



The Play Café is now approaching its second birthday and it is safe to say that it has had a tremendous impact in our community for families with young children.

It began as a response to the isolation suffered by young families during the pandemic when we realised that both parents and children needed a safe space to connect with others. Parents and carers were keen for the opportunity to share experiences of parenthood and just to socialise with others in the same situation. The babies and toddlers needed to interact with others and in some cases learn how to play & share in a lively, child-friendly environment. Our vision was to provide a first-class facility with top quality toys but to offer it at no cost to those attending, so that there were no barriers to entry – the Play Café is here for everyone who needs it, no matter their personal circumstances. With the cost of living crisis hitting some families hard, some would be unable to afford an entry fee and the stigma of being unable to pay is taken away – everyone is equal.

The Play Café operates every Tuesday morning during Term Time with a capacity of 40 children and their parents and carers. Word has spread and each session is full - parents and carers regularly have to be turned away when we reach capacity. The session is run by 6-8 volunteers each week on a rota, and they cover a number of roles: refreshments; talking to parents & carers; running crafts & activities (themed around the story for the week); and playing with the children and babies. All our volunteers are DBS checked and as you would expect, safeguarding is paramount.

The Play Café is a venture supported by the whole church – as you can see, the church is transformed after morning services every Sunday by volunteers from the congregation into the perfect playground for little ones. This is quite a big operation as 120



chairs need to be moved aside and the play mats, soft play equipment, toys, dressing-up clothes, craft tables and quiet space for babies all laid out ready for the Tuesday morning sessions. In the future, dependent on when we can recruit more volunteers – and a full-time Children’s & Families Worker - we are hoping to add another session on Monday mornings to meet the need that we can see in our community.



The families attending vary from week to week and we connect with them via Facebook to keep them updated on ‘what’s happening’ at the sessions and letting them know about other child-focused events run by St Mary’s such as Messy Church. Talking to the parents and carers each week, the Play Café appeals to a great cross-section of our community. Parents bring along their children, but also primary carers such as grandparents and professional child carers. We recognise that Grandparents are playing an increasing role in childcare enabling the parents to resume full-time work, and they are grateful for the opportunity to access great child play facilities. We have also seen an increase in the number of refugee families attending with families from Ukraine, Poland and Russia. These families welcome the chance to integrate further into the community they find themselves in and have said how much they appreciate the warm welcome they receive.



The mats and play equipment is so well used that we are now considering how we will replace them over time, particularly if we begin a second session as the ‘wear & tear’ will increase.

We are very grateful that the North West Chilterns Community Board gave us the initial grant which enabled us to set up the Play Café. David appreciates the opportunity to talk to you today and is happy to answer your questions.

Revd David Williams, Rector, St Mary's

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