

Briefing Paper – April 2009

Family support services - the role of volunteers

This briefing paper:

- **outlines** Home-Start's position on the important part that home-visiting volunteers play in the field of family support
- **highlights** the distinct nature of volunteering and the unique contribution that volunteers make to the delivery of family support services
- **points to** the need for wider recognition and understanding of the added value that volunteers bring to this sector
- **calls for** greater levels of investment both to sustain existing services and to expand to meet growing demand

The views in this briefing are anchored in 35 years of practical and research based knowledge. For more information or to discuss any of the points in this paper please contact:

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What We Know

Home-Start family support volunteers offer a valuable service to parents and their children centred on:

- a trusting relationship based on careful matching and the shared investment of an average four hours a week of dedicated time
- a flexible, personal and responsive approach, based on the individual needs of families
- a regular, long term commitment to the family from a named volunteer

Home-Start volunteers work effectively with families with complex and often interrelated needs: children and parent's emotional health and well being; children and parents' physical health and well being; children's behaviour and development; parents' self esteem; family isolation; family stress; household management and budgeting; coping with multiple births or multiple children under five and the use of other services in the area.

Home-Start family support volunteers contribute to local family support provision by:

- addressing individual family support needs
- engaging with parents often reluctant to use other services
- providing a vital route for referrals from statutory services
- participating in a range of multi-disciplinary and multi-agency work with other local services
- enabling families to support and engage with other services
- signposting families to other local agencies and services where appropriate

Volunteers working with families within their communities and trained in safeguarding children are already able to respond to the recent reiterated call by Lord Laming that child protection is a community wide responsibility, not just the brief of social workers.

Home-Start volunteers help build social capital by:

- enabling families to move into work and out of poverty
- offering families a bridge into the community
- building family and volunteers skills and confidence
- offering volunteers a route into training and employment

Large volunteering organisations like Home-Start require a level of infrastructure capacity to manage and support volunteers effectively and efficiently. Investment in volunteering is essential to support and develop good volunteering practice and to recruit, train and manage volunteers.

This investment provides a platform from which other family support initiatives can be launched, for example recent work developing parents' involvement in the early learning of their children was possible because Home-Start already had in place an infrastructure of supported volunteers matched with families in local communities from which to build the new initiative

Investment in volunteering brings substantial added value. There is a three way gain:

- for the parents and children - in direct benefits
- for the volunteers - in professional and personal development
- for the community - in social capital

In the current economic downturn, Home-Start volunteers have a key role to play in:

- delivering flexible, responsive, frontline services for families in financial need, tailored to local and individual needs
- providing a route back into employment and new career opportunities for people who are out of work
- giving a sense of purpose, hope and personal development to families and volunteers

What Home-Start wants to see

1. Greater recognition at national policy and local commissioning levels of the role and effectiveness of volunteers in delivering family support services and the added value that volunteers bring to service delivery through: the additional time that they bring, the personal long term interaction they have with the parents and children; the building of social capital in the community and the personal development of the volunteers
2. A shared commitment to sustaining Home-Start's existing, well established, extensive network of well trained volunteers currently providing family support services and contributing to the safeguarding of children in large and small communities across the UK
3. A greater recognition amongst funders and service providers of the costs required for the recruitment, management, training and support of volunteers.
4. Designated funds to enable Home-Start to respond to growing levels of demand and provide home visiting volunteers in every community across the UK
5. A shared commitment to stabilise and develop existing volunteer services rather than create new systems and programmes and to financially support both local services and the national infrastructure necessary to support this volunteer workforce

6. New volunteer based partnerships and initiatives – to address family support needs and growing levels of social exclusion and deprivation

Who we are

Home-Start is the largest volunteer family support charity in the UK. Our 15,000 family home-visiting volunteers support more than 70,000 parents and children a year in over 330 communities across the UK. Home-Start volunteers provide a sound parenting role model based on accredited training and parenting experience plus practical help and emotional support helping to move families forward, building their parenting skills and ability to cope with family life.

Home-Start meets the needs of families experiencing long term complex needs, as well as those experiencing short term, intense periods of stress.

Volunteering in the field of family support is a demanding role and volunteers require training and support to carry it out effectively. Home-Start volunteers provide a high quality, professional service for families within a framework of robust training, regular supervision and quality management standards.

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