

Aisling

1997 – 2007

“A Safe Haven in Ballymun”

*A Review Compiled and Written by
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Executive Summary



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Aisling Project was established in 1997 by Sr. Malen del Valle IJS in response to the expressed concerns of teachers about the daily difficulties experienced by children at school. Over the past ten years the Aisling Project has grown from strength to strength and what started as a pilot project is now a vibrant force in Ballymun, operating from four centres. It is an intensive intervention programme for children of “high need”, targeting the most vulnerable in Ballymun. It provides a safe place where children engage in purposeful activities after their school day and where their problems are addressed in a very concrete manner by caring and committed staff.

Most of the children attending the Aisling Project are referred by teachers and the social services and many of them live in very chaotic home environments where substance abuse, poverty, illness and domestic violence are a reality. Staff at the Aisling Project enjoy a very open, respectful and productive relationship with the feeder schools. The opening hours of the Aisling Project coincide with the school year but a summer project is run each year. Siblings of the children can participate in this programme.

The aim of this Review was to trace the history of the Aisling Project, assess the quality of service, evaluate the extent to which children and families have benefited and make recommendations for the future of Aisling in Ballymun. The methodology employed combined a mixture of interviews, consultations, observations, case studies and the utilisation of SACERS, an internationally recognised instrument for measuring the quality of after-school services.

The findings of this report demonstrate the many real benefits to the children who participate in the Aisling Programme: better school attendance and progress at school, better homework preparation, increased self-confidence and self-esteem, improvements in behaviour, improved nutrition, a sense of self-worth, access to a listening ear and opportunities to engage in a variety of activities that explore their individual skills and abilities. The Review concludes that the Aisling Project is highly

successful in meeting its primary objective of improving the daily lives of children in Ballymun. However the “safe haven” of the Aisling Project is only available to children from 8 years upwards and is discontinued when children enter secondary school, a time of great change in a child’s life. Consultation with the feeder schools also indicates that there are at least one hundred identified children each year of who would benefit from the Aisling programme at some level, but mostly at the same intensive level as is offered to current participants.

The consultation, activities and observations with children focused on their enjoyment of the activities, their motivation and interest in the Project and their comfort and relationship with the staff and volunteers. They participated wholeheartedly in the evaluation activities. All four centres received very positive evaluations from children who prefer outdoor/physical activities to indoor activities and view the Aisling Project as a “cool” place to be with no stigma attached. Any negative responses mainly related to “rules” and the implementation of these.

The Review also demonstrates that the work of the Aisling Project was very much valued by parents/guardians in reducing stress levels and providing a respite to families. For some families it has prevented children going into care and has been instrumental in keeping families together. However the report also concludes that many parents/guardians have multiple social problems that require intensive whole family support, which does not fit into the current remit or resources of the Aisling Project. Many of these parents, because of their own severe personal difficulties, are disengaged from their children’s lives and display poor parenting skills. They are not receiving intensive family support.

The evidence gathered as part of this Review also shows wider benefits to the community. Teachers, social workers and other agencies report that having such a project in Ballymun assists them greatly in their work. It prevents anti-social behaviour and develops, in children, a sense of pride within their community which can have far reaching and lasting impact.

The quality of the Aisling Project was measured using SACERS. SACERS scores provide an evaluation of how the Project meets the requirements of a high quality

after-school service, as determined by US experts. The results show very high ratings in a number of the subscales. Considering these are judged against an international standard the outcomes are a huge tribute to the staff and management involved in the Aisling Project. It is a particularly positive feature of the findings that staff interactions with children received such a high percentage of marks. This was followed closely by the subscales relating to the activity programme and its structure. The quality of staff, their dedication, non-judgmental attitude and respect is no doubt the key to the success of this project and is enshrined in the philosophy of Aisling. Aspects of the service that do not receive high ratings relate primarily to the fact the services are operating mostly from sub-standard buildings.

The Aisling Project is funded from a mixture of state funding and charitable donations. The core funding, for three of the Centres, is provided from the Department of Education and Science in the form of mainstreamed Local Drugs Task Force (LDTF) funding. The funding remains a LDTF initiative, does not fund all centres and needs reapplication on an annual basis. This volatility provides uncertainty about the future sustainability of Aisling Project. The work of the Project spans a number of Government Departments, Department of Education & Science, Department of Health & Children, Department of Justice, Equality & Law Reform and the Department of Social and Family Affairs.

The primary recommendation of this Review is that the Aisling model of after-school care should be extended in Ballymun because it is successful in providing positive outcomes for children. It should be available to children from second class and most importantly to children in their first year of secondary school to assist in what is often a very difficult transition. Any plan for future development should involve all stakeholders with an interest in the welfare of children. Appropriate systems for evaluating/tracking outcomes for children should be put in place. Other recommendations relate to some operational issues for Aisling staff and management and recommendations to policy makers relating to the need for family support intervention with the parents of the children attending Aisling, using existing successful models such as Strengthening Families and the Springboard Project.

The findings of this Review will hopefully inform the future planning of Aisling or

similar projects in Ballymun. The regeneration of this area provides exciting opportunities for this development. Accessing appropriate longer-term funding and ensuring sustainability remains the greatest challenge for this service. Greater “joined-up” thinking, a partnership approach and investment by the appropriate government agencies, at local and national level is required, to ensure the Aisling philosophy impacts positively on the next generation of children and families in Ballymun.