

**The CHEXS ‘whole family’ approach to  
engaging with children, young people,  
parents, carers and their families in the  
community. A Review**

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## 1 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, thank you to all the young people and parents who generously shared their time and their stories as part of this review. The first-hand accounts of their experiences of working with CHEXS and the journeys that they took, have enabled the review to gain a deep understanding as to how and why CHEXS works in practice.

Thank you also to the CHEXS staff team and Trustees for creating a positive opportunity and for their warm and friendly welcome. Also, to the staff across the schools I visited for giving me their time and to those community stakeholders who provided valuable insights, perspectives and textual context to CHEXS work in the Waltham Cross, Cheshunt and surrounding localities. Collectively this input has allowed for a deeper and more holistic review.

## 2 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Background:

- This independent review was commissioned by CHEXS to understand and document the charities approach in engaging with children, young people, parents/carers, and their families.

### Methodology:

- Some 48 young people, parents/carers, school staff, CHEXS staff and trustees, and local community stakeholders agreed to participate. A Rapid Appraisal Approach was used to capture the experiences, views and ideas to generate authentic insights into understanding and formalizing the distinct CHEXS 'whole family' approach.

## Findings:

- Young people viewed CHEXS intervention as a positive experience. This included help with relationships in and out of school, behaviour, increased confidence, schoolwork and practical achievements.
- The CHEXS 'whole family' approach was praised by parents and carers. The emotional and practical help they received was highlighted.
- School staff considered the informal, steps method and practical approach produced positive outcomes for children and students.
- Trustees viewed CHEXS as offering a range of interventions under the 'whole family' umbrella including; coaching, mentoring; early intervention, family support work, group activities and initiatives, community activities and individual face-to-face work.
- Community stakeholders were clear that CHEXS had a broad family orientated approach that promoted community acceptance and resilience.
- CHEXS staff saw partnership working, inclusivity, and working with children, young people and their parents and carers as offering a multi-faceted 'whole family' based approach.

## Conclusion:

- CHEXS is a unique community based organisation offering a 'whole family approach.
- CHEXS builds positive and trusting relationships with children, young people and their families, key to how families experienced its programme and activities.
- CHEXS offers an informal, open and face-to-face approach that supports children and their families in growing their capabilities, to learn, to change, to nurture relationships both within their families and beyond, to feel part of the community, and importantly aim for better more fulfilled lives.
- CHEXS success is due to its committed and passionate staff with their inclusive 'whole family' approach that inspires hope and futures for every child, young person and their families they engage with.
- CHEXS has a very strong case for approaching Hertfordshire County Council and other statutory agencies regarding closer partnership collaboration perhaps as an initial pilot project funded and evaluated by one of these agencies.

## 3 AIMS OF THE REVIEW

This independent review was commissioned by CHEXS to understand and document the charities 'whole family' approach in engaging with children, young people, parents/carers, and their families, and secondly, to consider how their approach might further enhance CHEXS's work, their partnerships with key stakeholders, other organisations, and current and potential funders.

## 4 FINDINGS

### 4.1 Young People's Voices

*"They let me talk and listen...its different...I learn new things...building things...I learn about what I am doing...makes me think"*  
(Young Person)

Two groups of young people were interviewed at one of the schools that works with CHEXS. Their comments about their involvement with CHEXS were all positive and indeed helped by the view that the CHEXS staff they came into contact with were seen as being both a part of the school but somehow different!

The students all commented on the impact CHEXS had on them which ranged from helping them both in and out of school with relationships, including friendships within their peer groups, giving them more confidence than they had previously, for example, schoolwork, helping with tackling issues relating to feeling anxious and improving their ability to socialise better with their peers. The

practical aspects they enjoyed, for example, the gardening and painting within the school grounds, gave those involved a sense of achievement and a legacy for everyone to see what they had achieved. It also was viewed as giving them new experiences and skills.

The CHEXS 'whole family' approach working with young people could be seen from their view as allowing them both space and time outside of their usual formal classroom/school environment, that CHEXS staff were, because they are outside of this formal 'teaching' role, could be less formal, more easily approachable, and were there to listen and support, all very similar to a 'youth work' setting, with its 'social educational' and relationship building approach.

## **4.2 Parents/Carers Feed Back**

*"CHEXS saved my life"*

(Parent)

The parents gave positive feedback to their involvement with CHEXS. Whether it was a parent experiencing financial difficulties, recovering from domestic violence, receiving food parcels or needing emotional support following a mental health issue all recounted stories of CHEXS staff providing a range of supportive measures that helped them tackle these challenges they were, or are still facing. All commented that they felt able to contact CHEXS at any time and in the future if they needed further support for themselves or one of their children, or both, even if they no longer had regular contact with a member of the CHEXS staff team.

The following comments highlighted CHEXS 'inclusive' approach; *"...she (CHEXS staff member) went above and beyond to help me"; "She would chat to me whenever I asked"; " She listened to me, offered me positivity and encouragement"; "...always felt I could ask a question...no point did I ever feel a failure".*

From the parents experience, CHEXS intervention into theirs and their children's lives was permeated by the approachable, understanding, knowledgeable and informality of the CHEXS 'whole family' approach with them. Whilst the 'whole family' approach parents considered CHEXS used helped them begin to understand, for example, their child's behaviour, in school and/or at home, or both; *"whole team understood, always there if needed"; "made you feel she had a lot of time for me...about all of us".*

The 'whole family' approach adopted by CHEXS in working with parents, carers and their children was recognised and seemingly understood by parents and carers interviewed. That there was an awareness that was articulated in the interviews that gaining insight into their child's behaviour at school might be linked to their family situation and its many variables of issues and challenges.

## **4.3 School Staff's Views**

*"CHEXS come in many different ways"*

(Teacher)

*"We see a difference in the children we refer to CHEXS"*

(Teacher)

Interviews with school staff whilst primarily focused on the CHEXS 'whole family' approach in working with their children/students, also provided a contextual element to this with references to the referral process, schools relationship with CHEXS, their assessment and impact of the activities CHEXS undertook with their children/students, feedback from CHEXS, and future arrangements with CHEXS.

## **The CHEXS 'Whole Family' Approach**

The question as to what approach CHEXS uses when engaging with the children from primary schools and students from Year 7 upwards at the secondary schools was encapsulated by the following examples; *"It's a nurturing students approach"; "A steps method"; "Students are quickly*

*put at ease"; "Looking forward...aspirational"; "Being honest with students...allows the students to think"; "They use first name terms to build relationships".*

However schools were not really clear when asked if there was a particular CHEXS approach or methodology they could identify apart from *"Early intervention"* being mentioned in school feedback on a number of occasions.

In the absence of any 'theoretical' approach school staff used terms such as *"its informal...non-threatening...works alongside students"; "Being practical"*, or that the community initiatives such in school gardening projects, inter-generational work with students from Year 7 upwards coming to primary schools and working on a group activity with younger children created opportunities for them to think about their, for example, their behaviour at school and at home.

## **Referrals**

There was an element of school staff moving away from simply referring children/students who were seen as the 'naughty ones' and/or those asking to become involved with CHEXS because it was seen as a 'good thing' to be part of. As one member of school staff commented *"it was viewed as getting out of lessons and school"*. Instead making referrals to CHEXS now generally appeared to be in the best needs of the child/student and/or their parents/families irrespective of their, for example, behaviour. With children referred seen to have experienced *"adverse childhood experiences"*, *"low self-esteem"*, *"poor parenting"*, and having *"no boundaries at home"*. Many were viewed as needing one-to-one work.

Schools were saying they were referring younger children, Years 2 upwards, to CHEXS because of the needs of children in school and family, at home, circumstances that was impinging on the child's educational performance. Staff overall were reasonably clear as to the programmes that CHEXS offered and what the expected outcomes might be with a rider that these required monitoring, updating and/or responding to changing needs and demands within the schools for CHEXS intervention and support.

Meetings took place at schools with members of staff who were identified as the key contact in schools responsible for working with and liaising with CHEXS. However in discussing this issue across all the schools visited it was not always clear as to what the schools hoped would be achieved by a referral to CHEXS.

## **Relationship with CHEXS**

All the school staff interviewed expressed a similar view regarding working with CHEXS. Comments such as; *"...easy to establish working relationships with CHEXS"; "They are supportive to the school and are good value for money";* and *"We really appreciate the way they go about making the whole process welcoming, informal and get everyone on-side very quickly"* was typical. The openness in which CHEXS approached school staff was similarly highly appreciated by school staff. CHEXS has a good relationship with all the schools it works with. The information flow between both would appear to be regular and informative. Some minor criticism that school staff received too many emails which they felt was information that was not wholly relevant to them, with perhaps a need to 'streamline' what information gets sent to what schools? Some suggestion that occasionally the information received from CHEXS was additionally rather too detailed.

## **Assessment and Impact of the Activities**

Schools collectively full of praise for CHEXS intervention in their children's and students' lives and their parents and families with a general opinion that schools viewed CHEXS as providing, in the majority of cases, an early intervention into a child/young person's situation. Although a number of

school staff commented that it would appear that Hertfordshire County Council appeared not to fully recognise this.

Evidence from schools perspective on the impact of CHEXS intervention on their children/students was viewed in a number of ways; Individual stories of children demonstrating positive behaviour in school emerged, both the school based activities and those undertaken outside of the school were praised by school staff in offering outcomes for them that were visible. The practical aspects coupled with the mentoring were viewed as positive in building relationships that carried over into children/students school life.

More than one school felt that in a 'perfect' world where funding was available children/young people would benefit more if their contact with CHEXS staff and the activities was more frequent, for example, weekly, rather than spread out over a period of weeks or longer. Basically a wish for more of the same but more intensive.

School staff in both the primary and secondary schools were looking forward to a post-Covid situation when their children/students would be able to take part in activities across the schools, for example, students from Year 7 upwards visiting primary schools to engage with younger children was felt to be an invaluable service for all concerned.

### **Feedback and Follow Up**

Schools appreciated the comprehensive feedback they received from CHEXS on each child/student. Whilst some school staff admitted that due to their school workload demands, post-CHEXS intervention and support was not always followed up, for example, whether a student had remained in school and/or their behaviour had improved rather than been excluded or referred to an alternative education provision. Similarly schools were not always aware of a home situation post-CHEXS intervention.

Schools viewed CHEXS comprehensive information they received in preparation for OFSTED inspectors when they visited the school as a positive resource.

### **Future**

All the schools contacted said they would continue working with CHEXS including those that had been involved with CHEXS for over 10 years to more recent newcomers. However this was subject to future funding arrangements, for example, the recent media reports that the Department for Education's proposed change to cut-off dates for children to qualify for pupil premium funding which goes to schools will result in a reduction to school budgets and was felt to be unhelpful (Adams and Vinter, 2021).

## **4.4 Trustees Thoughts**

*"Allows young people to be who they are"*

(Trustee)

*"Empowering families"*

(Trustee)

There was a very clear response from Trustees as to what CHEXS approach was and its aim in working with children, young people, parent/carers and families. Comments such as; *"breaking the cycle"*; *"provide family support"*; *"confidence building... for example, speaking at a CHEXS AGM"*; *"make things better"*; *"improve life chances"*; *"early intervention"*; *"ways of looking at themselves"*; *"brings children and parents together"*; *"gain a full picture"*; *"give individual support and developing young people's potential"*, were typical.

How CHEXS engaged with the aforementioned produced a number of different approach's and ideas from the Trustees, which could be labelled in the following ways, including; coaching;

mentoring; early intervention; family support work; group activities and initiatives; community work/activities; and individual work.

The outcomes of engaging was felt to be fairly straightforward and evidenced, for example, by “case studies”; “evidence from the child themselves”; “evaluations undertaken”; “external verification by OFSTED”; and “its reflected in the schools”.

There was a trustee view that local statutory agencies did not properly understand nor really appreciate the work of CHEXS which operates in some of the most socio-economically deprived areas of the county of Hertfordshire, for example, Waltham Cross (Hertfordshire Community Solutions (2016, Herts Insight, 2017). This, it was said, affected the lack of funding CHEXS received from these statutory agencies, as one Trustee commented “we are making impact on limited cost without their help”.

#### 4.5 Community Stakeholders

*‘CHEXS...they are committed people...fantastic...helped a lot of kids, parents, families...’*  
(Community Stakeholder)

A group of local people/professionals not directly involved with CHEXS but aware of their activities and the services they provided gave an insight into the context of CHEXS work in the Waltham Cross, Cheshunt and surrounding localities and the needs of these communities.

Whilst none could name a particular approach that CHEXS specifically used in working with families all were clear that it had a broad family orientated approach that promoted community acceptance and resilience. This was seen as being crucial, as one of the interviewees stressed, given the changing demographics of the Waltham Cross area, for example, in terms of diversity “There’s a lot more BAME representation now”, and the recent drift of ‘newcomers’, “Middle-class professionals”, as one commented, across the wider surrounding Hertfordshire area with people moving out of London since the start of the Covid pandemic.

#### 4.6 Hearing from CHEXS Staff

*“We work in partnership with parents”*  
(CHEXS member of staff)

*“Build connections between the child and the teacher, school and the family”*  
(CHEXS member of staff)

Two sessions were held with the CHEXS two teams, one with the Children and Young People Team and the other with the Family Support Team. The aim of these sessions was to understand from CHEXS ‘frontline’ staff what they felt was distinctive about the ‘whole family’ approach when engaging with people.

This included their influences on their work, including personal narratives; how they articulated the way they ‘worked’ with children/young people and their parents/carers; and what outcomes they hoped or aimed for as a result of their intervention.

- 1. Influences on the way they worked came from several areas.** They included training they had received which was felt to have either reinforced existing knowledge or given them new knowledge and/or enhanced their knowledge and skills; home life experiences; personal experiences, for example, being a child or a parent themselves; getting married, divorced, or single, being a mother; and recovering from a debt situation. Previous work and life experiences with positive school/teacher experiences was important as well. A passion to help people, a vocation was also a clear influence.

- 2. In articulating what they did when engaging with children, young people, parents, carers and families produced a range of thoughts, feelings and suggestions.** This ranged from mentoring children and young people; helping them gain new experiences; building connections and mediating between children, young people, teacher, school and the family; confidence building and learning respect for others; listening, communicating, gaining trust; working in partnership with parents; encouraging and supporting parents; providing solutions; empowering parents to become independent, to 'break' cycles of negative behaviour; work with and collaborating with other professional partners, triage and Family First; offering parenting workshops; work together with a family; supporting parents/carers one to one and at meetings; referrals to other agencies.
- 3. Both teams viewed the outcomes or achievements of their work as a combination of metrics;** bringing people together; building better relationships; increased community engagement; inspiring people to be whatever they wish to be; breaking negative cycles/barriers; giving parents tools to cope with life changes; responsibility; improve health and wellbeing; awareness, for example, their talents and aspirations; increased confidence; improved parenting skills/family lives; new goals; and helping parents/carers listen to their children.

There was clear and general agreement that their work was essentially not to keep children and young people in school, keep children/young people from being 'looked after' by the local authority, nor keeping children/young people away from criminal behaviour. These were considered to be the statutory duties of other agencies although they were often partners in these agencies intervention with 'higher need' families.

## **5 CONCLUSION AND OBSERVATIONS**

*CHEXS utilises a unique model to build strong families that contribute to a thriving community. By working with the whole family, CHEXS helps parents or carers build strong, positive relationships and trust with their children. In turn, we work with children and young people through a variety of innovative projects designed to build self-esteem, team-work, problem-solving and tangible skills. These projects instil a sense of purpose, meaning and aspirations for the future. Our focus on resilience equips young people to face everyday challenges and achieve their potential for a better future with confidence.*

(CHEXS website, 2021)

### **5.1 Conclusion**

My view based on the evidence collected is that the CHEXS 'whole family' approach is rather more than being a distinct approach or methodology as it is fully embracing of a number of good practice approaches. What is most striking is the ethos, culture and the values behind its activities which are built on building positive and trusting relationships with children, young people and their families. This is key to how families experience CHEXS programme and activities and a unique selling point.

CHEXS work in practice, as viewed by its actors and beneficiaries, is multi-faceted, ranging from coaching and mentoring children and students, group activities, family work, one-to-one work, its change focused and is nurturing, coupled with practical aspects for children and young people, and crisis interventions such for example, paying gas and electric bills, supplying food during the COVID pandemic and accompanying parents to local housing departments.



The 'whole family' approach that CHEXS embodies has been advocated as good practice in improving the life chances of families at risk as far back as 2008 (Cabinet Office, 2008). It is also one of the driving principles of the national Troubled Families programme that has been running since 2012 and now relaunched by the government as Supporting Families in 2021 (UK Government, 2021).

Similarly CHEXS 'whole family' approach has within it what Williams calls a *"Restorative approach is an ethos and method centred on building and sustaining positive relationships, which is increasingly being adopted in family and children's services in the United Kingdom"* (2019).

It could be argued that it is equally influenced by Friedman's 'Results or Outcome Based Accountability' model, a model used to measure outcomes and provide a common language. The approach asks three performance measures. How much did we do? How well did we do it? And Is anyone better off? (2015). Similarly it also has an element of the now redundant 'community social work' model that it is community based and focused whilst also being individual and family located, equally it is also very pragmatic and could be said to encompass some elements of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) with its identifying certain problems and attempting to help solve them, focusing on current problems, and working with people aiming at solutions.

However CHEXS 'whole family' approach is not focused on working with families with a high level of need whereby statutory agencies would be expected to engage with. Nevertheless it does offer support to those agencies, for example, Families First, as a key partner of a 'wrap around' service, "part of the jigsaw" as a CHEXS member of staff commented. This is an area of CHEXS intervention that is due both recognition for its positive impact with families from local statutory agencies and negotiated funding opportunities from the latter.

CHEXS is a unique community based organisation that moves away from what Cottam calls the *"continual management of crisis"* in relation to working with families by more formal (statutory) agencies (2018) with, for many, an often dispassionate and professional remoteness. Instead CHEXS offers a more open, informal and face-to-face approach that supports children and their families in growing their capabilities, to learn, to change, to nurture relationships both within their families and beyond, to feel part of the community, and importantly aim for better more fulfilled lives. It is primarily aspirational!

It would seem that CHEXS success is due to its committed and passionate staff with its inclusive 'whole family' approach that inspires hope and futures for every child, young person and their families they engage with. As one teacher said *"Getting CHEXS involved is the first step in getting the family some help"* which may well be the simplest and most meaningful and pragmatic way of how the CHEXS 'whole family' approach might be described.

As a last word it seems to me based on my findings from the interviews and conversations with the reviews participants that CHEXS has a very strong case for again approaching Hertfordshire County Council and other statutory agencies regarding closer partnership collaboration perhaps as an initial pilot project funded and evaluated by one of these agencies.

## **5.2 Observations**

There are a number of observations from this review of CHEXS 'whole family' approach that arguably impinge on its 'way of working' which might usefully be considered in its ongoing work with its beneficiaries.

### **1. Referrals**

Parents interviewed were not always clear about how they came to have received a service from CHEXS, whether it was from the school where one of their children was attending or another agency. One parent helpfully suggested that the first she had heard about CHEXS was when she needed help herself and felt that their parents in similar circumstances as her

who would benefit from knowing about CHEXS and what support they could offer before their situation deteriorated. Another parent suggested CHEXS needed to advertise their services more widely and not just in school reception areas.

## **2. Getting the message across**

Not everyone interviewed had a clear idea of how all of CHEXS programmes and activities were interlinked or not and the terminology used was seen as being at times too clunky and even verbose. This related to questions concerning who CHEXS actually worked with and who they did not. It might be helpful if the information provided on the website and the information schools and other bodies received perhaps stated this more clearly ie. what these parameters were. This also might apply to potential funders.

## **3. Rebranding CHEXS**

From the parent perspective none of the parents interviewed had any idea what the name CHEXS represented nor that it adequately represented the wide range of services and activities CHEXS offered for families. Whilst suggestions for a name change it was felt shouldn't refer to a 'family type service' as that was seen to have negative connotations relating to what one parent called "*social services for troubled children who might take your children away*". One parent considered "*life savers*" is what CHEXS did in their personal experience but viewed that as perhaps not an appropriate new name for CHEXS. Equally school staff had no real idea of what the name CHEXS represented nor did the wider group of community stakeholders.

## **4. Reflecting the Community.**

Working with children, young people and their families in an increasingly diverse ethnically, culturally and religious society calls for this to be reflected in staff groups working in such communities, for example, with reference to the Waltham Cross and surrounding neighbourhoods where almost upto 30% are from BAME and non-white British heritage (UKNSO, 2011). These increasing demographic changes occurring with the CHEXS 'catchment' area was remarked upon by some of the community stakeholders interviewed with the view that CHEXS should be monitoring this changing scenario and respond accordingly.

To enhance the already successful intervention and impact CHEXS has on the people it engages with the Staff Team and the Board of Trustees might wish to revisit this area to consider the demography changes occurring within their locality.

## **5. Staff Team**

More than one member of school staff raised the issue of increasing the diversity within the CHEXS staff teams relating to gender, that more men within the CHEXS team would be helpful in working with families where fathers and men were viewed negatively for reasons such as, their absence from the home and domestic violence. This also related to schools in which one member of staff called their school "boy heavy" and with predominately female staff it was felt children had no positive male role models.

governance, bringing in new skills, knowledge, ideas and developments. This might also include a family representative.

# **6 METHODOLOGY**

A Rapid Appraisal Approach was used to capture the experiences, ideas, views and aspirations from everyone connected to CHEXS to generate authentic 'bottom-up' insights. It used a qualitative approach in gathering this information using interviews with the following key participants, young people, parents/carers, school staff, CHEXS staff and Trustees, and community

stakeholders. In emphasising learning from this interviews it enabled the conceptualising of issues and generated insights into understanding and formalizing the distinct CHEXS approach. An analysis of relevant existing information/data held by CHEXS was also undertaken as was a search of relevant literature.

All 48 participants were informed at the commencement of an individual interview, conversation or group discussion that what was discussed would be confidential and that the anonymity of participants would be protected in any subsequent report.

## 7 REFERENCES

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## 8 APPENDIX

### Schools and organisations visited

#### **Schools**

Burleigh Primary School

Downfield Primary School

Goffs Academy (Secondary)

Goffs Churchgate Academy (Secondary)  
Holdbrook Primary School  
Millbrook Primary and Nursery  
St Joseph's Catholic Primary  
Woodside Primary School

### **Organisations**

B3Living - Housing provider

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Recent publications include: *Re-empowering into Voice: Experiments in Organic Community Coproduction*, (with C. Baker), *Community Development Journal* (2020). Recent Research Reports: *Key Findings from the Felmores Estate Community Consultation*, Basildon (2020); *Community Responses to Loneliness and Social Isolation*, City of London (2020) and *Listening to the voices of the community. Engaging with residents and the community of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea* (2021). Forthcoming Book: Roger Green, Keith Popple and Andy Turner (Editors), *Community Development and Urban Communities*, Palgrave Macmillan (September, 2021).

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