

Reading Family Aid – how we started

Reading Family Aid started, we believe, in the 1970s, with a group of people helping young mothers at Katesgrove House Adult Centre.

Over the years it has expanded, both in terms of the scope of what it does and in terms of the families that it supports, until today, when we help disadvantaged families right across the Reading area by providing support in areas that are not covered by the official agencies.

In 1993 we became a registered charity and RFA has since gone from strength to strength.

Each year we organise the Christmas Toy Appeal to provide a selection of toys for about 1,500 children, we organise a fun day out in the summer holidays for 4 coach loads of families, and when funds permit we provide tickets for a hundred children to go to the pantomime at the Hexagon each January. Recently we have started expanding our scope to organise additional days out, including short breaks for families who have never had a holiday before.

Fundraising

Various methods of raising funds have been used over the years, starting with homespun Bingo evenings, Beetle Drives, sponsored knit-ins, bridge days, coffee mornings, Bring & Buys, and a Strawberry Lunch.

We moved on to holding auctions, flower arranging demonstrations, barn dances and concerts. The Elizabethan Singers sang in St. Barnabas Church, Emmer Green before moving to the hall for a raffle and refreshments – proceeds donated to RFA. The Caversham Charity Folk Festival organisers included us in the charities benefiting from their events each year, for which we provided collectors.

Stalls taken at Purley Memorial Hall, Reading Volunteers Fair at the Town Hall, occasionally at The Mayor's Market in the Hexagon, Woodley Pagoda and Highdown Show, and more recently, Caversham Festival and Earley Green Fair have helped raise much needed funds.

We continue to receive regular donations from Caversham Link Group, local churches and private individuals. In recent years local businesses wishing to support local charities have been approached, with good results. The Toy Appeal attracts donations of money as well as toys from local organisations and businesses. Our applications to several Berkshire

Charitable Trusts, with fundraising advice from Reading Voluntary Action, have proved successful, and we also receive surprise donations from other sources through our supporters. Without all this wonderful help, we could not provide extra outings.

Outings and activities for families

Initially RFA only provided an annual summer day out for children and parents attending Katesgrove House, starting in the 1980s with trips to local places – first as guests at Englefield House for a swim and a cream tea; then to the Child Beale Wildlife Park and on to Pangbourne Church Hall for a buffet lunch and “Punch & Judy” show.

Going further afield followed, with trips to Thorpe Park, Marwell Zoological Park, Windsor Safari Park, Paulton’s Leisure Park, Cotswold Wildlife Park and Chessington World of Adventures. Legoland was also visited one year (helped by Lottery funding). We have been to the seaside several times, with trips to Hayling Island, Southsea, Bournemouth, and a day visit to Butlin’s Holiday Camp at Bognor Regis. These outings gave us the opportunity to let Reading disadvantaged families have a new experience, as some had never seen the sea.

The families now come to us through a variety of other local charities and community groups right across the whole Reading area.

We have also organised trips to the panto or cinema in years when funds allow, or when we have received complimentary tickets, in particular from the Masquerade company. In recent years a generous business sponsor has funded this.

The annual “Toy Project”

In the early years RFA concentrated on giving practical support to mothers attending the Katesgrove House Adult Centre, and their children in the creche. We also arranged for Father Christmas to deliver gifts to the children. On hearing of this, the Council’s Department of Social Services asked us to provide gifts for needy children across the whole of Reading. So each year we invited the area’s Health Visitors and Social Workers to nominate families in need, and filled family sacks with donated toys for distribution. With the Reading Chronicle’s support, this modest Toy Project has expanded over the years to become today’s ambitious and highly organised Toys and Teens Appeal.

At first the Katesgrove House facilities were used for the receiving, sorting and distribution of gifts donated, not only from Reading Chronicle readers, but from local schools, churches, and various organisations.

Then we started inviting more agencies to receive gifts for the disadvantaged children they sought to help. As the number of deprived children grew, from the initial 100 or so to the current figure of around 1,500, we had to seek larger premises in which to sort and pack the toys. In 1997 Crosfield School lent us their hall, but since 1998 we have been given the use of a large church hall (plus tables) in Reading. But we still need to borrow extra tables from three other sources to enable us to sort the gifts efficiently, and we need to call upon an expanding army of volunteers to help. Our extra volunteers come from the Volunteer Centre, Reading and Caversham churches, Reading University staff and students, staff released by commercial firms for a day, volunteers responding to the appeal in the Chronicle, and friends and relatives of committee members; our regular members welcome their help with this mammoth task.

From two days in the 1980s, it now takes six days to manage the project, with months of preparation beforehand.