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POINTS OF VIEW

Volunteers needed for charity that helps provide support for hundreds of families



Cllr Marie Goldman at Home-Start Essex with its CEO Nic O'Brien
HOME-START ESSEX

WANT to tell you about Home-Start Essex. It is doing vital work across our county, including right here in Chelmsford, and I want to tell you how you can help it.

Last year, Home-Start celebrated 50 years of supporting families. In that same year, 2022-23, Home-Start Essex helped 869 families, supporting 1,859 children.

That's a phenomenal number of people whose lives may well have been transformed by the thoughtful and caring support Home-Start Essex provides.

Last week, I was invited along to one of the organisation's family support groups, which are held weekly in the centre of our city.

I chatted for a long time to Nic O'Brien, Home-Start Essex's CEO. We talked about the incredible work they do.

Nic told me how they help so many families who are struggling with issues such as social isolation, lack of access to support services, and the cost-of-living crisis.

Support from Home-Start Essex is often a lifeline for those families who do not have a network of support around them.

I also met several parents who were attending the support group. It was clear that they were very grateful for having the opportunity to talk and interact with other parents and to tell the support workers about the challenges they were facing.

For some parents, the most important thing was the chance for some adult conversation while their children played with the toys and had the chance to interact with other children and make friends.

One parent had recently escaped domestic abuse. For her, it was the chance to feel safe and sup-

Cllr Marie Goldman with children at a Home-Start Essex family support group in Chelmsford
HOME-START ESSEX



ported without constantly having to look over her shoulder.

There were smiles and laughter and the odd tussle over a particularly interesting and brightly coloured toy. There was toast and fruit for the children and the parents (usually mums, but occasionally dads too). In short, it was exactly as it should be and, on the face of it, a common scene that is replicated at parent and toddler playgroups across the country - but with two key differences.

The first is that alongside the parents, you will also see Home-Start support workers.

These are both paid staff and volunteers who are on hand to provide a friendly ear to listen to

the issues the parents are facing without judgment.

In fact that was something that parents repeated to me more than once - nobody felt judged while there, just genuinely listened to and supported.

The second key difference is that this is a referral-only service. Families are referred to Home-Start from other organisations and services, including social workers and even GPs (although that's probably not happening as much as it perhaps could). The referral lasts for about six months. The aim is not to provide continuous support for years to come, but to give families the confidence and knowledge to empower themselves to move forward positively.

That's a very liberal approach - recognising that helping people break down the barriers to success is one of the most powerful things you

can do to help them for life.

The demand for Home-Start Essex's services are higher than ever with an increase in referrals of 134 per cent since the pandemic. Meanwhile, costs have also gone up and funding sources are becoming ever scarcer. So, what can you do to help?

The very first thing is to become a volunteer. Volunteers are essential to Home-Start's support for families. The pandemic reduced opportunities for volunteers to support families and the subsequent cost-of-living crisis has resulted in many people being unable to consider volunteering due to needing paid employment.

But volunteers are exactly what Home-Start Essex needs. It is looking to recruit volunteers throughout mid, west and south Essex.

Opportunities are flexible ranging from visiting a family in their own home to provide weekly support,

supporting within a group environment, and driving a family to access support services or supporting fundraising activities. Could this be you?

I know it's incredibly rewarding to be a volunteer. The difference you can make to someone's life simply by giving up some of your spare time can be astounding and the warm feeling it gives you knowing that you were able to make someone's life just that little bit better and easier - well, it's pretty amazing too. So how about it?

If you want to learn more, contact Home-Start Essex through their website here: <https://home-startessex.org.uk/>

But if you don't have time to volunteer, you can still make a difference by making a donation, which you can do on Home-Start Essex's fundraising page now: <https://home-startessex.org.uk/donate/>

I'm very grateful for the amazing work that organisations such as Home-Start do across our city and in the wider area.

I know that they make such a big difference to the people they help, but besides that, their contribution to the wider community is immense. Imagine what would happen to these parents and their children if they didn't have this sort of support.

And then imagine the detrimental effect that would have on our communities, on community cohesion, on lost potential.

It's a very lucky - and rare - person who sails through life without ever needing a bit of support from someone else. If we're lucky, that comes from friends and family, but that isn't always possible. Some lives are immeasurably more complicated than that.

Organisations like Home-Start are just one part of the many, many cogs and wheels that keep our society going, and I'm worried about their existence if funds continue to dwindle and be cut.

If you can help with that in any way, please, please do.

Marie

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