its location (this will be discussed later in ‘Reported issues and room for improvement’).
- 5.9 In the interview a paper-based exercise was used to evaluate the change in social relationships with important groups, organisations, and individuals in their lives, since receiving support from FG. The results were mixed. Improvements in self-confidence had enabled parents to form better relationships with other organisations, such as school and nursery teachers, and the dentist. One Dad told us he now accepts help from other support organisations, such as Cosy Kingdom, Citizens’ Advice, and the food bank. Closer to home, several parents reported a better appreciation of their child’s practical and emotional support, as well as stronger bonds, with one Mum telling us that “my relationship with my kids has been strengthened through going to the groups together”. However, only one of the parents interviewed reported improvements in relationships with their wider family, often citing deeply established rifts, or insurmountable emotional distance with parents, grandparents, and siblings, often because they were experiencing their own issues.

Not feeling judged

- 5.10 In discussing the quality of relationship with their worker, four parents described with great enthusiasm the lack of judgement they had received, particularly in the context of the family’s capabilities and progress:

She was so welcoming, she didn't judge me, she makes me feel that I'm not a failure and that it's OK to struggle and get the help that you need. (interview)

She lets me do things when I'm ready, doesn't force me, and she doesn't judge me. She knows my history and knows what I've gone through. (interview)

- 5.11 One compared Fife Gingerbread very favourably to the support she had received from her statutory services:

Other agencies judge you, they make you feel not good enough. (interview)

Support for children

- 5.12 The majority of the parents who had been concerned about their children's behaviour, emotions, health, or learning described to us the improvements in these areas following support from Fife Gingerbread. Children's confidence at school and social skills with other children came top of the areas of progress, perhaps reflecting their parent's growth in self-esteem and confidence and the frequently reported improvement of boundaries between parent and child. We were told by different Mums that "My son is doing well with communicating with other kids at the groups", "I can see a change in my son, play groups have been amazing for his development and speech", and "Now at the groups my son is gaining confidence to play with other kids. He also has more confidence going into school". One of the Dads made a connection between his son's and his own self-confidence, telling us that his son is more settled at school now, and "overall, my son's behaviour has improved...I felt I was failing, but the improvement is making me feel better about myself". However, for two of the interviewed parents, children's emotions appeared to be a work in progress, with one Mum saying, "I feel like I'm doing well with keeping my kids safe; my children's emotions will take a bit longer to fix".

A different approach

- 5.13 Interviewed parents were asked to compare Fife Gingerbread to other agencies or services. One Mum told us, "Compared to [other Early Years organisation], Fife Gingerbread are on board for you 100%. They cater for all of your needs, and listen to you more." Also comparing to another Early Years organisation, a Mum said "I worked with [name], but they were not that good because they just had us all sit in a circle talking, and it didn't really work, it wasn't as engaging as Fife Gingerbread was. I also like to one-to-one that Fife Gingerbread provides". Another said that her social worker was not around enough to help with her bad housing situation, and yet another Mum said that other agencies had been in touch about extra support for her son but then not followed up.
- 5.14 Echoing this report of sporadic contact from other agencies and organisations, one Mum who was highly critical of health workers, told us "The health nurse is terrible, she doesn't come often enough. They see you're stable then stop coming. And as you get older, people forget about you!". She later lamented how the health services just prescribe tablets for depression rather than getting at the root cause.
- 5.15 Other criticisms included being judged or belittled by other agencies - particularly by social services, being "told what to do", and not given realistic goals. It was also noted that such agencies focused solely on the child(ren), rather than seeing the family's needs more holistically. This was contrasted with the approach of Fife Gingerbread which involved listening to the parents and making a plan to address everyone's wellbeing.

Exits and endings

- 5.16 We now turn to the interview topic of exits and endings. One Mum explained that she greatly valued the consistent and frequent contact with her worker, and appreciated the lack of end date of the support service, because an end date would mean "there's pressure to fix things quickly". Others spoke about the 'pace' of the support, with several commenting positively that they never felt pushed or pressured. Support, in other words,

was in their own time, and at their own pace. One Dad, for example, was planning to attend a group. He managed to attend, but once there he did not go in. The support worker was supportive, and did not push him to go in. Rather, this first step was celebrated as a successful first step.

- 5.17 We asked the parents to tell us what they would like to happen next in their lives. Despite one of the aims of Fife Gingerbread being to promote families' independence, none of the interviewees stated any aims of being independent of Fife Gingerbread's support; indeed, seeing the service as their "safety net" when we asked about the future. This perception of a safety net was explained by one of the Dads:

As far as I am aware, I can stay connected for as long as I want, I can jump off when I am ready. I'm not going to jump off soon, I want to get the job sorted and I want something to fall back on. (interview)

- 5.18 Another Mum told us she would like to "Keep my relationship with Fife Gingerbread as long as I possibly can", explaining to us that she feels her son needs access to the playgroups beyond age two.

- 5.19 Another explanation for ongoing dependency on Fife Gingerbread support was that several parents described some ambitious life targets brought about by their improved self-confidence and saw the support of Fife Gingerbread as integral to realising these dreams. One Mum wanted to do a skydive, and to volunteer for a support organisation like Fife Gingerbread, and said her worker would help her make these happen. Although employability is not a stated organisation aim of Fife Gingerbread, ten of the fifteen parents interviewed wanted to find meaningful work or start college. One Mum told us that she wanted to join the police, but had to get her driving licence first, and this plan was drawn up with the help of her worker. Another Mum wanted to start her own business and had received advice from Fife Gingerbread on accessing other services in this area but said she would need ongoing support "because I have trouble answering long or complex questions". Three other Mums stated ambitions for higher education, and both of the Dads interviewed wanted to get into work, and were being supported by Fife Gingerbread to do this.

6 Conclusions and recommendations

- 6.1 This evaluation tells the story of a service that is enthusiastic and committed. There is a clear and identifiable approach to service delivery, and new staff team who are positively making a difference to families. There are, however, inevitable challenges in making sustained and consistent impact. In this final chapter then, we highlight the achievements made by the Early Years Team and offer recommendations to strengthen and improve the service.
- 6.2 To draw together the conclusions of this report, it is useful to return to the contribution story developed at the first workshop as shown in Figure 1.1. Key findings under the different contribution analysis stages are outlined below. The key risks that emerged throughout the evaluation are addressed in the recommendations below.

Key Strengths of the Early Years Service

- 6.3 Arguably, the key strength that underpins the programme is the commitment of its workers, and the passion they bring to the job of improving the lives of families in need. In addition, the strong working relationships of the current team have enabled the sharing of advice, information, and emotional support which are practices that more widely foster a collaborative culture and add value to the organisation. We recommend that Fife Gingerbread continues to recognise and reward the care, dedication, and teamworking of its Early Years workers.
- 6.4 The use of a trauma-centred approach to support has enabled workers to see the ‘bigger picture’ in a family’s story and use a support toolkit that is relationally sensitive, tailor-made, flexible and holistic. As evidenced by the parents’ accounts in this study, this sets Fife Gingerbread apart from other agencies, and we recommend this strength is promoted when applying for funding.
- 6.5 Workers’ creativity and ability to innovate in the design and management of support interventions has led to a broad and diverse range of activities for families to choose from. This enables a variety of family vulnerabilities and capabilities to be considered and has led to the high level of satisfaction expressed by the families participating in this study. We recommend workers continue to seek partnerships and build relationships with other organisations who provide venues and activities to enable this innovation to continue.

Parents views on how the service could be improved

- 6.6 When asked to share with us any issues or make suggestions for improvement in the Early Years service, 5 of the 15 parents interviewed could not think of any improvements – indeed, many simply stated that the service should continue as it is. The remainder of the parents told us about some areas centred on the themes of communication, the composition and location of groups, and worker/buddy coverage and availability.
- 6.7 On communication, one Mum told us of her previous worker having left Fife Gingerbread, but no one told her of this until several weeks had passed without any support. She suggested that advance warning of a staff member leaving would be appreciated. Another Mum was critical of the fact that volunteer’s phone numbers cannot be shared and would like a way to get around communicating last minute changes to availability for activities.

- 6.8 On groups, three of the Mums were critical of the recent change in the age limit of mothers in one of the groups to under 25s only. One Mum explained how this had affected her:

I made a really good mum friend at one of the groups, she's a bit older than me so now she can't come to the same group as me. I think it's to do with funding though. Now I am in a group with mums I don't know, it takes me a long time to get to know and feel comfortable with people. I don't know if I'll go again as it's out of my comfort zone (interview).

- 6.9 Another Mum articulated her sentiments on this issue, telling us that it should be the children's ages, rather than the mothers', which should determine the criteria for the group:

The age restrictions for mums in the groups, it should be about the kids' ages, that's more important. If kids are the same age, then they play better together. The age of the mums doesn't really matter..it doesn't matter whether you're a 16-year-old mum, or a 30 year old mum, you're still doing the same job at the end of the day. (interview)

- 6.10 It was noted by several parents that the location of some of the groups was a problem in terms of transport, and affected how many other parents turned up. One Mum remarked: "The Thursday playgroup - often I'm the only one who turns up. Not many people to come along in the Levenmouth area", with another Mum saying that the Thursday group is hard to get to because it is a 15-minute walk from the bus stop, and raining days tend to deter attendance. A Dad also commented on the low turn-outs for groups, noting high levels of attrition.

- 6.11 Turning to the final issue, perceptions of worker or volunteer non-availability were cited by two of the parents. One Mum appeared to rely heavily on her volunteer for moral support, telling us,

The buddy system. That's the only criticism of FG that I have. I was given a buddy to go swimming with, but now that's all stopped completely because the lady has left. Now I can't go. (interview)

- 6.12 One of the Dads identified too few male workers:

My worker used to come every 2 weeks, but this has changed over time. He can see how I have come on as a parent, so he comes out less and less. I don't blame him given how much of Fife he has to cover. (interview)

- 6.13 This Dad went on to suggest "I think they could get more men to cover Fife. It is a lot - would be great to get more workers to cover Fife". Frequency of visits or contact also arose as an issue with another Dad and one of the Mums, who told us that more frequent contact in the crucial first few weeks of the programme would be better.

Risks

- 6.14 We identified a few areas where the goals of the Early Years programme may be undermined by some interpersonal challenges that families face, as well as issues of mental health underfunding that exist beyond the remit of Fife Gingerbread at a societal level.

- 6.15 The evidence of some parents being over attached to their worker suggests that even a small degree of staff turnover poses risks to service outcomes that depend on parents' bond with and trust in their worker. We recommend that Fife Gingerbread supports workers in setting expectations with parents early on around the degree to which one worker can provide the family with support long term.
- 6.15 There was some evidence of over-dependency on the service over the long term, uncovered when the parents we interviewed told us about their future plans. We recommend that Fife Gingerbread reflect on this and consider to what extent this meets with the programme's goals of empowerment, progression, and independence for the families, as well as how this impacts on families in need who are still on the waiting list. We recommend further development of managing endings and exits for families using the Early Years service. This is not to suggest that support should be ended more quickly – but rather attention given to how support provision can be tapered off, and parents' expectations managed.
- 6.16 Given that the parents in this study frequently made connections between their mental ill-health and their social isolation, and that several parents had been re-referred to Fife Gingerbread after a relapse in mental wellbeing, we feel it is important that consideration is given to the limitations of its group activities as a way to tackle social isolation. Very few of the parents we spoke to had made meaningful friendships through the groups provided by Fife Gingerbread, pointing to a potential cliff edge in social connections in the future once families leave the service. Moreover, there are intractable issues such as living in a remote area with poor travel connections, cuts to community services and poor housing that make being engaged in a social network, and therefore staying in good mental health, very difficult over the long term.
- 6.17 On a more fundamental level relating to how Fife Gingerbread can truly provide a holistic approach to support, we believe that an inadequate level of public mental health support is putting an enormous strain on Fife Gingerbread workers to act as de facto counsellors, and that providing short term solutions to parents' mental health represents a sticking plaster over a bigger problem. This is clearly a much wider societal and structural issue, and is deeply connected to an ever-eroding welfare state and public sector. Fife Gingerbread's ongoing work with partners to push for social and political change is incredibly important and should continue to be valued.

Opportunities

- 6.18 The strengths and room for improvement identified in this study have presented some key opportunities which would put enable Fife Gingerbread to adapt to the increase in families needing support in the future and to reinforce its offering of bringing better todays and brighter tomorrows:
- A recruitment drive targeting male Early Years workers, volunteers or buddies would enable more lone fathers across Fife to be supported. Alternative routes to expanding services for Dad could include a mapping of demand, mapping other services working locally with Dads, and developing networks with local partners to enhance the support offer.
 - Developing the employability and work outcomes of the Early Years Service, as secure and meaningful employment was a priority area for Dads in the short term, and for most

of the Mums for longer term goals. Making stronger links or pathways into other parts of Fife Gingerbread that can support this, especially for Mums, should be considered.

- Develop additional ways of coaching parents in the soft skills and confidence needed to meet and connect more deeply with other parents, enabling them to build longer term relationships and improve progress in the 'Friends and Communities' Outcome Star.
- As identified by workers during the second workshop, there is an opportunity to make better use of the Outcome Star for managing parents' expectations around support input and outcomes, and for setting longer term goals.
- Overall, there is evidence of good data capture for individual families, and workers were very positive about the Outcome Star tool. However, improvements in data capture for the project overall could help to identify trends in referrals, to plan and target resources and activities appropriately, and to manage case closures. This data would capture, for example, demographic details of who is on the waiting list, such as ethnicity, gender, disability status etc., the composition of families who have completed their journey and are exiting the service, and also details of 'churn' including movement through the system and families who return to the service.
- In the workshop we noted there was some ambiguity and confusion amongst workers around when and how to talk to families about completing their programme of support. Further training and support for workers in this area could help to mitigate the overdependency discussed in sections 4.18, 5.16, and 6.16, and free up time and resources to help a greater number of parents in Fife.

Success case studies

6.16 We end the report with three case studies. Each demonstrates the important contribution that Fife Gingerbread is making to the lives of families living in across Fife. This small piece of research has shown the big impact Fife Gingerbread Early Years Team is making to families lives across Fife. This cases are testimony to the hard work and commitment that is being given to this work by staff. Given the value of the service – both in the numbers of families support and the approach, ensuring the long term sustainability of the project is vital.

Fiona

Fiona is a lone mother of one and has been working with Fife Gingerbread for 8 months. She had been referred by social services after she split with her partner and became worried about her daughter's safety in her father's company. Fiona was socially isolated and lacked confidence as a result of previous abusive relationships. At their first meeting, Fiona and her worker sat down together to plan what she wanted going forward. Although Fiona's initial priorities were her child's wellbeing, she realised she also needed support with her own mental health and forming social connections. Fiona is now engaged in a range of family trips and fun activities with her daughter, and has a buddy, to complement the once or twice a week visit from her worker.

Fiona told us she tends to be guarded and doesn't like to be a burden, but her worker has made her feel confident and trusting to open up about her problems.

“It’s like a breath of fresh air”, she told us, “I feel heard and I’m starting to find me, to find my voice again”. As a result of the group activities and one-to-one advice provided, Fiona has been able to access help from other agencies, and has gained a new self-confidence to form friendships with other Mums. Longer term, Fiona wants to continue with getting her home life stable, and then embarking on a college counselling course. She told us “Thanks to FG, I now feel positive about the future”.

Martin

Martin is a single Dad of one, with a background of periods in care and being homeless. Martin had worked full time before having to leave employment when he was assigned full time care of his son. Although Martin told us about his strong sibling and friend relationships, he felt he needed additional family support from FG, in particular in improving his parenting. Martin told us one of his key reasons for accepting the help of FG was so that he could “better” himself in terms of his employability and mental health, seeing the latter as crucial to supporting his son’s emotions and learning. With the help of his worker, Martin has engaged in Mellow Dads groups and with an employment officer. He has also had financial advice from FG, and has been supported in conversations with his son’s school. When we asked how his life has been changed by the EY programme, he told us “I’m more relaxed, I am more patient, and more confident”. Although some of his problems are beyond the help of FG (for example, the family lives a distance from his son’s school), he feels that his improved confidence gained from being pushed out of his comfort zone by his worker has addressed his previous feelings that he was “failing” as a Dad. Martin told us he appreciates how “FG will help you with anything”, and feels he can always fall back on FG for support as he progresses towards his goals of finding a new job and moving house.

Kate

Kate is a lone mother of one, who was referred to FG by social services when the effects of her psychiatric medication impacted her confidence in her parenting abilities. “I was suicidal and wanted to keep my son safe”, she told us. Kate is extremely attached to her worker, seeing her weekly and having phone calls several times a week. Kate felt that her worker was integral to her engagement in the programme, telling us “She’s the only one I trust and feel I can speak to”, citing a lack of empathy and listening skills from her friends and family. When Kate and her worker planned her support, Kate asked for help with the Outcome Star categories of her son’s health and emotions; the family routine; her son’s learning; and home and money. Kate has since embraced the family groups and trips provided by FG, and reported a great deal of improvement in both hers and her son’s self-confidence and happiness, as well as in the family routine and home finances. She told us that her worker is “always contactable, always listens to everything I need and get things done for me”, providing additional doses of humour to lift Kate’s spirits. The only thing Kate could think of that could be improved is a more reliable provision of a regular “buddy”; she lamented the

departure of her volunteer buddy because she felt unable to pursue some of the group activities without her.

Appendix A: Research Tools

6.17 The following research tools were used to facilitate the data collection:

- Information leaflet
- Interview schedule
- Survey

6.18 Copies are provided below.



**Research on the impact of Fife Gingerbread Early Years Service
Information for families taking part in the study**

Fife Gingerbread have asked Emma Davidson and Lisa Howard to undertake an evaluation of their Early Years services. Emma and Lisa are two researchers currently working mostly with Edinburgh University and both with professional experience of family research and community work.

This leaflet explains what the research will involve and what to do if you would like to take part.

What are the interviews about?

The evaluation will look at what Fife Gingerbread does and the differences that it makes for the families that it supports. The evaluation will be used to learn about the bits of Fife Gingerbread that work well and the things that could be improved. To answer these questions, we would like to speak to adult family members supported by the project.

What will happen in the interview?

An interview will take about an hour, and we hope you will enjoy sharing your experiences with us. We will use some activities to make sure the interview is interesting for you. The time and place will be arranged through your project worker from Fife Gingerbread.

The interview will focus on what it has been like for you to get support from Fife Gingerbread. We might talk a bit about the reasons that you get support, but you do not need to tell us anything that you don't want to tell us.

Why have I been asked to take part?

You have received this information because you are receiving support from Fife Gingerbread. We are aiming to talk to families with a range of different views and experiences.

Do I have to talk Emma or Lisa?

No – it is your choice. No one will mind if you don't want to. In the interview, you do not have to answer any questions if you don't want to, and you may stop the interview at any time.

What will happen to my answers?

If you agree, we would like to record the discussion. All of our recordings and notes will be stored securely and only members of the research team will have access to the information you provide. Everything you say will be kept private and confidential. The only circumstances where we will pass on any information you provide is if we are concerned that you or someone else you know is at risk of harm. If we were going to do this, we would talk to you about it first.

What you tell Emma and Lisa will be used in these reports, but it will be written in a way that tries to make sure that no one knows that it is about you or that you said it. We will use a fake name and change bits of what you say so others will not be able to identify you.

Who is doing the project?

The researchers completing the project are Emma Davidson and Lisa Howard. Emma works at Edinburgh University and has done other research evaluating early years project. She is a big fan of Bookbug and has conducted research on public libraries. Lisa is also a researcher at the University. Her work is on parenting. The research is funded by Fife Gingerbread and has been approved by the University's Ethics Committee

Further information

For more information about this evaluation, you can speak to your Project Worker or email one of us at:
Emma: e.c.davidson@ed.ac.uk or Lisa: lisa.howard@ed.ac.uk

THANK YOU!

WE LOOK FORWARD TO MEETING YOU SOON

FIFE GINGERBREAD: Parent / carer interviews Topic Guide

Brief for Interviewers

Explain that we have made contact on the basis of the family's earlier consent to take part in the research.

Briefly outline scope and purpose of the research – i.e. to investigate on behalf of Fife Gingerbread more about their views on the kinds of help and support provided and what it has been like for you and your family.

Go over information leaflet, especially this part:

"Emma or Lisa will ask about your experiences and views of the Fife Gingerbread service. They might talk a bit about the reasons that you get support but you do not need to tell us anything that you don't want to tell us" ..." Everything you say will be kept private and confidential. The only circumstances where we will pass on any information you provide is if we are concerned that you or someone else you know is at risk of harm. If we were going to do this, we would talk to you about it first."

Stress that the focus is on the experience of the family and the individuals within. The questions are designed to be as positive as possible for families that may be under stress. The open-ended approach to most questions is aimed at eliciting detail from the participants rather than pre-supposing existing categories/research expectations.

The 0-10 scale has 0 as the lowest and 10 as the highest rating.

Most of the outlined questions can be supported by asking appropriate 'how', 'where', 'when', 'what' and 'who' questions in order to identify detail. 'Why' could also be appropriate, though more likely to be speculative and therefore less helpful.

Questions for parents and carers

Icebreaker – To help tell me learn a little about you and your family, could you help me create a doodle / current picture of your family and its relationships?

Using a flipchart, give a pen to the parent and ask them to draw with you a rough picture of the people in their family (represented by stickmen). Then ask them to draw stickmen (for individuals) or several stickmen/blobs to represent important groups who the family comes into contact with regularly, including support workers, counsellors, social workers, children's school and teachers, friends, GPs, etc.

Explain we are going to come back to this diagram later

B. Referral to the project and previous interventions

1. Are you able to tell me about how you and your family came to be referred to Fife Gingerbread? [try and get their journey – did you know who Fife Gingerbread were? who did they meet first, what was discussed]
2. How well was it explained how Fife Gingerbread could help you?
3. How did you feel about being referred to Fife Gingerbread? Did you have any concerns/fears?
4. What do you think would have happened if you hadn't agreed to the referral?
5. On a scale of 0-10 (0 none at all, 10 completely) how much choice do you think you had over the referral?

C. Relationship with the Project and the Development of the Support Plan

1. Could you describe how Fife Gingerbread works with you?
2. Do you have a special Project Worker who comes to see you and other members of your family?
3. Does the Project Worker work mainly with you or does he/she also work separately with other family members?
4. How often have you been seeing your Project worker(s)? Roughly how much time do they spend with your family each week? How has that changed over time?

D. Support Offered and the Impact of Fife Gingerbread

1. Who has been involved in deciding what support would be useful to you and your family (in drawing up initial support plan, and subsequently)?
2. What has Fife Gingerbread done to help you and the other members of your family? Use the cuts outs to ask about:
 - (a) whether this is being/has been provided, and
 - (c) which support is most important (use squares to help (including some blank ones!) – i.e. put in order / piles). Discuss why
 - (d) For each form of support **not provided**, ask whether this has been offered/whether the respondent would welcome such an offer
3. On a scale of 0-10, how well have people listened to your opinions in deciding what kinds of help you needed? Can you give me an example?

4. In general, how helpful are you finding the support offered by the project? - 0 (not at all helpful)-10 (very helpful)

5. Have you found anything unhelpful?
6. Are there issues you have worked on with your Project Worker which have been difficult?
7. How would you describe your relationship with your project worker on a scale of 1 – 10 (1 = awful 10 = brilliant). Tell me why?
8. On a scale of 0-10 how confident are you that the Project Worker(s) will be able to help you make a lasting improvement in your life? Tell me why?

E. Relationships with agencies since project intervention

Go back to the FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS DIAGRAM.

1. Which of these relationships have come about since you were referred to Fife Gingerbread? E.g. organisations, groups or agencies, new friends or community connections?
2. How would you say each relationship on this diagram has changed since before you were referred to Gingerbread? Which have got better, or worse?

F. Outcomes and Future Plans

1. What three words would you use to describe how your life has changed since being in contact with Fife Gingerbread?
2. From 0-10, where 0 is useless and 10 is couldn't be better, how would you rate Fife Gingerbread?
3. Do you think the service could be improved at all? How, if so? Is there anything else that I should have asked you, or that you would like to add?
4. Overall, how does Fife Gingerbread compare to other services that you have used? [probe on ethos, feelings of safety, feeling welcome, stigma, accessibility, sense of community, building capacity, resilience]
5. What would you like to happen next?
6. How do you think Fife Gingerbread can help you to achieve this?
7. What do other agencies need to do to help you achieve this?
8. What do you think you and your family need to do to achieve this?

Probes – Forms of Support Offered by the Project (Question D3)

Cut out the squares below.

My children's health	How I feel
My children's emotions	Keeping my children safe
Friends and community	My children's learning
Work	My children's behaviour
Home and money	Our family routine

SURVEY

Evaluation of Fife Gingerbread Early Years Service

We are currently undertaking an evaluation of Fife Gingerbread's Early Years Service. The aim of the evaluation is to find out how well the Early Years service is working and the different ways it has impacted on families in Fife.

The more families that share their views and experiences, the better able Fife Gingerbread is to deliver the services most needed.

This survey will take around 5 minutes to complete. All your comments will be completely anonymous and all surveys will be entered into a prize draw for a £40 shopping voucher.

If you have any questions about this survey, or the evaluation, please call XX

Awareness of the Early Years Service

Which Gingerbread service are you currently working with?

When did you start working with Fife Gingerbread (month and year)

What was the main reason for seeking help from Fife Gingerbread? For example, you may have been having trouble with your child's behaviour at school, or difficulty with housing or family life.

Roughly how long did you wait to see the Project Worker?

Less than 2 weeks

2 to 4 weeks

1 to 2 months

More than 2 months

I didn't have to wait

How did you find out about the service offered by Fife Gingerbread in the first place?

A healthcare worker (e.g. GP or health visitor) referred me

A social worker referred me

I read some information about it (e.g. in a leaflet)

I can't remember

Other (please specify)

How long have you had a project worker?

Less than 1 month

1-2 months

3-6 months

7 months – 1 years

Over 1 year

How often does the project worker visit / contact you?

More than once a week

Once a week

Fortnightly

Monthly

Other

Who decided how often the project worker would visit you?

Does your project workers visit enough?

How do you contact your project worker?

Text / whatsapp

Phone

In person

other

Have you always been able to contact your project worker when you have needed to?

Yes

No

Unsure

Where do you usually see the Project Worker?

At home

At Fife Gingerbread Office

Other (please specify)

When you were referred to Fife Gingerbread, to what extent did you want help with each of the following? (Mark the most relevant boxes)

(outcome star categories)

	A lot	A little	Somewhat	Not at all
My children's health				
How I feel				
My children's emotions				
Keeping my children safe				
Friends and community				
My children's learning				
My children's behaviour				
Our family routine				
Home and money				

To what extent would you say Fife Gingerbread has been able to help you? (Mark the most relevant boxes)

	A lot	A little	Somewhat	Not at all
My children's health				
How I feel				
My children's emotions				
Keeping my children safe				
Friends and community				
My children's learning				
My children's behaviour				
Our family routine				
Home and money				
Work				

Is there any additional help you would have liked / like from Fife Gingerbread?

Are you and your family receiving any other help from other agencies at the moment? If so, please write down which ones in the box below.

Has Fife Gingerbread supported you in accessing other services? If so, please describe how.

Is there anything about the support you've received from the Family Support Worker at Fife Gingerbread that is different from other services you have received? If so, please describe briefly in the box below.

How do you feel when you are with your project worker? (1-10) [interaction with worker]

Understood

Welcome

Safe

Relaxed

Able to be myself

Able to talk about difficult things

What one or two things have worked really well in terms of the support you've received from the Fife Gingerbread?

What one or two things could be better?

Overall, what positive changes have you noticed since you have been working with Fife Gingerbread?

What one thing are you most proud of in that time?

Where would you have gone to for help had the Fife Gingerbread not been able to support you?

A family member

A friend

My GP

The health visitor

Teacher

No-one

Other

Overall, how satisfied are you with Fife Gingerbread services?

Very satisfied

Satisfied

Neither satisfied or dissatisfied

Dissatisfied

Very dissatisfied

ABOUT YOU

Are you:

Male

Female

Other

How many children do you have?

How many children under 5?

How old are you?

Area

What are the parenting arrangements for your child / children?

Two adults parenting at home

I have sole responsibility for my child / children

I have joint responsibility for my child / children

Other

What is your ethnic origin? [need to review categories]

English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British Irish

Gypsy or Irish Traveller

Any other White background

White and Black Caribbean

White and Black African

White and Asian

Any other Mixed / Multiple ethnic background

Indian

Pakistani

Bangladeshi

Chinese

Any other Asian background

African

Caribbean

Any other Black / African / Caribbean background, please describe

Any other ethnic group, please describe:

To be entered into the prize draw for shopping vouchers, please provide your details below

If you would be willing to talk to researchers further about your responses, please provide your name and telephone number. This will not be shared with any one else.