

Step By Step, Family and Community Wisdom: Holding a Fine Balance

An Evaluative Report



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1. Introduction

This is a report of a research study conducted by Professor Emeritus Karen McArdle, FRSA and Sue Briggs, MBE for the project known as Step By Step (SByS), a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO), which supports families with small children, who feel isolated or vulnerable in the Moray Council area of Scotland. It has its co-ordinating base in Elgin, Moray, Scotland.

Thanks are due to all the people who participated in this research, giving of their time and energy to answer questions and tell the stories of their lives with Step By Step. We hope they find their point of view represented in this report. We have chosen to include a wider and longer range of quotations so their voice can be heard well.

This was a study quite specifically of the impact of the project, incorporating future planning. It was not a direct, formal evaluation of performance against objectives, though evaluation of dimensions of the project was an important contribution to assessing impact. The research questions were:

- a) What are the strengths and limitations of Step By Step's policy and practice?
- b) What makes Step By Step different in its services and ways of operating?

- c) Is Step By Step a value for money project and a 'safe pair of hands?'
- d) What is the perceived profile of Step By Step by funders, stakeholders, referrers and of course, staff, volunteers and participants and are these congruent?
- e) How and in what ways could Step By Step improve over the next 3 years?

2. Step By Step

Today, the Step By Step explicit mission is **to support families who feel isolated and vulnerable. It helps families to develop friendships, confidence and skills, which will enhance their lives and help them to give children the best start in life.**



The project seeks to:

- Offer a warm welcome in a friendly environment for parents with children up to the age of three;
- Encourage enjoyment through play, story time and songs, which encourages parents to participate in activities with their children;
- Listen well and to be responsive to the needs of families, helping parents to build relationships with their children, wider families and others;
- Offer learning and development through life-skills training, including healthy eating to improve the well-being of families;
- Support families to become more resilient so that they can better cope with the challenges of family life;
- Engage in partnership working, sharing knowledge and learning from others;
- Promote values of respect, equality and inclusion for all at Step By Step;

The history of Step By Step is that it was founded in Nov 2008 by an auxiliary Minister in the Church of Scotland, who felt strongly that a Christian calling embodied showing God's love in action, by 'travelling with people during the dark times that may hit any of us on life's journey.' As a retired Consultant Paediatrician, she hoped to enable parents who were struggling in one way or another to give their children the best possible start in life. She realised that it was difficult to provide a welcoming, inclusive and nurturing environment for families who felt isolated, vulnerable or socially insecure in mainstream parent and toddler groups.

Spiritual dimensions of projects are rarely discussed but are considered by the researchers to be important and often overlooked. It is considered by the researchers that this project follows a broadly blended values system, derived from Christian teachings and Humanistic principles about the worth and equal value of everyone in society and the need to work to achieve a more equal society, in which everyone can thrive.

So, in this context the concept of smaller groups where nurturing relationships could be fostered was born. A planning group was set up representing Health, Community Education and Social Services, other Third Sector organisations and the Church. After a successful eight-week pilot project, Step By Step in Moray obtained 3 years match funding from the Parish Development Fund of the Church of Scotland.

A snapshot of Step By Step's current profile will see over 255 families present over a year; a total of 765 people, meeting in groups at different times during the week, in 4 different venues. Staff and volunteers will be working with the groups of parents / grandparents / carers and their young children. Families may attend for 12 visits and many stay for up to 3 years. At this time, there is a waiting list of 45 families. Below are descriptions of typical activity at SByS.

○ **Outline of SByS Activity Observation – derived from reflections of Karen McArdle**

I walked into the group and there were 13 toddlers, and 15 parents. 2 staff and 2 volunteers. What struck me first was the quiet. It was not very noisy with 13 toddlers! They were all engaged in playing with colourful and a wide variety of educational and sensory stimulating toys. Chairs were arranged in a circle and there was a separate space for snack time. Peer support was observed as the parents worked closely with their children and others' children playing with the toys. Children not mixing well were invited to mix. When there were tears, volunteers modelled behaviour to help parents console their child.

Story time was welcomed with shouts and cheers from the children and I saw them quiet again, all fully engaged as a story, with actions and participation, was told. It was a story the children knew and plainly liked. The parents joined in too. Snack time was also met with delight as children were taught to help others, to try new and healthy foods and to be social over a meal. I spoke to parents who told how SByS helps for socialising their child and it gives them respite and ideas for managing behaviour and wellbeing.



The terms 'school-ready' or school-preparedness' came to mind. These children knew there were times for different behaviours. Story time was a quiet time and involved sitting and listening to an adult speak. There were times for noisiness too. There were times for individuality and times for sharing. I knew that this would be a godsend to a busy primary school teacher and would give the children a good start in their learning life.

The adults discussed challenges they had had with pregnancy and shared stories of difficult births and how they coped. They found this affirming and confidence building.

Step By Step was observed providing a safe and secure environment with indoor and some outdoor play facilities and opportunities. It has 4 premises in which family activities take place. These are in Elgin, Forres, Lhanbryde and Portessie. Care was taken in each location for the premises to be safe and welcoming for both children and parents. At the time of writing, they have 160 families participating, with the support of 30 Volunteers (7 Former SbyS Parents) 3,308 typical volunteer hours were counted in 2024. There are 9 Trustees - 2 volunteer in sessions / 5 are parents (not former SbyS parents). There are 10 staff and there are 2 hours per week of pro bono counselling.

○ **Outline of SByS Activity Observation – derived from reflections of Sue Briggs**

The SByS activities I observed, in different locations, were all well organised with clear routine and a planned programme which families attending were very obviously comfortable with. Children were confident and happy in their surroundings and used equipment safely and well. I particularly liked the use of colourful floor mats to define play areas no matter

which building or location the activities were in. Children used the space well. They have made friends, as have the parents between whom there was positive interaction. The atmosphere was consistently conducive to good learning.

Key Workers are trusted individuals with very good skills in leading activities. Families are known well by staff and volunteers. I observed warm peer connections in all settings and positive interactions between all present. There was a lot of laughter, with those present obviously having fun. Parents reported that they feel well supported by staff and volunteers. In addition, good and helpful signposting to other services was valued by families.

Volunteers contributed in a very constructive way and were involved in all activities. They had access to training to help them deliver in their role. There was obvious mutual respect between staff, volunteers and parents. The structure of provision was seen as helpful by parents and some reported positive results transferred to the home. This was particularly in relation to snack and singalong time. The snack element was well designed to allow children's learning and for group interaction. The role of volunteers is seen as vital to the organisation, and the healthy connection with the Church community has led to positive opportunities for volunteering. There is an intergenerational dimension to this which is an important aspect in delivery. The involvement of a Board member as a volunteer in activity observed is welcomed and is good for communication.

Parents came forward willingly to talk about SByS. Some parents spoken with were quite emotional about how well they had been supported with life's challenges. They were also appreciative of the accommodation of older children in the activities in the holiday period. This removed possible barriers to participation. It was clear that the referral process in place was valuable to families. There was respect for confidentiality and the option for staff and volunteer de-brief is constructive for all involved.

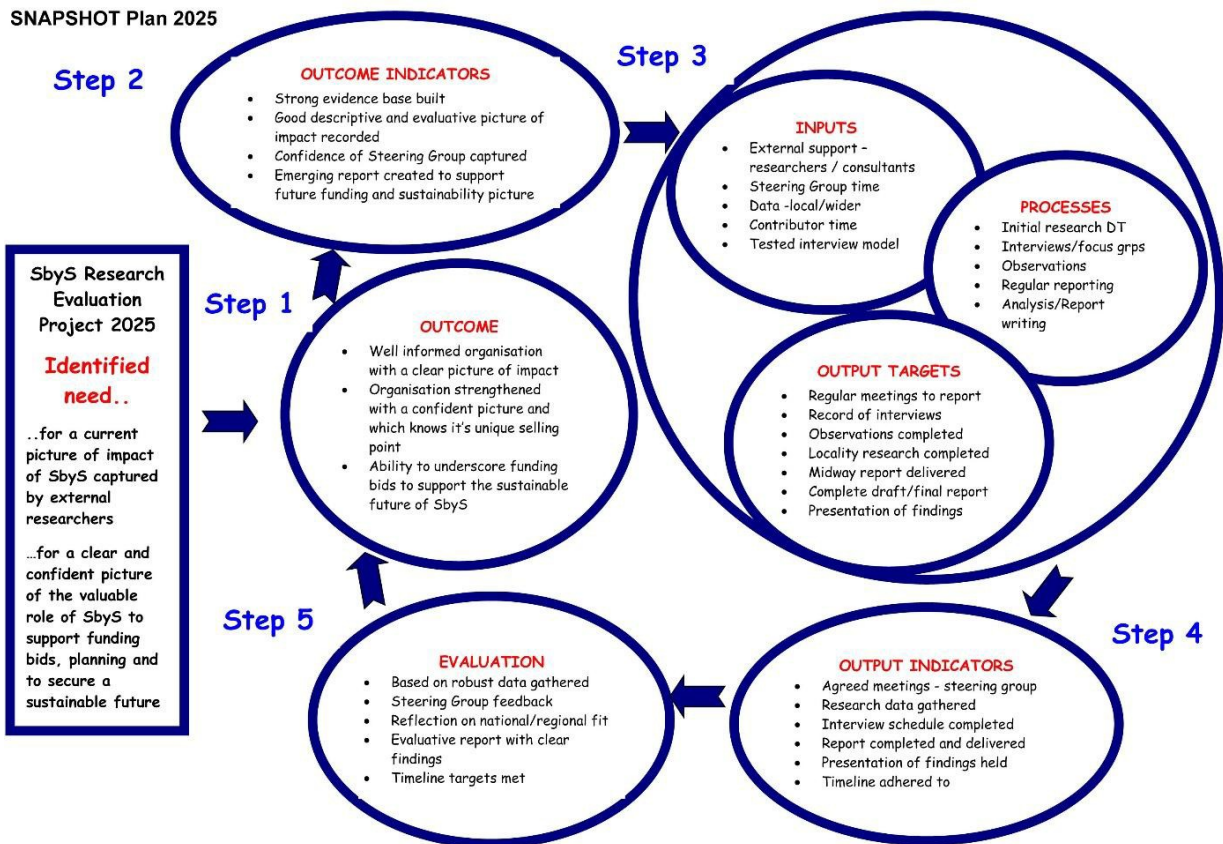
Consistency of provision and programme delivery across the geography demonstrates good use of available equipment, effective use of staff and volunteer time and creates a positive space for parents who relish attending and a safe and stimulating environment for children to develop.

3. The Project Process. Description of planning, monitoring and reporting

An initial online meeting between key Trustees, Project Manager and the Researchers (McArdle and Briggs) led to a clear understanding of what was sought by the organisation. The core of the Project has been based around research and evaluation with the intention of giving the organisation a robust external view of how it is doing against its main aims and supporting sustainability in the future.

A draft plan was created by the researchers using an established process which identifies need, outcomes sought, practical activities undertaken and evaluation. The plan was accepted by the Trustees and Project Manager. This plan, along with a monitoring timeline helped to keep the Trustees and Project Manager well informed of progress. Regular reporting was a valuable feature of the process, allowing for adjustments where necessary and effective sharing of important information. Contact between key players was therefore an important part of ensuring the overall research and evaluation project tasks were on track.

The researchers would like to thank the Trustees and Project Manager for efficiencies in planned visits and helpful communication in the overall process.



4. The Moray Context

Moray is a traditional county and local authority area in Scotland, with a population in the order of 96,000 people. It lies in the North-East of the country, with coastline on the Moray Firth, and borders the council areas of Aberdeenshire and Highland. It is a place of beauty and has a positive quality of life for many people. Principal towns in terms of population are Forres, Elgin and Buckie. Smaller towns are Aberlour, Keith, Fochabers and Lossiemouth. All have secondary schools. There are two large military bases in Moray, RAF Lossiemouth and Kinloss Barracks, which bring a transient element of population to the area.

Poverty in Moray is rising and doing so at a faster rate than for Scotland as a whole (Fairer Moray Forum Action Group {FMFAG}, 2022). In Moray, the number of children in poverty increased between 2014 and 2022 by 3.2% to 24.1%. Over the same period, Scotland saw a rise of 2.9% to 24.5%. Only seven Scottish Local Authority areas have increased at a greater rate than Moray during this time. The lower paid economy in Moray is also a contributing factor; this averages £15.94 per hour (gross full-time hourly pay) compared to the Scottish average of £18.10 and ranks Moray 28/32 of Scottish Local Authorities (where 1/32 is highest). The average working week in Moray is 40.6 hrs, compared with the Scottish average of 38.8 hrs per week. Even by working more hours a week, the average full-time weekly pay in Moray (£647.2) is significantly less than the National average (£702.80). Due to this low wage economy, Moray is likely to be less resilient to increases in the cost of living in

comparison with many other Scottish Local Authorities, which in turn is a likely contributory factor in the rising levels of child poverty in Moray.

Support services recognise that in-work poverty is a particular challenge for many households in Moray (FMFAG, 2022); with many in-work families experiencing hardship. They may also find that access to some of the low-income financial supports through benefits and grants is limited, compounding the struggle to make ends meet and increasing the reliance on charity support such as food banks

What these statistics mean for Step By Step is:

- Increased risk of child poverty and lack of wellbeing;
- Increasing need/demand for the service from professionals for their clients and from families;
- Increasing complexity of participants' home lives with children;
- Increasing need for trusted local family support;
- Increasing pressure on professionals who work with families;
- Increasing need for a wider range of services and support from SBYS;
- Increasing need for ancillary support such as food and clothing exchange.

5. Management of Step By Step

SByS records show that, at time of writing the report, since 2008 the project has worked with:

over 2,600 families,

Over 150 volunteers

At time of writing this report, the project was working with:

160 families

7 baby groups

8 toddler groups

2 pregnancy support
groups

30 volunteers

Management Board

A Management Board of 9 Trustees meets quarterly and holds an Annual General Meeting yearly. Annual or bi-annual Board Strategy meetings are held. The organisational risk register is reviewed and agreed quarterly. Stability of Trustee representation is apparent. An identified Trustee takes responsibility for child protection issues which are discussed regularly at meetings with the intention of finding good, sensitive and appropriate solutions to complex issues. A named Trustee also takes responsibility for volunteer representation to the Board.

Policies

Policies of SByS are detailed in a Staff Handbook. They are extensive and written in plain English. Appendix B shows a list of guidelines and policies which ensure the safety and wellbeing of participants and staff.

6. Theoretical Underpinning

The theoretical underpinning of SByS was not always known by staff. Staff were more conscious of the practical implementation of theory. Attachment theory is one aspect of theory that underpins the processes of the project and a training session, with the leading academic, Dr Suzanne Zeedyk, took place in 2018, illuminating practice in continuing professional development, concerning the profound importance of relationships in early childhood years. It is probably time for Attachment Theory to be revisited.

The underpinning principles of SByS have been illuminated further by this research and they are considered further in the Discussion section of this report (See section 9.1). We consider that a Model of Family and Community underpins the theoretical framework for SByS. The project uses, explicitly, for example, experiential learning, to assist families to consider parenting skills and to consider learning from their own experience. This is enhanced by peer learning and input from volunteers, which have the potential in this context to provide affirmation, social development and the family wisdom that come from social interaction and shared experience. Propositional knowledge in the form of resources and advice is a feature of the provision, but advice is managed sensitively to ensure that it is facilitative and relevant.

Well-being is often discussed but rarely defined. In this context, the well-being of families is concerned with 'living the life the family would choose to live.' There is an assumption, however, that this will be desirable for others, which it may not be. It is strongly value-based and these values are explicit and discussed frequently. It was the researchers' view that they include respect, inclusion, diversity, equality and a strong sense of community. These values can be often tired in our experience from overuse of the terms, but the values were alive and vibrant in this project. It is important to note that the staff, trustees and volunteers were all in synchrony about the non-judgemental Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) values that underpin SByS.

The theoretical underpinning of SByS is considered further in Discussion, Section 9.

7. Methodology

As this was a complex project with concomitant complex understandings of impact on individuals, an interpretivist qualitative approach was considered appropriate, which would manage this complexity and allow for synthesis of data and ideas. It was considered that there was a need to re-examine the scale of the project, so quantitative data was also required. A balance of stories was sought, which would illuminate impact according to scale, quality and effectiveness (McArdle, 2020).

Sample

The data was sought from five different populations; from staff (**10**); from participating families (**60**); from volunteers (**30**); from external stakeholders/referrers/funders (**8**); from Trustees (**5**). The voice of children 3 years and under would be difficult to achieve, we concluded, so participant observation by the Researchers, in the course of the 5 study days was used, assessing emotional, social and practical wellbeing, through analysis of child behaviour.

Methods

It was considered appropriate to use narrative inquiry with parents, and staff as we were seeking the life stories of the individuals who had attended the project. Narrative inquiry is an accessible means of conducting interviews and most specifically allows the respondent to frame the ways the interview progresses and to frame the concepts that are addressed. It also minimises the power dynamic between researcher and researched, as telling stories approximates to a natural conversation. Narrative inquiry characteristically involves limited numbers as the life stories are case studies rather than a sample. Narrative inquiries were held with **4** families. As they are descriptions of whole people it is important to see transcripts as whole, rather than breaking them down into bits for analysis. Accordingly, we have included an exemplar transcript of a whole interview as Appendix D.

Volunteers were interviewed for their perspective of the project. **25** volunteers were interviewed in a focus group setting, after a light lunch to break down any communication barriers. Volunteers play an important role as befrienders and mentors at the project; and the project also has an impact on their lives. In some cases staff had previously been volunteers so were able to talk from two perspectives.

It was decided to interview family members, but it became apparent that busy lives after the SByS sessions was not always compatible with being interviewed and, in these cases, focus groups as part of the programme were conducted. Families at the sessions generally knew each other and this led to greater depth of discussion and exploration of issues. Themes for the focus groups were determined by the Researchers derived from the themes identified in the research questions. 3 groups were researched by focus group, consisting of approximately 12 - 14 people for each group. A total of around 50 parents/carers participated in the research. It is difficult to be exact as parents came and went in the process. A criticism of the sample could be that some people who had left the project were not interviewed but it was often the case that people who left would come back and had not actually gone permanently. This was backed up by the data which showed people attending and reattending after time, so it would be difficult to identify non-attenders.

The accounts from the annual reports were scrutinised and policy documents were scrutinised for their influence on finance by the Researchers. The Project Manager was interviewed twice, about finance and his communication with Trustees about funding and about strategic aims.

Stakeholders were interviewed to gain an external perspective of SByS and its community. This included professionals working in complementary domains, including those who chose to refer clients to SByS.

Observations were conducted at 4 sessions to see the impact of the programme on the young children.

Trustees were interviewed to look at overall governance of the charity.

Data was partially transcribed and analysed using thematic and discourse analysis and synthesised in discussion between the two researchers.

Ethical issues were not unusually complex for this project. All participants were able to give informed consent and appeared pleased to be asked to comment on their experiences. Observations were used to assess the impact on young children. Wherever possible identities have been hidden in reporting.

8. Findings

8.1 External Stakeholders

The stakeholder group associated with SByS is extensive and reflects very relevant provider contexts. They include local authority and NHS providers, funders, third sector partners and importantly, local community groups and organisations, including the churches, plus supportive individuals.

SByS is highly regarded by stakeholders, as part of a strong and developed community-based delivery grouping. Regular referrals from professional bodies over many years illustrate the value placed upon the service they offer. There is a slight sense of SByS operating 'under the radar' but definitely not in a negative way; rather in a positive individualistic way. The provision is seen as having a well negotiated fit for families and was described as 'more than a curriculum'.

The SByS Manager is a regular attendee at important planning and collaboration meetings across the geography they cover. Other SByS staff network well with colleagues beyond their own employing organisation. Communication with stakeholders has been strengthened by publication of the quarterly SByS Newsletter. This ensures important information is shared and the role of SByS may be more widely understood.

When asked about the role and contribution of SByS in Moray stakeholder comments include:

- SByS are a very supportive organisation.
- SByS seem to be a unique organisation – not sure if anyone else is doing this – may be some similar services.
- SByS has robust staff and volunteers – often becoming paid staff – good sign.
- SByS has a strong ethos.
- SByS (including their staff and volunteers) see families themselves as strong agents of the future. This is a positive.
- The work of SByS and others creates health and community outcomes, meeting life's challenges.
- SByS are part of a connected Moray, championing families; generating better lives; and meeting organisational values.
- SByS top of the list to suggest to a family.
- I refer because SByS provide good quality provision and also good signposting to other services.
- SByS is a good organisation with good people who want the best for those attending.

(stakeholder interviews)

Stakeholder views include that SByS are navigating the current challenging picture and doing this very well. Challenges for the future were described as;

- More young people are leaving than coming into the area.

- Relatively high levels of seasonal work.
- Combination of pandemic, cost of living crisis and constraints on the public purse continue to impact.
- Moray has a lot of things which mitigate against poverty – food banks etc. – but these don't seem to change circumstances.
- Forces families – always a factor in planning considerations in this area.
- Year by year funding allocations at Scottish Government level creates issues – filters down to operations – creates tension and uncertainty.
- Now it's not so possible to achieve funding over the longer term
(stakeholder interviews)

Suggested considerations for the future were described as;

- Community led local development stands the best chance.
- It is important for organisations like SByS to look ahead and future plan.
- Strong partnerships and strategic planning will help to realise positive targets.
- A wellbeing economy is important in any way forward – especially in such a volatile world.
- SByS can feed into reviewing high level strategies and new ones being developed if their own strategic plan is clear.
- The Community Led Vision for Moray may provide some of the balance required if other local or national strategies or plans leave SByS feeling they are being pulled away from their own core purpose.
(stakeholder Interviews)

The quotation below summarises how a Community Health Visitor had assessed and valued SByS.

Well, I went and did part of a session with the intention to see what it was like. And I'm now a serial referrer! (Laughs) I've referred a lot of families to it.

I think, um, it's good basic teaching. How to do weaning; the importance of singing and nursery rhymes, reading; it helps with child development. As well, it supports maternal and paternal wellbeing. They (parents) aren't lonely; and it impacts (positively) on the baby.

(stakeholder Interview)

8.2 Volunteers

Semi-structured interviews were held with SByS volunteers seeking information across a number of identified themes. In addition, a focus group was held with SByS volunteers, which allowed for discourse in the setting. Volunteers also contributed constructively to the picture built through observation visits.

We could not operate without them (volunteers); it wouldn't be the same. Being there and listening is so important, supplementing the staff. Families see the same volunteer and can build relationships. Some have been with us for many years and some were former parents. They don't really need to be advertised, it's more by word of mouth. There are volunteers in every group setting.

(staff member)

Asked about their role, volunteers came up with the following positive activities.

- Support.
- Make sure the families are happy; make the tea and snack (laughter).
- I get down to their level.
- I encourage parents, seeing what progress they have made as parents. I notice and encourage.

(volunteer focus group)

Asked why they continue to volunteer, the group mentioned positive feelings and their own benefits of friendship and feeling appreciated.

- Friendships.
- I love the work.
- It's almost as if you have a little bit of play yourself.
- It's absolutely brilliant!
- The warmth of staff and their support.
- I feel appreciated.

(volunteer focus group)

Volunteers were asked what training they had had and at first could not remember any, but subsequently were able to identify training on sexual harassment, child protection, First Aid and child development. Asked what they would like in the form of training, Listening Training was mentioned.

Asked what qualities volunteers bring to SByS, volunteers were able to identify a number of contributions.

- Experience.
- Knowledge and skills.
- Family wisdom.
- Not qualifications.
- Listening skills so you listen and are not there to give advice...unless specifically asked.

(volunteer focus group)

What does SByS do for parents and children was discussed. For parents, the following were identified.

- Brings parents together.
- Gives them time with their children.
- Development. Helps them look at their child like a flower.

(volunteer focus group)

The outcomes for children were seen to be wide ranging.

- They are around adults they would not normally be around; It sort of makes them a bit more accepting and accepted.
- Communication.
- Confidence.
- Learning.
- Shape and colour, textures.
- Singing, reading and storytelling. You often end up going home singing the songs yourself (laughter).

(volunteer focus group)

Asked about negatives, there was silence and laughter. A matter was raised about how two women from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds did not seem to mix with other parents. The volunteers did not feel confident with “social engineering”. They answered the problem themselves by tackling the complexity from their experience; helping them learning English; suggesting being:

more inclusive; getting support from the family workers; and family wisdom.

Volunteers got their own benefits from participating in SByS, but recognise themselves as a source of learning from experience for parents. They are important contributors to the “family wisdom” discussed in section 9.

Volunteers said they enjoyed the focus group which brought them all together and expressed a desire for this to happen again, to discuss common issues.

In one to one discussion, volunteers value the role the church plays in supporting the community through SByS and see their role as a positive contributing factor. They attend regularly and take the responsibility seriously. They know that they play an important part in supporting families.

“Not just about what can I give but also about what I get back from volunteering”
(volunteer interview)

“Feel valued and respected by professionals involved and also by parents”.
(Volunteer interview)

“A lot of joy – it’s a safe place – fun – games – organised play but with freedom”
(volunteer interview)

“Attended various training courses and feel well placed to volunteer”
(volunteer Interview)

8.3 Staff

The interaction between the researchers and staff was very positive and helpful during the period of research. Those interviewed were keen to share their views and contributed well to the overall exercise. The approach and ethos observed confirmed the positive levels of staff feedback in the most recent SByS staff survey.

Staff reported, using examples, about the care they felt for their wellbeing when working at SByS.

Disillusionment with the education system, I am afraid. Yes, I worked with severe and complex needs and just lack of funding, yes it was the major, major issue . . .
(working for SByS) it was meant to be. It’s just such a welcoming environment and the team leader and project manager, they have your best interests at heart as well. Not long into that, my stepfather died and the approach that they took, was you need to be better, you need to be okay before you can support the families. You need to take the leave you need.
(staff member)

It's a really lovely place to work. Friendly. There's never two days the same. Gosh what else? Obviously, we've had different bosses over the years. I don't want to be a 'boss suck-up' but Gareth is the best one we've had. If there's something with the kids, he'll let me take the time to deal with it. Obviously, we can't take the mick, and I'd never do that, but he's compassionate; that's the word. And I:

think that's how SByS is; we're all compassionate. I just love my work.
(staff member)

I feel they tell us more than they would tell a health visitor because we're not attached to a health service as such. More than they tell a social worker, health visitor or midwife, or people like that.

(staff Member)

I'm really proud to work here at SByS. I used to be a parent. . . I come here and it's my happy place.

(staff Member)

Staff were asked about their role at SByS, needs both physical and mental were adduced of participants, both parents and children.

I am there supporting the family, as a whole. The needs of the parents are paramount and they need to be at their best physically, mentally, in order to be able to support their child. Bring them up, give them the best chance.

(staff member)

The main reason. For the vulnerable families, it's giving them support. For some of them that might be quite profound as they are struggling to get out of the house. So I think it's just (pause) . . so, support is such a huge term. It IS support!

(staff member)

Key strengths are being non-judgemental; we are here to help no matter what.

(staff member)

I think that we're quite low key. Folk do come here and are not seen to be struggling to come to Step by Step. Public don't associate it with really struggling.

(staff member)

We don't label. We are a happy place. That's not to trivialise the challenges families face. Our approach with peer support is different from other organisations We've all got strengths, we all do something for each other. It is informal and loose for peer support. People are happy to share and be vulnerable. Here it is okay to be vulnerable. This what sets us apart.

(staff member)

In terms of being able to share experience I think that's the most important thing.

(staff member)

Families stay with us. We hold onto families. Retention.

(staff member)

We do it in such a subtle way the families do not really know everything we are do, are doing for them. They start to open up.

(staff member)

The needs of the individual were recognised and the parents' autonomy of being able to take it or leave it and the complex impact of the positive parents on the child were discussed

It's not a one size fits all. There are many, many parenting styles and many ways to succeed. It's offering support to the families, as much as they want and they can take it or leave it.

(staff member)

They (parents) blossom in confidence and it rubs off on the children.

(staff member)

Training was described as 'tons.' Including 'Child Protection, First Aid, PEEP Children's Course, Sexual Harassment, Baby Massage.' But staff did not have a record of their training; of course they would have had certificates.

Staff were asked about areas for improvement in SByS. Staff were very positive in their answers. One staff member alluded to the need for the 4 centres to be the same. This means in approach but clearly not, we suggest, in terms of local need which could be examined more closely. Staff reported 'digging' for local information but how this is interpreted to affect the programme was not clear. Strengths and any limitation of SByS were discussed.

We're growing as a charity and we're now in four places; so perhaps we need a bit of moderation to be sure, in each setting, the same approach is happening. That may be something we could have a look at.

(staff member)

Weaknesses are having a waiting list.

(staff member)

What we do could do better is broadcast the model nationally.

(staff member)

Staff were asked what SByS would be like in 5 years' time.

I'd like it to be more Moray-wide.

(staff member)

It'll be bigger and more of it hopefully. I would love it to be spread Scottish-wide, if not UK-wide. I think every town should have one.

(staff member)

I think it all depends on funding. Funds are notoriously hard to come by. And our model is so simple, and although it works on this relationship theory, perhaps funders are looking for more, sort of, more measurable outcomes. Yes, so, for example, we could go down the road of tying up with some health initiatives. But they will have an agenda and force us down a road we do not want to go.

(staff member)

Staff were given three wishes for SByS. The following answers show what staff wished for.

- Secure funding.



- Facilities could be better, more garden area.
- A proper kitchen.
- To be able to roll it out to other towns in Moray.
- More of them, one in every city.
- For it to have unlimited funding.
- A garden space that's ours.
- Secure stable funding.
- Replicated across other areas.
- More recognition of skills and qualities.
- To have continuous funding. Continuity.
- Do more with Dad's Groups. We could try again.



8.4 Participant interviews and Observation of children and parents

Key to the understanding of impact of SByS in Moray is of course the feedback and views of those most affected, the families and participants. The interaction of the researchers with the families involved was vibrant, engaging and productive for the purpose of the research. In delivery activities, families were very willing to share their views. In several of these engagements the parents were quite emotional when talking about how the organisation had improved their lives and had given their children a better start in life. The ethos and accepting nature of the services of SByS, which lead to these outcomes are described below.

It's very comfortable here, like It's a safe space. I love coming. I swapped days at work just so I could keep coming.
(participant Interview)

I have really bad anxiety and I cannot do public places. I do not feel unsafe at all here. I cannae go to some other places. She (her child) benefits from it and I get a cup of tea and a piece (Laughs)!
(participant Interview)

If you've got a new situation, you can ask them (family worker). Everyone is from all walks of life and they are accepting. Other places I've been can be picky. The workers here are lovely!
(participant Interview)

The Pregnancy Group in Elgin was described as 'a great new addition to services offered.' The Rummage Room similarly is welcomed and well used. Parents are glad that they can both take but also donate to this facility. The size of the groups is very important to the families involved; several parents described improvement in their child's behaviour once changing from a large and noisy group elsewhere to the SByS provision. They also appreciated the flexibility of staff when holiday periods meant they may have to miss activities, as they had older children ineligible for the usual group. Most parents and carers were aware that provision had been extended to accommodate families in wider Moray and valued this; however they also recognised the danger of expansion and cost implications for SByS.

When asked what has changed for them since coming to SByS the following comments were recorded:

- If I wasn't here, I would be at home – no company – particularly hard in the winter.
- I look forward to coming to the group; it's a big part of my week.

- It lets me feel others are going through the same things.
- Helps interact with others.
- Gives good routine.
- It's a home away from home.
- I feel I have someone to talk to here.
- Has literally changed my life.
- Feel loved here.
- Allows my kids to develop independence.
- Has enriched my life.
- Like a family – help and support.
- I get information – signposting to other services.
- Everyone gets on.
- Prepares the children for next stage.

Asked what the children make of SByS, the following quotation is typical of responses given.

She (her child) loves it. She gets outside in the sunshine. She loves it. She gets all excited when we go out, out in the car for coming to SByS.

(participant interviews)

Parents and carers appreciate access to space and equipment for their children in the activity sessions. They also spoke very positively about the structured snack time and how that helps them replicate this at home. It is clear that families appreciate the way the activities are run, they also have the opportunity to shape the programme in advance. They are communicated with well through both a closed Facebook page and an open one. Most parents spoken to had recommended SByS to friends and family. The synergy between family – referrer – provider was a strong one borne out by feedback from stakeholders and staff.

Good that all the children are around the same age – been to other groups in the past where older ones playing make it difficult for little ones – too noisy

(participant interviews)

The good relationship between families and volunteers was very evident to the researchers and in particular the intergenerational aspect was strong. One older volunteer described feeling like a grandparent in the setting in which he helped. Whilst there was some comment about how valuable it would be to expand into other villages with SByS provision, most parents and carers spoken to understood the value of the smaller sized groups and believed this should be protected.

Numerous repeat mentions of SByS creating the feeling of family for participants chimes very well with the concept of and modelling for Family Wisdom, discussed in Section. 9.

8.5 Trustees

Trustees work well together and have an honest and constructive relationship with the Manager and staff of SByS. They meet the requirements placed upon them through the SCIO structure and identify strongly with the aims of the organisation. They understand their responsibilities and maintain a good overview of operations, well informed by the Manager. The commissioning of this research demonstrates a healthy approach to defining what is working well and what might secure a future for the organisation.

When asked, what makes you stay in this role, comments included;

- Hearing feedback and knowing it works.
- Seeing the human being in the work.
- The ethos is important to me.
- Faith linked to social action is important to me.
- Humbling and exciting.

When asked what they see as the strengths of the organization, comments included;

- A local organisation rooted in communities.
- Staff team works well.
- A stepping stone though the rest of life.
- Optimum size – scale – being a small organisation is some of the magic which works.
- Solid bunch of volunteers working with paid staff.
- Way we go about our work.
- SByS has a good standing in the community.
- Intergenerational element which involves grandparents, for example.
- People stay with SByS; some get employment.
- SByS shows wisdom leading through an approach which is valued.
- Everyone matters.

When asked, what are the main challenges over the next 3-5 years, comments include;

- Bigger we get – funding becomes more of a challenge.
- Knowing when is a good time to stop – or simply tread water for a time.
- Waiting lists.
- Limited by funding – would need serious financial backing to expand.

The longer quotations below show how Trustees value the project strongly and this is reflected in the support they offer the organisation and its staff.

I was working full time and was not willing to get involved in too many things, but I was approached and humbled and I had begun to think of an exit plan from work . . . I was beginning to think about something I was keen and interested in, once I had a bit more time.

(trustee interview)

From the beginning I've been impressed with how sessions are run and the ethos and ambience in the sessions. The variety of people who attend and the reasons why they come. I do feel it has a real purpose and serves a need in the community. I enjoy all sorts of aspects of it, but I feel it's serving a very good purpose and helping a lot of people.

(trustee Interview)

Because it's uncomplicated and effective. It's very simple, not simplistic, as a family offering that seems to have huge benefits. I met a volunteer in the gym, it was (name) in her 77th year. "I'll keep volunteering well into my eighties," she said, "in fact as long as you don't get arthritis in your tongue, into your nineties," she said, "I can keep volunteering till then because, I can sit and talk to the other mums. I might not be able to hold the weans but," she said, "I can sit and talk." this was while she was pedaling away at the gym.

(trustee Interview)

The linkage between staff/volunteers and Trustees was good, with appropriate overlap in their roles, with some Trustee being volunteers. Staff felt close to Trustees and Trustees were insightful and considered in their discussion of the project. They recognised the need for responsibility and care in the governance of the project. They recognise the pressures which exist for the future of SByS. They are acutely aware of the need for balance around maintaining provision and danger of expanding to meet need. They are actively seeking advice and support around longer term viability and sustainability possibilities. This should be congratulated.

8.6 Potential Funders

All Funders are governed by priorities and timelines. It is recognised nationally that there is real pressure on available funds, in order to meet organisational goals. This inevitably impacts on projects, initiatives, and organisations, for whom sustainability is built around external funding. SByS is such an organisation.

There appears to be a theme of restriction on longer term and recurrent funding awards due to uncertainty about future available funds for dispersal across the country. Although it is difficult to evidence, there appears to be some emphasis rather on new and emergent initiatives, as opposed to ongoing support to delivery. This is hard for organisations such as SByS where the value of what they are delivering is recognised but long term financial sustainability is tricky. The high levels of demand on organisations for time spent on funding applications is a feature of organisations; in particular in the third sector. The scale of operation means it can be particularly hard on small and medium sized operators.

It is important to state that the connection between local funders, such as the Churches, and SByS are seen as vital and productive to both parties; and it is fair to say that visible positive impact on families experiencing poverty and hardship is seen as strengthening the wider community. In other words, local action local results. Also seen as a positive dimension is the coordination of funders network meetings by TSI Moray (Third Sector Interface), which are reported as being very useful for collaboration and sharing of information.

Gathering information from relevant funders proved challenging – from the responses to interview requests, the following quotes merit sharing:

Seeking a Scotland where everyone has the opportunity to thrive – funding well is an aspiration for us
(funder discussion)

Funding relationships are important and we work at this – we place high importance on building relationships with those organisations we fund; especially those we fund year on year.
(funder discussion)

It is important to manage the exiting of some funding relationships.
(funder discussion)

Funding decisions need to be made irrespective of the climate - funders should think of how they can improve a process for applicants
(funder discussion)

Available expenditure in relation to delivery and operations is a challenging business for organisations such as SByS. Forward planning and financial rigour are both essential practices.

For SByS the attention paid to both identified need and the potential for expansion are highly important and this is recognised by Trustees and staff. For the researchers this resonates in the sub heading for this report – Holding a Fine Balance.

9. Discussion

9.1. The model of SByS: Family and Community.

It is important that the model that underpins SByS is illuminated, so that the key vision or the 'Unique Selling Point' (USP) is known to all staff, to provide a theoretical context for the work and to provide an answer to the question, how is Step By Step different from other projects? To answer this question, we need to start first with complexity of SByS's aims and purposes.

The complexity of issues that might arise for SByS, in terms of wellbeing of children is described with reference to NIHR in their table of indicators from the research literature in 'Start for Life Outcomes.' NIHR generated and annotated a list of population health indicators for England, in the domains used in the framework: Safe, Healthy, Happy, Developing and External Factors. The following indicators have been shortened and edited slightly to represent what has been seen by, or reported to, the researchers as being in the domain of SByS. This is to give a picture of the complexity of interventions, that may be managed in SByS or identified and referred to other services. The things that have been left out related largely to child mortality.

SAFE

Unintentional Injuries

Intentional injuries

Experience of abuse and neglect, including domestic abuse

Family relationships stress, conflict

Happy

Parent and social relationships

Quality of Life, including physical wellbeing

Play

Healthy

Immunisation

Healthy growth, weight and size

Healthy eating nutrition

Child physical or sedentary activity

Parental smoking/alcohol habits

Sleep, quality and duration

Consolability

External Factors

Housing

Neighbourhood factors, green space, air quality

Access to books

Parental smoking alcohol factors

Development

Overall development

Language and communication

Social and emotional development



Cognitive development
Connection to family, friends, culture

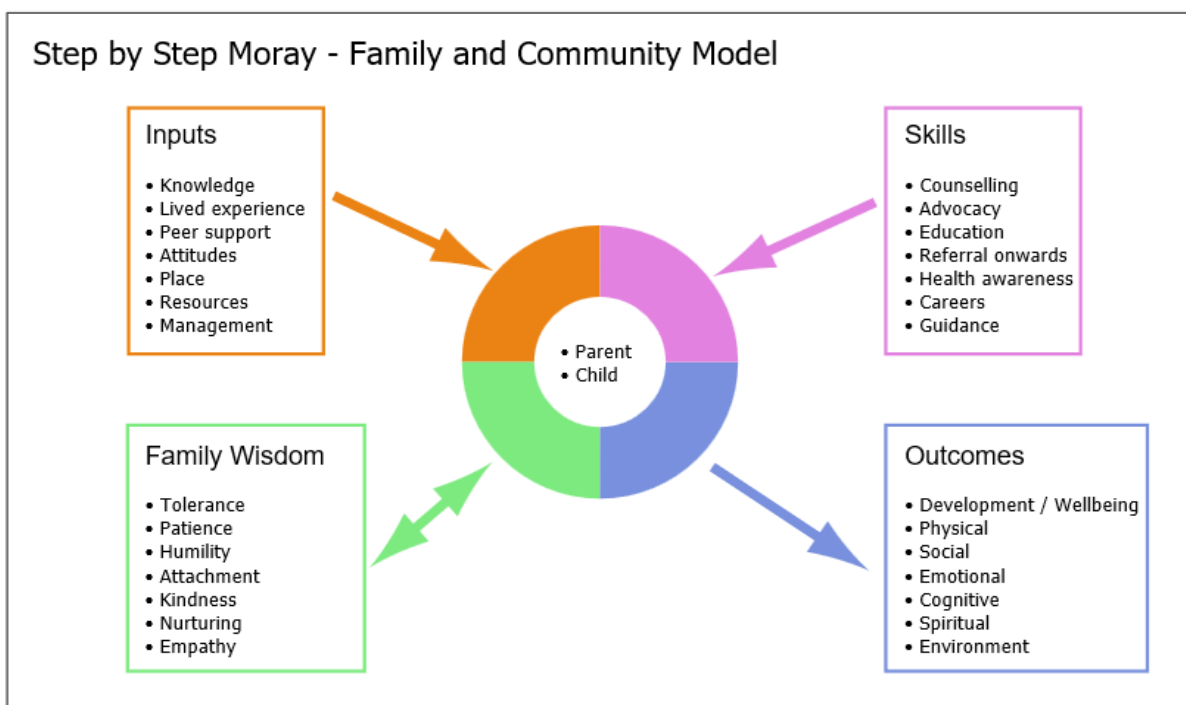
Social environment

Quality of community (absence of crime, services close by)
Support or parents from family and friends.
Poverty levels
Employment
Parental mental health and wellbeing
Parental physical health
Parental eating activity Substance misuse
Parental lack of literacy/numeracy Little or no English
Parental parenting skills

(Derived from: NIHR Policy Research Unit, Children and Families) (2025) Starting for Life Outcomes Framework: Appendix 7) referenced in Section 12

SByS manages and encounters all these dimensions in its work and examples of all these dimensions were described to, or observed, by the researchers. We found that respondents frequently expressed that SByS was good, great, and effective but could not put a finger on why it was different from (and arguably better) than other organisations with similar social remits. We, the researchers, were determined to get to the bottom of this.

What makes Step By Step different and so successful? In its outcomes we refer to the **SByS Family and Community Wisdom Model**, represented by the diagram below.



The parent and child are at the centre of the model. Inputs include the knowledge of staff; lived experience of volunteers; and peer support. Attitudes that are non-judgemental and inclusive; carefully selected places for activities, good resources and careful management, all of which the researchers have observed. In our view the aspects in the table above found in other organisations working in similar contexts – however – not all embrace the qualities in the box titled Family Wisdom which is where we see the value base strengthened and uniquely applied through SByS.

The skills of staff which lie largely implicit, rather than being recognised by all staff we interviewed, include informal counselling, advocacy on the part of parents and families; informal education around health and wellbeing of children; knowledge of where and how to refer; health awareness and careers and guidance knowledge.

The most significant part of the diagram for those who want to know why SByS works and is different from other projects, relates to **Family Wisdom**. Family Wisdom has a history and a culture that permeates sound, resilient and robust communities. Culture and historical attributes of communities may, however, be interrupted. For example, forces families in Lossiemouth may experience moves and new postings with families not always being intact.

The Family Wisdom of SByS is intergenerational and replaces isolation with connectedness. The knowledge and skills of Family Wisdom are tried and tested; carry the authenticity of and respect towards lived experience; and the knowledge is accessible and understandable. Family Wisdom which respects all of the family's rights, provides a safe and secure environment in which to manage relationships which might not be so straightforward at home, thereby building resilience for adults.

Wisdom is defined helpfully, in this case, by Artificial Intelligence online as, 'the ability to apply knowledge and experience to make sound judgments and decisions, often involving insight, discernment, and ethical considerations.' It's more than just possessing information; it's about understanding its implications and using it effectively in various life situations. Wisdom also encompasses the capacity for self-reflection, perspective-taking, and recognizing the complexities of human nature. In the diagram above, we concentrate on the attributes of those with this wisdom. They may be volunteers, may be staff or peer parents. We have selected for the diagram, the attributes we witnessed at SByS, linked to promoting helpful discussion, such as patience, tolerance and humility. The attributes lead to positive outcomes; outcomes across the wellbeing and development domains of the physical, social emotional, cognitive, spiritual, and environmental dimensions. We have specifically highlighted resilience for adults; and being 'school/nursery ready' for children as outcomes.

We are of the opinion that this Unique Selling Point (USP) of Family Wisdom needs to be made explicit to all staff so that they can know this dimension of why SByS is effective and can represent this USP to the participants, volunteers, community and, of course, self and funders.

We refer to the model as the SByS Family and 'Community' Wisdom Model. We consider the context in which SByS operates contributes to the project's effectiveness too, by SByS being engaged in community life. Community Development has been defined as a 'practice-based profession and an academic discipline that protects participative democracy, sustainable development, rights, economic opportunity, equality and social justice, through the education and empowerment of people within their communities, whether these be of locality, interest or identity, in urban or rural settings.' (IACD quoted in Mayo, 2024:2). There is a seamless blending of SByS activities and the wellbeing of the community, as the

community development principles are congruent with SByS's underpinning values.

The cover image for this report reflects both balance and ripple effect, both of which are threaded through the practice captured. For example, we found many ways in which SByS addresses education and empowerment of the participants, through advocacy, promoting resilience and through its attention to individual and community wellbeing. SByS sits well with its community. It is well regarded and has informal links with many other organisations, which bring their own knowledge to bear on its activities. Links exist with the public sector, third sector, private sector, other charities and churches. Community development interventions can be promoted to enable communities to cope within their existing constraints, while also contributing to the development of participants' critical consciousness, building solidarity for alternative futures and education for social transformation. This is subliminally the value outsiders or partners are seeing in SByS, we suggest.



9.2 The underpinning Child Development Goals.

Early child development is associated with longer term educational attainment and economic, social and health outcomes in adulthood (Jung et al, 2025). The new (2024) Labour government in Britain has identified child development as a key part of its policy agenda and has committed to a target of 75% of children being 'ready to learn' age 4-5-years by 2028 (currently 67% of children, based on the teacher assessed Early Years Foundation Stage Profile). The measure of child development at age 2-2½-years is an important measure on the trajectory of being 'ready to learn' at age 4-5-years. Whilst this refers to education in England and Wales, looking at 2 – 2½ years the following key domains were explored by Jung et al., (2025)

- Communication: babbling, vocalising, listening, and understanding
- Gross Motor: arm, body, and leg movements
- Fine Motor: hand and finger movements
- Problem Solving: learning and playing with toys
- Personal-Social: solitary, social play and play with toys and other children.

The Jung et al study found a striking gender gap in child development, as girls were more likely to be assessed as meeting the expected level of development compared to boys, regardless of ethnicity or neighbourhood deprivation. This was not the case with our research, where boys and girls were behaving similarly, with of course individual differences. We found in our observations that the key domains of Communication, Gross-Motor skills, Fine Motor Skills, Problem Solving and Personal Social skills and so on were being met. We choose here to mention the work done by Education Scotland and the Care Commission to join up common agendas and support quality improvement in their new framework which will illuminate the learning stages contributed to by SByS. (See References section 12).

9.3 Value for Money and Finance

In the year 2024/5 780 group sessions were held with 255 families, parents/carers, children meaning a total of about 765 people. In addition, 2,300 individual support sessions were held with 51 families to meet individual needs. 46% of families were referred, which means that 54% self-refer.

30 Volunteers excluding trustees work for SByS. Currently 7 are former parents.

Funds of £220,000 were held in this year and the overall cost of an intervention is £28.75 per family- £2.40 per visit (minimum 12 visits)

It is not possible to work out a reliable cost per head figure for the service, as each individual family has a different experience and asks for different services, but the cost per intervention is approximately £2.40 using all the available funds.

The savings made to the local authority, the tax-payer and the community are immense. SByS may be thought of in part as social prescribing. The cost of a GP visit is £200 (reported by local General Practitioner) per 8 minutes, not taking into account peripheral costs of accommodation or overheads. SByS, will save money on GP visits, where anxiety, depression and social isolation are factors that stimulate attendance at SByS.

The cost of an intervention at SByS compared to the eight minute visit (the typical length of doctor visit) is £2.40 for one and a half hours, as opposed to £200 for an 8 minute visit for a doctor; for 8 minutes including overheads (McArdle, 2018). The ratio is £ 1: 83

This figure vastly under-represents the cost effectiveness of SByS, as many SByS interventions last more than an hour and a half. Also, an eight minute doctor's appointment will frequently be followed by further appointments, typically 4 for any individual who is socially isolated.

**This suggests figures that will be close to savings to the public purse by using SByS of:
£ 1 : 332.**

Savings made by referrers also need to be taken into account; such as the financial costs and workload of community nurses, social workers and other health professionals. Qualitative savings include *inter alia* improvement in the social skills of pupils once the children go to school; quality of life in the community and community spirit; well-being of individuals and families.

It is our conclusion that SByS represents considerable value for money (VFM). There was no evidence in the accounts of expenditure unrelated to direct service provision and associated essential costs (e.g. Staff Development). It is value for money because it provides an essential service, as perceived by participants, to a significant number of people, at a relatively small cost.

It is not only the cost of doctors that must be taken into consideration. Health visitors (estimate £20 per hour; reported by health visitor) are likely, and reportedly do, make savings on repeat visits and social workers (estimate £20 per hour; reported by senior social worker) too.

Funders include National Lottery, The Robertson Trust and William Grant Foundation and private donors. We had hoped to speak to a range of funders about future planning and priorities in general for those funding community-based initiatives like SByS, but interview requests were not responded to comprehensively. However, the following information gathered from the process has proved valuable. SByS is clearly a trusted and valued organisation as repeat funding shows. The element of local funding in particular demonstrates this. It is an organisation known in the area and is well respected by stakeholders, including the church community. It has a record of achievement, has an

identity built over time and, as a Scottish Charitable Incorporated organization, it meets all its obligations. Trust between **funder** and **funded** is really important to securing ongoing financial support. One Funder described their hope as being to “fund well”. This is built on principles and intention to make a difference and have impact, which SByS can demonstrate.

A Finance Sub-committee meets regularly to provide information to trustees quarterly on financial progress. The Treasurer is a former Bank Manager. Projected finance for next 2 years shows that, without a significant increase in or reduction in expenses, SByS cannot function much beyond September 2026. The major costs are staffing and rent of premises. Relationships with existing funders are good, giving some leeway in terms of profiles of expenditure. A major funder has indicated that they will take a break from SByS after 11 years of consecutive funding; further funding is being sought to sustain SByS into 2027 and beyond.

9.4 Handling a Fine Balance

An overview of our findings and interpretation of the data finds that SByS handles a range of complex issues with a fine balance, that shows value maturity and a ‘weather eye’ on emerging issues. We have selected tensions as exemplars to illustrate this.

Firstly, there is a tension between marketing SByS for recognition and to attract more participants, at the same time as keeping the services low key to ensure people do not feel embarrassed being seen to attend. There is a waiting list of 45 families and we consider that the balance of marketing is held just about right. We consider that marketing to other providers/funders/referrers could use the Family and Community Wisdom Model to explain how family wisdom works.

A second tension is in the decision about whether to grow or remain the same size. Fear was expressed that growth might impact negatively on collegiality of the organisation. At the same time further need has been identified and there was interest from the community and stakeholders about expanding to offer a service in Keith. It is our view that this expansion would meet an identified need and, with care and balance, the collegiality, motivation of staff and quality of service would be maintained.

A third tension lies in being subtle, authentic and discreet about what happens at SByS at the same time as the need being apparent to be known, recognised and funded. There is sometimes a risk of complacency. We consider once again SByS has largely got this balance right. We were pleased to hear that SByS had been presented to other professionals about its outcomes; and we consider that more could be done of this kind of work to communicate our findings about how SByS works and is effective. The circulation of the SByS Newsletter goes a long way in this regard and this relatively recent development is seen in a very positive light. This also presents an opportunity to report on the research undertaken. We consider that to avoid smugness and to continue to improve self-evaluation should be developed as outlined in section **10**.

This handling of fine balances is impressive and shows a strong and appropriate reaction to complex issues. SByS is well led by Trustees and staff to manage these tensions well. It shows a sophistication of judgement and thoughtful deliberation has taken place.

The consideration of fine balance relates directly to sustainability. Decision making by funders over new and developing, versus existing and sustainability. Management and

Trustees deliberating over new identified need and sustaining existing provision. Management and staff considering protection of group size versus waiting lists and maintaining quality. Trustees and management taking responsibility their budget responsibilities – spend or not to spend. Holding a fine balance sits quietly under many other considerations.

We recognise that some people find it harder than others to thrive and want to pitch in that direction
(Funder interview)

We seek a balance between short and long term funding awards, with fewer new ones appearing in order to support ongoing work.
(Funder interview)

During Covid, chats were set up online on Facebook and these were designed and delivered to be similar to face to face experience. Decisions taken around this sought balance in a crisis situation, whilst observing unavoidable strict health and safety restrictions. There were always arts and crafts activities and a story as well as gardening activities for example. The organisation showed itself to be flexible to new needs. Participants report huge importance being placed on provision at that challenging time.

10. Summary of Key Strengths and Areas for Continued Development

The view of the researchers, based on what we have seen, what we have heard and what we have read, is that Step By Step is a very well run organisation with clear mission and goals, effective planning for delivery, mutual respect amongst all staff and volunteers, valued by wider stakeholders and funders with an evident impact being made on the lives of those with whom they work.

Key strengths

- Clarity of goals and purposes informed by need.
- Clear impact on families and their lives.
- Strong relationships and respect between all staff and volunteers.
- High levels of commitment from Trustees.
- Increasingly positive networks with wider stakeholders
- Efficiency in operations recognised by parents, staff and volunteers and which respects the fine balance needed to operate well.
- Effective delivery based on a consistent model which values Family Wisdom.
- Practice underpinned by visible empathy, kindness and an understanding of life challenges.

There are always elements of continued improvement for any organisation and Step by Step is no different. The researchers wish to make clear that the areas identified below for consideration do not detract from the success of the organisation. It is in this spirit that we suggest the following continue to be developed:

Areas for Continued Development

- Improve self-evaluation.
- Consider making accredited training available to staff for career progression.
- Implement succession planning for staff.

- Support volunteer gatherings.
- Maintain training records for accuracy and reliability.
- Develop staff/volunteer awareness of multi-skilling they employ as an affirmation of the complexity they manage.
- Communicate the Family and Community Model to all staff within the organisation and externally to show the sophistication of practice and the unique selling point (USP).
- Strengthen 'signposting' to other partners, to create progression for participants (e.g to employment services).

The recently published self-evaluation framework for Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) sectors is a guide to self-evaluation which helps settings identify strengths and areas for development in their practice. Whilst not formally linked into these sectors there would be benefits to SByS in referencing some of the quality indicators used to strengthen the links between their provision and early years school contexts. In short, this would demonstrate the importance of their work in stepping stages to school provision.

The framework is designed for easy access and practical application in numerous contexts with helpful questions and illustrations and can be dipped in and out of as relevant.

- **Continuous process:** Self-evaluation is a cycle of reflection and development for early learning and childcare settings.
- **Identifying strengths and areas for improvement:** It helps settings understand what they are doing well and what needs to be better.

[New Quality improvement framework for the early learning and childcare sectors | News | Education Scotland](#)



11. Conclusions

In this concluding section, we refer back to the research questions that framed the inquiry. The strengths and areas for development of SByS have been outlined above (Section 10.) These are key areas for development for the next 3 years.

The question was posed, what makes SByS so effective and different from other organisations. We were determined to answer this question. Step By Step is different from other projects, in a number of ways. The first way is that it makes use of Family Wisdom. A community exists in SByS and we all know it takes a 'village' to raise a child. The community has access to the practical lived experience of volunteers and staff to approach wellbeing, through a range of different approaches in the domains of knowledge, skills and attitudes. The intergenerational dimension of SByS contributes to this community.

SByS is also different because it manages the 'fine balance' so well. It is a sophisticated mix of vision, management and implementation that enables professional and family wisdom to facilitate problem solving and wellbeing.

Relationships are crucial to the success of SByS and underpin its fine balance. These are not always harmonious, but appear to us to be appropriately positive and critical when needed. The Family and Community Wisdom Model of SByS, in section 9, shows the empathy and virtues that contribute to the trust; trust that develops between staff/volunteers and participants. We define trust, as the 'promise of a good future relationship, all things being equal.'

Step By Step is a value for money project and through its ethos, policies and practice represents a 'safe pair of hands.' The project is unanimously seen as a positive influence in our research on people's lives in Moray. The perceptions of SByS were congruent between researched populations.

Overall, SByS was perceived very positively by respondents and we concur with this positive picture that emerges, of a finely balanced family and community organisation, with ripples fanning out into the community, underpinned by family and community wisdom.

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Appendix A – Information provided by the organisation

- List of current activities
- List of current funders
- Most recent staff survey
- Recent funding bid submissions
- Contact details – key stakeholders
- Step by Step Newsletters
- Annual Reports
- Copies of finance committee reports
- Relevant external reports

Appendix B – Policy documentation Index

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Step by Step - Research and Evaluation Project 2025

Professor Karen McArdle and Sue Briggs MBE

Questions for Project Manager

1. What is size and scale of SByS. How many participants, volunteers, locations and staff?
2. How many funders and potential funders, who are they so we can follow them up?
3. What are SByS strengths? Any limitations? Outward looking and inward looking.
4. What do you consider to be SByS's USP?
5. How well do you think SByS is doing and how do you know? How do you measure success?
6. What does the future hold for SByS – challenges and opportunities?
7. How does SByS meet community needs? Diverse communities : city, rural and Lossiemouth?
8. How can we best find out answers to our research questions? Who/What do we need to see face to face and. who/what can we do by Zoom?
9. When planning our visit for data collection, what can we do and see?

Questions for Volunteers

1. How long have you volunteered at SByS?
2. What caused you to volunteer?
3. How many hours do you volunteer in an average week?
4. Can you think of ways in which SByS is helpful to parents and/or children?
5. Can you think of ways in which SByS is unhelpful to parents and/or children?
6. How do you feel at SByS generally?
7. What has been the impact on you of SByS?
8. What advice for staff at SByS do you have?
9. How would you describe SByS to others?
10. Is there anything SByS should do - or could do better - in the future?

Questions for Staff

1. How long have you worked at SByS?
2. What made you join SByS?
3. What has made you stay?
4. What is the main purpose of SByS?
5. What skills, qualities do you bring to SByS?
6. What if any training have you had?
7. Is there any other training you would like?
8. What are SByS's key strengths?
9. What are any weaknesses of SByS?
10. What do you think SByS will be like in 5 years' time?

11. If you had 3 wishes for SByS what would they be?

Questions for Participants

1. What made you come to SByS?
2. How many children have you got and what are their ages?
3. How is SByS helpful / unhelpful?
4. What has changed, if anything, for you?
5. How do you feel at SByS?
6. What has been the impact on you?.....your child?your relationships?
7. Are you aware of any learning (knowledge, skills, qualities)?
8. Did you feel challenged by anything at SByS?
9. What advice do you have for staff/volunteers?
10. How would you describe SByS to others?
11. Is there anything SByS should do in the future?
12. Age, M/F?

Narrative Inquiry for participants (4) Volunteers

Tell me about the first time you heard about SByS.....continue

Questions for Stakeholders - including those who refer

1. Can you tell us how you know SByS? How well do you know it?
2. Can you tell us a bit about your employment? What do you do in Moray?
3. Is there poverty in Moray? Where is it located and how does it manifest itself?
4. Do you think poverty has an impact on young children?
5. SByS is about giving families a head start in life, can you see how this would work for Moray?
6. Do you recognise rural deprivation in Moray? How does this manifest itself?
7. Do you see trends in Moray that suggest things are getting either better or worse for families?
8. What is the employment level in Moray? Is this an issue for families? Do you see this getting better or worse over the next 5 years?

Specific questions for referrers:

- e.g. Why do you refer people to SByS?
What kind of people are you likely to refer?

Questions for Steering Group by Zoom

1. How long have you been associated with SByS?
2. What drew you to it in the first place?
3. What makes you stay?
4. What is the main purpose of SByS?
5. What is your role as a Reference Group member?
6. What knowledge, skills and qualities do you bring to the role?
7. What are SByS's strengths in your opinion?
8. What are the main challenges over the next 3-5 years for SByS?

9. Thinking of strategic planning, what would be the main goal for SByS over the next 3 – 5 years?
10. If you had 3 wishes for SByS what would these be?

Questions for Funders

1. What are the key aims of your organisation?
2. What is your role in the organisation?
3. Can you tell me about your Fund? Who you fund, criteria for funding, length of funding duration?
4. Often funding is short term which can be challenging for projects. What is your organisation's view and practice on this?
5. How should applicants prepare and draft applications for funding? What are the key mistakes made? And what are the characteristics of successful applications?
6. With potential austerity, more organisations will be seeking funding. What impact will austerity have on funding?
7. What are the other challenges for funders in quite troubled times?
8. Do you have any advice for organisations seeking funding in the future?

Rules

- Ensure consent forms are signed by participants
- Confirm agreement from individuals to participate in the focus group
- Confirm that the group is happy for the discussion to be recorded
- Reiterate confidentiality i.e. no names will be used; issues discussed are not to be repeated elsewhere
- Renegotiate throughout the discussion i.e. is everyone happy to continue?
- Thank everyone for participating
- Explain that the information received may be used in an Impact Report produced for SByS

Observation Schedule

- Adults happy – how do we know?
- Children happy?
- Adults learning from key worker?
- Adults learning from peers/volunteers?
- Children learning?
- Support provided by key workers?
- Support provided by volunteers?
- Any issues dealt with effectively?
- Key content relevant and attractive to parents?
- Key content relevant and attractive to children?
- Atmosphere positive?
- Safe environment?
- General comments.

Appendix D – Participant Parent Narrative Inquiry

Can you tell me about the first time you heard about Step By Step?

Eight years ago, eight years ago! That's a long time, yes. I've got 3 kids and so all three of my children have come to Step By Step. So, it's great yeah.

And how did you hear? did somebody tell you about it?

It was, actually, one of my friends that turned round and said about Step By Step in the health visiting team and all that. They mentioned Step by Step and I applied for Step By Step and got in. It is fine. It was only one of my own weans, and yeah, absolutely loved it. But you don't stay with . . . obviously moving and what not. Then I had my youngest (child's name) and came back to Step by Step. They put me in a mixed group so that I could have both boys there, which was absolutely magic and stuff. They were really attentive. If I needed to take my youngest (child's name) to go and get his bum changed they've watched the older one. To take the oldest and sort him out in the toilet they watched the younger one. Yeah, it is absolutely amazing. Then this time round they had the pregnancy group, which Tracy (staff member) got in touch for me and said that she was about to start a pregnancy group, asked if I wanted to be a part of it.

I was like sure, interesting, yeah, which is the first time they've done it. It was really good, because like we did the baby massage. Tracy (staff) turned around an option, this baby massage, yeah, we had talks about any worries and about the pregnancy, yes, and it was generally really good. And it was just a case of, like, come in have a chit chat about anything on our planet. She says right now each of us, we're at different stages of the pregnancy, yeah, and it's just it was absolutely amazing and can't really say any more than that.

Have you been to any other places?

No, I hadn't. I know the reason I came to Step By Step, was I wanted to meet other families. I had to get out of the house again, you know, have some other interaction, as well as the child. Which my child could have interaction with other children, yeah, and for his development as well as, yeah, making sure that I wasn't just blocking myself at home as a new mum. And, you can get lonely and so it was just it was more just to turn round and be able to meet new people. Yeah, trying you know to put myself out there and have some fun and quality time with, with the child. And it's just, it was absolutely amazing!

I know it was a long time ago, but can you remember what it was like when you first came in?

We were made welcome. The staff were very welcoming, you didn't have to sort of hover at the back door or anything. No, the staff was very welcoming, yeah, I will say since we've moved from Winchester House to here, it's a lot more, I feel that as well more spacious yeah, it's a lot more spacious. I feel like it's more welcoming here than Winchester 'cause it had the big ceilings, yeah, I didn't like and, not just that, I've got past with Winchester House, right, so that it was like walking into the past that wee bit as well. But, whereas here it's, it's so nice, it's so calming, it's yeah it's like a breath of fresh air. If I need to look next to the toilet a lot they'll look after the bairn and, yeah, they they're quite, they are really accommodating yeah, ah and my heart goes out to them, they're really good.

What's been the impact on you and your children? Start with you and then look at the children.

It made things better than it would have been otherwise. It has like I'm in heaven with my eldest child and I got started from there and I, originally, just wanted to lock myself away and not really do much and Step By step has made me not want to be just sat in the house all the time with, yeah, kids. I want to, I want to be able to do stuff which is good for you and it just, overall, it makes me feel better even with my, with me having anxiety and stuff. It's yeah it's like I said, it's like a breath of fresh air and it's why it's so calming. So I just it's like walking home it's like opening to a family home, yeah, which is great. And that that's the best way I can describe it, is it's like walking, into your family home. and if you're, looking at how that, at that, has impacted children it does. When you're stressed out and you're anxious, children can pick up on it. Whereas when you're coming in to relax, they're relaxed, able to enjoy themselves. Yes, it's, it makes it, makes him so much easier. (Child's name) he didn't get to finish going to Step By Step because of obviously COVID but Step By Step helped so much through COVID .

And they were so attentive to make sure that all the families were taken care of and doing well. Able to still do activities with their children, yeah, which blossom, made lockdown so much easier for me, yeah. I just I couldn't be any more grateful to Step By Step for it, yeah. Like my daughter, as soon as I say too much all over, right we're gonna go Step By Step today and her face lights up she, she knows where she is; it's almost like she knows where she's going; she comes in at the door and has just got a big breaking smile on her face.

What did she like about it? what do you think it is that makes this matter?

Just how welcoming and home warm this place is as a child, like, she can go and play in what she wants a lot. I know that she's on the move she doesn't have to just sit in one place 'cause at the moment we have 2 bedrooms, so she's limited to the space that she's got, yeah? Whereas when we come here she's got room right, yeah, to crawl around and, yes, (child's name) yeah everything and it helps with her development. And she tries foods here; things, yes I might be a little bit wary about buying at home, yeah, in case she doesn't like it, and like she absolutely loves her melon, absolutely loves it. It's an unusual thing for a child to like, but it's great that she does. She loves cucumber, so I'll do like long sticks at home though yeah and firm. All these trying things isn't just trying all these different foods, but I might not feel ready to give her at home, yeah. Whereas here it's, like, I feel a lot more relaxed, because I know that if anything was wrong and all that, that I have this Thursday. Yeah, it makes me feel more at ease trying to restore myself. So, it's quite good. . . yeah overlaps for myself because I know that if anything was tough enough, I could call in the support. Yeah, there's people, a lot of people, volunteers as well as their Family workers.

I've been here for two days and one thing I think is that Step By Step for the children is going to be a really good preparation for school. What do you think about that?

Because one, you see them with a lot of other children, not a lot, but other children and two, that they get to know that they that they get to have quiet times and not quiet times and the three, that they can join in singing and all that kind of thing it's a really good start 'cause, yes, because well with my youngest, he only was here for about a year for obviously it (Covid) struck and then he had to go to nursery , yeah, lockdown and all that was lifted; it was nursery time, yes like that, so it was a case of he went into nursery and he's, he's still boisterous, yeah hyperactive and all this and I just I feel now that all that's going to be a little

bit more straightforward, yeah and it will be just a gentle easing into senses sort of thing, hopefully yeah.

Is there anything you don't like about Step by Step or you think could be better?

No, not really because they form the main thing. I would turn around really do for them being here right, yes. It makes a difference when you're walking in, doesn't it? Yeah, huge and, like Winchester House was, it was nice and always there, but wasn't really space for like the rummage room yes or anything like that and here this thing called the rummage room, which is absolutely amazing.

Do you have to ask to use the rummage room or is it just you just go and do it?

No, you can just go in and do it, so there's no stigma about using stuff from the rummage room. No it's fine, it's just straightforward yeah that's great, yeah.

Yeah, I do take things and it's normally like leggings and, yeah, the food that I love it more than anything else, but that it's not just for toddlers and babies . Also got for other children yes, which I absolutely love. And so they've had like shoes and now I've managed to get hold of really nice shoes for my older son and, and he's absolutely loving them. Oh, that's great when they came in and out he'd actually just gone through his shoes that night, it was perfect timing and yet it's brilliant because it helps it helps us, it helps families that are struggling. I, I just absolutely love that about it and the fact that when I am struggling I can, I know, I can come in. I can pick up a couple of extra bits and bobs yeah when they've been. Yeah, I'm like I donate stuff too. Beforehand, it was only had a small little space for like 10 goods. Stuff like that helps farmers out with good food, food items. (Name of staff member) is great, in that is it's not always with items that you need, yes and I've got this place and it's bigger. I generally think that they they've done amazing with, with everything here it's looks like it's a lot more welcoming. It's, I feel like it's more spacious, yeah,

I want you to imagine that I'm one of your friends and you're telling me about Step By Step.

I would highly recommend it. I would say that Step By Step is absolutely amazing! You've got them . . . they're a dream to be able to get stuff. You've got an area where the kids can play; they get their story time and sing songs. And it's not provided for the kids, but I will use, could have tea, coffee, water. And then you've also got the activity where you get depending on the age of the child, you get to do arts and crafts and to do rice sensory play. Yes, they try and make it as age appropriate as possible yeah and so it's like, a couple weeks ago, we did hand painting. We made little flowers and painted flowers yeah and of course (child's name) is not even one yet, she can't do it herself exactly. But just they are trying like holding hands with a paintbrush and trying to do it is absolutely amazing it's from yeah and it's very welcoming yeah I would recommend it I would highly recommend.

Do you think Step By Step should be doing anything in addition to what they do?

They got this wonderful thing they do with the families and stuff. You think about it, partially because I've got older children. I can't come Step by Step and it mars the holidays. Yes, so I do think they should be in, there should be a thing for like parents. I've got older children, yes, so they're in like primary school and all that and they can't be left alone. The mum could still

that the older kids could come through the holidays so that you can still do it yes. And I do think that would be a great idea and opportunity and it would help a lot of families out as well, yeah, because it would mean that people could still come out with their younger one, yes, and the elder ones will be looked after. Yeah, even if it was just the case of like having once in like the reading room and all that, with some bold, older games. Yeah not, not get what you do, yeah with the younger children. I think that would be great and I think it would be quite good and then help support families a wee bit as well, yeah.

If they had an online support for people when they leave Step By Step would you do that?

I'm checking the Facebook group or something that was where we checked in every so often that usual diamond, like they did in COVID.

Would that be a useful thing do you think?

I mean face to face is better, but it's a lot of people especially like myself are, don't do so great. I've got mental health problems, yes. OK, so if it's just a quick message; you know that it's easier to lie on a message, yes, then it is, yeah face to face that's right

Is there anything about Step By Step that we haven't talked about, that you think's important that we haven't covered?

it's important to tell them just that they're doing an amazing job, yeah, it seems that way everybody's saying, so grateful for them yes, yes that's terrific.

Thank you very much for your time; I appreciated your opinions and you'll be able to see the report when I have finished.



