

# **A Healthy Home**

## **Yeovil4Family**

### **Introduction**

A constructive and disciplined home environment often provides the initial basis for good health. Good eating habits, physical activity and seemingly small – but crucial – domestic responsibilities all contribute to mental and emotional wellbeing. Without reinforcement at home, school lessons on healthy eating and exercise can go unheeded.

How can families be sustainably encouraged to bring about this supportive environment in the home, and impact on longer-term physical health?

### **Origins of the project**

Yeovil4Family places individuals within troubled families in Yeovil, providing goal-oriented support to help them develop resilience, confidence and problem-solving skills.

The organisation began as an informal group at a local church, and grew when Somerset County Council began to refer its clients. In 2012, the group was formalised with a successful bid to deliver the county's response to the government's national Troubled Families initiative. To date the service has supported 132 families.

Almost three-quarters of families in the programme experience a range of health inequalities, particularly mental health issues. Yeovil4Family frequently encounters poor emotional wellbeing. Lack of confidence and self-esteem pose significant barriers to employment, with social isolation further undermining any sense of wellbeing.

### **Partnership working**

Yeovil4Family's method has been adopted as best practice by a number of other authorities across the UK. The organisation has been advising the government's Troubled Families Initiative.

### **Approach and delivery**

Five areas characterise Yeovil4Family's aims and approach. The first is that relationships are central; a family link worker and volunteer mentor provide goal-oriented support for an average of 12 months.

Secondly, genuine respect for clients empowers families and equips them with necessary skills and confidence to overcome future challenges independently. Thirdly, families are encouraged to set their own direction and achieve their own goals.

The fourth principle is 'care not cost', whereby the group uses volunteers who have chosen to be there rather than being paid to do so. Finally, Yeovil4Family is committed to consistency and loyalty, ensuring that the same mentor will return to the family each week despite the difficulties that inevitably arise.

The organisation delivers a tailored service to each family. The family link worker carries out an initial assessment, then matches the family to a suitable volunteer who provides one-to-one support for one hour a week. These sessions are flexible and might include discussing how to address children's behaviour, support in dealing with financial correspondence or making doctor appointments.

An important part of the process is generating a 'family journey map', which identifies key events from the previous two years, allowing the family to reflect and consider what could be done differently.

"The maps are great for overcoming different levels of literacy but are also very powerful in illustrating all the things that have happened to a family," says programme coordinator Rachel Dyer. "Sometimes that is a light bulb moment for them – they might see how everything has spiralled from one event. It also gives the worker a good understanding of what and how the family have been dealing with."

Quarterly reviews are held with the family based around two questions: how big are the issues you are facing as a family and how confident are you in tackling these issues? These are complemented by a wellbeing questionnaire.

At the heart of the organisation's approach is a principle of enabling families to tell their own story, understanding it, then helping to shape it. A volunteer workforce is critical to the project's success.

## **Success and outcomes**

Yeovil4Family has effected change in the lives of many families. Yet the organisation's work defies easy measure and quantifying. Dyer says: "We measure progress in the lives of people and families, in the relationships they have with us and with others around them. It might be the look on their face, an improvement of their moods – more good days than bad – or it might be the start of empowered decision making. But these are the milestones on the very personal journeys they are on."

## **Future plans and obstacles**

A possible way forward would be to make poor health outcomes a marker for the Troubled Families initiative. This could mean identifying health issues within the initial assessment (rather than inferring them from contact with other agencies or observation). It could also involve providing simple but effective training such as the Mental Health First Aid course provided for Yeovil4Family workers.

## **Conclusion**

Yeovil4Family has helped to bring about transformations in families' lives that begin with small steps and tasks. Encouraging families to take real ownership over their wellbeing through mapping and telling their stories can have a powerful impact on health outcomes.

Yeovil4Family is a positive illustration of how a charity can effectively administer a government initiative, supplemented and boosted by volunteers.

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