

Volunteers Matter, London Living Room

Tuesday 12 May 2009

Thank you, Julia Neuberger and thank you Kevin Brennan for speaking at our event this evening. You obviously both feel very strongly about the value of volunteers. I share your passion, so I'd particularly like to thank all the volunteers who have come here tonight to share their time and their stories with us.

I've been looking forward to this evening for many weeks now and the wonderful opportunity it's given us to celebrate all that's special about volunteers, especially our Home-Start volunteers. We're here tonight:

- to pay tribute to the important part that Home-Start volunteers play in delivering family support services
- to celebrate the unique nature of their contribution
- and to acknowledge the impact that support has for families and communities today.

Let me start by sharing some of the things I have experienced in my years with Home-Start – I'll try to be brief, but that won't be easy since I've worked in Home-Start for almost 25 years now, both in my local community of Reading and in recent years, up and down the UK. I've visited many communities, and met hundreds of volunteers – they've taught me so much.

I have enormous admiration and respect for the thousands of volunteers who pause their own busy lives to give their time and experience to other families in their community. They support other

parents who want to do the very best for their children, yet for all sorts of reasons, are finding it hard to do so.

I've seen how Home-Start volunteers work so effectively with families with long term, complex needs, and met those who support so well the parents who are experiencing short term, intense periods of stress.

I've seen how powerful this freely given, gift of time can be and what an extraordinary difference three or four hours a week of a volunteer's time can make to a family's life ... if it is given regularly and consistently.

Committed volunteers, well trained and carefully supported in their work, always have been and always will be central to Home-Start. They play a very special role in:

- giving the family exactly the tailored and personalised support they need
- safeguarding children and nurturing their wider development
- helping families to identify and access other local services
- and even more importantly, winning the trust of parents who are often reluctant to use those other services or simply can't access them. (Figures released by the Family and Parenting institute earlier this month show the huge variations in access to support up and down the country – some London Primary Care Trusts have as few as one health visitor per 800 children.)

I've seen for myself the added value that volunteers can bring:

- to building the skills and confidence of parents and their children

- in helping parents move into new opportunities for learning, then work and then out of poverty
- in bringing new opportunities for children in play and just having fun
- to giving families a bridge into their community
- and along the way the volunteers themselves often find a route into training and new employment

And I've seen that while volunteering might be freely given, it doesn't come for free. Organisations like ours need a level of infrastructure to recruit, manage and support volunteers, to build on and make the most of their skills and experience. It is vital that we invest in volunteers, in their recruitment, training and supervision, and in developing good volunteering practice. This investment will provide a foundation on which other family support projects can build - we have a number of partnerships now underway, with Turn2Us, Child Poverty Action Group and Shelter - they will all tap into our proven volunteer network, bringing additional help to families.

And the great news is that investing in volunteering goes such a long way:

- it adds value for parents and children
- it adds value for volunteers - in terms of professional and personal development
- and it adds value for the wider community - building social capital

We all appreciate how crucial family life is to our children's happiness. Being a parent is one of the most important things that any of us can do. I will quote Lord Laming from his recent Progress Report on the protection of children in England, "*the years of childhood pass all too quickly, and become the foundation upon which the rest of life*

*depends*". That's some responsibility he's talking about –and it's vital that we get it right.

Home-Start believes, alongside many others, that for the vast majority of children the best place for them to be brought up is with their families.

And the majority of parents are of course doing their very best – albeit in sometimes terribly difficult and challenging circumstances. But too many parents - here in London and across the UK - are still struggling, with the best will in the world, to cope on their own. Thankfully, well trained, committed volunteers can be a real force in improving the odds for these families.

If I had just one message to share with you this evening it would be that volunteers really can make a difference to the lives of the families they support. And through the work they do, they really can make an impact on the wider community.

But for this vital work to continue, and to provide volunteer support for every family who needs it, we (and by we I mean government, local commissioners, funders, supporters, and indeed all of us here in the room tonight) must work together to continue to capture the very real strengths of volunteers and create an environment in which they can flourish. We must recognise and acknowledge the vital role that volunteers play; we must put the investment in place that organisations like ours need in order to respond to the growing need that exists in our communities.

Such an investment will be an investment well made. I say this because whilst others are talking about helping, our 15,000 volunteers are in family's homes every day quietly doing just that. It's a sound investment because while others are discussing how to help people to

develop skills to help themselves, how agencies need to work together, how child protection is a community wide responsibility, how workforce development is vital, how local communities need to be empowered, Home-Start volunteers are just getting on and doing it. While others agree with us that having the best start in life gives children greater potential to succeed, our volunteers are helping to make that happen.

So on behalf of everyone here this evening, and everyone who cares about the future of our communities and the young families living within them, thank you Home-Start volunteers for being so wonderful and thank you all for your support.

End.

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