

Home-Start Kernow

An external evaluation of Year One of a Big Lottery Fund grant to provide home-visiting support to families across Cornwall.

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Home-Start Kernow
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Introduction

Home-Start Kernow recognises being a parent, whatever your situation, can be very difficult at times, especially when children are young.

From its base in Redruth, South West Cornwall, the charity offers support, friendship and practical help to parents with a child under five across the county. Some parents feel exhausted and overwhelmed by the stresses of family life. Others struggle to overcome additional challenges, including post-natal depression, illness, disability, social isolation or multiple births.

Home-Start Kernow helps parents by matching them with a carefully selected volunteer who must undergo an extensive eight-week training programme before visiting the family in their own home to provide emotional and practical support for as long as parents require it. Often referred to as “home-visiting”, this simple model of support can provide preventative input at critical flash-points in a parent’s life which can significantly reduce the need to receive long-term support from statutory services and other agencies.

Now in its 15th year, the charity faced closure in 2014 when cuts to public services and the challenging financial climate meant trustees were unable to secure sustainable funding to continue their vital services for local families, despite their best endeavours. Fortunately, Home-Start Kernow was pulled back from the brink of closure after successfully applying for a three-year Reaching Communities grant of £390,197 from the Big Lottery Fund, which has enabled Home-Start Kernow to “bounce back” and make a fresh start on supporting local families when the new grant commenced in October 2014.

About the project

Home-Start Kernow designed the Big Lottery Fund project in direct response to the range of needs identified by local families.

Trustees and staff recognised that, without Home-Start Kernow, the largest gap in local services would be their core offer of home-visiting support, which sees local people with parenting experience recruited and trained as volunteers before being matched with local families to support their needs.

These needs may range from a mum experiencing post-natal depression after the birth of her baby and becoming withdrawn and isolated to a parent struggling to cope with a bereavement or a relationship breakdown. The charity has agreed a number of milestones with the Big Lottery Fund over the next three years, broadly structured under four core outcomes as follows:

- 1. Families with young children develop increased confidence and self esteem and improved parenting skills.**
- 2. Families with young children will become less isolated.**
- 3. Families make a measurable improvement in identified needs leading to an improvement in family well being.**
- 4. Families have increased access to local services leading to a wider support network.**

About the Evaluation

Now at the end of the first year of the Big Lottery Fund grant, this report was commissioned by Home-Start Kernow to provide an external evaluation of the project's impact on families thus far, identify areas for improvement and highlight good practice and potential opportunities.

Home-Start Kernow recognises the importance of evaluating and learning from the project, particularly in terms of learning from key stakeholders, including families, volunteers and partners. Trustees and staff designed the project with external evaluation in mind and tendered for an external evaluator in November 2014. The successful applicant was Steve Allman, an independent evaluator with significant experience of evaluating Big Lottery Fund projects for Home-Start schemes around the UK, who will work with the charity for the duration of the grant, evaluating their work at regular intervals.

The management committee devised a clear vision for the evaluation; the main aim being to determine the effectiveness of the home-visiting service in meeting the needs of individual families and evaluating the confidence of external partners in the overall service.

The evaluation seeks to answer key questions posed by the charity to determine whether home-visiting support leads to significant improvements in the identified areas of need and whether families are satisfied with the service, in addition to identifying what works well and what can be improved. Similar questions are asked of external partners and the charity also seeks to ensure staff and volunteers are satisfied with the support offered to enable them to deliver a quality service.

Methodology

Home-Start Kernow set out their preferred methodology with a particular emphasis on engaging key stakeholders in the evaluation, primarily families and external partners. The requirements of the evaluation are to conduct satisfaction surveys in Years 1 and 3 and to present the findings in a report.

The charity also proposed 5 structured feedback meetings with staff and trustees throughout the project to assist in evaluating and developing the service. The first of these took place in February 2015 and included an Evaluation Workshop for staff and trustees. The second took place in June 2015 and the third is scheduled for November 2015, just after Year One.

In consultation with the evaluator, the methodology was adjusted to incorporate additional feedback from volunteers and to include an additional round of engagement with key stakeholders in Year Two.

During summer 2015, towards the end of Year One, the evaluator engaged 19 of the 20 contactable families provided by Home-Start Kernow, who sought their permission to share their contact details with the evaluator. The primary method of engagement was via telephone interview (13) and online surveys (6). 21 volunteers responded to an online survey and 8 external partners, mostly referrers, provided their feedback.

HSK has submitted documents for evaluation as they become available, including statistics from MESH, Home-Start's bespoke database, Big Lottery Fund reports, and the internal Quality Assurance report by Home-Start UK, in which the scheme achieved 91% compliance with HSUK standards.

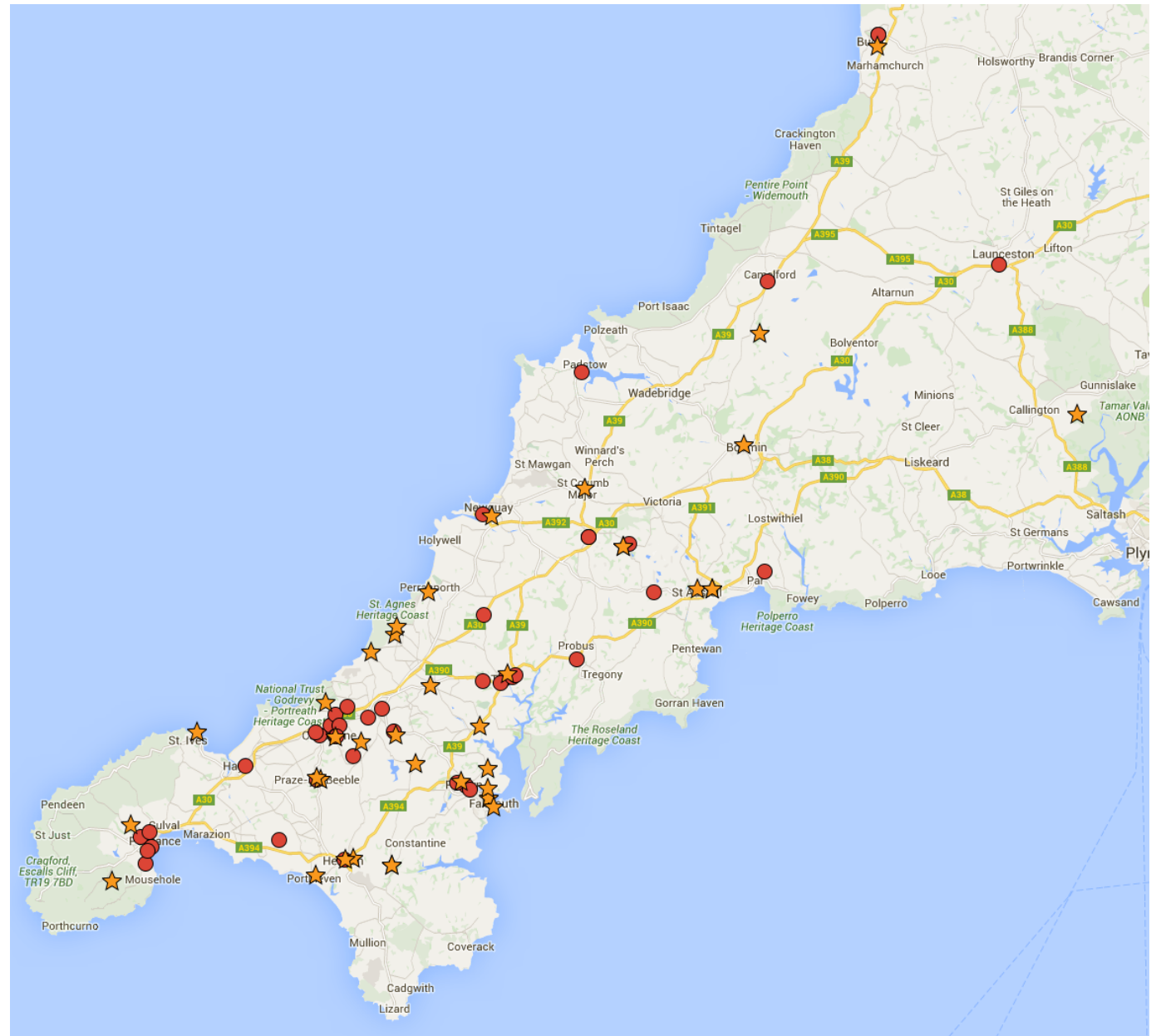
Project Reach

The map shows families supported by the project during the Year 1 (red circles) and volunteers (orange stars).

HSK covers a vast rural area which can present a number of challenges for families and for the charity itself.

To get a sense of the rurality of Cornwall, note that there are approximately 80 miles between families supported at the most Northerly point (Bude) and those supported at the most Southerly point (Penzance).

There are approximately 70 miles between the charity's most easterly volunteer who lives near Calington and most westerly volunteer who lives near Mousehole.



Feedback from Families

All families engaged in the evaluation report that Home-Start Kernow has had a significant impact in their lives and in the lives of their children. The charity supported 43 families in Year One, a little behind their anticipated target but this is largely down to re-establishing the charity and is discussed further in the challenges section of this report.

As part of the external evaluation, HSK are particularly interested in noting improvements in identified needs and determining families' levels of satisfaction with the service. HSK also seeks to determine what works well and what can be improved in Year Two. Here are the main findings in Y1:

- HSK provided contact details for 20 families and 18 of those families engaged in the evaluation, the majority were interviewed by telephone.
- 88% of families are very satisfied with HSK; the highest of 5 potential ratings. 1 family is satisfied and 1 family says HSK is OK.
- 100% of families are very likely (69%) or likely (31%) to recommend Home-Start Kernow to other families in Cornwall.
- 88% of families say HSK has enabled them to gain confidence to at least some extent. 44% of these families report improvement to a very high extent and 31% report improvements to a high extent (75%).
- 81% of families say HSK has improved their self-esteem to at least some extent. 38% of these families report improvement to a very high extent and 31% report improvement to a high extent.
- 81% of families say HSK has enabled them to engage in new activities to at least some extent and 75% of families say HSK has enabled them to access local services to at least some extent.
- 63% of families say HSK has improved parenting skills by at least some extent. The majority of those parents (31%) suggest parenting skills have improved to a high extent and 13% suggest a very high extent. Almost a third of parents (31%) say parenting skills have not improved at all. It's difficult to establish an accurate picture of improvement in parenting skills as a number of parents are uncomfortable with being asked about them.
- The number of parents supported by HSK to meet other families with children to at least some extent (44%) is equal to the number of parents who have not met other families with children at all (44%). A number of parents suggested that this was not the primary reason for seeking support or that there were no other families in their immediate rural area.
- 95% of parents feel less isolated by at least some extent.
- 88% of parents report improved family well-being to at least some extent; 25% to a very high extent and 38% a high extent (63%).
- 73% of parents have been enabled to access a wider support network.

Meeting Big Lottery Fund Outcomes

Families engaged in the evaluation report high levels of impact from their interaction with HSK, often across multiple Big Lottery Fund outcomes.

1. Increased confidence, self-esteem and parenting skills

- 27 of 42 families identified have gained confidence to engage in activities.
 - 15 of 31 families identified report changes in parenting methods, including improved confidence managing behaviour and planning learning activities.
- “I have a health condition which makes it hard to look after the children and keep on top of the housework. HSK has helped around the house, helped with hospital appointments and made it easier to be a good parent.”

2. Reducing Isolation

- 25 of 41 families identified have accessed community activities, including parks, playgroups, children’s centres.
 - One family meets another family on a regular basis.
 - A parent has started a twins group in Bude which 4 families now attend.
- “I had PND when we moved here. We didn’t know anyone and I didn’t go out. It was good to have a friend to help build my confidence.”

“HSK supported me after a very traumatic birth which has left me very ill. My family is hundreds of miles away, we’d have had no help without HSK.”

3. Improvement in identified needs and family wellbeing

- 34 out of 43 families supported have achieved an improvement.
- 30 families have identified improvements in 50% of their identified needs
- Families report improved well being as a result of HSK intervention.

“I had post natal depression and couldn’t face being alone with our baby when my husband went back to work, but if he doesn’t work then he doesn’t get paid which would have resulted in financial problems for us.”

“I had chronic depression which was effecting the whole family. Just that couple of hours a week gave us all a little window of relief.”

4. Access to local services and wider support networks

- 16 of 34 families identified are using new services for the first time.
- Services include public transport, medical appointments, nursery, educations, Citizen’s Advice Bureau and debt advice.

“I have a 5 year old and 3 year old twins, one with additional needs. HSK has helped immensely by getting us involved in local activities and making it easier for me to attend a range of meetings about my disabled child.”

What Would Have Happened Without Home-Start?

Sometimes parents struggle to identify the full impact of Home-Start, often because the model support is so subtle it becomes part of everyday life.

In these circumstances, the evaluator asks “what would have happened without Home-Start?”. A selection of responses from HSK families follows:

“Without HSK I wouldn’t have started college or gone on to university. Before I was isolated, I didn’t leave the house for two years. HSK was the catalyst to me getting to where I am now.”

“Without HSK, I don’t think my husband would have felt confident about leaving me on my own with the baby so that he could go back to work.”

“When my wife was diagnosed with PND we were very isolated as we didn’t have any family in the area and I had to work to keep money coming in. Without HSK, she’d have felt more isolated and taken long to recover.”

“I’d have got more and more depressed. I was in a bad place and my volunteer really helped to lift me out of it.”

“I really don’t think I’d be here right now. My volunteer saw me go from rock bottom and back upon and she’s been on that rollercoaster with me. She is an exceptional match.”

“I’d still be struggling on anti-depressants. HSK has given me a weekly dose of light at the end of a very dark tunnel.”

“I was suicidal before HSK began helping me. It’s scary to think how much worse things would be if it wasn’t for their support.”

Areas for Improvement

Parents engaged in the evaluation are largely satisfied with the service. Only 4 parents suggested potential areas for improvement, which can broadly be summarised as improving volunteer recruitment and raising the profile.

In the evaluator’s experience, parents are often reluctant to suggest areas for improvement because they feel it is potentially detrimental to the charity’s ongoing funding and they do not like to appear ungrateful for support.

In conversation, the evaluator gained a sense that a small number of parents feel the referral and review process is a little cumbersome and excessive.

“My volunteer was only available for one set time, which meant if HSK needed to review the support I would lose my support for that week. I was also a little overwhelmed by the amount of reviews and paperwork involved, it seemed a little over the top.”

Feedback from Volunteers

Volunteering is the life-blood of Home-Start Kernow's model of home-visiting support and the charity has worked hard during Year One to re-establish its volunteer base and ensure sufficient numbers are trained to support families.

HSK has engaged 38 volunteers during year one, run 4 preparation courses to train 23 volunteers and provided one to one training for a further 8.

Volunteers engaged in the evaluation report a number of ways in which their support has helped families, ranging from everyday support such as help with

The charity is particularly interested to find out whether volunteers are satisfied with the support offered to enable them to deliver a quality service and gaining feedback from volunteers is a key part of the evaluation process,

- 21 volunteers responded to our invitation to participate in an online survey.
- 81% of volunteers say volunteering with Home-Start Kernow makes them feel valued often or very often.
- Asked about their overall experience of volunteering for Home-Start Kernow, 71% rate it as very good and 24% rate is as good (95%).
- Asked about their experience of the recruitment process, 67% rate it as very good and 29% rate is as good (96%).

- Asked about the quality of preparation training, 86% rate it as very good and 10% rate it as good (96%).
- Asked about the frequency of supervision and support, 67% rate it as very good and 19% rate it as good (86%).
- Asked about the quality of supervision support, 76% rate it as very good and 24% rate is as good (100%). This is a very positive score in comparison with similar evaluations undertaken by the evaluator.
- Asked about their experience of being matched with their most recent family, 67% rate is as very good, 29% rate is as good (96%).

Benefits to Volunteers

- 86% of volunteers say volunteering has increased their confidence to at least some extent.
- 76% of volunteers say volunteering has enabled them to develop new skills to at least some extent.
- 90% of volunteers say volunteering has enabled them to contribute to their community to at least some extent.
- 38% of volunteers say volunteering has enabled them to secure employment to at least some extent; although the majority explain that securing employment was not their primary motivation for volunteering.

How Volunteers Perceive Benefits to Families

- 95% of volunteers believe Home-Start Kernow enables parents to gain confidence to at least some extent.
- 85% of volunteers believe Home-Start enables parents to become more active in their local community to at least some extent.
- 95% of volunteers believe Home-Start enables parents to reduce feelings of isolation to at least a large extent; this was the outcome rated highest by volunteers with 52% suggesting it impacts to a very large extent.
- 86% of volunteers believe Home-Start enables parents to improve parenting skills to at least a large extent.
- 95% of volunteers believe Home-Start enables parents to give their children better life chances to at least some extent.

Volunteers Top Tips

Volunteers were asked for their “top tips” for new volunteers or anyone thinking about volunteering with Home-Start Kernow. Here’s a selection:

“Start with no expectation of what you can do, be led by your family. What you think they need may not be what they think they need so take it slowly, they may need time to trust you.”

“Be encouraging. Sometimes parents don’t realise they’re doing a really good job already because it can be tough, so they think they’re rubbish parents.”

“Keep a small toy or game in your bag or pocket as an ice-breaker when you’re meeting children for the first time.”

“It can be quite normal to have a run of cancellations or illnesses at the start of a new match but this will diminish as the family starts to feel more comfortable with you.”

“The family may feel as nervous as you do. They may feel you’re going to judge them so be sure to provide reassurance.”

Areas for Improvement

- Training and Networking are the two main areas for improvement.
- 7 volunteers suggest elements of the training offer could be improved.
- 4 would like additional courses, suggested topics include mental health, drug and alcohol awareness and safeguarding.
- 2 feel the prep course could be improved by being shortened and being “more professional and structured.”
- 5 volunteers would like to have increased contact with other volunteers, either in person or online using a Facebook group, for example.

Feedback from External Stakeholders

Home-Start Cornwall has a successful track record for working in partnership with other organisations with a view to extending the benefits for families. The charity has previously contributed to a number of key strategic documents impacting on children and families services; including Cornwall Early Help Strategy, the Child Poverty Needs Assessment for Cornwall and the Cornwall Joint Strategic Needs Assessment for children, Kernow Matters.

A key challenge for the charity in Year One of the Big Lottery Fund project has been re-establishing the profile of the organisation with local partners and HSK has been pro-active in re-establishing these links and networks. HSK is a member of Cornwall Voluntary Sector Community Forum and Engine Room, which has supported the charity with strategy and business planning.

HSK is particularly interested in learning from the views of external stakeholders and determining whether they are satisfied with the access to and delivery of the service to the community.

8 external stakeholders responded to our invitation to participate in an online survey. All have experience of referring families to HSK. The survey findings are as follows:

- The stakeholders include 4 Health Visitors, 3 Nurses and 1 Social Worker.
- Asked to rate a number of factors relating to HSK, stakeholders rate the following factors in equal measure; 5 very good (62%) and 3 good (38%):

- ◆ Overall satisfaction with the service provided by HSK.
- ◆ Overall opinion of HSK
- ◆ Support provided to families
- ◆ Process of referring families
- ◆ Quality of volunteers

- Stakeholders identify some scope for improvement on the availability of volunteers. 62% suggested availability was OK and only 25% suggest availability is good. The majority acknowledge that HSK is challenged by limited resources and recruiting volunteers in a largely rural area.
- Asked to rate HSK's willingness to work in partnership, 3 stakeholders say it's very good, 4 say it's good and 1 says it's OK.

Key Strengths

- External stakeholders value Home-Start Kernow's ability to respond to the needs of families flexibly and within an acceptable timescale.
- Their collective feedback suggests that HSK communicates well with external stakeholders, provides honest feedback and sets realistic expectations.
- They recognise that HSK has an informal approach which works well for families who may fear the stigma of engaging with statutory services.

"Clients feel that HSK volunteers are non judgemental and willing to support them in a variety of ways, as opposed to

Family Support Workers who have specific remit for a short period of time and often aim to get families into children's centre groups as their priority."

"HSK is an easy to access service popular with families as it offers practical support from volunteers who can relate to their experience."

Areas for Improvement

- Volunteer recruitment was identified by 7 out of 8 external stakeholders as the primary area for improvement.
- They acknowledge limitations of funding and resources, but share a view that this is an essential element of HSK support which needs addressing.
- Recruitment, availability and promotion of volunteers are the main areas for improvement suggested by external stakeholders.
- Stakeholders offered other suggestions; including HSK speaking at Health Visitor Forums to raise awareness and promoting their services on the new Health Visiting Facebook page for Cornwall.

"Some Health Visitors have become disillusioned with referring to HSK due to the lack of volunteers, but we appreciate this is linked to funding so can't always be helped."

"Availability of volunteers is often a problem. It's difficult offering families a service and then it not actually being available."

"We're aware of restrictions on the numbers of volunteers to we tend to scrutinise the quantity of referrals that could be sent to HSK."

Additional Feedback

- One external stakeholder would like to see HSK work with older children.
- Two expressed their concerns about HSK losing its funding again.

Challenges

At the end of Year One, HSK has notified the lottery of three amber challenges; the charity's ability to achieve project outcomes, financial health and external factors.

Feedback gained during the evaluation process has been largely positive, but a number of potential challenges are identified which support HSK's own assessment and may warrant further attention from the board and staff team:

1. "Bouncing Back"

Re-establishing the charity and restoring its service to full capacity has been a key challenge for HSK in Year One. The charity was within days of closure when it received the good news about Big Lottery Funding and it takes time to rebuild. In February, the evaluator sensed staff and trustees were affected by the near-closure and recommended they allow themselves to move on.

2. Meeting Big Lottery Fund Targets for Families

Before the project started, HSK had been left with no option but to wind-down the charity which saw delivery fall from 50 families to just 10. HSK has made huge strides during Year One to increase the number of families supported and reach Big Lottery Fund targets but this has been more difficult than expected as the charity is effectively starting out as a new organisation.

3. Volunteer Recruitment

As with the previous challenges, re-establishing volunteer recruitment has been a challenge for HSK during Year One, particularly in the north of the county. HSK faces increased competition from other providers supporting

families, particularly those delivering the Troubled Families programme. The staff team have a sense that the eight week preparation course may deter some people from volunteering as it's a considerable commitment.

4. Marketing

Marketing and raising the profile in general has been challenging, but particularly in relation to volunteer recruitment. The local press now charge a fee for adverts and the do-it website has not been as useful as it once was.

5. Measuring Outcomes

The evaluator has identified a specific challenge concerning outcomes measurement in that the four Big Lottery Fund outcomes are very similar, making it difficult to attribute impact and the evaluator is concerned that, in some cases, HSK may not be crediting itself fully for the impact it enables.

Eg: HSK measures parenting skills which, in the evaluator's experience of similar projects, parents do not like to admit there is scope for improvement. HSK suggests that 15 out of 60 parents have been supported to improve parenting skills. 42 out of 45 families have been supported to improve confidence; yet confidence is also a parenting skill but it is not taken into account under the current framework, which may skew the level of impact.

2 families engaged in the evaluation feel "over-measured" by HSK and report the amount of reviews and paperwork required by HSK to be too excessive.

6. Other Challenges during Year One have included staff having to adjust to new software (Office 365) which has had some teething issues; maintaining a presence on social media and effectively using the HSK Project Plan.

Recommendations

The feedback from parents, volunteers and external stakeholders, in addition to regular interaction with staff throughout year one, indicates that Home-Start Kernow is effective in delivering the Big Lottery Fund project, despite the challenges it has faced in the first year of the project.

The evaluator does not consider there to be any fundamental recommendations to improve delivery, but offers the following recommendations for consideration in Years Two and Three:

1. Big Lottery Fund Outcomes

There is considerable overlap within the current BLF outcomes framework and the evaluator recommends that HSK considers a more structured approach to attributing impact under each outcome to enable more accurate reporting, or considers proposing slightly revised outcomes to BLF.

Outcome 3 is particularly difficult to measure as parents are not always comfortable discussing lack of parenting skills and there is scope for repetition with other outcomes when focusing on identified areas of need.

HSK may benefit from clearer definitions on improvements such as parenting skills and well being and a clearer outcome framework to aid recording.

HSK might like to explore the potential to work in partnership with other voluntary organisations on shared volunteer recruitment events/promotion.

2. Review Regular Evaluation Tools and Techniques

HSK should review its assessment and feedback process in response to the comments from a small number of families who feel it's too cumbersome. There may be potential opportunities to align these processes with the external evaluation more closely in Year 2, making it easier to gather the data required and increase families' awareness of why HSK requires information.

3. Marketing & Raising the Profile of HSK

By all accounts, this appears to have been a real challenge for HSK in Year One and staff and trustees have worked hard to re-establish the charity. Unfortunately, this impacts on other key areas, such as volunteer recruitment, which in turn impacts directly on the number of families HSK can support and therefore the charity's ability to sufficiently meet it's BLF outcomes.

HSK is seeking to appoint a Media Assistant which will certainly improve things, but the charity should also consider whether current resources allow it to buy in professional external support, even if only for a limited time, say 6 months.

4. Establish regular communication with external stakeholders

Whilst stakeholders perceive HSK to communicate well on an individual level, there is a desire to receive more regular general communication about the charity, its current capacity and current challenges with a view to offering help, where possible.

It is recommend that HSK considers ways in which to meet this need; perhaps by regular email bulletins, holding regular networking/feedback events and by building a mailing list of supporters.

Acknowledgements

The evaluator would like to acknowledge the contributions of all stakeholders who have contributed to the evaluation, but particularly the families who shared their stories, which are sometimes complex or of a very personal nature, in the hope that it will illustrate the impact of Home-Start Kernow.

We're also grateful to volunteers and trustees, who already give their time so freely, and to partners who took time out of their busy roles to contribute.

About Home-Start Kernow

To find out more about how Home-Start Kernow helps local families, volunteering opportunities or funding needs, please contact HSK directly:

www.homestartkernow.org.uk | 01209 214490

About Home-Start UK

Home-Start Kernow is affiliated to the national charity Home-Start UK, a network of over 250 schemes which supports 32,000 families a year. There are certainly benefits of being part of a national network, but there is also a common misconception that Home-Start schemes are centrally funded.

Home-Start Kernow pays an annual affiliation fee to Home-Start UK in return for support and use of the brand. As an independent charity, staff and trustees are fully responsible for fundraising and generating income streams.

About Steve Allman

Steve Allman is an independent evaluator with an extensive background in children's services, both at a strategic level and practitioner level working directly with families. He supports charities to evaluate and communicate their impact and use it to develop sustainable strategies. He has a particular interest in Home-Start, having worked with nearly 20 schemes around the UK.

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