



The Red Hen Project



Independent External Evaluation

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Executive Summary

This evaluation has focused on the work of The Red Hen Project in the CB4 area of Cambridge over the past two years. The evaluation draws together the views and opinions of a range of people involved in various ways with the Project sought during late summer and early Autumn 2021.

This report is based on the views and opinions from a number of sources listed in the introduction, including surveys and phone interviews with parents and carers, staff and trustees, heads and other school staff, other agencies and partners, and a Zoom interview with a child.

There is **remarkable coherence in the overwhelmingly positive views and opinions** that people have expressed about the project. There is a **strong picture of a much-appreciated organisation**, with the parents, schools and other organisations speaking incredibly highly of the project, its workers and its impact. People from different perspectives had similar perceptions of the project; these consistent views are a good indication that Red Hen clearly conveys to people the message of what it is about and what it does.

This small-scale, predominantly qualitative evaluation has found that the project has **successfully built relationships with families and has provided them with support tailored to their needs**. They report considerable benefits to themselves, their children and their family life.

I like to think it has benefited my son, well, all of them. My greater confidence helped him at school. The support I got helped me support him better. I was able to help him more because of the help I was getting.

Parent

The organisation's **clear and shared value base** and how the workers put this into practice are seen as the key ingredients to enabling Red Hen to support parents often at tough times of their lives. Their values inform their approach, and **they can engage with parents who often find it challenging to access support in other ways**.

A wide range of outcomes was identified by parents.

Parents said that as a result of working with Red Hen they:

- **had more confidence in their parenting**
- **learnt and implemented parenting strategies to deal with children's challenging behaviour**
- **were better able to address problems at school**
- **had greater understanding of different aspects of family situations**
- **had experienced improved relationships within the family**
- **reduced stress**
- **increased their understanding of their children**
- **helped them learn and implement better ways of speaking with their children**
- **increased their self-esteem and self-confidence.**

It has been a very big help. We feel very supported. I think [worker] gets us and understands us. She is not on anyone's side. We both feel listened to. She gives us ideas of how to approach things and then we try them out ourselves.

Parent

These were also strongly supported by school staff.

Red Hen helps with routines that help children at school. Bedtime routines mean they will be less tired, a morning routine means they come to school having had breakfast. Routines help with having time to read and write it in the reading diary. All these things can make home calmer and more settled and relaxing and so children come to school better able to get the most out of it.

School staff

Parents only used the top numbers 6-10 when asked how helpful Red Hen has been to them, using a scale of 1 to 10, with **74% of the 69 parents ranking Red Hen's helpfulness as 10**, (where 10 is very helpful). As evidenced by this evaluation, Red Hen is very satisfactorily meeting all of its aims.

Sometimes parents do not have the confidence to engage with school; they are not confident around school. Often, they had a bad time at school themselves. This can show in all sorts of ways – distance, aggression, absence. Red Hen helps bridge that gap. Red Hen gives parents knowledge and information about school, they can attend meetings with parents and help them prepare what they want to say.

School staff

Major challenges to the work of Red Hen were seen to be the lack of other complimentary or more specialised support for families. When available these had limited capacity, and high thresholds of access restrict their usefulness. In addition, levels of poverty facing families greatly increased challenges.

There was **minimal identification of gaps or developments that could be pursued**; these suggestions do not undermine the high level of provision overall. Rather they provide goals to aim for to achieve an ever-improving service in the future.

However, the one challenge that is clearly articulated by Trustees and managers is the financial security and sustainability of the model in the future. The evaluation shows that there are a range of options that could be considered, but great care will need to be taken to ensure that options do not change the essential essence of Red Hen. Its values, its local embeddedness and connections, and its ability to tailor support to the specific needs of each family are what makes it so valuable to the community.

One thing that makes it work is it is local people doing local work. There are a number of parents that used to get support from Red Hen that now volunteer – they are great ambassadors for Red Hen. When other parents hear them talk about what Red Hen helped them with, it says a lot. The local reputation is excellent.

School staff

Red Hen **manages a complex set of relationships with several schools, Early Help and other funders** extremely well. In addition, it has **excellent relationships with other agencies** it works in partnership with to support families in the area. All these agencies included in the evaluation spoke very highly of the work, and felt Red Hen was meeting its objectives and also supporting them in achieving their own.

Red Hen have the community attachment and work well to integrate families back into community support and reduce reliance on professionals. This is an area of work Early Help used to do, but no longer has any capacity for. Without it, Early Help was seeing more re-referrals back into Early Help and Social Care, as once professional support finished there was nothing. But Red Hen with the groups and signposting, for example to sports activities for children or parent's groups, do this well. They connect a family back into the community.

Other agency

If that leaflet had not been put in my bag I don't know where we would be as a family now, I don't know what life would be like. Then turning up at a coffee morning seemed impossible; I needed another adult who was kind and friendly and reassuring telling me I was doing OK. We would not be doing half the things we are today without that leaflet. They have had a super positive impact on the whole family, but most particularly me.

Parent

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 The evaluation

Practical Participation was commissioned by The Red Hen Project to undertake an external evaluation of its work with families in the CB4 area of Cambridge. The evaluation was undertaken by Jennie Fleming of Practical Participation (www.practicalparticipation.co.uk).

It was a predominantly qualitative evaluation seeking the views and opinions of those involved - parents, the staff and trustees of Red Hen, school staff and workers from other agencies with knowledge of Red Hen's work.

This report is based on the views and opinions from the sources listed below.

- 69 surveys were completed by parents on Red Hen summer trips. Not all gave information about themselves, but of the 55 who did, one was a grandparent, the rest were parents; 45 of these were female and nine were male. The majority of these families started working with Red Hen over the past two years.
- 11 telephone interviews were conducted with parents. Eight mothers, one father and two grandmothers were interviewed. These were either identified by Red Hen or offered themselves to be contacted via the survey. The evaluation questions asked about their views and experiences of Red Hen and any impact this had on them and their families.
- There was one Zoom video interview with a child.
- Seven members of staff were interviewed via Zoom or telephone.
- Four trustees of Red Hen were interviewed on the telephone. One was also a previous user of the Project, and one was also a previous head teacher of a participating school.
- Two school heads and three liaison workers were interviewed via Zoom.
- Three workers from other agencies were interviewed via Zoom.
- One external trainer was interviewed by phone.
- A review of documentation and data provided by the project was also undertaken.

Zoom meetings were recorded with permission and detailed notes were taken during the interviews and typed up immediately. The quotes throughout the report come from these sources.

This is a slightly edited version of the external evaluation of the work of The Red Hen Project undertaken by Practical Participation in October 2021.

1.2 The Red Hen Project

The vision of Red Hen is to improve life chances and support families from dependence to independence.

The evaluation relates to the aims of Red Hen which are:

- support families and children and improve life chances
- help families move from dependence to independence
- nurture positive parenting skills in our families and the wider community
- foster social integration, access and participation, thus reducing social isolation
- co-ordinate support in a focused way, promoting interagency liaison and co-operation
- enable families to seek appropriate support from other agencies.
- advance the education of children by helping to remove barriers to learning
- prevent truancy and exclusions and encourage parental involvement in their children's learning
- build more positive relationships between families, their schools and the community.

2.0 Outputs

Outputs refer to the activities of Red Hen, the things it does to support children and families.

The Red Hen Project is a small local charity that has been working with primary school children in North Cambridge for over 23 years. Our family workers support children and their families to overcome barriers to learning, providing a link between home and school. We work one-to-one in their home, at school, and in the community and also run a range of outreach group activities; drop-ins, groups, parenting courses, workshops, family activities, trips, and volunteer opportunities.

We focus on the individual needs of each child and their families; there is no 'one size fits all' approach. The Project prioritises one-to-one support, complemented by peer support, and help families to become independent. This may include addressing behaviour difficulties, reluctance to attend school, routines, accessing out-of-school activities, problems with housing, benefits, debts, relationship breakdown, domestic violence, or anything else that makes life difficult for children and parents.

The Red Hen Project offers a range of support and activities for families with primary aged children in the CB4 area.

www.redhenproject.org

2.1 One-to-one support

Offered via casework which takes place over several months, focusing on the specific needs of each family, and as one-off support on a very specific issue for some families

The families for the tailored intensive one-to-one case work are referred by one the three schools that contract with Red Hen or the County Council via the City Early Help Team Manager. The aim is to prevent families from falling into crisis and move families to independence. The types of issues families might be supported with include child behaviour, developing routines, housing issues, debt, domestic violence, mental health issues, children with special needs.

They have helped me loads with bedtime routine, getting out of the house and generally having someone to talk to.

We have the support mainly with our 11-year-old who has got lots of issues with anxiety and no sense of the consequences of his actions. Don't know what we would have done without Red Hen, we would not have known what to do and how to manage. It really helped him – and us.

Parents

Many parents spoke of the significant difference the one-to-one support has made to them and their families. Parents and school staff identified that the ability of Red Hen workers to be flexible and adjust to each family's needs was crucial. The Red Hen workers do not have fixed timescales they must keep to and are able to work with a family for as long as necessary, within reason.

One to one support is also offered on a short-term basis to families facing a specific issue such as food or fuel poverty, moving house and benefits claims. This advice and support is offered to numerous families – both those who had worked with Red Hen intensively with a family worker in the past, and those new to Red Hen, many of whom self-refer to the Project. This support is much appreciated by families when they are coming to the end of the intensive support as it reassures them that support will continue to be available.

The long-term case work is offered to families referred by the three partner schools and referrals from Early Help (part of Cambridgeshire County Council), both of which contribute funding for this work

2.2 Practical help

One of the key strengths of Red Hen is its ability to respond quickly to real needs of families, especially those experiencing financial difficulties.

Practical help comes in many forms, including:

- A bag of essential household items in a crisis
- a box of fresh fruit and vegetables
- a foodbank voucher
- occasional help with topping up fuel metres
- a referral to a charity to help with children's clothes
- help at Christmas with gifts for children
- applying for individual grants to cover the unexpected, for example a washing machine breaking down
- help with school uniform when a child has a growth spurt
- help getting to the Citizens Advice Bureau, and someone to entertain the children while a parent has a meeting.

During COVID Red Hen were really supportive. Dropping things round for the kids to do.

Parent

They have such great community links – they can access things like food and clothing or white goods from charities they know of.

School staff

2.3 Groups

Monday 'Stay and Play' sessions (also known as Coffee Mornings) run throughout term-time. This is a session where parents and carers can come for breakfast, a cup of tea and a chat. Parents spoke of this session very highly. They valued being able to chat to the family workers about any issues or concerns and also meeting with other parents. The start time (8.45am) was appreciated as it is convenient straight after school drop-off.

The coffee morning was great – the timing was perfect. You could go straight from school drop-off. It was close to school and local, nice staff and good things for the kids to do. I met parents there I would not have otherwise know. It is open to everyone – it is so diverse – like the community. A real range of people go. Whatever social and economic circumstances, we are all parents and that is what we have in common.

She [family worker] tried to get me to go to the coffee mornings, but I was reluctant. Parents' groups full of people that all you have in common with is you are parents. Eventually I did go, and someone offered to make me a piece of toast and get me a cup of tea – I nearly cried – someone doing something for me! The other parents there were great; it was not one of those fake groups, where everyone is pretending everything is OK.

I could say I got a cup thrown at me this morning because it was the wrong colour and they understood things like that had happened to them. You could turn up in yesterday's T shirt and still feel ok. There was no pretence; you can be as vulnerable as you need to be as the other parents let you know they are as vulnerable too.

Parents

Thursday drop-in is a relatively new session developed in response to the pandemic when the space for our Monday group was unavailable. As the name suggests, families can drop in for a cup of tea and a chat. The sessions often have a topic for parents and carers to discuss. At present, this session needs booking due to COVID restrictions. Like the Monday session, parents said they valued the opportunity to meet other parents and get support from workers and parents, as well as a chance for their children to play.

I mainly use the Thursday drop-in – the friendly atmosphere, the children get free space to play. It has given me the chance to have quality time with my [child].

Parent

The drop-in groups can be used for families to stay in touch with Red Hen once one-to-one work has finished. This was appreciated by parents and school staff.

The drop-ins are particularly useful as it means that families don't feel completely alone once their case is closed. It gives them an opportunity to touch base with them every now and then.

School staff

We have started making the Drop-ins more of a 'surgery' where workers are available for advice, or we have a speaker. Parents get to know they can come and ask a question or for some help. The workers then might say, 'speak with x she has had the same issue, see what she did'. All part of that building the supportive community. For some those little snippets of advice, the knowing someone is there to check things out with can prevent them re-emerging as a 'case'.

Trustee

I met other workers at the Coffee morning. They are all friendly and talk with you and play with the kids. I know if I asked a question of any of the workers, they would be able to help me, or put me in contact with someone who could.

Parent

2.4 Family trips

Red Hen offers trips over the summer holidays and other activities throughout the year. Many families would not otherwise be able to get out of Cambridge. This year trips were organised to Wickstead Park and a maize maze. These are much appreciated as many families do not have the ability to get out themselves.

I like the days out that everyone can afford. They bring people together to socialise.

The trips were amazing; I had no car then and would never have been able to give the boys experiences like that. They were just brilliant. You can stick with others or go off on your own, knowing you will come across people you know. Again, this year the trip will be the only thing we do this summer. This will be true for others too. For some it will be they can't afford it or for others the fact their workers and other families are there to help if you need it; they would never do it without Red Hen.

Parents

The value of the trips and activities was recognised by school staff also.

The trips are really valuable to families. They further the experiences of our children who would not have those otherwise.

School staff

2.5 Cooking Groups

Club Cook is a group where parents and children cook together. With COVID-19, meeting together in person was not possible, so Red Hen developed a new virtual cooking club for families managing a tight budget. This was spoken of highly by parents that had used it.

My son loves the food. He keeps saying "I want the Red Hen food". Usually, he is such a picky eater – but will always eat the food from the Red Hen sessions. He likes preparing the food with me. On Sundays we bake, and he often joins me in preparing a meal.

Parent

2.6 Parenting Courses

A number of parents who took part in the evaluation had attended the **8-week 'Raising Children' parenting course** and valued what they had learnt from it. Some reported that they regularly used information and techniques they had learnt from the course.

I have done the parenting course, still use things from that at home. Some of the ideas were really good.

Parent

Workshops are run on a variety of topics such as sibling rivalry, bedtimes, building resilience, making mealtimes fun, cooking on a budget. Parents spoke of how they found these useful.

I have picky eaters, and this really helped, changed my attitude to mealtimes, changed how we approached the table. I was more encouraging and less cross: if they didn't want to eat – fine, 'try one bite and then you can go'. They stopped being a battle. Things like a ketchup smiley face, I would never have thought of that. It is OK for meals to be fun.

Parent

2.7 Signposting

The **Red Hen Facebook Page** provides information about events, talks, activities internally and externally. Parents said they used the Facebook page for information, activities and Project events.

2.8 Volunteering

Opportunities for parents, carers and grandparents who feel able to **volunteer** are offered by Red Hen. Those people who have taken up these opportunities valued them highly. Volunteering increased self-esteem, gave people the chance to give back to Red Hen and develop new skills.

Before COVID they did Cook Club in the school kitchen, and everyone would come together and cook, and I would do some drawing or something with the children. But now it is online, so I have delivered the food for the Cook Club sessions.

Carer and volunteer



3.0 The outcomes for children and their families of working with Red Hen

Information for this section comes from all those who took part in the evaluation - parents themselves, school staff, Red Hen staff and trustees and staff from other agencies.

A wide range of outcomes were identified by parents.

Parents said that as a result of working with Red Hen they:

- had more confidence in their parenting
- learnt and implemented parenting strategies to deal with children's challenging behaviour
- were better able to address problems at school
- had greater understanding of different aspects of family situations
- had experienced improved relationships within the family
- reduced stress
- increased their understanding of their children
- helped them learn and implement better ways of speaking with their children
- increased their self-esteem and self-confidence.

3.1 More effective parenting

Parents spoke of **parenting more effectively** due to Red Hen support.

I use different methods now after the parenting course. The parenting course gave us different ideas to try after each meeting.

I am more able to parent effectively and am calmer with the children.

I have managed to control my child's attitude a lot better with different techniques and keeping us busy each week with Cook Club.

It has helped us understand the children and each other better. The support has been amazing – just to be able to talk to someone that is understanding and sympathetic.

Parents

3.2 Increased Confidence

Parents said feeling **more confident in their parenting** and being overall less anxious helped them and their children.

I am more confident as a parent. We talk more openly as a family.

They have helped with my child's sleep routine and my confidence.

Being able to have confidence in disciplining the children myself.

I am much less anxious when problems do arise, I know how to deal with them, or if I can't I have people I can ask.

Parents

One parent said:

It is not a magic wand. Their behaviour is still challenging – it is not going to go away but I understand it better and have ways of managing things that I did not have before. I do actually use the ideas and things I have learnt - everyday.

Parent

The **increased confidence** reported led to wider outcomes for some parents. Examples included attending groups and being able to better support their children.

I feel able to attend groups due to greater confidence and meet with other parents.

I like to think it has benefited my son, well, all of them. My greater confidence helped him at school. The support I got helped me support him better. I was able to help him more because of the help I was getting.

Parents

This greater confidence was observed by school staff who also saw benefits for the whole family.

When a mother's self-esteem and self-worth increases it changes the children too; we see it in school.

We see improved relationships within the family.

School staff

In some cases, the increased parental confidence led to very significant changes for the family.

After about 18 months of visits and two years of coffee mornings I now feel I can be a parent and feel human again.

They gave me more confidence as a parent to leave an abusive relationship

Parents

3.3 Engaging more positively with school and other agencies

Some parents spoke of how the support from Red Hen helped them **participate actively in meetings at school or with social care**.

The Family Worker comes to the TAF (Team Around the Family) meetings and helps me put across what I want to say. Also, with meetings at school. My child was attending part-time, and it was increasing really slowly; with their support it is now full-time again.

Parent

School staff shared this perception that with Red Hen support, families could **engage more positively with school**. Because of the increased knowledge and confidence of parents and better routines at home, children arrived at school more able to participate.

Sometimes parents do not have the confidence to engage with school; they are not confident around school. Often, they had a bad time at school themselves. This can show in all sorts of ways – distance, aggression, absence. Red Hen helps bridge that gap. Red Hen gives parents knowledge and information about school, they can attend meetings with parents, help them prepare what they want to say.

Red Hen helps with routines that help children at school. Bedtime routines mean they will be less tired, a morning routine means they come to school having had breakfast. Routines help with having time to read and write it in the reading diary. All these things can make home calmer and more settled and relaxing and so children come to school better able to get the most out of it.

Lots of parents need support in early parenting techniques. Families may not have good routines – about food, about bedtimes, about medication. Red Hen does such a good job of supporting the development of such routines. We then notice the effects at school.

We typically refer to help with bedtime routines, getting to school in the morning, eating habits, parents with low self-esteem. Red Hen supports the families in addressing these and developing routines. We notice it in children being more settled when they arrive at school, parents being less anxious, parents engaging better with school. They are soft, but important measures.

School staff

3.4 Improved outcomes for children

School staff recognised the range of issues the Red Hen staff support families with that lead to **improved outcomes for the children**.

They help families get re-housed, find them help and advice with bills and finance so people can move, they support women fleeing domestic violence. They found a charity to clear a woman's rent arrears so the family could move away from a violent partner. They family are now safe and settled.

Often it is other pressures that are causing the problems at home. Money and debt are big ones. By supporting families manage their finances better, for example, they can focus more on the children and family life.

Our primary aim is to provide education, but we can see that some children just cannot access the education because of things at home. We know if a family is not functioning at home, they won't at school. Without Red Hen those families would not be able to access education properly. The main issues families face are money and parental mental health. After the third lockdown we noticed a real dip in many parents' mental health.

School staff

3.4.1 One child was spoken to as part of the evaluation. The conversation with them has been edited into the **case study** below.

A ten-year-old child was feeling sad and upset and their family and school were worried about her negative feelings. She had had support from Blue Smile, a mental health agency, and did not reach the thresholds for CAMHS¹.

The child started meeting one-to-one with a Red Hen Family Support Worker who described the work as focused on trying to change her thought patterns and see more positive things around her. The child said,

"It was scary at first. I was worried she might be mean. But she wasn't, she was kind. I could speak with her about things.

We did talking and art. We did painting, scratching a blackboard to make pictures, a Happy Book I think it was called and talked about feelings and all that. We talked about confidence, and she helped me with my anxiety and worries. Yes, it helped me when I started. I was sad and upset; now I feel really happy. I write in the Happy Book every night; I think I will keep doing that.

I enjoyed it all, none of it was difficult. [Worker] was sweet and kind and easy to talk to. Every time we talked, she had this big grin on her face. It has finished now; I feel a bit upset about that as I enjoyed the time with her. I enjoyed the trip to McDonald's at the end – it was a nice outing."

The Red Hen worker is considering further support as the one-on-one work has finished, possibly the Big Sibling Support programme. They will continue to work with the family and there will be some sessions that include the child.

"[Child] has gone from strength to strength – initially they hated their teacher and so I asked them to think of the good things about her, but each came with a 'but. . .' However, now they have a much better relationship with the teacher and are pleased she will be their teacher again next year. [Child] is so much more smiley and positive. I am giving them a new journal today too, as they have filled up their other one."

(edited from conversation)

¹Cambridgeshire's Child and Adolescent Mental Health Team

3.4.2 Children's Feedback

The Project's own records for the last three years include **feedback forms from children**. On these the majority of children indicated that things had improved regarding how happy they feel at school, how they feel after sharing their feelings, whether things are better at home, parents being happier with how things are going and their enjoyment of things outside school. No children said there had been no change. Some children took the opportunity to elaborate on their rankings.

[Worker] helped with my relationship with mum, mum is trusting me more.

She helped me with cards, and the calm. These help me when I am angry.

Relaxing strategy - manage my emotions better having my squishy ball with me.

I liked that she helped me to be on time at school. I am also happy that she gave me a chart and I get a reward at the end of the week. She also paid a bit of my bed money. (RH sourced a grant for a new bed)

Children

Red Hen staff also observed changes arising from their interventions in families at home, in schools and in the wider community.

The impact of the work that we do is that we see parents be more confident and able to cope at home. As their struggles become more or less dealt with, they have the capacity to do more other things and the children start to arrive at school on time, in clean uniform, do reading at home and all those things that contribute to achievement. We see happier parents and happier children. They are more open and talking more.

The parents we work with have generally not got a great relationship with school. Many had a difficult time themselves in their own schooling. It is about helping them overcome their fear, realise that schools are not the enemy and start to build a more positive relationship between them. We will go to meetings with the school with parents, we might make that first call to get things started, and start building that bridge, but mainly it is about helping them do things for themselves. Once parents have a more positive relationship with school, or even just one staff member they are more able to engage and hear what the school is saying.

Red Hen staff

3.5 Improvement in accessing support from other agencies

Red Hen also helps families access services such as housing, legal services, mental health support or debt advice. Getting support from these agencies was recognised as having a positive impact on families.

It can be overwhelming to try and access services. Just picking up the phone to make a GP appointment can be too much for some people, so they do not get access to the counselling that they need. Or for the Law Centre so they do not get the legal advice they need. We help them make those first moves.

Families are embarrassed and ashamed by debt. We build up the relationship and tell them they are not alone, they are not the only one facing this; it is not your fault. Once they have been in contact with CAB and got debt advice, there is so much less stress there is time and energy to do more for the children. The children pick up on anxiety in the household and so may play up, and this can get better as parents get support with the issues they are facing.

Many of our parents have their own traumas from childhood that have not been dealt with and that affect their ability to be good parents. They may not have had good experiences of childhood themselves, or role models of how to be parents. Being a parent can trigger things for them – but once they have therapy, or counselling or sometimes awareness is enough, they can begin to change things.

Red Hen staff

Parents identified that Red Hen helped them **access other support**.

We have had access to other support – like Blue Smile.

Parent

School staff likewise pointed to Red Hen having access to a wide range of contacts that could provide **additional support for families** – winter coats, school uniform, and grants. One of the Red Hen staff also identified their database of local organisations as a real asset in the work.

There are issues around attendance, lateness, uniform. One family referred to us as the children came in non-uniform clothes and often dirty clothes. When we went in and spoke to them, it became clear they did not have the money for school uniform and were very embarrassed about this and did not want it known. We were very quickly able to get all the children uniform and other clothes from GrowKids. It was not the parents were not bothered; they just did not know where to turn. Often, we can find very quick ways to take some pressure off a family in one small area and then things ease all round.

Red Hen staff

3.6 Greater knowledge and understanding about their children and child development

Some parents spoke of having tools and knowledge that they could use.

There are topics to learn about and discuss. Things like sleep, relaxation. Even if they are not relevant to me right now there is always something I can take from them. Like how to get children to open up and talk when something seems to be worrying them. I have changed the way I speak with my child about that now.

It has been a very big help. We feel very supported. I think [worker] gets us and understands us. She is not on anyone's side. We both feel listened to. She gives us ideas of how to approach things and then we try them out ourselves.

Parents

3.7 Reduced Isolation

Many parents spoke of the importance of not **feeling they were alone** as a result of Red Hen support. They attributed this to the support of workers.

We feel like someone cares. We feel part of something. We feel reassured we are not the only family that needs help.

Parent

They give you support and you do not feel so alone as there is someone who understands your circumstances. When you feel a bit down with it all they will listen and offer advice, but you don't feel judged, and you realise you are not alone.

Grandparent

Feeling less alone was also attributed to **meeting other parents in similar situations** at Red Hen groups and activities.

At the drop-ins you get support from the other parents and the workers – it is a nice balance. Different people have different takes, and different ideas, it is good to have different people to bounce off. Other people are in a similar situation, everyone has a reason for being there. We are a small group, and it feels like a family. Particularly during COVID it has been good to have that to look forward to. I sometimes think, I can't wait till Thursday.

Parent

3.8 Increased access to educational opportunities.

School staff identified a range of ways they noticed the impact of Red Hen's work on children and **increased their ability to get the most out of school.**

We notice improvement in attendance, improved mental health.

We see children being more positive, coping better with emotions, less anxious. We see the benefits at school.

Absolutely their work supports the children's engagement in education. Much of the work might be done at home, but we see the benefits in school. Attendance does improve.

School staff

3.9 Improved connection with local community

Parents told of feeling more **connected with the local community**, and so meeting more parents in similar situations. This could be particularly important to people suffering with anxiety.

They let us know about things that are going on, so we get to meet other parents and relate to others in the same situation.

I suffer with anxiety, and I am being supported in trying to take part in events.

I find it hard to take myself out of the home, but I feel like I am getting better.

I am shy and find it difficult to speak with people I don't know well. Through Red Hen I have had contact with more families and now I know faces. It makes it easier to smile and say help or speak at the school gates. It makes me feel safer.

I mix with people I would not otherwise know.

Parents

3.10 Increased uptake in volunteering

Some of the parents and grandparents spoken with had gone on to **become volunteers** with Red Hen.

I now volunteer with Red Hen. In lockdown I delivered food parcels. I am so proud I can give something back to the organisation that helped me so much at a really difficult time.

Grandparent

It started slowly. I was going to the group and after a while I would offer to cut the bananas or do the washing up. Then one of the workers might say, 'That person over there, they are new. Why don't you go over and explain what we do here?' It was a gradual thing over about 2 years. No one ever pushed me, but it was possible because of their support.

Parent

Red Hen staff also acknowledged how some **parent's transition to being helpers** at the groups and then other volunteer roles had a positive impact.

We see parents moving to be volunteers. For example, at the coffee mornings. Some parents come in after dropping the children off at school and slump down, staff will go and speak with them, but we see that other parents who are in a better place at the time go and speak with them. We did not make this happen, it was something parents did themselves. Supporting rather than being supported does amazing things for people. The knowledge you can help others can have an amazing effect. It can lead to many changes, including opening up horizons and ultimately them being in a position to work.

Red Hen staff

3.11 Access to new experiences

Parents pointed to the trips, and other experiences they got through Red Hen being extremely valuable, giving **new experiences** and happy family time.

They have encouraged me to do things that I might not have had the confidence to do. Me and the kids have had such a tough time, things like the trips have been amazing to us as we have been able to be happy together and start making happy memories.

We have done things and been to new places we would not normally go.

The trips are great. Red Hen sent round free tickets for the theatre, and we went. [Child] loved it. It is not the kind of thing we could afford to do, so it was an experience [child] would never have had without Red Hen. This is true for many families on the trips. If it were not for Red Hen, they would have nowhere to go over the holidays.

Parents

3.12 Increased cooking skills

Many parents said they had increased their **knowledge of cooking** and now cooked less from tins and more from fresh ingredients.

More homemade cooking and a different approach to life.

We use the cookbook and really enjoy it.

Making food time more fun, it is not such a chore.

Parents

3.13 Reduction in hardship

Families also mentioned the **reduction in hardship** due to the practical help in terms of food parcels and activity packs during COVID.

They were a massive help with things like the food parcels, the veg boxes and the things for cooking with the kids. The activity boxes with craft stuff for the kids. They were all a godsend when we were struggling in lockdown.

Parent

3.14 Challenges to Achieving Outcomes

Sometimes, despite the support of Red Hen, the desired outcomes do not come about. This can be for a number of reasons as the following quotes illustrate.

Red Hen might have advised and supported and advised and supported and still nothing changes. Then it might need to go to Social Care. Sometimes things just bounce off parents, they nod and appear to be listening – but never implement a change. For some parents there are very complex and deep-rooted issues. Sometimes related to their own childhood and upbringing. I don't know there is anything more they can do in some situations – they can just offer advice and support, but if parents do not respond or adapt, they cannot enforce it. If they became more dogged or forceful many parents would just withdraw.

It is not all success stories though. Sometimes families are not able to change things enough and we then work together and may need to refer some to Child Support.

School staff

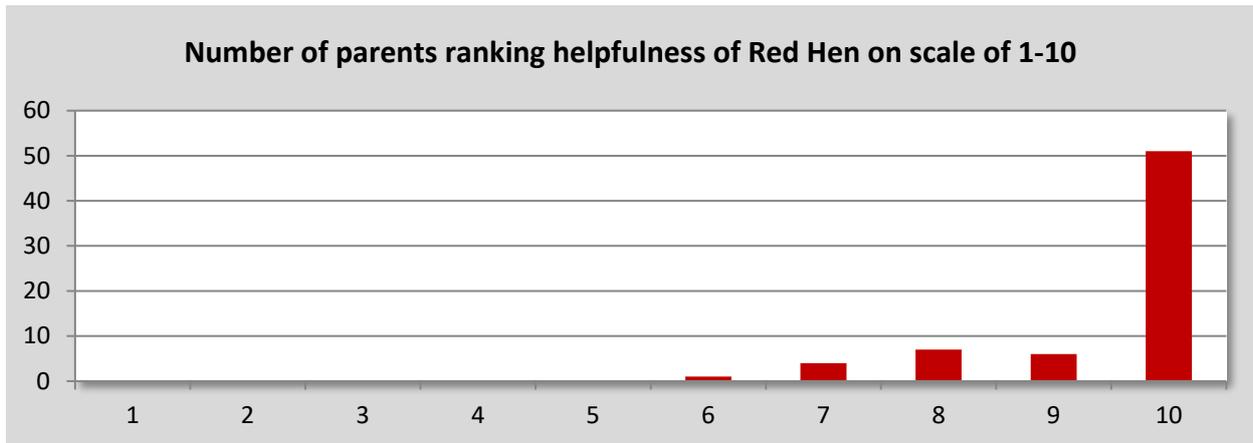
Sometimes the issues facing parents never really go away.

For some families the barriers never go away. They bounce around a lot of different services. But through Red Hen they are connected with somewhere they trust, and they know they can come back to us, or call.

Red Hen staff

3.15 Helpfulness of Red Hen Support

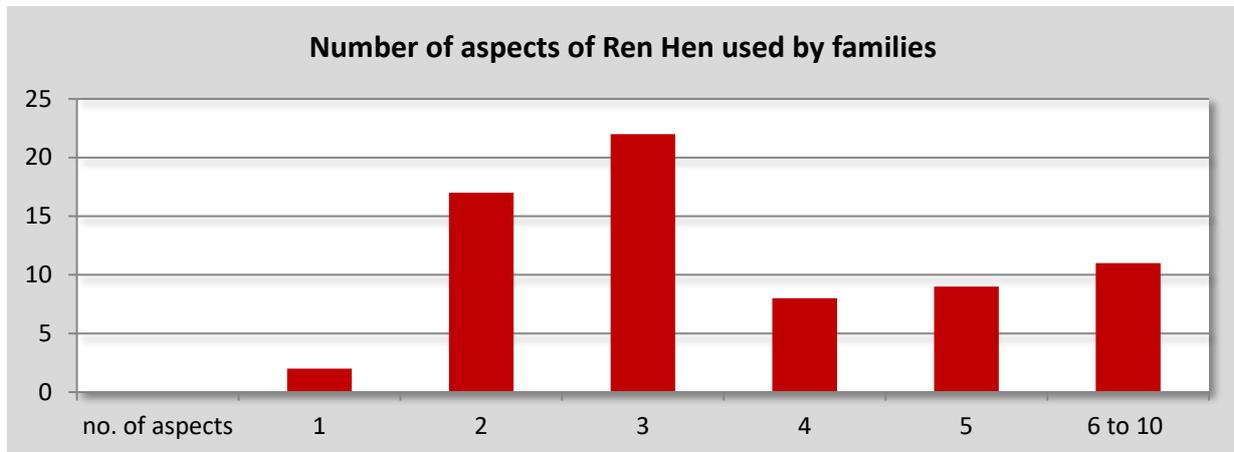
In the survey, parents were asked how helpful Red Hen had been to them, using a scale of 0 to 10 where 10 is very helpful. Parents only used the top numbers 6-10 of the scale, with **74% of the 69 ranking Red Hen a 10**.



In the survey all the parents who answered the question (64) indicated that Red Hen had made a difference to them and their families. 49 said they did things differently at home as a result of Red Hen’s involvement with their family.

3.16 Engagement

All of these services had been used by parents who contributed to the evaluation. Some of the families used just one and some all of them. The majority of families used at least three different services.



The wide-ranging offer that Red Hen has was identified as a valuable aspect by all groups who took part in the evaluation.

They have given me no end of support – help with budgeting, coping with children, courses, help with a computer for the home schooling. We have been on trips (at that time, I could not have done the trips for the children without them). The boxes of fruit and veg, they really helped. The list goes on. Lots of stuff for the kids and things to keep them entertained – craft packs, bat and balls, puzzles, books and games. Some were new, some second hand, and they let the children choose what they wanted. Also, they dropped them all off themselves, so we had a chat too- that was really important. A friendly face and someone to talk to. During the pandemic, that meant so much.

Parent

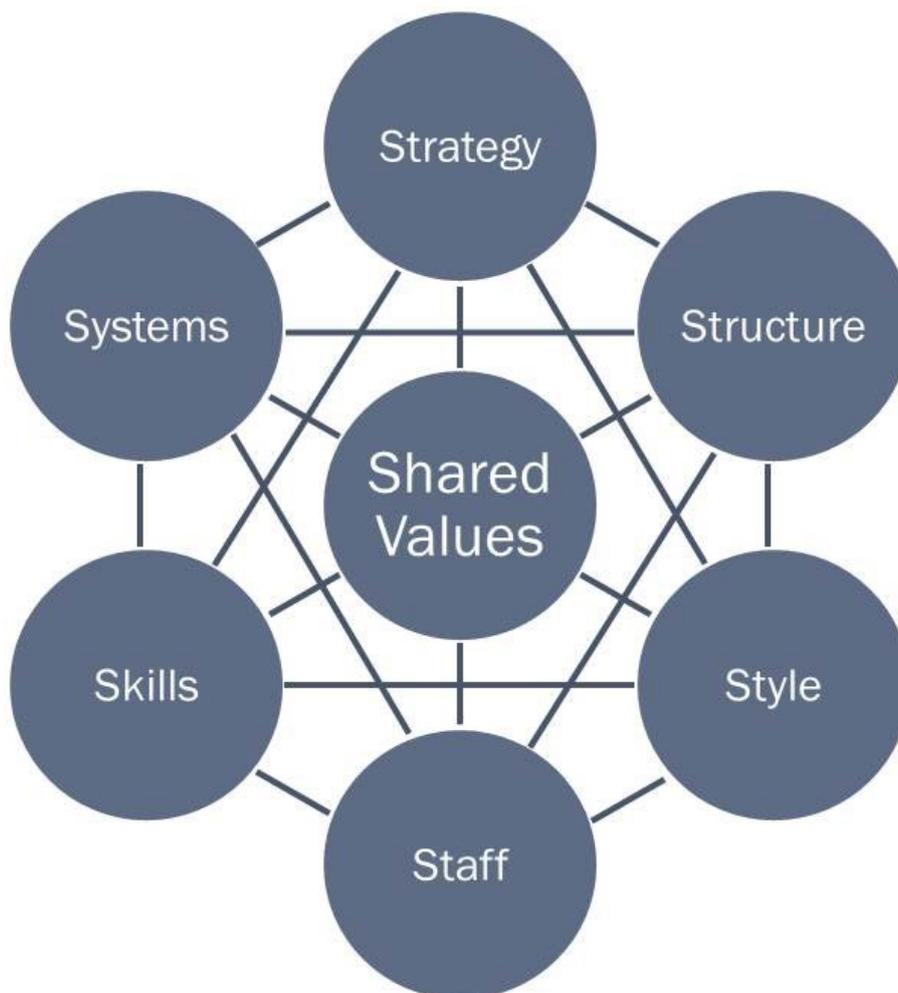
They offer such a range of support – it is huge – the food parcels, the one-to-one support, the groups, the trips.

School staff

4.0 What supports Red Hen to achieve these outcomes

4.1 The McKinsey 7S Model

The section above sets out the outcomes the Red Hen Project achieves from the point of view of parents, school staff and Red Hen staff and trustees. The rest of the report will consider what it is about the Red Hen Project that makes it possible to achieve the outcomes. The McKinsey 7S Model will be used to provide the framework for this section.



The McKinsey 7S model² is a useful tool to reflect on the effectiveness of an organisation. The framework considers how seven elements of an organisation (Style, Shared values, Staff, Skills, Structures, Systems and Strategy) can be aligned together to achieve effectiveness in the organisation. The key point of the model is that all the seven areas are interconnected and a change in one area requires change in the rest of the organisation for it to function effectively and that the 'soft' areas of shared values, skills, staff and style are those that are key to organisational success. The evaluation concentrates on these soft areas, with much less information collected about structures, systems and strategy which are therefore not discussed in equal detail.

In this section they are grouped as: **Shared Values, Style and Culture, Staff and Skills, Structure and Systems.**

²<https://www.strategicmanagementinsight.com/tools/mckinsey-7s-model-framework.html> This model also known as the Diagnostic Model for Organisational Effectiveness, developed by Tom Peters and Robert Waterman of McKinsey Management Consultants (1982)

4.2 Shared Values

An effective organisation needs a clear, shared set of values that guide the way it works. These should be visible in everything the organisation does. The values are closely related to the organisation's purpose, which also needs to be clear to all concerned.

Red Hen staff and trustees were asked about the purpose of the Red Hen Project and there was a strong shared understanding of what the project was about. This understanding matches closely the Vision statement of Red Hen (p2).

It is about supporting families overcome barriers to education. Working with them on things that are stopping their children getting on in schools and life. The ultimate goal of all we do is that children succeed at school.

It is about helping families in overcoming current issues, such as school attendance, behaviour at school or home, so children can achieve more. At the heart of it is trying to enable families to live the best life they can together.

Trustees

A trustee explained that the charitable objectives are written on the Board minutes to remind people of what the organisation's purpose is.

We keep the charitable objectives constantly in mind. So, we ask ourselves – how do the food parcels or the activity packs or the coffee morning impact on children's achievement in school?

Trustee

It is to support families facing challenges to overcome the gap that stops them being able to do all they can for their children and themselves. We work with many different families – with many different backgrounds – but all are facing challenges that impact on their child's learning and development. We work with them, so they are less isolated and more confident, and have the support they need to help their children achieve.

We work with families to remove barriers they may be facing so they and their children can thrive in schools and the rest of their lives. It is parent-led work to identify the blockages and barriers and start to see what can be done to reduce them.

Red Hen staff

School staff spoken with also shared this understanding.

It is about supporting families to enable their children to get the best out of education and life generally. They support with all aspects that go on in families, so that kids can have the best chance of achieving their potential. It redresses the balance for some children. They support with behaviour, food, finances and things that improve the lives of families and therefore children.

School staff

According to the 7S model there should be a clear strategy to achieve the organisation's purpose and reflect its values, which is realistic and resourced and takes account of service-user involvement and relevant partnership working. Red Hen's organisational strategy has not been a focus of this evaluation. However, all who took part in the evaluation showed a shared understanding of the purpose of Red Hen, strongly indicating an organisation with a clear direction.

4.3 Style and Culture

Every organisation develops a distinctive style or culture – “the way we do things around here”. This includes the leadership and management style. It is vital that the culture fits the values and the purpose of the organisation.

Red Hen’s style and culture was one of the key things that come through in the evaluation. The style of the work and the culture of the organisation were highlighted by parents, school staff, as well as Red Hen staff and trustees.

In the survey, parents were asked to describe the Red Hen team in three words. The word cloud below represents the words they chose and their frequency. It emphasises the style of the work of Red Hen and its workers.



In both the survey and interviews, parents identified a clear culture underpinning the work, that they said was held by all workers. Parents said that workers were approachable; they felt listened to, not judged, supported, and reassured.

I felt listened to. It was not official or someone from authority. I never felt she was checking up on me or judging me, she just made gentle suggestions. Like [child] never slept and she would say, ‘Have you tried this or that?’ She did not tell me I had to do this or that, just made suggestions and helped me think through things when my head was not straight. More like a friend – but a knowledgeable one. Not authority.

Grandparent

The ethos is kind, supportive and non-judgemental. For me it has been hard to ask for help, but I have had to do it. They have never made me feel embarrassed about it at all.

I always felt comfortable. [Worker] was not one of those people who would make decisions that are outside what you want. She reassured me I was doing OK; it was like an auntie giving me advice. Try this and I will come back next week and see how you are doing. Sometimes you just need to hear another human say you are OK, you are doing OK. Your confidence grows from that. At that stage I had no one else visiting, no other adult I could talk to. Someone turning up each week to chat, listen and offer some sound advice really kept me going.

Workers can offer advice, but often just listen and you work things out yourself.

Parents

The recognition of this culture and style of working was strongly recognised in the interviews with school staff.

There is no stigma with the work. It has been drilled in at school and in the community that this service is here to support you. People welcome a Red Hen worker. Since the start of the pandemic no parent we have suggested Red Hen to has said, 'No'.

They empower parents to get themselves out of their difficulties with support.

They help break down problems. When you are in the middle of a problem it can seem huge and overwhelming. Red Hen helps break it down and suggest small actions that can sometimes have a massive impact.

School staff

Red Hen staff and trustees were clear about the culture as well.

The family workers are very, very good. We have a person-centred approach. The family workers are very good at listening and seeing beyond the presenting issue. They are passionate about working with families and improving the lives of children and parents. It is not just a job for us; we have passion and drive to make things better.

Red Hen staff

Workers are non-judgemental; we provide early intervention and support based on the recognition of how hard it is to be a parent. At the start, we make no judgement nor have expectations that they should be doing better. There is gentleness about how we work with parents.

Trustee

Some trustees chose to describe Red Hen by what it was not. Red Hen is not school or social care.

It is also about what Red Hen is not. Red Hen is not Social Care. Local people do not feel threatened in the way they can feel threatened or worried about social care or early intervention. Rightly or wrongly, they are perceived as the 'big stick', though that is not the best term. But in the worst-case scenario parents know Social Care can remove children. Red Hen is grassroots and seen as part of the fabric of the community. They do other things, not just the one-to-one work – the coffee mornings, the drop in, the trips.

Red Hen is not school. It is seen as separate from schools. Even when we had a closer relationship with schools, the workers were never employed by schools.

Trustees

Parents also sometimes compared Red Hen with other support they may have received.

In the past I've had family workers from [other agencies] but they have a small time-frame to work with you and try and cram everything in to a few short sessions. The difference and good thing with the Red Hen Project is you don't feel rushed and can deal with any issues as they arise and at a pace that is comfortable for all the family.

Parent

Red Hen staff said they took a whole-family approach and consider what is happening for the family at home, not solely the child at school. Trust was seen as a key issue. The organisation was seen as having built up trust with the community over the years it had existed. It was well known and had a good reputation in the area.

Parents do not always trust professionals and may have had bad experiences previously, but they do trust Red Hen.

School staff

Though people shared the view of Red Hen as being supportive and non-judgemental, staff at both schools and Red Hen were clear that, if difficult conversations needed to happen with families, they would happen. And at times, in the best interests of the child, families might need to be referred to Social Care.

We have a family contract that we use with families at the start of working with them. It sets out what they can expect of us and we of them. We talk about how there might be times that we disagree, but will chat about it and find a way forward. We put time into building relationships and trust with families, so if we do need to challenge it does not feel so threatening. If you have a good relationship it is possible to challenge without threatening. It is important we do challenge; we must do it if things are happening that are not helpful to the family.

Red Hen staff

The style of Red Hen was apparent to an external trainer who came in to offer the team training in the use of the Family Outcomes Star; they said,

I have been delivering training on the Family Outcomes Star for many, many years – I must have done 100s and 100s of them. I was just bowled over by all the workers. They were all very open, very intuitive and very person-centred. They instantly got the Outcomes Star and how it would work in their practice. It was apparent in how they spoke about their work that they work collaboratively in a strength-based, goal-directed, very focused way with a clear remit and understand what it is they are trying to achieve. I don't always see this – and it really stood out to me for this reason.

External trainer

This culture has led Red Hen to have a good reputation in the community.

The quality and consistency of the work, the relationships established with families, its reputation – families talk to each other, they share experiences. Red Hen would not be able to do what it does if they were saying bad things about it.

Trustee

One thing that makes it work is it is local people doing local work. There are a number of parents that used to get support from Red Hen that now volunteer – they are great ambassadors for Red Hen. When other parents hear them talk about what Red Hen helped them with it says a lot. The local reputation is excellent.

School staff

4.4 Staff and skills

The organisation needs to have the range of staff that will enable it to be effective. This includes staff at different levels, in different roles, covering all necessary functions, bringing a range of experience and perspectives. The staff team also needs to have the appropriate skills to deliver its purpose.

Parents' comments focused mainly on the quality of the workers, and all **could not speak highly enough about the quality of the staff** at Red Hen.

All the workers are brilliant.

The workers are all so committed and helpful and kind. I have the utmost respect for them.

The staff are amazing – so approachable and friendly.

Parents

Parents also recognised the **high level of skill and knowledge** of the workers.

They are a fount of knowledge about everything in the community. I got in touch with Pinpoint, classes – I would never have known about those if Red Hen had not told me.

Being creative and thinking outside the box – the workers at Red Hen make really good suggestions that I would never have thought of – ‘What about doing it this way?’

Their knowledge, their understanding of people and families.

They have a deep knowledge of how to support families and how dynamics between parents and children work. That you need to work with every family member for it to work. Everyone needs the same level of understanding.

Parents

School staff and Red Hen trustees highlighted the strength of the team of workers at Red Hen.

The broad experience of the team. They are well recruited and draw on different strengths and experience of the team members well. With the larger team they are now, they have a vast amount of combined experience.

School staff

All the staff have the relevant training. The new staff have embraced the culture and ethos. It is a quality staff team.

We get staff who want to work with us and who recognise what families are facing. We use the title Family Worker – not uncommon, but reflects the role. We advertise widely. We have a good reputation and people come to us because they want to work in this way. We include the families and schools in recruitment.

Trustees

The workers themselves recognised the strength of the team.

The team is key for me. There is such a wealth of experience and knowledge to draw on. One knows the area so well and has masses of contacts. Another has knowledge of children with special needs, another anxiety and mental health. Everyone has things they know a bit more about than me and I can draw on that knowledge.

The team is very supportive. The workers are one of Red Hen’s greatest assets. We all want to achieve the best for the families we are working with.

Red Hen staff

Workers pointed to the support from management for their work as being important to them being able to work effectively.

[Managers] and the team are really supportive. [Manager] protects us from a lot of the admin and bureaucracy the work entails.

Red Hen staff

4.5 Structure and Systems

The structure of the organisation should help it to deliver its purpose. Each part should add to the organisation's capacity to do its job well. Every organisation needs to have efficient and effective systems in place, for example for managing staff and finances, creating a safe and healthy environment, communicating between people in and outside the organisation, and gathering and using information.

Red Hen is a charity governed by a Board of Trustees. There are 10 trustees, some of whom have been on the board for over 15 years, whilst others have joined in the past 12 months. Governance was not a focus of this evaluation; however, it was discussed by some trustees and staff. In 2019 Cambridge CVS undertook an organisational review and many of the recommendations have been enacted. This has included changing the membership of the governing body and revising the charitable objectives and so increasing Red Hen's independence from the schools that contract its work.

This was felt to have been a really positive move, increasing the strength and independence of Red Hen.

Good practice, such as reporting, creation of sub-groups of the board to focus in more detail on specific aspects of the organisation, were seen as effective by trustees.

The sub-committees are a really good idea and mean things can be given greater consideration than by the whole board. It gives an opportunity to examine things in more depth.

The reporting is outstanding.

Meetings start with an account from one of the staff about a family and the work being done. This means trustees are much more aware of the work and what workers are doing.

Trustees

The range of skills, knowledge and experience of trustees was identified as a strength, though the lack of diversity on the Board was noted by a trustee.

We are a very white group of trustees which does not reflect the area and the families Red Hen works with. That is more of an observation than a criticism.

Trustee

Some school staff acknowledged they had been uncertain about the changes before they had happened but now recognised the improvements they had brought.

I wanted to get over how mistaken I was in my reservations about the changes – it is a much stronger organisation now.

School staff

Staff and trustees reported that systems within the organisation work well. Red Hen was seen to have the necessary policies and procedures in place to support the work.

We are so much more professional nowadays – in a good way. We are not more bureaucratic or complicated – but we have better systems. We now have the policies and procedures behind us, we have new skills and experience on the Board, and we have a skilled new staff team and all that that brings.

Trustee

Staff said that they appreciated the regular supervision they had and found it supportive. Staff said they felt supported by management and said they valued the trust put in them by management, meaning they are able to make many decisions about their work without having the check back with managers.

We are trusted as workers, we do not need to check everything out, we are allowed to use our judgement about how much time to spend with a family this week, or how long we work with a family. We do have our protocols and systems, but they do not hold us back or slow things down. We can be flexible and make things happen for families. I organise my timetable within my hours myself.

It is the most supported position I have ever had. The work can be really stressful and emotional. [Manager] is fantastic. I regularly check in with her in addition to supervisions. Supervision always starts with me and how I am. [Manager] is always available and approachable. Also, we support each other, we have a WhatsApp group, and we look out for each other. It is easier now we can all be in the office, but it is still flexible and can work from home.

[Manager] has created a culture where we are not micro-managed. There is flexibility in how we managed work and our own families. COVID has helped with that in terms of other ways of working, but it is her too. We trust each other to do the job and do it well.

Red Hen staff

All groups spoke of the importance of the flexibility of the work Red Hen undertakes, how it can be tailored to individual needs without time limits.

Red Hen are not so time-limited as we are. Our case load is reviewed every six weeks and cases re-prioritised with regard to whole case load every six weeks. We are saturated and so Red Hen picks up some of the cases we would have worked with in the past, as part of step-down process or before we actually work with them. It really helps manage our caseloads.

Other agency

Our support is not limited by a fixed time - we don't have a 12-week programme and that is it. We can be flexible and when we do close a case, we are able to offer support in other ways – like the drop-in and coffee mornings. So, they still have support from us and each other.

Red Hen staff

The caseloads of the Red Hen staff are monitored by the manager, and casework supervision is used to look at capacity and workload. However, some workers did say they could feel overworked and find it hard to manage their time especially, if something happened leading to one of their families needing much more time. All workers said they felt supported by each other; though some felt there was the potential for more shared working.

We all find the workload quite a lot, we are always trying to catch up – someone said the other week, 'We never catch up.' So I never feel quite on top of everything. It is no-one's fault but if there is a crisis with a family it can take up a lot of time, and of course they can pop up out of the blue.

Red Hen staff

4.6 Key Service Contracts and Funding Streams

4.6.1 Core Lottery-Funded Work with Primary Schools

Red Hen's relationships with local primary schools are long-standing, going back to the founding of the charity in 1998. Each of the three current schools is able to access a quota of family cases – which was historically based on the number of pupils. Since the charity's first Lottery-funded grant in 2013, schools have been asked to make a small contribution to the running project, again based on their roll numbers.

New pricing models introduced over the past 12 months in preparation for the end of the Lottery funding mean schools can now decide on a number of cases based on need, rather than be restricted. The contribution requested, based on percentage of the cost to deliver the service, has also risen from less than 10% to 40%. This is part of Red Hen's strategy to move to a more sustainable funding model.

Each school has a key member of staff who is the main day-to-day liaison with Red Hen, often a head of inclusion. (Inclusion & Wellbeing Leader or Safeguarding and Family Liaison Officer are typical job titles). This individual refers children and their families to Red Hen and is present in monthly 'link' meetings where the family work, caseload and progress are discussed. Joint working, sharing of information and strategies are vital to the work's success.

This work utilises the project's own referral process, monitoring, recording and reporting systems.

4.6.2 County Council Grant-Funded Early Help Capacity Building Project

The work extending the capacity of the Early Help team is a 12-month project funded by an Innovate grant from the County Council. To qualify for this funding, a project must either be new, or build on an existing project in a new location or with new beneficiaries and show that they will reduce pressure on council services and/or offer direct savings for the council. This project allows for up to twenty families to be 'held' by Red Hen.

The manager of the City team is able to allocate families to Red Hen as well as her team, thus expanding their capacity. Red Hen is particularly powerful in situations where families are reluctant to work with statutory services, and are experiencing isolation and need longer term support, connecting into their community.

This project involves Red Hen staff accessing and utilising county council's referral process, monitoring, recording and reporting system – Liquid Logic. There are regular meetings between the City Team Lead and Red Hen managers.

For both pieces of work Red Hen manages its own caseload, deciding on threshold levels and the length of each piece of family work.

4.7 Key Working Relationships

4.7.1 Working with Schools

Schools reported that their relationships with Red Hen are good. They considered that **Red Hen provided a level of support to families that would not be possible to provide in any other way.**

They are an extension of the school's work. We are thrilled to be continuing to work with them. We could not be without them. Red Hen provides a level of support we just cannot provide in-house.

School staff

They pointed to **common purpose, good communication and partnership.**

[Family Liaison] speaks with Red Hen two or three times a week. We have a really close working relationship.

We have six cases. We could always have more, but that does us well. We are almost always at capacity with our cases.

We have four families – obviously I would like more. They are very flexible with us and how they work with families. There is no limit on the sessions they offer, they work to the natural end and agree with the family when the work stops.

Red Hen is really flexible in how we use our cases, and with their capacity.

School staff

School staff reported that **relationships** between them and Red Hen were good.

We have an honest relationship and can work together to support families. There really are not tensions from our point of view. We won't always agree and have some really interesting conversations – for example about when to refer to Child Protection – but I see it as robust professional dialogue. Not arguing but listening to each other and accepting another point of view.

I would prefer to refer to Red Hen than Early Help as Red Hen's response is so much quicker. I recently referred a family to Red Hen and the Support worker had made the first visit in less than a week. They have a good understanding of the area and the community, they listen to us and they listen to the families. We have such good contact it feels like we are working in partnership – not that we are handing a family over to another agency.

School staff

Red Hen staff agreed that relationships between schools and Red Hen were very important and that in the main they were good.

Relationships with schools are really positive and they are supportive of Red Hen.

Work closely with schools, meet monthly/fortnightly to keep each other up to date. Parents know about these meetings. Communication is key.

This is another reason relationships with schools are so important – if we have a disagreement between school and Red Hen about what to do next, we need to be able to discuss it. I feel Red Hen is listened to in these situations.

Red Hen staff

Red Hen staff said that **closing cases** could be difficult as for some families new issues arise. However, the intention is that cases should be closed when the issue or challenge the family were facing that lead to the referral is resolved as far as feasible. Staff were anticipating that the use of the Family Outcomes Star will help staff, families and school reach agreement on when cases should close.

Sometimes it feels like some cases will never close, as new issues always come up. We are starting to look at if original issue for referral has been dealt with whether it is appropriate to close the case.

The Family Outcomes Star will help with this, I think. It will enable us to work with the family to evaluate where they are and how they have moved on their journey of change.

Red Hen staff

School and Red Hen staff both emphasised that cases can be re-opened, if necessary, and that one-off support is available to families as well as support from staff and other parents at the groups Red Hen runs. The emphasis should be on supporting families to move on and be independent.

Some months later parents might pop into drop-in and have a conversation and come back the following week to let us know how it went. Just recently a case that was closed some months ago got in touch feeling low and overwhelmed by some forms that needing filling in. They came in and I went through the forms, and they left saying they felt so much better for finally completing them. That did not lead to the case being opened again, it was one-off support.

Red Hen staff

The schools did not report any difficulties in how decisions to close cases were made.

Never had a disagreement about when a case should close. We are in such close contact we tend to be on the same page about it.

School staff

Understandably the **payment by schools** to Red Hen for the family support was of great importance to both Red Hen and the schools.

An exploration of the financial arrangements between schools and Red Hen was not part of this evaluation. However, it did come up in some of the interviews. The responses to questions about this showed the complexity of the issues.

As a school we need to keep remembering that the offer is so many different things, not just the case work. I do think it is value for money, but we often just think of the particular families, and need to remember that much wider offer, because that is part of what makes people willing to accept support from Red Hen when they need it.

School staff

When asked what the school might lose if they employed family support staff themselves the response from one school was

I don't know, I have never employed family support workers directly. I guess we would lose the food parcels, the links with Kettles Yard, the support from a team rather than a single worker. And that worker would not have the support of colleagues. Also, maybe it would not be seen in the same light if the support came from within school. But ultimately it will come down to the pounds and pence at the end of the day.

School staff

4.7.2 Working with Early Help

The manager from Early Help was equally positive about working with Red Hen, highlighting the consistent quality of the work, the community contacts and the more flexible timescales as being important to its success.

Red Hen have the community attachment and work well to integrate families back into community support and reduce reliance on professionals. This is an area of work Early Help used to do, but no longer has any capacity for. Without it, Early Help was seeing more re-referrals back into Early Help and Social Care, as once professional support finished, there was nothing. But Red Hen with the groups and signposting, for example to sports activities for children or parent's groups, do this well. They connect a family back into the community.

Local Authority

Communication was seen to be good between the two organisations.

I meet with [manager] monthly now. We have good communication, it works well. Some cases I just allocate, some we need to talk about first. They let me know if closing a case and contact me if there any issues I need to know about.

Other agency

Whilst it was recognised that Red Hen working with cases supported Early Help, it was also noted that Red Hen does not have the capacity to work with all the cases in CB4 that could be referred to them.

4.8 Interagency working

Interagency work is at the core of Red Hen. Staff have links with many other organisations to help it work. Red Hen staff spoke of the organisations they have good contacts within the area and the city. These included advice agencies like CAB, service providers such as housing, charities such as the local food bank, charities providing clothing, and Kettle's Yard, a creative arts organisation, amongst others. Red Hen really appreciated these links and felt they enhanced their work and enabled them to offer a wider range of support than they could otherwise do.

We go to lots of interagency meetings – they are really useful. They help me know what is going on in the area. What courses are on at the local college, how housing support is changing and where people can go for information, it helps us know where best to signpost families to.

Red Hen staff

School staff also recognised the value of their links and the contacts they could access for family support.

They signpost families to so many other services. Mental health support, clothing, agencies that can offer support with finances and debt.

School staff

Staff from one partner organisation which took part in the evaluation reported how much they valued their partnership with Red Hen, saying that they benefited from Red Hen's positive and trusted relationships with local families.

It is a great way to introduce ourselves to the families via an organisation they trust. Because Red Hen say this is going to be OK, it will be fun, it will be interesting, they will come and give it a go. They are like an ambassador for us in the community.

Staff other agency

Beyond the relationships Red Hen has with families they also recognised how much they learnt from working with Red Hen – for example skills in listening to families, enabling and starting from families' knowledge and interests. They also appreciated the constructive criticism from Red Hen in the planning and delivery of the sessions, feeling this really helped them be engaging to the families.

Art can be scary for people not familiar with it. The fact they all get stuck in and join in with the activities alongside the parents really helps break down any barriers for the families.

Staff other organisation

Such partnerships also help the organisations to meet their own objectives. This organisation reported that some Red Hen families do attend other family events after being part of the joint activities and the number of visitors they have from CB4 has increased.

5.0 Gaps in what Red Hen provides

Parents were asked in both interviews and surveys whether they thought there were any gaps in the range of services Red Hen provides. The majority of people could not identify any gaps in what Red Hen provides and took the opportunity to reiterate how good they thought the services from Red Hen were.

Just keep going with what you are doing.

Parent

A few did make suggestions, and these were: more staff to reduce the workload and to be able to work with more families, more trips, more cooking sessions and staff training to ensure staff are up-to-date. This last suggestion was made in the context of appreciating the level of knowledge a Family Worker had had, not a lack of knowledge.

Keep all the support workers and their training up-to-date. It really helped that our family worker had a good understanding of ADHD.

Parent

People from all groups pointed to the lack of face-to-face work there had been over the past year due to COVID. However, it was also acknowledged that this was changing.

It is not their fault, but it would be good to have some things like they were before COVID – larger groups, not having to book. Hopefully by next year there will be more of that again.

Parent

A parent mentioned they would appreciate the possibility of meeting with just parents.

Groups just for parents – no children there. There is the coffee morning, but there are kids about and parents have to stop to peel a banana or rescue someone from the slide. It would be really good if there was a space for just parents – even if just for a short while. A room close by where you could drink a cup of coffee while it is still hot, maybe parents taking it in turns to watch all the children.

Parent

This was also mentioned by staff and trustees.

Maybe a group just for parents? I know there is the Monday group, but I think it feels like you need younger kids to go, and the talking is done whilst painting a picture with them. Something without kids for friendship, support?

School staff

A trustee wondered if families might benefit from support in looking at next steps for them as a family – looking at their family's goals and ambitions and the steps to reach them.

What next or how you can live the best and most fruitful life. As we wind up cases because the objectives are met, at that point maybe we could put more time and energy with them to look at what next, but of course only if families wanted it... But that is a small thing, not a major gap.

Trustee

Other things mentioned as gaps in current provision were: self-referrals, something for older children, better links with special schools with children living in CB4.

Red Hen trustees and staff highlighted the need not to move away from Red Hen's primary purpose.

Nothing leaps out other than upping the capacity ... There is a lot we could do, but maybe should not. We need to always keep in mind our primary purpose.

Trustee

6.0 Challenges to Red Hen's work

Red Hen trustees, staff and school staff were asked what they considered were the greatest challenges to the effectiveness of Red Hen's work.

Inevitably **COVID** was discussed and the limitations this had placed on the work. Everyone spoke highly of how Red Hen had adapted its provision in COVID and how they had used technology and supported families' access to technology. However, the lack of face-to-face contact was felt by all.

The lack of groups because of COVID, though we are beginning to look at running them again. There is a huge group of parents who will not get referred by school – they are just managing but would really benefit from the groups and courses we run like the sibling rivalry, parenting courses. We could do more to promote those in the community and get to a wider range of families.

Red Hen staff

6.1 A lack of other complimentary or more specialised support for families

There was seen to be a lack of other organisations to offer support, and also issues of capacity and **thresholds of those organisations that there are**. This results in fewer options when needing to refer people on to specialised support. Social care thresholds were seen to have gone up, meaning Red Hen was now supporting cases that in the past would have been supported by Social Care. Lack of specialist services was also seen as a challenge.

There is much less other support around, fewer resources. The parent of a child with ADHD has many fewer options than before.

The restrictions on who we can refer to now – thresholds are higher, waiting lists longer.

Trustees

Lack of resources pushes the social care threshold up, and we get involved in cases that in the past would have been with social care.

Lack of services especially mental health support. There is such a need for the services there are, that the thresholds are higher and many of our families whilst needing help do not meet them. CAMHS³ do some amazing work, but do not have the capacity to work with many of our families. If they do meet thresholds, there is often a long wait. It is frustrating for families when they cannot access the services to get the support they need – it is like hitting roadblocks.

Red Hen staff

How other agencies work with families Red Hen is also supporting was seen to be a challenge.

Other organisations are our biggest challenge. I have waited for three months to get a response from a Housing Officer.

It is frustrating when we have to rely on other agencies and they do not necessarily deal with things as we would like, or do not take the approach we would and put families off

Red Hen staff

If they do access support, it might be a fixed six sessions regardless of what might be needed.

School staff

³Cambridgeshire's Child and Adolescent Mental Health Team

6.2 Poverty and deprivation and the worsening situation of families were identified as challenges to Red Hen's work.

Financial struggles are so big. Families with six children and with the benefits cap they just do not have enough money. Even for working families money is an issue. Low wages, childcare costs – lack of money is a barrier to families.

Red Hen staff

High rents in Cambridge, low wages and pressure from DWP to work, were also seen as **increasing stress on families**, and so a challenge for the work of Red Hen.

There is some pressure from the benefits agency for parents to work – but for some with mental health issues it would just be too much.

Red Hen staff

Housing is an issue too – rents in Cambridge are so high, they leave people with little money for other essentials.

Trustee

6.3 Lack of financial security for Red Hen was recognised as a challenge.

Finance is the number one challenge. Financial stability.

Trustee

The reliance on schools and their ability and willingness to pay for the support Red Hen provides families was seen as a vulnerability. This issue is also discussed from the schools' perspective (p28)

Linked to that is school finances – a big problem also if schools can't engage in full recovery of costs. Though Red Hen is cheaper for them than employing their own staff, and if they did employ their own staff there would be the stigma of that, and also that would not include the Drop-in and other community activities.

Trustee



7.0 The Future

The trustees and management team are clearly giving the future of Red Hen careful consideration. There was considerable uniformity in their thoughts about the future. There was recognition that much had changed at Red Hen over the past few years – the governance, the increased staff team, COVID leading to the development of a number of new activities. School staff recognised these changes also.

There has been a lot of change over last 18 months, and a real sense of vitality, engagement and enthusiasm – not that I thought it was tired before – but there is renewed energy right now and increased capacity means they can do more.

School staff

A desire was expressed to **consolidate** and review where the organisation currently is.

Really looking forward to embedding what we are doing. There has been a massive amount of change in organisation recently and COVID too. I think we need to take care not to overwhelm ourselves with change but consolidate what we are doing. And then look at what next – for example maybe more mental health expertise within Red Hen.

Red Hen staff

We are still working out how to use our newfound freedom, now we are not so closely linked to the schools.

The pandemic has been good to us in some ways – it has been a massive boost to our visibility and people’s awareness of what we do. Donations have gone up. Of course, we don’t know if that will stay or drop again. I want us to build on it and capitalise on it, though - for example to be a company’s go-to charity to support. Build on those relationships forged in the pandemic.

Trustees

Trustees and staff were clear though that any future developments needed to remain within Red Hen’s core purpose and values.

Notwithstanding this recognition of the need to consolidate, there were thoughts about how the organisation might develop in the future. One of these was how **to bring more specialist knowledge into the team**. The two areas where this possible lack of expertise was recognised were mental health and debt and finance. Three broad models to do this were put forward: training and increasing the knowledge level of existing staff, closer links with other organisations providing these services and the employment of specialist workers by Red Hen. All were considered to have both some advantages and challenges.

Staff training was seen to potentially increase the support to families.

We are not experts in money advice, we signpost to other organisations, but it such a big area of work and so difficult for some people to speak about. We are discussing whether we should skill up a member of staff to be more knowledgeable about debt and budgeting and they would do this aspect of work with any families that need it. Maybe have a worker that is up-to-date about things like tariffs – bills and finance could be their focus. Should we do this ourselves, or should we partner with another organisation?

Red Hen staff

As the above quote illustrates, the option of partnering with other organisations should be considered.

There is a lack of some knowledge in the team, like specialist housing or benefits knowledge. Me being on the phone to UC [Universal Credit] for an hour with a parent might be supportive but is not necessarily the best use of time. When we manage to link a family up with someone at CAB, for example, you can really see the benefit. Having some access to that knowledge and expertise directly would be really helpful. We cannot learn it - there is too much, and it changes so often.

Red Hen staff

The third option was Red Hen employing specialist workers to bring expert knowledge of, for example, debt advice, budgeting and mental health into the team.

Sustainability and adequate funding were a major concern for the future. It was recognised it is not possible to sustain, let alone grow the organisation on the income from schools alone. People expressed concern about schools' ability and willingness to accept an increase in costs for Red Hen support.

Schools – their costs went from 10% of the cost to 40% this year. It might be possible to increase to 50% and still be competitive with other organisations. If we go too expensive there is the danger they will think they can do it themselves. I fear they underestimate what it would cost them to do what we do – like including clinical supervision. Do they want to employ workers that go into family homes and all that entails?

Trustee

The worry is continued funding. We want to keep the costs for schools as low as reasonably possible, as schools can only afford so much. But it is not possible to sustain, let alone grow the organisation on this money alone. We are exploring other avenues – but it is a worry.

Red Hen staff

The difficulty of attracting funders to continue existing quality work and for 'backroom services' was acknowledged, as many funders prefer to fund new work and direct work with families.

People spoke of **different ways to increase financial sustainability** based on different funding and partnership models in the future. One suggestion was charging for services for other groups of people (for example, charging parents outside Red Hen's criteria to attend the parenting course, selling a guide for parents through the process of getting ADHD diagnosis or offer their services as part of an employee assistance scheme). It is important to acknowledge these are possible ideas to pursue at the moment – not a plan of action.

Another theme for potential future developments was increasing the scope of Red Hen. This could be more schools, older children, more areas, taking referrals from other agencies. Each one creates its own set of considerations about how it could be done.

It was felt such expansion into new areas would need to be sustainable to be considered as an option. Another option suggested was becoming part of a larger organisation. All options were seen to have risks and benefits.

Trustees and management said they would want Red Hen to continue to become more professional as a charity, and to be able to secure the employment of Red Hen staff and provide them with a career path and for them to be able to develop things they see are needed. The need for more management hours was also mentioned.

Concern was expressed about **growing too big too quickly** and also that if Red Hen grew too big it would lose its 'essential essence' of being known, trusted and local which is key to its ability to engage with parents.

The danger is we get too big and topple over – though our roots are strong, and that might mitigate.

Trustee

I like that it is a small team doing high quality work, this means the values stay close. If it grew too much it might lose this.

School staff

Such moves would be a huge step, and we have not really considered them seriously yet. I do not know what the appetite for change amongst the trustees is.

Trustee

8.0 Conclusions

This evaluation has focused on the work of Red Hen in the CB4 area of Cambridge over the **past two years**.

The evaluation has drawn together the **views and opinions of a range of people involved in various ways** with the project. There is **remarkable coherence in the overwhelmingly positive views and opinions** that people expressed about the project. There is a **strong picture of a much-loved and appreciated organisation**, with the **parents, schools and other organisations speaking incredibly highly of the project, its workers and its impact**. People from different perspectives had similar perceptions of the project. These consistent views are a good indication that Red Hen is very clearly conveying to people the message of what it is about and what it does.

Major challenges to the work of Red Hen were seen to be the lack of other complimentary or more specialised support for families. There was seen to be a lack of other organisations to offer support, and among the few that there were, limited capacity and high thresholds of access restrict their usefulness. In addition, levels of poverty facing families greatly increased challenges.

There was some identification of gaps or developments that could be pursued, such as the development of more groups. Some of these are already being addressed – for example two new groups started running in September, one of which is for parents only. Whilst important, these suggestions do not undermine the high level of provision overall. Rather they provide goals for an ever-improving service in the future.

The evaluation shows that Trustees and managers recognise there is a range of options that could be considered in order to secure the financial security and sustainability of the model in the future. In deciding on any new development it will be crucial to ensure that options do not change the essence of Red Hen - its values, its local embeddedness and connections, and its ability to tailor support to the specific needs of each family.

Red Hen manages a complex set of relationships with a number of schools, Early Help and other funders extremely well. In addition, it has **excellent relationships with other agencies it works in partnership with to support families** in the area. All these agencies included in the evaluation spoke very highly of the work and felt Red Hen was both meeting its objectives and also supporting them in achieving their own.

As evidenced by this evaluation **Red Hen is very satisfactorily meeting all of its aims** of which are to:

- support families and children and improve life chances
- help families move from dependence to independence
- nurture positive parenting skills in our families and the wider community
- foster social integration, access and participation, thus reducing social isolation
- co-ordinate support in a focused way promoting interagency liaison and co-operation
- enable families to seek appropriate support from other agencies.
- advance the education of children by helping to remove barriers to learning
- prevent truancy and exclusions and encourage parental involvement in their children's learning
- build more positive relationships between families, their schools and the community

In summary **The Red Hen Project has been very successful at building relationships with families and has provided them with support tailored to their needs, such that they report considerable benefits to themselves, their children and their family life. The clear and shared value base of the organisation and how the workers put this into practice are seen as the key ingredients to enabling Red Hen to support parents often at very difficult times of their lives. Their values inform their approach, and they are able to engage with parents who often found it difficult to access support in other ways.**

We feel like someone cares. We feel part of something. We feel reassured we are not the only family that needs help.

Parent