



Home-Start South Hams,
Plymouth & Tavistock

February 2014

Stepping Stones

An evaluation of Stepping Stones, a project
delivered by Home-Start and funded by the
Big Lottery Reaching Communities Fund.

Home-Start South Hams,
Plymouth & Tavistock

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**“I wouldn’t have coped without help
from Home-Start.
Their support was a stepping stone to
me sorting myself out.”**

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Home-Start South Hams, Plymouth and Tavistock believes that having a friend is one of the most supportive, enabling relationships in a parent's life.

Formed by the merger of two local Home-Start schemes, the charity provides support and friendship to parents with a child under 5 across a five hundred square mile area of Devon which varies widely from the rural wilderness of Dartmoor to the urban cityscape of Plymouth.

Home-Start South Hams, Plymouth & Tavistock (SHPT) believes that many parents are desperate to do the right thing to give their children the best start in life but can find themselves fighting against the odds. Issues such as disability or mental health, redundancy or unemployment, or family breakdown or domestic abuse can impact on any family at any time and Home-Start SHPT can be on hand to provide practical help, support and friendship, but also works preventatively by delivering services to respond to the changing needs of families.

From its base in Kingsbridge, Home-Start SHPT supports parents in their own homes by matching them with a trained and experience home-visiting volunteer and provides a range of other opportunities for support, including family groups, training courses and financial advice.

ABOUT HOME-START

Home-Start SHPT is affiliated to [Home-Start UK](#), a national family support charity that helps parents build better lives for their children. Founded in Leicester in 1973 by a visionary volunteer who saw a role for volunteers to support families in their own homes at the start of their child's life; the Home-Start network provides support to 32, 000 families annually.

There are nearly 300 local Home-Start schemes working in communities across the UK and with families on British Forces bases overseas. The scale of the network can impact negatively on the charity as there is a common misconception by the public and key partners that an affiliation to a nationally recognised charity must mean that the charity is financially secure.

In reality, every local Home-Start scheme exists as an independent charity with its own constitution and board of trustees. Home-Start SHPT has full responsibility for its own fundraising and sustainability and does not receive any financial support from Home-Start UK.

“We were so disappointed when the local authority withdrew funding from the scheme as it was particularly successful. We see Home-Start working incessantly to raise funds, but it's not right that they should have to take their focus away from what they do best – supporting local families.” Children's Centre Manager.

ABOUT THE EVALUATION

The Board of Trustees at Home-Start SHPT commissioned Steve Allman in January 2014 to write a summary evaluation of their Stepping Stones project; initially delivered as two projects funded by Reaching Communities grants and combined following the merger of the schemes.

Purpose

The purpose of the summary evaluation is not to duplicate the reporting process, but to provide additional value by engaging with families, volunteers and other key stakeholders to seek their views on the impact of the charity in order to validate their own internal evaluation and to gain an external perspective on the charities' strengths, challenges and future strategy.

Self-evaluation

The scheme has undertaken its own self-evaluation which has highlighted a range of positive outcomes for families and volunteers, in addition to some areas for improvement in future. Furthermore, under the terms of the grant, Home-Start SHPT provides regular reports to the Big Lottery Fund on items including expenditure, outputs and performance against outcomes.

Literature Review

The evaluator has reviewed reports submitted to the Big Lottery Fund, in addition to the scheme's own monitoring reports and data from MESH, the Home-Start database which records the "family journey", a method of measuring key milestones agreed with the family. The literature review indicates that the charity has performed well against the outcomes agreed with the Big Lottery Fund and has robust monitoring and reporting procedures in place.

Methods

Following the literature review, the evaluator conducted telephone interviews with 30 key stakeholders comprised of 13 parents, 7 volunteers, 4 key partners, 3 staff and 2 trustees selected at random by the evaluator from a contacts list provided by Home-Start SHPT.

Parents and volunteers also took part in a structured survey based on project outcomes which ranked opinions on a Likert scale according to the strength of their agreement/disagreement.

Partners, staff and trustees took part in an open-ended telephone interview with the evaluator collecting qualitative data based upon the project outcomes agreed with the Big Lottery Fund.

Interviews took place in January and February 2014 and the average duration was 30 minutes.

“I couldn’t face leaving the house. If it wasn’t for Home-Start I’d still be sitting at home on my own like a hermit.”

OUTCOMES

The project outcomes proposed by Home-Start SHPT were based upon the needs of families living in each area and the challenges they experience. Both projects sought to achieve similar outcomes and, for the purposes of the summary evaluation, the combined findings are discussed under four broader themes relating to the original outcomes which are as follows:

Plymouth

150 parents report feeling less isolated and more engaged in their local community.

100 parents report improved employment skills and opportunities through targeted courses and volunteer support.

75 parents report living in reduced poverty via maximising income and support to connect with employment services.

60 volunteers report increased life skills or gain employment skills through experience, accreditation and training.

South Hams & Tavistock

100 parents report feeling less isolated and more engaged in their local community.

50 parents report improved employment skills and opportunities through targeted courses and volunteer support.

50 parents report living in reduced poverty via maximising income and support.

50 volunteers report increased life skills or gain employment skills through experience, accreditation and training.

1 OVERCOMING ISOLATION

COMBINED OUTCOME: 250 PARENTS REPORT FEELING LESS ISOLATED AND MORE ENGAGED IN THEIR LOCAL COMMUNITY.

“We live in a very rural area and there aren’t many groups. Before Home-Start I could go for weeks without any company, so just knowing that my volunteer was coming to see me once a week gave me a little contact with the outside world.”

100% of parents agreed that Home-Start SHPT made them feel less isolated, with 58% of those parents in strong agreement. Parents cited a number of reasons for isolation, including being new to the area, living in a very rural area, not having a large family or many friends, or feeling that their circumstances made them “different”, including having twins or a disabled child.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

“I was scared of going to new places, but I knew it was important for my child. My Home-Start volunteer put me in touch with the Children’s Centre and then she came along with me until I had the confidence to start going on my own.”

The extent to which a family felt engaged in their local community was more subjective with 58% of parents agreeing that Home-Start SHPT had made them more engaged in the their local community, 16% disagreed and 26% neither agreed, nor disagreed. “Feelings” of community engagement were intangible, but parents could cite specific groups or events attended.

Those parents in agreement cited their Home-Start volunteer as being a critical conduit to helping them access their local community, or helping to get organised in order to do so.

75% of parents agreed that Home-Start support had helped them to access community facilities and events. Home-Start had helped parents to access practical facilities, such as shopping at the local supermarket, necessary facilities such as doctors’ appointments and child related activities including health visiting appointments, playgroups and music/dance sessions.

MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS AND POST NATAL DEPRESSION

“I had really bad post natal depression. I couldn’t face leaving the house so I didn’t go out to my mum’s, or town, or anywhere. If it wasn’t for Home-Start I’d still be sitting at home like a hermit.”

“I did a course about coping with post-natal depression and heard about Home-Start there. My health visitor referred me because I was so low and wouldn’t leave the house to get my baby weighed or go to groups. She helped me to get out of the house more and gradually helped me build the confidence to go out on my own.”

Where parents reported low levels of community engagement and high levels of isolation prior to Home-Start support, their mental health needs were a critical factor. A number of mums had experienced post-natal depression (PND). One mum described how she had intentionally isolated herself from friends and family following the birth of her child because she felt that they expected her to be happy about the birth and she could not meet their expectations.

Other mums who had experienced PND described becoming isolated because they did not feel able to answer the door to visitors or lacked the motivation or will to leave the house. One mum described how she felt able to cope with her baby as long as she stayed at home because she was anxious about being judged outside if she was unable to console her child if she cried.

Parents experiencing mental health needs or post-natal depression reported a positive intervention by their Home-Start volunteer, with “listening” being cited by a number of mums as a positive outcome, in addition to having someone to talk to. Other mums welcomed a more direct approach from their volunteers, who had been proactive in encouraging them to take part in community events, complete household chores or face up to financial problems.

HM NAVY

“We moved to Plymouth because my husband’s in the navy. I didn’t know anyone, but I felt too old to go out and make new friends. I went to playgroups but if people didn’t talk to me it knocked my confidence and I didn’t go back. My volunteer helped me see it differently. She’s the sort of person you just want to be like; a great inspiration.”

The geographic patch covered by Home-Start SHPT includes HMNB Devonport, the largest naval base in Western Europe which employs 2500 service personnel and civilians in Plymouth.

Most mums engaged in the evaluation were the partners of service personnel and described some additional isolation and community engagement issues specific to forces families. One mum described feeling isolated because her partner was away for months, or was required to work long hours when he was based in the UK.

Another described how not being allowed on the base made it difficult to meet other mums in the same situation and she didn't feel that non-naval mums understood how isolated she was feeling. Some mums had not disclosed that Home-Start was supporting them because they felt needing additional family support could stigmatise their partner as being weak and that it may adversely impact on his navy career.

One professional supported the views expressed by parents and suggested that one of the issues is that navy families do not meet the usual criteria for being a family in need as their income is relatively secure and they live in private housing. Another professional felt that the navy could do much more to support the partners of its personnel and that the family support organisations run by the navy needed to engage more in the local voluntary community sector.

ADDITIONAL NEEDS

“One of my children has a disability and Home-Start has been my first port of call for everything, they've given me much more support than other services, even the NHS.”

“My child has additional needs and was taking up a lot of my time, both in a negative way with hospital appointments and the grief and sadness that come with having a disabled child, but also in a positive way, which could often mean that my other children missed out on my time. Our volunteer was fantastic and gave me support to look after him and also spend time with my other children.”

Two mums engaged in the evaluation were parents of disabled children whilst others reported their child as having additional needs, which included behavioural needs and learning needs. Both mums with disabled children had been matched with volunteers who had significant experience of disability. One volunteer was a retired physiotherapist and had offered practical advice which mum felt she could have waited for years to receive from the NHS.

Parents cited Home-Start volunteers as being critical friends regarding behavioural issues, brought about as a result of a formal diagnosis of autism through to the more typical “terrible twos” behaviour. Volunteers had provided practical tips and advice which had made significant improvements to children's behaviour and had a positive impact on other areas, such as stress levels and positive relationships within the family.

Parents valued the support and guidance offered by volunteers, with one mum saying *“she came in when I was at breaking point and helped me to rebuild. It didn’t change overnight, but just knowing that she had been there with her own kids made me feel less of a failure.”*

PERSONAL SUPPORT

“My volunteer is just so positive! She makes me feel like I can do anything. With her support, I’ve been able to completely overcome my post natal depression and all sorts of things about my confidence, how I look and my weight (I’ve lost four stone!).”

“I struggle with my confidence in social situations and would use my volunteer as a wall when we went out. I used to think I was letting her do my talking for me, but then I realised that I was joining in conversations because she’d broken the ice for me.”

All parents engaged in the evaluation described how their volunteer had supported them to overcome some of the underlying personal issues which had led to their feelings of isolation or their lack of community engagement. Confidence and self-esteem were frequently referred to by parents as being critical to gaining independence and being able to cope.

The simplest interactions were among the most highly valued, such as listening to a parent or offering advice. One mum said, “when I’m having a bad day, she’ll listen to me, then say “right, come on, there’s washing up here to be done!”. Another reported that she opened up to her volunteer “because she’s older and wiser, so I don’t feel threatened by her like I do with people my own age”.

In many ways, Home-Start SHPT is able to offer a cost effective, simple service which meets the most basic needs of families and can prevent them requiring further intervention from other services. However, in some ways, the Home-Start model is a victim of its own success in that the support is so basic and so simple that it never tends to be viewed as a priority.

RURAL ISOLATION

Rural isolation is a key factor for some parents who have been supported by Home-Start SHPT. Some parents reported that even if they felt confident to access community facilities there are very few community facilities to access. One parent felt her village catered very well for older people but not for young mums with families and this view was echoed by others who felt doubly-disadvantaged by being isolated as new parents living in an isolated part of the county.

2 DEVELOPING NEW SKILLS

COMBINED OUTCOME: 150 PARENTS IMPROVE EMPLOYMENT SKILLS AND OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH TARGETED COURSES AND VOLUNTEER SUPPORT.

“When I found myself ‘umming and ahing’ about getting a job, my volunteer was there to give me a kick up the arse and tell me to just get on with it!”

“My volunteer supported me to go back to work after my husband left. I felt very isolated on my own and was close to giving up, but she listened to me, she encouraged me to carry on and, most importantly, she made me believe that I could do it.”

“Until I went on their Next Steps course I was a single mum on benefits. The course really built my confidence and I felt able to start making important decisions. I’ve been self-employed ever since.”

TRAINING

The charity can report some real “successes” in terms of helping parents into employment. Two parents who took part in the evaluation are self-employed as a direct consequence of attending a “Next Steps” course provided by Home-Start and two others described how their volunteer had provided the support and encouragement they needed to go back to work.

UNEMPLOYMENT A SECONDARY ISSUE

However, it would appear that these examples are the exception rather than the norm and this is largely down to the ethos of Home-Start SHPT which is most effective at supporting families with the underlying issues which may prevent them from gaining employment; such as confidence or self-esteem, or overcoming depression.

Whilst 17% of the parents asked agreed that Home-Start had improved their employment skills or opened up new employment opportunities; all of the remaining parents reported that employment was not a focus for them for various reasons, including anxiety, depression, childcare commitments, or simply that their household income was sufficient, but there were other areas that required support.

Rural isolation prevented employment for some, with one mum describing her trip to the job centre on two buses with two children in tow whilst another mum who wanted to work felt that employers were prejudiced towards navy families as they may move away in the future.

STIGMA

Both the literature review and engagement with families supported the notion that there is certainly a role to support parents who wish to work, but the charity has to be sensitive to the needs of all families and employment should not be an implied expectation or outcome.

This was supported by a number of parents who reported feeling under pressure by professionals to justify why they were not employed or seeking employment, especially where they had made a choice to be a full time parent and had reviewed their financial situation beforehand. Some parents acknowledged that they felt “employable” since being supported by Home-Start.

VOLUNTEERING

41% of parents agreed that Home-Start had discussed volunteering opportunities with them, mostly on an informal basis in conversation with their volunteer about either getting back into work or finding an outlet that allowed some time out from their parenting role.

3 parents showed an interest in becoming a Home-Start volunteer in order to “give something back” after receiving support from the scheme, whilst one mum said she would “need to get my own family sorted out first before I start helping other people run theirs!”.

BRYONY, ALTERNATIVE ARRANGEMENTS (FLORIST)

Bryony is one of the parents who attended a number of employment courses run by Home-Start SHPT at the Totnes Children’s Centre over a year ago. She says that the courses offered by Home-Start SHPT influenced her decision to set up her business:

“With four kids, I’m always tearing round to appointments or activities, or one of them is off sick from school. I didn’t feel that I could commit to a job, but I couldn’t face signing on. I went along to Home-Start’s Next Steps course at my local children’s centre and it was pretty in depth. We talked about setting goals and hitting targets and I could feel my confidence grow. Since then I’ve set up my own floristry business and it’s great because I’m doing something I love, but I’m also working from home mainly, which means I can fit work around the kids.”

3 INCREASING FINANCIAL INDEPENDENCE

COMBINED OUTCOME: 125 PARENTS REPORT LIVING IN REDUCED POVERTY VIA MAXIMISING INCOME AND CONNECT WITH EMPLOYMENT SERVICES.

“My volunteer went through budgeting with me. Just simple things like how to plan meals for the week so you don’t spend too much on the food shopping.”

“They asked me about money but it’s not about money for me. I need help with other things and even if I had a million pounds in the bank, I would still need their help.”

Home-Start SHPT has trained volunteers who can offer a “Maximising Income” check to families to ensure they are receiving their full entitlement of benefits and state support, but the structure of social welfare in the UK has undergone radical change during the life of the project and it’s been difficult for those volunteers to keep up to date with the changes.

42% of families engaged in the evaluation agreed that support from Home-Start had helped them to increase their household income, but not always in the way Home-Start intended. Although parents were aware of maximising income checks and most had been offered one, very few had taken up the opportunity as they did not feel it suited their financial situation; but they had benefited in other ways, mostly from their volunteer sharing their experiences.

Of the families who noted improvements to their household income, it was again the simple interventions that had the most impact. Home-Start volunteers passing on their knowledge, skills and experience to families is difficult to quantify, but some parents were able to relay specific examples, including; a volunteer showing a mum how to plan meals to budget her weekly food shopping, another volunteer taught a parent to sew after realising she bought new children’s clothes to replace torn garments because she didn’t know how to mend them.

As staff and volunteers suggested during the evaluation, it can be difficult to identify improvements in household income because parents do not always like to disclose it for reasons on a scale ranging from feeling they are struggling with money to feeling that they should not be requesting support from Home-Start if they are not struggling for money.

Anecdotally, two volunteers can recall conversations with parents about improvements in their financial situation which they feel have originated as a result of informal advice they offered. One parent received a substantial tax rebate after a volunteer suspected she was overpaying.

4 DEVELOPING VOLUNTEERS

COMBINED OUTCOME: 110 VOLUNTEERS REPORT INCREASED LIFE SKILLS AND/OR EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH EXPERIENCE, TRAINING AND ACCREDITATION.

“What I like best about being a volunteer with Home-Start is that it’s possibly the only job you could do where being made redundant is the best thing that could happen.”

Volunteering is the essential foundation of the support provided by Home-Start SHPT and nearly 50 volunteers are actively supporting the charity. 7 of those volunteers engaged with the evaluation and, in addition to sharing their views, they were asked about common themes.

The volunteers unanimously agreed that volunteering with Home-Start is a positive experience; that they feel valued by the charity and that they have received sufficient training. 7 out of 7 volunteers asked agreed that Home-Start SHPT has a positive impact on families.

Broadly speaking, there are two different types of Home-Start SHPT volunteer. The first is those who have reached, or are nearing, retirement and have taken up volunteering to give something back to the community or share their extensive skills and experiences with others.

The second group are those volunteers who are at the start of their career, or have changed career, and hope to have a positive impact on families whilst also gaining practical experience and training in their related professional field, which may typically include health and social care or childcare. Both types of volunteer are very welcome at Home-Start SHPT, whose only preference is that volunteers should have personal experience of parenting.

TRAINING

“The training is very good. It’s very in depth over 10 weeks and it really makes you think. It’s very useful and very informative; it’s not at all superficial.”

“The training is very interactive. They make it so that everyone can say what they want and you don’t feel like there are any stupid questions. I’ve made some really good friends, which is a real bonus as that’s not necessarily why I started volunteering.”

The training provided by Home-Start SHPT received exceptionally positive feedback from the volunteers who engaged in the evaluation, with 100% of them agreeing it was sufficient and all volunteers speaking positively about its content, delivery and value to their volunteering role.

The training package was included in the literature review and is delivered as a comprehensive 10 week programme to equip volunteers with the skills to support families, whatever their background. In addition, Home-Start SHPT provides volunteers with occasional opportunities for follow-on training; a number of volunteers interviewed were due to attend a specialist course on Post Natal Depression at the time of the evaluation.

ACCREDITATION

50% of volunteers over 3 years achieved an accreditation and 45% of volunteers in Plymouth moved into employment or training. Volunteers expressed mixed views on the value of accreditation, relating directly to the two types of volunteer described in the introduction to this section. Volunteers engaged in the evaluation were retired or nearing retirement and felt that accredited training was not necessary or valuable to them, although it had been offered.

Staff and trustees were pleased to support volunteers in making the transition to work, but some expressed a concern about the time invested in training volunteers who moved on. There is strong evidence to suggest accreditation assists volunteers to find work, but no evidence to suggest that volunteers only sign up with the scheme to receive the free training.

Home-Start SHPT may like to be mindful of the old adage used in voluntary sector training; *“What if we train our volunteers and they leave?”* or *“what if we don’t and they stay?”*.

MANAGEMENT

“Home-Start has very good processes in place. It’s easy to volunteer with them because everything is black and white, the guidance is there for anyone to access and there’s always someone on the end of the phone if you need them.”

Volunteers engaged in the evaluation reported high levels of satisfaction in volunteer management and spoke highly of the staff involved in their management and development. All volunteers felt valued by the charity and the most notable comments were those relating to being able to call upon staff for advice and support at any time, even evenings and weekends. Volunteers valued the practical input and experience shared by staff during training sessions.

MOTIVATION

“Volunteering is incredibly rewarding because you start with a family and they’re a young mum really struggling with their new role, but you stop working with them and they’re back on an even keel, coping with life, enjoying being mothers.”

“Even if mum just seems a little bit brighter the next day, I feel I’ve made an impact.”

“I worked with one mum who had experienced domestic abuse. Her child was very reticent towards me and wouldn’t leave mum’s side. When he finally came over to me, it felt like a huge breakthrough.”

“One mum had experienced domestic violence. She left home with nothing. She slept on the floor so the kids had a bed and they ate meals on the floor sitting at a table made from a cardboard box. Eventually, she said she didn’t need me anymore; she was ready to go it alone. I was so proud of her; it was such a good feeling.”

The volunteers engaged in the evaluation were motivated by giving something back to their community and sharing the skills and experiences they had gained as parents themselves. Many volunteers had retired from related professions, including teaching and physiotherapy, and felt that Home-Start allowed them to continue to use their skills in a positive way. All volunteers reported being most motivated by seeing the impact of their support on families, but only after further enquiries as they were all very modest about their impact.

SHARING SKILLS & EXPERIENCE

“Mum wanted to cook a healthy meal for the kids so we talked about what she needed to get from the shops and how to prepare it. She planned it herself and asked if it was right – it was such a simple little thing but she was so chuffed with herself.”

“There’s lots of people piling pressure on mums and lots of people being critical, but there aren’t many people like us to say ‘it’s ok mum, you’re doing a good job.’”

“What I like best about being a volunteer with Home-Start is that it’s possibly the only job you could do where being made redundant is the best thing that could happen.”

Volunteers described sharing their skills and experiences with families by role-modelling and providing practical assistance to complete everyday, and more complex, tasks at home.

PARTNERSHIPS

Home-Start SHPT works with a number of partner organisations in the area who either refer families to the charity for support or offer complimentary and additional services. Four partners and two former partners who are now Trustees contributed their views:

“I find Home-Start staff to be very professional but also warm and friendly. When we refer a family to Home-Start, they take an active interest from the outset, they attend liaison meetings at the Children’s Centres and they keep us informed about any support they offer.”

“With statutory services focused on providing low-cost short term support to those families who are most in need, Home-Start’s “little but often” model is more crucial than ever to ensure families with moderate needs don’t miss out on support.”

“We recognise how much time and energy Home-Start SHPT has to put into raising funds to ensure its own survival and it makes us very concerned for their future.”

“Families can come in the Children’s Centre for an hour or two and tell us everything’s fine, whereas Home-Start volunteers see them ‘in real life’ at home. It’s a much more up close and personal than any statutory service could provide.”

Children’s Centre Managers

“Referring a family to Home-Start is very easy. Staff always responds within 24 hours and, even if they can’t help us, they’ll follow it up or make useful suggestions.”

“Home-Start’s real skill is in matching the right family to the right volunteer. I’ve never known a placement breakdown because they made the wrong match and the families I refer to Home-Start always tell me their volunteer went above and beyond to help.”

“They help families who’d find it impossible to get a social worker because they’re not in need, but what does in need really mean, anyway? How long is a family in need for? Volunteers must save the Council a fortune by giving up a couple of hours each week.”

Health Visitors

CHALLENGES

“The only bad thing I could say about Home-Start isn’t something they can do anything about; it’s about short term funding. All we ever hear about is that there are more families who need us but there is never enough funding to go round. Staff need to know they can pay their own bills, so they leave and we end up short-staffed for a while, which puts pressure on us all.” **Home-Start SHPT Volunteer**

Feedback about Home-Start SHPT from families, volunteers and partners was overwhelmingly positive. Those engaged found it difficult to consider areas for improvement or weaknesses, other than positive criticism such as “there should be more of it, everyone should have it”. There were some obvious challenges identified and some minor areas for improvement:

Funding

Funding and sustainability is without doubt the single most challenging issue facing Home-Start SHPT. With two Big Lottery Fund grants reaching a natural (successful) conclusion and without any statutory funding whatsoever, there is a sense that the charity is living on “borrowed time” and this is felt at every level from trustees and staff through to families and volunteers.

The charity is already utilising its reserves and, without any additional long-term funds, there is every likelihood that it will be forced to wind up its services by September 2014. With no formal fundraising role within the charity, it falls to the Scheme Manager to generate income in addition to running the scheme on a day to day basis. Despite her obvious fundraising skills and capabilities it is a difficult task and the future of the scheme remains uncertain.

Staffing

Those engaging in the evaluation remarked that the achievements of Home-Start SHPT are even more significant given the small staff team. Only 3 members of staff are involved in arranging support to all families and as many volunteers. Additional funds would enable the charity to recruit a full staff complement and offer support to more families.

Referrals

There was some suggestion from professional partners that they would like to hear more about the support offered to the families they refer and any successful outcomes.

Volunteer Management

The scheme manages volunteers well and delivers a consistent training offer, but would like to have capacity to build on this in future and offer further volunteer development opportunities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Home-Start South Hams, Plymouth and Tavistock delivers an effective service to families who report that, whilst the model is relatively simple, the impact is invaluable.

Having reviewed the literature relating to Home-Start South Hams, Plymouth and Tavistock and considered the views of key stakeholders, the following recommendations are made:

Recommendation 1

The charity appears to lack a robust strategy and business plan to ensure its future sustainability and it is recommended that this is addressed by the Board urgently. The Scheme Manager is clearly a skilled and capable fundraiser, but the traditional sources of income for the charity are under pressure and a well thought out fundraising plan/strategy is essential.

It is also recommended that the Board consider alternative funding opportunities which are not traditional; such as social investment or loan finance from specialist funders who support charities with managing cash flow or developing new products and services. Whilst there is no guarantee that an application will be successful, the board may like to explore the possibilities.

Recommendation 2

The charity has had initial discussions about developing a social enterprise, or generating its own income and these discussions may form part of any future strategy or business plan. The Board may like to explore some of the support and funding options available for developing this area of work and consider which of its products and services could generate income.

Recommendation 3

Volunteering and training are key areas of expertise for Home-Start SHPT and the charity may be able to build on their expertise with a generic offer to other charities or via e-learning. These are new areas of work and may require initial capital, but could assist in sustainability.

Recommendation 4

There is an appetite from volunteers to receive additional training opportunities and follow-on training at higher levels to aid their progression. There is potential to generate income from such training by offering it on an open basis to volunteers and staff from other organisations.

Recommendation 5

On partnership; it is recommended that Home-Start SHPT builds on recent dialogue with forces charities to explore partnerships and potential joint funding, in addition to exploring partnerships with organisations which may be able to share in delivery or business support.

Recommendation 6

Home-Start SHPT staff and volunteers are naturally modest and reserved about their impact, but this may deter potential funders and partners if they do not understand its impact.

It is recommended that Home-Start SHPT improves its marketing; perhaps by defining its impact on specific needs, such as mental health, depression, disability, etc. which may assist in recruiting new partners or developing further funding opportunities for specific needs.

Recommendation 7

The scheme has a relatively low-key online presence and may be missing out on opportunities to make a positive impression on potential funders and partners. There are a number of free tools available to share the impact of the charity via social media and it is recommended that the charity takes advantage of online opportunities, perhaps recruiting a volunteer or volunteers specifically for this purpose who can support social media and search optimisation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to acknowledge and thank all the families, volunteers, partners, staff and trustees who engaged in the evaluation, but particularly the parents who were willing to share their personal experience of Home-Start SHPT in the hope that it may help other families who are in similar situations.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve Allman is an independent charity consultant with a track record in the children and young people's voluntary sector at every level from volunteer to chief executive and chair. As a practitioner, he supported disabled children and young people with complex needs and their families, primarily in social care settings. As a chief executive he led a regional disabled children's charity and also served as a trustee on numerous boards, including elected chair of both the Suffolk Families Forum and Council for Disabled Children. A parent himself, Steve currently serves as community governor at a special school.

FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information about Home-Start South Hams, Plymouth & Tavistock, please contact:

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