

# **A Mile in Their Shoes**

## **Home-Start North Manchester**

### **Introduction**

Children's first experiences are critical for healthy mental and social development – yet these early years are often the most challenging for parents. The pressures associated with early parenthood are exacerbated in areas of deprivation; parents often cope with little family support, facing additional social and cultural barriers.

Practical advice and support at a grass-roots level is extremely effective, particularly when offered by volunteers with real-life experience. How can parents be sustainably supported in their communities to ensure happy healthy lives for their children?

### **Origins of the project**

Home-Start North Manchester (HSNM) empowers parents to build better, healthier lives for their children by drawing on the expertise of volunteers. Home-Start projects are based on the philosophy that parents equipped with skills and knowledge have an overall positive impact on the child's health, and that there is a strong link between the child's wellbeing and that of the family.

Children in parts of Manchester face particular challenges – their health is on average worse than in other parts of England, with 25,000 children in the region said to be living in 'severe poverty'. HSNM launched in 2007, and covers communities tackling high rates of unemployment, poverty and negative health outcomes. Four wards are above national average for black and minority ethnic groups, which can experience problems related to cultural and social barriers to integration.

### **Partnership working**

HSNM has developed strong partnerships with several organisations including GMCVO, GM Probation and Public Health. The project is part of the BIG Manchester Partnership, an innovative service that addresses the impacts of domestic abuse, mental ill-health and substance misuse on children.

### **Approach and delivery**

HSNM provides support and practical assistance to 120 families with at least one child under the age of five who has been identified as having additional needs, such as behavioural, educational or health-related.

Crucially, much of the work is delivered by volunteers, who have committed their time and knowledge to the service. Volunteers are trained to deliver weekly outreach and befriending sessions, which take place in the community or family home.

Volunteers help families map out the journey they need to make in order to improve their confidence, make changes to their lifestyles and build better futures for their children. The project offers activities allowing parents to interact with their children, whilst also learning practical skills such as budgeting, cooking, and establishing routines. This is delivered for as long as is necessary; on average the process takes eight months.

It's a highly personalised, localised and responsive service which is also very cost effective. The project's approach is founded on principles of early intervention and prevention, empowering families to take responsibility and assume control over their lives.

Peer support is crucial: volunteers are themselves carers or parents with lived experience. Unlike health professionals who have stricter areas of focus, this approach allows broader drivers of health to be embraced, such as the pressures of becoming a new parent, and the impact it has on existing family relationships. Many of the volunteers have themselves received support from Home-Start, and this has proved a powerful and impactful dynamic, creating a strong sense of trust, resulting in confidence and independence for the new parents.

"These volunteers are modelling the change they're talking about," manager Shelley Byrne says. "The intervention is taking place in the community, delivered by members of that community."

### **Success and outcomes**

HSNM has seen significant and consistent improvement among service users, based on the organisation's own MESH (Monitoring Evaluation System HomeStart), a visual tool which examines goals families set themselves.

By empowering parents and increasing engagement in their children's upbringing and wellbeing, parents are more likely to make better choices. They may be more likely to attend a health clinic, immunise their child and improve basic domestic routines. Home-Start demonstrates that crisis can be avoided and the dependence on statutory services reduced if families are given the right support and skills when it's most needed.

### **Future plans**

Challenges facing HSNM include recruitment and retention of volunteers due to issues around access to childcare, and a low threshold for children's referrals can mean some children enter the service prematurely.

### **Conclusion**

HSNM's peer-led approach and emphasis on forging meaningful connections both within the family and the wider community are fundamental to its success. By addressing the broader context of wellbeing and its determinants, the cost-efficient project empowers families to regain control over factors that determine the health and wellbeing of their children. It demonstrates that involving families in the process of self-development increases their capacity and resilience over the long term, reducing demands for expensive services.

*Researcher Jolanta Shields*