

Meeting with Home Start

Tuesday February 26 2002

I visited the office of Home Start in High Wycombe and met their two project workers / organisers. Home Start (High Wycombe) is a branch of a national organisation but like many other voluntary groups they operate with a good deal of autonomy, raising funds for their work and determining their own priorities. The national body gives advice and support and undertakes some monitoring of activity.

Home Start provides help and support to the parents of under school age children, and respond to references from childcare social workers, health visitors and doctors. They also accept referrals from concerned friends and family. Their volunteers work closely with families helping with guidance and parenting skills. The volunteers come from a variety of backgrounds and are trained locally by Home Start. They recruit people who have parenting skills and patience and the ability to get on well with others. Most volunteers coming forward are women but they have recently recruited a man.

Home Start has two project workers who support the volunteers and also undertake administration of the scheme. They normally work with about twenty families at a time but they run with a considerable waiting list, currently about 40 families. It can take six months or more before some needy families are accessed. They said that to reduce the waiting list they would need extra funds in order to recruit another project worker. They get good help from local organisations in finding volunteers.

Their funding comes from the Social Services and the Wycombe Primary Care Group. When asked about relationships with the County Council, they responded by saying they had no dealings with the Council only Education and Social Services (so much for the corporate image). Two years ago the project was near closure because of funding problems and the uncertainty of the County maintaining their grant. Fortunately the combination of the Primary Care Group and Social Services enabled them to continue. I asked who decided the level of their funding? They said that they didn't know. They just submitted invoices and waited about two to three months for them to be paid.

They have an agreement with the County Council that provides funding over a three-year period in return for their services. They did not favour a service level agreement.

They said that relationships were generally good. There had been some difficulty with changes in social services but had maintained close working with education and they named several officers with whom they had contact. I asked about contacts with County Councillors. They said that they were always very pleased to welcome Councillors to their AGM and named some that regularly attend. However there was not much more contact than that, they said they were perhaps closer to District Councillors. Councillors had been helpful during their funding crisis.

Asked what additional support they would like to receive from the County they said that training could be helpful and they mentioned the Data Protection Act and Health and Safety.

I asked about monitoring and whether it was onerous. They said that they were required to provide a great deal of information for social services, education, health and their regional office also had to be kept informed. The requirement of each funder is different but they were now able to provide the information in a common form.

This small organisation has an impressive record and can point to a significant record of success. They have helped to change the lives of many families.