

## No such thing as a typical week...

You know how you can rate an organisation just by what you have seen of the work they do on social media and based on some minimal contact you have with them? You think you understand the depth of the work they do and then you start to work for them and realise you have really had no clue. That's where I was with Children Heard and Seen until July 2020. I thought that CHaS did brilliant work, but I was only seeing the tip of the iceberg and that iceberg is huge.

Let me give some context. Children Heard and Seen was formed a little over six years ago with the specific purpose of supporting children with a parent in prison and their families and reducing intergenerational offending. There is an equivalent of 4.5 full time staff employed by the charity and it also provides placements for student social workers. Volunteers are crucial in providing mentoring, support in groups and undertake identification work but that is it. There are not hundreds, even tens of staff yet since lockdown CHaS has been working nationally and currently supports over 200 children and their families.

I want to try to give you an idea of the breadth of the work CHaS is involved in but let me be clear, there is no such thing as a typical week. I asked everyone to give me their diary for so I could share with you and provide a small insight into what this little charity does. I am going to try to do it justice so let's begin.

There are core activities that happen weekly, 121 sessions with children, provided by qualified staff who support the children in exploring their feelings about having a parent in prison. There is a workbook that covers things like arrest, sentence, visiting that helps the children to think about their experience, to identify their feelings. To develop coping strategies and healthy ways of managing their feelings. Support for children who have a parent who is due to be sentenced and for those who have a parent due for release. Group work sessions for different age groups, including Little Inventors where children focused on how to make lockdown safer and more fun, CHASE, (Children Heard and Seen Everywhere) for primary school children to have a creative space and Youth Advocates for older children. Peer led support groups for parents/carers. Oh, the groups, they are run in the evenings and at weekends too, this isn't nine-to-five work.

Any activities that are planned require huge levels of organisation as every child is sent everything they need in advance. Meaning every item is purchased and individual packs made up and posted out to arrive in time for group or 121 sessions. No child is excluded because the costs of materials would be too high for a family, everyone is included. Last week for CHASE kits contained materials for cookie boxes, Easter gardens, clothes peg dragonflies, spy masks, invisible ink, bubble painting, origami animals, modelling clay aliens, cress egg heads and Easter hats.

Then there is Reading Pals, discussions with referral agencies, meeting new referrals, liaison with local police, volunteer supervision, liaison with COPE regarding young people being involved in the EU Childs Rights Strategy, collating poems for a new poetry book.

Donated laptops being wiped and set up for children so they can take part in online activities, then distributing them. Student supervision, discussions with local media regarding a radio interview, CHaS receives between three and five requests for media interviews and requests from PhD students and broader academia for access to children and families each week. They have to be considered on a case by case basis and many have to be rejected on the basis involvement will create very little change for the children or families. At times I can feel that, particularly academics, treat children and families like research fodder expecting them to talk to a stranger about some of their most difficult experiences. Whilst this may support the academic in attaining their PhD, it changes nothing for the families.

A new student placement was also being organised as was shadowing for staff from Families First. A meeting with a student on placement with Families Outside who wanted to learn more about the CHaS online provision and how it was implemented also took place. Communication with schools to discuss how in school support can be facilitated online in response to lockdown. Reports were written for funders and bids written to try to ensure the sustainability of CHaS. Meetings with other organisations to explore opportunities for joint working, an online presentation to the WI to let them know what we do and how they may be able to support us. Staff training to ensure the team are up to date with safeguarding. Training of volunteers prior to their engaging with children and families. Personal thank you letters to anyone who has donated to CHaS, numerous social media posts to keep families up to date with the work we are doing, alongside updating the website, you tube channel and Instagram.

Work around identifying children with a parent in prison is like the labours of Sisyphus. Whilst it remains that there is no statutory recognition of children with a parent in prison a great deal of time is being taken up contacting schools, youth clubs, alternative school provision to raise awareness of CHaS and the support that can be offered to children and families. You would also think that these organisations would be grateful for the information and sometimes they are but all too often, the response is something along the lines of, 'We don't have children like that in our school.' There is also the admin that goes along with organising, recruiting, training and placing volunteers and all the other admin that is necessary to keep the charity organised, keeping records up to date, spreadsheets and databases maintained. There is follow up from the Roundtable Event that took place in December 2020 and surveys were sent out asking the children what kind of activities they would like.

Last week also included CHaS giving evidence to the Joint Committee on Human Rights, part of the preparation for that included a meeting with Birth Companions and working with families and children to record their thoughts. There was also planning for a focus group with the Centre for Social Justice and supporting mothers who attended the MOJ focus group for family and significant others.

Research tells us maintaining positive family relationships reduces reoffending by 36% and CHaS supports children and families past the point of release and can offer specific support to families in the first crucial weeks when a loved one returns to the family home.

Feedback from families following this support has been that without it the family would have broken up with the potential for increasing the risk of reoffending. The total estimated economic and social cost of reoffending is £18.1 billion, it would appear to be common sense to financially support an organisation that can have positive impacts on these outcomes? Furthermore, the cost of intergenerational offending is £1.5 billion with 65% of boys with a parent in prison going on to offend. Would you care to hazard a guess at how many of the over 600 children CHaS has supported who have committed an offence that we know about? Stop guessing, I'll tell you, ONE, a significant drop from 65% wouldn't you agree? So, if you are reading this and you have any influence or know someone who does would you mind giving some consideration to the information above.

Children with a parent in prison and their families are often talked about as being 'hard to reach', my feeling is that children and families are hard to reach because, despite the latest estimate being 312,000 children experiencing parental imprisonment in England and Wales each year there is still no statutory mechanism for identifying who or where they are. Being invisible will make you hard to reach.

