

Background to Intervention

March 2020 – this initiative emerged following Covid-19 lockdown and pausing of in-person supports to family carers

Family carers are proven to be at a greater risk of isolation, loneliness and depression than the general public^[1]

Covid-19 resulted in a sudden shutting of services and supports for family carers'

- ✗ Respite
- ✗ Day care
- ✗ Face-to-face support groups
- ✗ Dementia cafes
- ✗ Educational Supports
- Home care - c. 20% reduction

- Our organisation pivoted overnight. Staff led initiative with board and funder support
- Social work informed approach. Extensive staff experience in online group moderation in their private lives
- Set up a closed/private Facebook group format
- Key early and ongoing role of volunteer family carers and health and social care professionals

1 Aims / Purpose of Intervention

- Facilitate the sharing of reliable, trustworthy information
- Facilitate peer support between family carers
- Signpost to services & other organisations
- Provide a safe virtual space for family carers to seek reassurance, ask questions, receive peer support and contain raised anxiety
- Help family carers feel less alone, less isolated, more supported and more valued
- There's also an element of socialising and fun in the group

2 Theoretical Underpinnings

- **Social Support Theory**^[2] – (emotional, informational and instrumental), 'you are not alone'; social activities for the carer
- **Reciprocity Theory**^[3] – posting question/dilemma, posting suggestions, private messaging
- **Communities of Practice**^[4] – separate moderators and volunteers group, ongoing training, individual support for volunteers
- **Social Comparison Theory**^[5] – upwards, downwards & lateral comparisons; advantages and disadvantages
- **Digital Social Work Practice**^{[7][8]} Supporting vulnerable and marginalised populations^[6]

3 Problems this Intervention Addresses

Problem	Solution
Traditional public in person support groups require considerable time investment by client, travel time and have privacy issues	Accessible at-home to >95% family carer population, need high speed internet
Lengthy waiting lists	Online project has no waiting lists
High cost of 1-2-1 interventions	Intervention cost <€20 per client (no cost to participants)

4 Current Project Status

- **July 2026:** 6 years in operation. Over 11,600 members. Active engagement (>85%) and member retention rates (97%) remain very high
- €175k annual state funding secured (from the HSE, as part of The Carer Guarantee)
- Professionally moderated by 2 full-time staff members and 12 volunteers, all current or former family carers



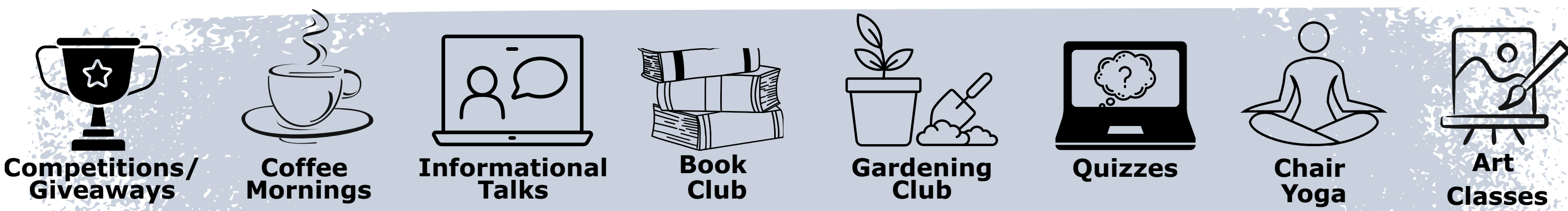
5 Culture

- Zero tolerance for nastiness – especially to other members and to volunteers
- Ambitious, innovate and iterative
- High-quality, considered moderation
- Ongoing staff and volunteer training and continuing professional development (CPD)

6 Novel Aspects of Intervention

- Regular care packages and other gifts to family carers.
- Annual family carer participation in creating a group calendar
- Online social activities
- Modest financial reimbursements for volunteers (ICT equipment, contribution towards internet fees)

7 Expansion of Associated Activities



8 Roles of Staff/Volunteers

- Screen membership applications
- Ensure informational documents updated and uploaded for all
- Approve/reject suggested posts
 - Checking tone, GDPR compliance and relevance of topics
- Welcome new members
- Monitor/moderate posts & comments
- Follow group policies and protocols
- Share other NGO's/organisations relevant posts
- Consider new activities
- Best practice online/forum moderation
- Referrals/ safeguarding
- Sustainability/finances
- Communicate/reiterate/demonstrate values

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9 Operational Challenges

- Facebook Platform not to everyone's liking (but it's where people are)
- Ongoing caution about storage and use of data (protocols, delete data regularly)
- 24/7 nature of online platforms (boundaries, staff support, rotas)
- Few publications detailing efficacy (Coulson, Neil et al – focus largely to date on self-management of health conditions)^[9]
- Consistency in moderation (culture of the group; protocols developed; frequent team/volunteer meetings)
- Risk of vicarious trauma (training, self awareness)

10 Growing Evidence Base

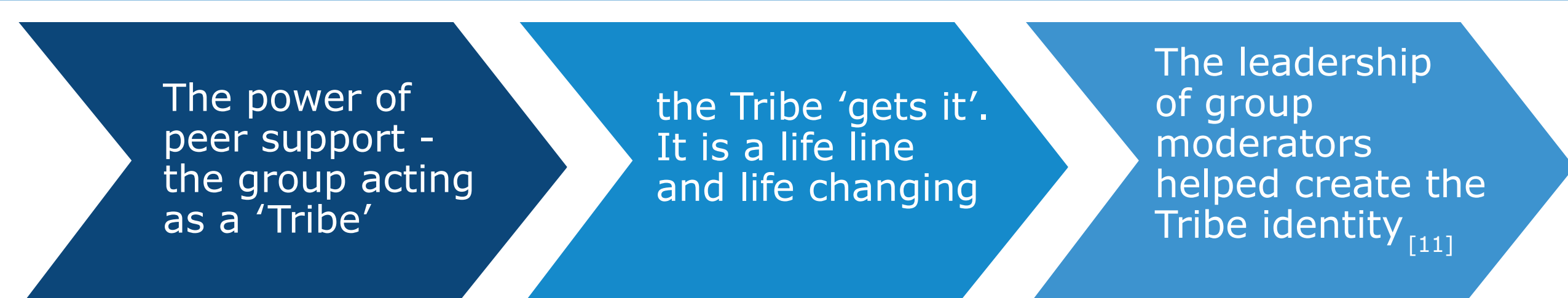
PhD. Rosemary Daynes Kearney – three research questions.

- Why are they important?
- What works well?
- Who uses them?

Research collaboration continuing with University of Limerick and Indiana University.



11 Emerging Research Themes



12 Group Member Feedback

"This group has helped me so much over the years, the book club has been fabulous, the quizzes are great, the coffee mornings wonderful, it's so isolating being a family carer and other people don't understand how exhausting and difficult it is but everyone in the group gets it and it's so so good to have the support as I can't get out to socialise due to caring responsibilities. I'd be lost without this group."

"I'm burnt out and this group helps me on my darkest days with support and comfort. This group helps so much with information. I also love the online classes they do. They are fantastic and you get to engage with other family carers. It's fantastic."

"Hi. I'm not a person who goes out to meet friends for tea or coffee etc, I feel anxious around people a lot of the time. This site has helped me to interact with others from the safety of my home. I can be at ease ... people who understand this carers life. The support from other members is such a help, it feels less alone."

13 Findings/Outcomes

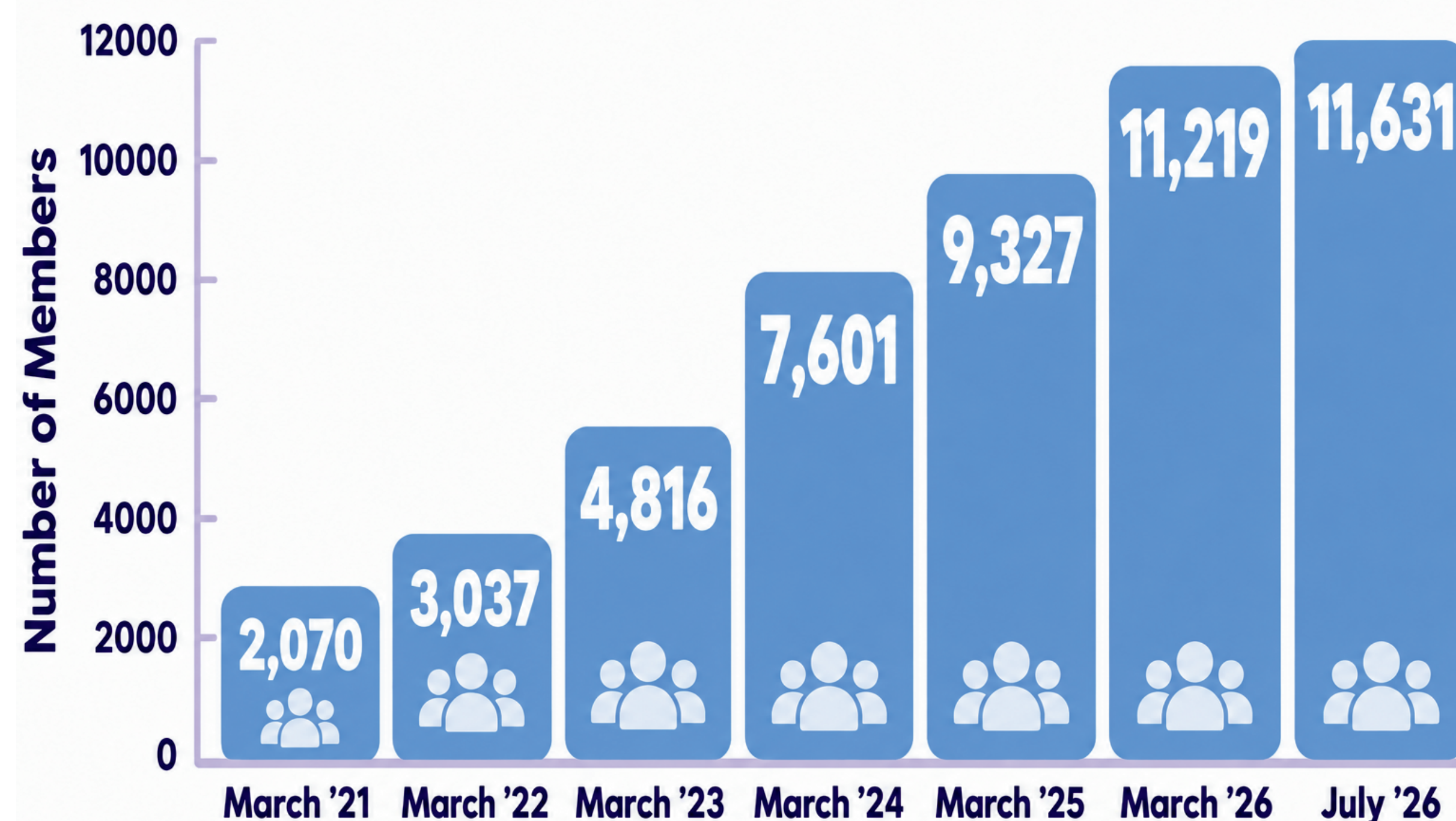
A Dec 2025 survey (n=281) reported:^[13]

- 72% have been caring for 10+ years
- 98% retention rate over 12 months
- 94% rated their experience as positive or very positive
- 93% found the group personally helpful
- 30% of respondents do not receive any services for their loved one
- 77% have never attended an in-person support group
- 59% have made meaningful connections through the group

- The most frequent words used to describe the group:
 - "supportive"
 - "helps"
 - "informed"
 - "understands"
- A thematic analysis of carers' messages to the government surfaced consistent concerns:
 - financial hardship
 - the impact of means testing
 - lack of respite
 - social isolation
 - administrative burden
 - fear for loved ones' future

The abolition of the means test for Carer's Allowance was the single most frequent request

MEMBERSHIP OF THE ONLINE FAMILY CARER SUPPORT GROUP



14 Unmet Need and Recommendations

- A June 2026 survey of 142 members found:
 - 97% of members would use a 1-2-1 support service if available
 - 83% of those who had previously sought comparable support elsewhere experienced delays
- Recommendation:
 - Provide 1-2-1 intensive support to a cohort of members: per recent funding bid