Empowering Families

Home-Start Suffolk Coastal

An Evaluation of the Big Lottery funded Empowering Families Project

Steve Allman
July 2013
“I LOST MY CONFIDENCE WHEN I HAD KIDS AND THEN HOME-START HELPED ME GET IT BACK. THEY EXPLAINED IT’S NOT ONLY ME WHO NEEDS HELP, IT HAPPENS TO A LOT OF PEOPLE. YOU THINK YOU’RE THE ONLY ONE, BUT THEY TELL YOU IT’S ALL AROUND AND IT’S OK TO ASK FOR HELP.”

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INTRODUCTION

“Where The Start Is” is an independent external evaluation of the Empowering Families project, delivered by Home-Start Suffolk Coastal thanks to funding from the Big Lottery Fund. Steve Allman Ltd was commissioned by Home-Start Suffolk Coastal to undertake an independent evaluation during May and June 2013.

From the very early stages of the evaluation, it was clear that Home-Start Suffolk Coastal had performed well against the outcomes agreed with the Big Lottery Fund and the evaluation process was designed to assess the extent of the project’s impact based upon the findings gathered from families, volunteers and key stakeholders, in addition to making recommendations as to the most impactful next steps for the project.

ABOUT THE EVALUATION

As they enter the final year of the three year Empowering Families project, the charity are able to clearly demonstrate how families have benefited and are on target to achieve the agreed outcomes and milestones. The purpose of this evaluation is to provide an external assessment of the extent to which the project is impacting on the lives of the families it supports and to make recommendations on the natural next steps for the project, based upon the views gathered by engaging with families, volunteers and key stakeholders.

Prior to completing this final report, the evaluation was conducted in four distinct phases; commencing with the evaluator undertaking a brief literature review of reports, policies and procedures, followed by direct engagement with families during family group sessions and by individual interviews by phone and in person. The third phase engaged directly with volunteers via a group work session and online survey and the fourth engaged with staff and other stakeholders by way of structured group work and open telephone interviews.

The Board of Directors at Home-Start Suffolk Coastal have taken an active interest throughout the evaluation process and have shown a genuine enthusiasm for hearing and acting upon the views of families, volunteers, staff and other key stakeholders. The Board invited the evaluator to present interim findings at their meeting in May 2013 and have requested a presentation of the final report at their forthcoming AGM in July 2013.

METHODOLOGY

A total of 36 parents engaged in the evaluation; 33 mums and 3 dads. 22 parents completed telephone interviews; 12 took part in group work or individual interviews at family groups; 2 parents were unable to contribute by phone or during family groups and were visited at home by the evaluator.

34 volunteers engaged in the evaluation and contributed their views. 24 completed an online survey designed to generate both quantitative and qualitative data; 6 engaged in the evaluation during family group sessions and 4 attended a volunteers’ lunch and group work session offered as part of the evaluation.

3 professionals who have referred families to Home-Start have engaged in the evaluation and shared their experience of working in partnership with Home-Start; one of whom continues their involvement as a Director.

In addition, the Home-Start Suffolk Coastal staff team has made a significant contribution by encouraging parents to engage with the evaluation process; as well as attending a group work session for staff which focussed on their self-assessment of progress against the project outcomes, in addition to gaining their insight as to the strengths and challenges of the project and their assessment of current and future family needs.
Home-Start Suffolk Coastal\(^1\) believes that every parent should have the support they need to give their children the best possible start in life. Founded in 1999 in response to local need, it is one of only three Home-Start schemes in Suffolk and supports families living in the Suffolk Coastal district from its base in Woodbridge.

Home-Start Suffolk Coastal does not consider there to be any such thing as a typical family and supports people from a wide range of backgrounds, the only criteria being that there is a child under 5 in the household.

Providing the right support at the right time is one of the key underlying principles of the charity, which delivers a flexible range of services in response to the changing needs of its families. Home-Start Suffolk Coastal supports parents in Family Groups in Woodbridge, Felixstowe and East Ipswich; in their own home by matching families with a trained and experienced home-visiting volunteer and provides a number of other opportunities for support, including regular social events and guidance and signposting to other local services.

The charity is affiliated to Home-Start,\(^2\) a national family support charity that helps parents build better lives for their children. Founded in 1973 by a visionary volunteer who saw a role for volunteers to support families in their own home at the start of their child’s life; Home-Start provides support to 32,000 families annually.

There are more than 310 local Home-Start schemes working in communities across the UK and with families on British Forces bases overseas. Whilst the charity may be affiliated to the national charity, it exists as an independent, separately-constituted entity, with full responsibility for its own fundraising and sustainability.

### EMPOWERING FAMILIES

#### PROJECT OUTCOMES

Home-Start Suffolk Coastal designed the project around achieving the following four outcomes for families and volunteers and designated measurable milestones against the following four outcomes:

- **320 families will have improved confidence and independence in accessing universal support services.**
- **114 families will have been supported to attend a family group, focussing on the needs of parents and children. These families will have improved parent/child relationships and will understand and engage in the importance of play activities.**
- **72 local people will have trained as volunteers and gained transferable skills, and knowledge, with 30 of these gaining a formal qualification. These increased skills will have benefits to the individual in their future employment, confidence and personal development and to Home-Start in the quality of support provided.**
- **60 families will receive support through the maximising income project. 30 of these families will have an improved quality of life through increased income, and through the prevention of child poverty.**

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\(^1\) [http://home-startsuffolkcoastal.btck.co.uk/](http://home-startsuffolkcoastal.btck.co.uk/)

\(^2\) [http://www.home-start.org.uk/](http://www.home-start.org.uk/)
RECORDING

The charity has performed well against the outcomes agreed with the Big Lottery Fund. The initial literature review undertaken by the external evaluator demonstrated extremely proficient systems and processes for recording outcomes and the charity provided the evaluation with full access and explanation of the system.

Home-Start use MESH, the Home-Start UK database, that records essential data about the families it supports, such as their level of need or reasons for referral, in addition to tracking their “family journey”, which is the charity’s method of measuring key changes to a family’s circumstances against agreed outcomes and milestones.

PERFORMANCE

In their most recent End of Year Report to the Big Lottery Fund (March 2013), Home-Start were able to report a successful second year, with two outcomes achieving their agreed milestones in full and the remaining two outcomes achieving 95% completion at the time of writing. The data gathered as part of the evaluation process supports the success reported by Home-Start and acknowledges the same challenges they refer to.

In addition, one of the findings from the evaluation sample drew correlations with some of the outcomes reported by Home-Start from across the full range of families supported where there were close matches:

- Home-Start report that 64% of families report increased independence. 64% of the sample reported the same.
- Home-Start report that 69% of families report improved relationships. 73% of the sample reported the same.
- Home-Start report that 67% of families report improved play. 77% of the sample report increased understanding of play.

Prior to engaging directly with families and volunteers, the evaluator undertook a literature review of reports submitted to the Big Lottery Fund by Home-Start, in addition to their own internal monitoring reports and found that Home-Start has robust procedures and practices in place for monitoring outcomes and can provide the substantial evidence to support their reported progress and achievements.

“WHEN I FIRST STARTED COMING TO THE GROUP I FELT LIKE A TRAIN WRECK. BACK THEN, I DIDN’T KNOW THAT MY DAUGHTER HAD AUTISM. THEY HELPED ME REALISE THAT STRUGGLING DIDN’T MAKE ME A WEIRD MUM; JUST A NORMAL ONE.”
CHAPTER ONE: ACCESSING UNIVERSAL SERVICES

“I was a new mum. Everyone said I looked well, but no one ever asked if I felt it.”

- **OUTCOME:** 320 families will have improved confidence and independence in accessing universal support services.

Universal support services include the full range of services that are available to all families, but may seem inaccessible to some families who lack the confidence or independence to access them. From child-centred services such as Children’s Centres and playgroups, through to everyday routines such as visiting the doctor’s surgery or job centre; Home-Start aims to increase access by improving parent confidence and independence.

The evaluation found a clear distinction between reported levels of confidence and independence of those families receiving a home-visiting service, who reported higher levels than those attending family groups. 91% of the 22 families surveyed felt that Home-Start had a positive effect on them. 100% of the parents who contributed in family group work sessions reported improved levels of confidence and independence, with 64% of home-visiting families surveyed reporting increased independence and 55% improved confidence.

The research suggests a link between confidence, independence and [Hardiker](#) levels of need, with Home-Start’s own data suggesting the majority of families attending family groups have been referred to the group by a professional and are likely to present needs at levels 2 and 3 of the scale, with some at level 4.

The home-visiting service is also taken up by families with high levels of need, but families at level 1, for whom preventative work is the priority, are more likely to take up the home-visiting service than attend family group.

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**Hardiker Levels of Need**

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Hardiker Model (1991), a widely used framework for family support work in the United Kingdom
**CONFIDENCE**

“I felt confident in the group because I knew that we all had these little issues in our lives, some little reason why we were all there, but at the same time I felt that we all shared something in common; we had all been brave enough to ask for help.”

“I don’t take praise and compliments very well, but they helped me realise I’m doing ok.”

“I was left feeling that things weren’t as bad as they first seemed and I COULD cope better than I gave myself credit for. It made me realise that I can get through the tough days.”

“I felt like I’d disappeared into myself, but Home-Start visits brought me out of my shell.”

“I wish they gave you a manual when you leave the maternity ward, but they don’t.”

“My confidence was fine, but I’d just moved house, I’d separated from my partner, I’d found out my youngest had autism; I just needed a couple of hours each week to pop to the shops or the doctors or whatever. It wasn’t about confidence.”

100% of parents attending family group report increased levels of confidence, with common experiences being that it was good to get out of the house, make friends and have someone (another adult) to talk to. Some parents reported an initial reticence to attend the group when referred by their health visitor or social worker, but shared that this soon passed as the staff and volunteers created such a friendly, open atmosphere. One parent shared that their partner disapproved of them attending parent groups, but Home-Start had given them the confidence to attend in any case, whilst another shared that they did not usually attend family groups for fear of professionals “spying” on them, but had found Home-Start to be relaxed and non-intrusive.

During group work, parents shared that it was not only good to get out of the house, but attending family group gave them a specific reason to leave the house, whilst for some it was their only reason to leave their home all week. “It stops me from being at home with nothing to do, staring at the same four walls” said one, “they kick my butt to get motivated and get out”, said another mum, metaphorically speaking.

Of the 22 parents interviewed individually, 15 received home-visiting support, 1 had attended family group and 6 families had received both of these services, attending family group and receiving home visiting support.

55% of parents surveyed individually agreed that support from Home-Start had improved their confidence, but many in this group reported they were already reasonably confident prior to receiving support. Commonly, this group tended to report high levels of confidence as an individual, but low levels of confidence as a parent.

Parents in this group described how their home-visiting volunteer had been essential in having the confidence and motivation to leave the house and access universal services, complete everyday tasks and chores. Some parents reported high levels of isolation and a lack of parenting role models in their immediate circle, which had impacted on their confidence as a parent; “there’s no way of knowing if I’m getting it right or not.”

95% of volunteers surveyed felt they had helped a parent to feel more confident. One parent shared her initial concerns that seeing an experienced and trained volunteer with her children, a “Mary Poppins” figure, may actually reduce her levels of confidence. In reality, she was surprised to find that the volunteer’s approach was similar to her own, which increased her confidence by reducing her perception of the “chasm” she felt existed between her perceived ideals of parenting and the everyday realities of parenting young children.
"When Home-Start first came to my home, I was like a scared little child curled up in a ball and my ex-partner did all of the talking. That was 2 years ago, but already feels like 10."

"I was really anxious about going out to do things, even little things like appointments."

"I don’t always feel that I need to ask for help, but just knowing that I can and it would be there if I needed it makes me more eager to do things for myself."

"Before Home-Start, it was impossible for me to take both boys out on my own."

100% of parents who contributed to group work during family groups reported increased levels of independence and a further 64% of parents interviewed individually reported an increase in independence.

Parents shared a range of experiences regarding independence, with some differentiating between feeling independent and being able to fulfil tasks independently, or the restrictions they faced in doing so. Parents reporting improved levels of independence shared examples of being able to pop to the shops or collect older siblings from school, either with their volunteer accompanying them or taking care of their younger child. Some parents described activities they would not have been able to take part in independently; one mum with twins was supported to attend Baby Massage, which would have been impossible on her own with two babies.

86% of parents agreed that Home-Start had a positive effect on their child and independence was a key factor here, with some reporting Home-Start provided an opportunity for them to act independently from their child, and for their child to experience brief independence from their parent. For children, the brief moments spent with a volunteer were their first taste of independence from their parent and some families acknowledged that experience of being with other adults was positive preparation for school or nursery.

For parents, home-visiting volunteers provided the opportunity for brief independence from their child, with many parents describing their efforts to complete as many household tasks as they could in the available time! Parents attending family groups value the group format, which provides an hour where the children are entertained by staff and volunteers, with parents taking part in a group activity in another room. For some parents, this might be the only hour of the week that they are able to act independently from their children.

Parents receiving home-visiting support report a higher level of independence than those receiving support through family groups, which the evaluator attributes in part to varying levels of need. The majority of parents attending family groups have been supported by Home-Start to manage multiple issues impacting on their level of independence; which may include financial needs, safeguarding concerns, mental health needs or disability (parent or child).

Some parents experiencing multiple needs reported that Home-Start had offered the right level of support and, in some cases, “done everything it could”, but the impact of their multiple needs meant it was unlikely that support they received from Home-Start alone would increase their independence.

Some families receiving home-visiting support also reported having multiple needs, but these did not appear to detract from the primary shared experience of being supported by Home-Start to access universal services.
"One of the guys from the education centre gave a talk at the family group, so I did a few courses and I won an award for Adult Learner of the Year."

"I was living in a small village stuck at home with the boys. They suggested a playgroup not too far away and even offered to help with transport for me and the kids to get there."

"I was having some housing problems at the time, but Home-Start put me in touch with an organisation who provided me with some good housing advice."

"I used to feel too shy to go into places like the Children’s Centre, but now I take my daughter there whenever we’re nearby and have some spare time."

"They love going to playgroup at church, but without our volunteer we’d never get there."

68% of parents surveyed agreed that support from Home-Start had enabled them to access universal services. Parents in receipt of support via both family groups and home-visiting volunteers cited a number of everyday universal services that support from Home-Start has enabled them access; such as doctor and hospital visits.

By the nature of the service, those parents who had been supported by a home-visiting volunteer cited a wider range of universal services they accessed with support from Home-Start. These services included a range of drop-in and leisure services, with a particular emphasis on play and socialisation opportunities for children; access to Children’s Centres, playgroups, play schemes, sports activities and twin groups had been facilitated.

Parents shared Home-Start has facilitated universal access to educational services too, including being able to attend parents evenings and sports days at school, with one mum sharing that “before Home-Start, I never went to any of the events at school, it was just impossible for me to get there with little ones in tow as well”.

A significant number of parents contributing to the evaluation had children with disabilities or special educational needs (the exact number wasn’t measured, but the evaluator estimates it to be at least 25%). For this group of parents, Home-Start had been crucial in facilitating access to a range of specialist services, with parents sharing support received at school SEN reviews and meetings to discuss their child’s behaviour.

In addition, a number of parents reported that Home-Start had increased their access to universal services by referring them or signposting them to other services. For parents of children with special educational needs, examples included Opportunity Groups, the Parent Partnership Service and Contact a Family; with one recalling Home-Start arranging a meeting with a disability charity and caring for her child whilst she attended.

Levels of confidence and independence, as discussed, impact on a parent’s ability to access universal services, but additional barriers are simply the practicalities of parents making arrangements or researching the opportunity and organising for the family to get there; Home-Start encourages and motivates families to do so.

64% of volunteers contributing to the evaluation agreed that their support had enabled a family to access universal services. One point of note is that families and volunteers understood the concept of universal services after further explanation, but the phrase itself was unfamiliar, which impacted on their ability to make a reasonable judgement as to whether or not Home-Start improved their access. An additional point on terminology is that some of the services accessed by families of children with special needs are universal in that they are open to all families of children with special needs, but are considered specialist services by some.
CHAPTER TWO: PLAY AND RELATIONSHIPS

“I notice little changes, like the way I read books to my son. Before Home-Start I’d read from start to finish and he’d just sit there. Now we talk about what’s on all the pages.”

- OUTCOME: 114 families will have been supported to attend a family group, focussing on the needs of parents and children. These families will have improved parent/child relationships and will understand and engage in the importance of play activities.

The Empowering Families project enables Home-Start to run weekly family groups in Woodbridge and Felixstowe. Parents attending those groups during the evaluation described a number of benefits, primarily having a reason to leave the house, engaging their children in positive play and socialising with other parents. Family group sessions are two hours, with the first hour run as an open play session for parents and children and, for the second hour, staff and volunteers provide structured play for children whilst their parents take part in a social activity together. During the evaluation, this session was used to undertake group work with families, but previous activities include cooking, crafts such as painting or card-making and occasional talks.

Home-Start previously ran a family group in Leiston, but this evolved into a peripatetic service offering alternative home-visiting support following feedback from parents who found it difficult to attend the group due to rural isolation and a lack of regular public transport in one of the most rural parts of the county.

Home-Start recently launched a new family group in South East Ipswich which builds upon the ir learning from the previous family groups by running as an open “drop in” session for local parents and children. The team anticipate that, by providing a universal service in an easily accessible venue, they will attract parents from the immediate area who may be experiencing level 1 and 2 needs but who are not engaging in statutory services, so would be unlikely to be referred to Home-Start via the usual channel. Home-Start hope that this approach, combined with a new “light” referral process, will increase the number of families supported by the charity and create a ripple-effect in being able to support families with other needs that become apparent over time.

There is strong support for the new model of family group; most importantly from families using all three groups currently, who reported that the informality of the group is one of the most valued attributes; “if you want to talk about stuff you can, but you don’t have to, they’re not in your face like some people can be.” Volunteers at the South East Ipswich group felt that the drop-in method would prevent the group from stagnating or becoming a clique, with new families joining the group more frequently and others moving on.

During their focus group, staff valued the lighter referral process, with a number of them identifying excessive paperwork as one of their greatest challenges, or weaknesses, which could impact on their time with families.

One point of note; all parents who contributed to the evaluation during family group sessions could demonstrate that Home-Start had a positive effect on their family relationships but, along with home-visiting parents, were uncomfortable with the suggestion that Home-Start “improves” their parenting relationships, with some suggesting they have a positive parenting relationship on the whole, which is less positive at critical times, depending on a combination of other factors, such as stress, money, relationships, health, etc.
"By giving me a break, I could come back refreshed and able to deal with his behaviour. I hate admitting it now, but during the tough times, I hated my son for how he was."

“I was quite stressed with a lot going on, so when she came round and took my kids to the park it was good for me to have some time out, but also them to have time out from me.”

“She showed me different techniques for parenting, like discipline and how to cope.”

“Coming to group gives me something to talk about with my kids and helps build a bond.”

“I never used to go to groups, but they’ve brought me out and helped me to help my kids.”

All parents who engaged in the evaluation during family groups agreed that Home-Start had helped to improve their relationships with their children and only 5% of parents receiving home-visiting support disagreed.

As mentioned, there was significant discussion with parents around notion of “improved” relationships, with the evaluator offering an alternative view whereby the parent-child relationship is non-static and follows a spectrum which may improve or deteriorate according to a number of factors.

This view was widely accepted by parents, who went on to give a range of examples which indicated that support from Home-Start at improved their relationships at critical times of their lives. Coping with stress, depression and poor health were critical examples of where Home-Start had enabled some parents to maintain a positive relationship with their children, by providing a brief break from parenting, or by signposting parents to other agencies whose intervention had a secondary positive impact on the relationship.

Role-modeling was a key factor identified by parents who felt that simply seeing other adults (staff and volunteers) interact with their child improved their own parenting by observing the way in which another adult engaged their child in conversation or play activities, responded to their needs or managed their behaviour. Parents valued Home-Start’s policy of only engaging volunteers who have demonstrable parenting experience, with many reporting that hearing their volunteer’s parenting experience had a positive effect on their own.

One parent reported feeling reassured that her volunteer had also struggled to cope with her own children in the early years, but had “come out the other side ok”, whilst another parent identified a positive unintended side-effect in that her volunteer improved her relationship with her teenage daughter, simply through providing a neutral presence, listening to concerns from all parties and providing objective guidance to both.

In family group sessions, some families shared their experience of feeling that their relationship with their child, or their parenting abilities, were under constant scrutiny by professionals, particularly where there were safeguarding concerns. However, those families acknowledged that, whilst Home-Start was also aware of specific concerns, staff and volunteers spoke to them as equals, as parents, and they did not feel judged.

Parents of children with special educational needs in particular are a group who report significant improvements in their relationships with their children; for many of these parents, attending family group gave them the confidence to access other services which had a secondary impact on their relationship with their child; and for some the family groups provided their first experience of seeing their child accepted and included alongside others; one mum said “I used to be so protective of her, I would wrap her up in cotton wool, but just seeing her here playing alongside other kids makes me relax and feel more optimistic for her”.

Where The Start Is | Empowering Families | Home-Start Suffolk Coastal
“They’re a lot more social and happier, playing with other kids and getting involved.”

“My eldest wouldn’t touch messy stuff before, but now we spend a lot more time getting paints and Play Doh out and getting messy!”

“The “story sacks” are great, my daughter loves the dinosaur story. I used to hate reading to her, but it encourages you to read the whole book and use your imagination.”

“My child has autism and doesn’t “play”, but that didn’t stop my volunteer from always taking him out to the park, keeping him active and trying different things.”

“When I feel like I can’t play with him, I can take a step back and my volunteer steps in.”

“From coming to group and playing with other kids, I’ve noticed that my son’s come out of himself more and his speech has really improved.

77% of parents surveyed agreed that Home-Start promoted the importance of play. Home-Start’s own measurements go further, with their Year 2 report stating that 67% of the 76 families attending family group last year report playing with their child daily for at least half an hour and 65% reading to their child each night.

The evaluator witnessed a number of play activities during family groups, where a wide range of toys and games were available to children from art and craft activities through to imaginative play and active play. One notable moment in Felixstowe saw children mimicking volunteers setting up “snack time” in a pretend kitchen!

Parents attending family group were positive about the play opportunities available to their children, with some reporting that play and the opportunity to socialise with other children a key factor in their attendance. Furthermore, many parents remarked about gaining confidence from seeing their children play with other adults, for some who were isolated from their families; it was the first time another adult had played with their child and some reported feeling more confident about other adults looking after them at school or nursery.

Play had a strong impact for home-visiting families too, where parents frequently referred to volunteers being adept at playing with and occupying their older children whilst they attended to their youngest. Some parents said volunteers had brought their own older child’s games or toys to the house for their children to borrow, or had shown an active interest in engaging their children in new and imaginative games and activities. Some parents referred to the low cost involved in entertaining children, with one remarking her son enjoys going to the park with their volunteer and collecting leaves and sticks more than any of the toys she’d purchased.

Critically, many parents in the sample group also acknowledged the wider benefits of play and felt Home-Start had achieved a number of additional outcomes. Social skills, language development, behaviour, boundaries, relationships and sharing skills were all areas of improvement referred to by parents as a result of improved play, with some parents suggesting that improved play had improved their relationships within the whole family; one mum said her son’s behaviour improved after she consciously made time to play with him. Another mum acknowledged that she used to play with her son, but he had been “squeezed out” since his sister was born and the support from Home-Start enabled her to recognise this and redress the balance.

Perhaps the most notable finding from conversations with parents in family group about Outcome 2 was their realisation that the smallest and simplest of changes can have the biggest impact on play and relationships.
CHAPTER THREE: VOLUNTEERS

“It’s testament to her and her personality that we were all at ease with her so quickly. It’s hard to explain just how much she helped me. I was never once patronised for wanting help, despite me feeling like a complete failure.”

- **OUTCOME:** 72 local people will have trained as volunteers and gained transferable skills, and knowledge, with 30 of these gaining a formal qualification. These increased skills will have benefits to the individual in their future employment, confidence and personal development and to Home-Start in the quality of support provided.

Home-Start has invested significant time in developing advanced and robust policies and procedures for volunteer recruitment and training. This was evident from the initial literature review, with the evaluator being given access to all training materials, course outlines and training evaluations, and supported by the volunteers and families who took part in the evaluation.

100% of the 26 volunteers who returned a survey agreed that Home-Start was a positive volunteering experience; made them feel valued; gave them sufficient training; had a positive impact on families; that families made them feel valued and that they would recommend volunteering with Home-Start to others.

All 26 volunteers surveyed had supported families via home-visiting, but 9 had also supported families in family groups and 3 volunteers had supported families as part of the maximising income project.

Home-Start scored exceptionally highly in other areas too, with 96% of volunteers reporting they had gained new skills; 86% saying they had shared their skills with families and 75% reporting that both their confidence had improved by volunteering with Home-Start and that they had been offered a formal qualification; with others reporting they know formal qualifications are available, but they don’t wish to formalise “helping out”.

Shared skills included, predominantly, cooking and household tasks, ways of soothing babies, including songs and nursery rhymes, play and games, household budgets and, for some, dealing with difficult behaviours.

54% of volunteers surveyed considered that Home-Start had made them more employable, with one volunteer attributing gaining a new job to the new skills and confidence she gained from volunteering. Although volunteer age wasn’t measured, many volunteers within the sample reported being of retirement age and suggested that they weren’t looking for employment, but felt their new skills would help them if they were.

In addition to training, volunteers and families report the matching process to be equally robust. Only two families felt that their volunteer had been the wrong match; one felt that her volunteer was not agile enough to be able to play with her children, whilst another felt her volunteer was inexperienced and lacked confidence – but these two were incredibly isolated examples and had both been suitably addressed and quickly repaired.

Almost without exception, parents report a close bond with their volunteer, some of whom have come to regard their volunteer as a surrogate parent or grandparent; all of whom have come to regard them as friend.
“I adore those lovely ladies! They don’t gain anything, but they give so much.”

“I don’t know how she does it, but she always seems to come round at the times when I need her most. I always feel that, if I need help, she’ll try and see me if she can and it’s something for me to plan for and look forward to.”

“Yes. Yes. Yes. I got really big physical and mental support from my volunteer. Not only did she help with the children, but she helped me as a mother as I had someone to talk to. She was non-judgemental, just understanding and talking.”

“We talk a lot about cooking and she’s given me recipes which have changed some of our eating habits. We like talking and it’s been good for me as I don’t usually do that.”

“We sit and talk about parenting and my volunteer says to me I’m doing fantastic! So I say to her, do you ever have to leave me, can’t you stay forever?!”

“She (my volunteer) goes on all these courses, so she comes back and tells me all about it and she’s giving me all this advice on how to work things out.”

“Ironically, my volunteer helped with my teenager, who was having some issues, so she’d sit and talk to the volunteer about them, who could then help me and her remove blocks.”

“Last week I was really tired and stressed, so she took my son to the park. I got an hour to myself. Some weeks we’ll just sit and have a chat and a rant and sort a few things out.”

“They’re so good that I sometimes wish they could come more than once a week, but then I remember that they’re just volunteers and they’re not doing a paid job.”

“She’s amazing! Allison (the co-ordinator) does such a good job of pairing up. For example, I’m still breastfeeding my child at a time when other mum’s may have stopped, but she understands why I want to and she doesn’t judge me or make an issue about it.”

“My partner drives a lorry so it’s baby talk all day and HGV talk all night. I really look forward to her coming round so I can have an adult conversation!”
“Hearing stories of current volunteers during training then working with a family has been great. Knowing I’m making a difference to a mum and her children is very rewarding.”

“Having brought up two daughters of my own, I’m happy to use that experience to help other families who may need a helping hand for whatever reason.”

“Some situations whilst volunteering aren’t so positive, but the support and training helps you accept the good with the bad but, most of all, understand it.”

“From my first contact with Home-Start … I’ve been impressed by not only the professionalism of the team, but also their warmth and friendliness.”

“They treat volunteers as individuals whose particular characteristics are taken into consideration in matching with families. They engender a feeling of confidence that everyone has something to offer, even if it’s a very simple something; oneself!”

“I’m quite confident anyway, but the skills Home-Start gave me helped me have confidence that I am giving my family the best support I can.”

“All volunteers start out with a feeling of uncertainty about how things will be and exactly what they will be able to do, but confidence grows with positive experience and, if ever there are less positive issues, Alison and Tara would always be supportive.”

“The training was comprehensive and delivered at just the right pace. Despite some of the subjects covered being quite daunting, I felt just the right level of humour and fun was injected into the course.”

“The initial 10 week one-day course is comprehensive and is backed up by ongoing refresher and additional courses, both mandatory and optional. I have done quite a few of these but would like to continue to do more as it’s always good to be aware and the training days also provide a great opportunity to be with other volunteers and learn from them (and enjoy their company).”

“After completing the Maximising Income training, I have worked with several families. One family was featured on the BBC Saints and Scroungers programme as the maximising Income revealed they were entitled to Income Support, Child Tax Credits and help with hospital costs which the family was not claiming; this was a very positive outcome.”

“Over-stressed parents also sometimes see a different way of engaging with children in the volunteer. Children benefit from this. Parents usually benefit from the company and the sheer relief of someone else occupying children.”
CHAPTER FOUR: HOUSEHOLD INCOME

“I had my benefits reassessed and got a big refund. Without Home-Start I don’t think I would have had the confidence to question whether my payments were correct and challenge them.”

- OUTCOME: 60 families will receive support through the maximising income project. 30 of these families will have an improved quality of life through increased income, and through the prevention of child poverty.

The fourth and final outcome of the Empowering Families project is perhaps the easiest one to measure, but the support provided to families under outcome four has taken a broader approach than initially anticipated.

In performance terms, Home-Start has performed well against a difficult backdrop of changes to government policy which have created a benefits system widely different to 2010 when the project was first planned. Having completed 35 of the required 37 maximising income checks in Year 2, Home-Start were concerned that the welfare system was changing at a faster rate than the advice and support structures around it, so took the decision to postpone further checks until after the Comprehensive Spending Review in June 2013.

Only 9% of families in the sample agreed that Home-Start had increased their household income, but Home-Start’s own records report wider agreement, with approximately 25% of families who received a maximising income check in Year 2 consequently receiving a real-terms cash increase in their level of benefit payment.

27% of volunteers surveyed shared that they had helped families to assess benefit and grant entitlements, with 14% reporting known a known increase to household income. In qualifying their response, volunteers referred to support with household budgets, reducing shopping costs and identifying free or cheap, activities for children as being the reason behind the increase, rather than changes to social security and welfare.

Many families also made reference to receiving an unexpected Christmas Hamper from Home-Start, at a time when their finances were strained and there is evidence to show Home-Start signposts to other services. These small actions, when accumulated, can contribute to increasing income and preventing child poverty.

“They arranged for someone to help me fill out forms for Disability Living Allowance.”

“They did talk to me about finances and, since they’ve stopped coming, it’s motivated me to go to the Council and get a few things sorted out.”

“They put me in touch with a charity who advises on disability benefits and they even looked after the little ones for me whilst I went to the appointment.”

“My volunteer had some experience of getting her own benefits sorted out and it really helped me to hear about what she did and find out who I had to talk to.”

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**KEY PARTNERS**

“Some families, because of their needs and experiences, can quickly become comfortable using services like Home-Start as a “crutch”. However, Home-Start designs their service in such a way that families don’t build that dependency; they act as a third party that always enables them to access other local services so they stand a better chance of being independent.”

“Referring a family to Home-Start is really straightforward. Their forms are very simple and clear, yet manage to capture a lot of detail about the family’s story”.

“As a referrer, the value of Home-Start is its unique role as an independent resource which supports the family directly whilst working alongside other agencies who may be involved.”

“I always hear good reports about the volunteers; that they empower families to take responsibility rather than negotiate a level of dependency.”

Approximately 75% of families are referred to Home-Start by professionals, mostly those in statutory services including Health Visitors, Social Workers and staff from local Children’s Centres. One of Home-Start’s key benefits for families is that it has established a wide network of statutory and voluntary support services.

The literature review and MESH database shows that Health Visitors make the majority of referrals to Home-Start, and this is supported by the families surveyed, many of whom weren’t aware that support was available. As a project evaluation focussed on outcomes rather than an evaluation of need, families who engaged were not obliged to share details of why they were referred to Home-Start as some would not be comfortable discussing those needs with an external evaluator with whom they had no existing relationship.

However, some families did indicate that safeguarding concerns or concerns about their mental health had led to Home-Start becoming involved and, where that was the case, they reported positive outcomes. Home-Start was reported to have engaged in a number of statutory processes, including Team Around the Child (TAC) meetings with other professionals and attending meetings in school concerning statements of special educational needs or behavioural issues.

Home-Start has a positive relationship with the other two schemes in the county and the three have recently commenced joint planning meetings to focus on delivering a countywide service and avoid duplication which, in part, has resulted in the Ipswich Family group commencing, with support from Suffolk County Council. The charity has also been in discussion with another local charity about partnership working and shared resources.

The evaluator was able to engage three referrers in the evaluation, who all remarked on the positive impact of Home-Start on families and acknowledged strong links with local Children’s Centres and other services. One referrer commented on the recent changes to the referral process, which has become a registration process rather than an assessment-based process, and felt this change would benefit more families in future.

Whilst very few families commented on key partners outside of Home-Start, there was a general consensus from family group families that Children’s Centres hold a wealth of useful information about a range of support services available to families, but those families who don’t attend would not access the information.

Similarly, some home-visiting families reported that they found out about Home-Start by chance through their health visitor, but knew of other families in need locally who had not been told about Home-Start by theirs.
CHALLENGES

There were very few criticisms of Home-Start throughout the evaluation period with the overwhelming majority of families and volunteers relating positive examples of their experience of using its services.

When asked about weaknesses or unmet needs, the only weaknesses parents could offer were that Home-Start should offer a 24 hour service “like Tesco” or that maternity wards should give mums a leaflet about it. With 100% of volunteers agreeing they would recommend Home-Start to others and 91% of parents reporting a positive impact on their children, areas for improvement were hard to come by, but there were some...

Marketing: some families, and volunteers, felt that Home-Start would benefit from additional funds to market itself and its services to a wider range of families. Some parents reported discovering the service by chance; one saw an advert for volunteers in their church magazine, another picked up a leaflet at the doctors’ surgery. Parents identifying marketing as an area for improvement suggested potential means of advertising to parents “at source”, such as via maternity units, family planning clinics, nurseries and schools. However, they acknowledged the challenge of successful marketing resulting in increased demands for the service.

Endings: Whilst most parents felt that their support had ended at the right time and on their terms, a small number (four) shared their thoughts as to how endings could be improved. One parent felt that she was asked to leave family group too soon and wasn’t ready and was upset that her friend, who she considered to be at a similar stage, was able to continue attending the group. Another felt her volunteer support ended too soon.

There are some inconsistencies in the length of support offered to families and these are visible to parents. For example, some parents attending family groups have been going for over two years, whilst others have been encouraged to access universal services after just a few months. Home-visiting support lengths ranged from 2 to 18 months. Whilst realising that families have very different and individual needs, it may be useful for both the charity and the families if there was clearer guidance about the likely duration of support.

Increased Demand: Outstanding referrals show there is a real demand for Home-Start’s services and it would appear that this is compounded by cuts to other statutory services and changes to the welfare system. Furthermore, there are families already supported by Home-Start who would like more support; particularly those in family groups who would like attend more regularly than once a week. Some parents receiving home-visiting support acknowledged the demand on the service; but felt they would benefit from more hours.

In contrast, whilst most families regarded Home-Start support as a necessity, some reported that it had been a “bonus”, with two suggesting they had been prepared to purchase equivalent support if required. Staff are very clear that “there is no such thing as a typical Home-Start family” and universal access to the service by any parent is a core principle but, as demand increases at a higher rate than available resources, Home-Start may face the challenge of ensuring that the parents who access their service are the parents who need it the most.

“There is no such thing as a typical Home-Start family.”

“Today everything seems ok and I can cope, but tomorrow I might be one of those families who needs some help.”
RECOMMENDATIONS

Home-Start Suffolk Coastal is able to clearly demonstrate that it is meeting and, in many cases, exceeding the intended outcomes of the Empowering Families project and, as a result there is little room for improvement.

However, with a view to being able to sustain the project beyond the funding period and taking into account some of the suggestions made by parents, volunteers and staff during the evaluation process, the following recommendations are offered for consideration by the charity’s board of directors and staff team:

Recommendation 1

There is scope for home-visiting support to take a more structured approach and perhaps be time-limited based upon a family’s specific needs at that time. Such an approach could potentially eliminate inconsistencies in length of support, but also ensure volunteers and families are focussed on specific needs.

Recommendation 2

In relation to the recommendation above, it is recommended that the charity is clearer with families (and volunteers) about how and when support will end and what may be available in terms of follow-up support, perhaps by utilising tools such as the “family journey” chart to enable parents to track positive improvements.

Recommendation 3

There is an appetite from parents to take part in focussed courses or sessions which will enhance their development of key skills; such as cooking, play or money management. Some parents are interested in gaining accredited qualifications in these areas; but others would gain in confidence simply by attending.

Recommendation 4

To continue to learn from and develop the new format for family groups, which shows signs of having the potential to support more families on a transient basis as they drop in (or out) without building a feeling of dependency which some of the families in the other groups describe and maintaining its universal access.

Recommendation 5

In relation to outcome 4, but possibly others, some families were interested in hearing brief external “talks” from other agencies and professionals which may incorporate benefits advice, interview skills, CV writing, etc.

Recommendation 6

In relation to future challenges, it is recommended that the board and staff team consider their contingency to respond to rising levels of demand for the service, ensuring it can still be accessed by those who need it most, perhaps by developing clear referral criteria or perhaps by subtle marketing references online and in print.

Recommendation 7

It is recommended that Home-Start develop a marketing strategy to enable easier access to information, with a particular focus on utilising their website to reduce admin; online referrals, volunteer applications, etc.

Recommendation 8

It is recommended that the charity develops a “product and service” mentality to enable clearer communication with families, funders and commissioners about the added value in its range of services and, in time, the ability to market those products and services in their own right, perhaps generating its own income.
CONCLUSION

It is the opinion of the external evaluator that the Empowering Families project has indeed empowered families and the project has entered its third and final year on course to achieve the agreed outcomes.

This opinion is formed on the basis of the information, experiences and opinions shared by the families receiving support from Home-Start (who account for over one third of families supported) and the volunteers providing support to those families (who account for nearly half of the current volunteer pool).

In addition, the staff team and board of directors have been able to provide sufficient evidence in the form of information, data and documentation to reassure the evaluator of the project’s achievements in years one and two and that they remain focused on delivering the key outcomes to families in year 3 and it is hoped these outcomes will have a lasting impact on families and volunteers which extends beyond the funding period.

Steve Allman, 1st July 2013

FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information about Home-Start Suffolk Coastal, please visit www.homestarteastsuffolk.org.uk

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve Allman is an independent consultant with eighteen years of experience working with children and families in the voluntary sector at every level from volunteer through to chief executive and chairman.

An experienced practitioner in the youth and social care sectors, his direct work with families of disabled children and young people with complex needs and experience as chief executive of a large voluntary organisation provides an unusual insight into the importance of charities understanding evaluation and impact.

Steve has served as chair of the Council for Disabled Children and the Suffolk Children and Families Forum; as vice chair of Young Suffolk and as Social Entrepreneur in Residence at the School for Social Entrepreneurs East.

Now a freelance consultant and researcher, Steve helps charities and social enterprises to deliver their vision and enables them to deliver real outcomes to real people and (maybe) change the world a little bit.

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