

Heritage Short Break to Suffolk, October 2019

Evaluation summary

Outside In Pathways (OIP) is a registered charity (as of January 2020). We support people with complex needs (including learning disabilities and autism) to produce art and performance inspired by the collections of London's museums, galleries and royal and religious palaces. Our short break service allows Londoners with complex needs to experience the cultural heritage of other parts of the UK. This evaluation describes what happened when we organised a heritage short break to the Suffolk coast for five parents each with a child with autism. The trip was arranged in collaboration with The Brain Trust Charity and funding was provided by the National Lottery Awards for All programme.

The model

- Prior to the trip, none of the parents had been able to have a holiday or spend 'quality time' with their child because of lack of specialist support for the child's complex needs.
- The families travelled to the Suffolk coast by train and minibus.
- Accommodation for the four-day break was a house in the grounds of St Felix School, near Southwold in Suffolk.
- Parents were responsible for the care of their children for the duration of the trip, including catering at the school (donations of food were made by Waitrose and [C. Lidgate, Butcher & Charcutier](#)).
- OIP arranged a programme of events about the cultural heritage of the surrounding area.
- St Felix School supplied a housekeeper to manage access to the school's facilities and organise local transport.

What worked well

- The feedback from parents was some of the most positive received in the 10 years that OIP has been operating.
- Parents said the trip worked because they were with other families who share similar experiences, who would not judge them as parents, and with whom they could work cooperatively to manage daily tasks and keep the children safe.
- The children also bonded well as a group; parents were pleasantly surprised at how the children worked together, cooperating with one another, sharing activities and tasks.
- Parents appreciated staying at a venue with lots of safe space and places for children to explore and enjoy themselves.
- Parents spoke about the positive effects for them and their children of being away from London, in a rural setting with wildlife, tranquillity and star-filled nights.

"This kind of environment is essential to our children's wellbeing; the quietness of the night, nature speaking to you, is priceless. You can tell me there are plenty of nice parks in London, but nothing beats that. It has pushed me to explore, to think there are other places to go in England"

- Families said their children loved encountering the sea, often for the first time in Britain.
- Families enjoyed experiencing aspects of ‘a traditional British seaside holiday’, specifically the beach, fish and chips, the pier, the amusement arcade and the lifeboat museum.
- Several parents became emotional when talking about changes in the children’s mood or behaviour which they attributed to the break. While some of these changes were apparently quite subtle, they were very significant in the context of the child’s history and needs.
- Each of the parents spoke about wanting to follow-up the break by meeting up again with the other families that had taken part, doing similar activities to those undertaken during the break and becoming actively involved with OIP.
- The trip was delivered to budget and valuable lessons were learned which will make future trips more efficient.

“He only uses two-word sentences, but when we were there he was saying ‘I’m going upstairs’ or ‘I’m going outside to play’, ‘we’re going on an adventure, a jungle-walk!’ The environment makes a big difference... Now he is back and school and telling them all about it.”

Learning points

- It was not possible to arrange the trip for the school summer holidays, but a week became available during the autumn half-term holiday and the families were keen to take advantage of the opportunity. This caused some logistical problems for the school and meant poor weather and limited daylight hours.
- Families felt that the break could have been longer (either 5 days or a week) considering the time taken travelling to and from the school and time spent settling in.
- Parents also suggested a need for greater flexibility in the timetabling of daily activities in recognition of the variation in daily routines that arise when 5 families live together, particularly around morning routines.
- All parents signed a contract which set out the various responsibilities and expectations for the trip. Some minor misunderstanding about these were quickly resolved.
- Some of the heritage activities that had been arranged were considered more appropriate for older children. It was also suggested that more activities relating to the rural heritage of Suffolk could have been included.

“The majority of these kids get feedback through doing things and not just looking... We could have Googled things and prepped them beforehand. Like the museum was fantastic but I could have turned it into a game – spot the object. So, it’s not that it was the wrong thing to do, it was how it was delivered.”

Next steps

Given the very positive feedback from parents taking part in the heritage short break, OIP is currently fundraising to put the learning from this evaluation into effect. Further heritage short breaks in Suffolk for London families with children with autism are planned for the Easter and summer school holidays 2020. Opportunities for families to engage with the collections of London’s museums and galleries are also being explored.