

PE1683/C

Home-Start UK submission of 23 May 2018

Thank you for inviting Home-Start UK to respond to the petition PE1683 calling on the Scottish Government to provide better support for multiple birth families.

We will focus our response on the benefits of non-financial support. However, we are pleased to see the response from the Scottish Government which addresses some matters relating to finance. We also support fully the assessment of additional financial strain for multiple birth families given in the submission from The Multiple Births Foundation. We have a wealth of comments from families, volunteers and staff which underpins the issues of financial stress raised in that response – including reduced income due to childcare pressures, transport and equipment costs.

About Home-Start's support service to families

Home-Start is a federated charity with a network of 31 independent Home-Start charities in Scotland and over 250 UK-wide. In Scotland they range in scale from very small organisations supporting under 50 families at any one time to those which are supporting up to 300 families a year. Our network specialises in support to parents with children in the Early Years (0-5 mainly and up to 8 in some Home-Starts) provided mainly in the form of home visiting and drop-in groups, with the vital relationship building with families led primarily by trained volunteers. We accept referrals from any source, including self-referrals. In the case of multiple births we are very likely to receive referrals from health visitors at an early stage as some of the challenges facing new parents of multiple babies are well known.

Funding from the statutory sector for Home-Start's home visiting family support service in Scotland has reduced by over 20% since 2012. During this period we have grown our reach to over 3000 families, including over 6000 children a year by attracting funding from other sources. It is important to point out that there is no specific funding available for home visiting support to multiple birth families although the number our network supports can be high. For example, in researching this response we established that 10% of families supported by one Home-Start (which supports over 200 families overall) in the first quarter of 2018 were multiple birth families.

Key relevant issues raised by families, volunteers and Home-Start staff

Social Isolation and loneliness:

The leading underlying cause for referrals to Home-Starts is loneliness and social isolation, often in association with mental health problems. We agree with The Multiple Births Foundation's assertion that this is a problem which is prevalent in multiple birth families and is often linked with mental health problems particularly depression. 43% of all families referred to our service cite loneliness and social isolation as a reason for wanting support and 39% of referrals cite mental health difficulties. On working with families 93% report feeling less lonely or isolated.

Social and emotional support from volunteers is valued by multiple birth families but also help with the simple challenges of getting out of the house to maintain and grow support networks. Everything from getting out of a third floor flat alone with babies and buggy, getting on a bus or feeding and changing multiples while getting an older child to school or nursery becomes harder for these parents. Becoming an extra pair of hands is a significant element of the relationship between supporter and supported in multiple birth families. Practical help from Home-Start volunteers is rated highly by multiple birth families but it is often a surprise to them to find that type of help might be available.

Parent feedback:

"They helped me move out and about from home with my twins, which never happened earlier. Having a volunteer support gave me confidence to go out alone as well. Highly recommended."

"It helped give me time to adjust to having twins and gave me the opportunity to have company when feeling isolated with newborns"

"I had never realised Home-Start could help mums of multiples before I had twins. I always thought it would be a social worker who could refer families and didn't realise you could self-refer."

Recommendation:

A clearer referral pathway for multiple birth families. Charities such as Home-Start providing family support do not have significant promotional budgets. We are heavily reliant on busy, often over-stretched midwives and health visitors to raise awareness and many families are not referred because they do not know they can get any help even if they ask. The Scottish Government recently revealed that knowledge of the availability of free childcare for some two-year olds was a barrier to access which shows how hard it can be to reach families even with comparatively large resources

for disseminating information. We feel that more consistency in alerting families to potential sources of help at the ante-natal stage would be of significant benefit.

Peer support:

Research shows that mothers with strong, supportive social networks tend to raise children who flourish in social, emotional and behavioural terms – this is the basic requirement for educational attainment and lifelong wellbeing.

Peer support is often lacking for multiple birth parents because fewer people really understand the very different nature of their family journey. For example, we often hear that “normal” parent and baby groups can make doubts about parenting ability worse as parents of singletons do not understand the need to do things differently with twins or triplets. In response to this Home-Start often sets up family groups focused on the specific needs for multiple birth parents to meet others with similar experiences.

Home-Start experience:

“We offer the same support to parents of multiples that we do for any other parent, home-visiting and group support. Our prevalence of multiples fluctuates and we go through periods of having quite a number of twins and then none at all. I would like to offer a kind of pop-up group, so when a need arises then we can pull a group together quickly and then disband it when it is no longer required.”

“From our experience working with families, the support can be very hit or miss. Here in East Lothian the nearest twin support group is in Edinburgh until we started one in Dunbar in late 2017.”

“We instigated a local Facebook support page, in response to discussions with families with twins as they felt this would be more beneficial than organised meet-ups given the extra pressures of multiple births.”

“The future of the twins group will rely on funding for the group but also funding for the worker long term.”

Recommendation:

A return to more flexible and predictable funding settlements with an element of core funding would help the Home-Start network to respond speedily and appropriately to the peer support needs of multiple birth families. Short-term, now generally annual, funding arrangements with the statutory sector combined with a growing reliance on restricted and project focused income makes responding flexibly as need arises in a community harder to achieve. For example, we have started to look at how to encourage more informal peer support networks but when engaging people who feel quite vulnerable we do need to be sure we can offer sufficient support over a reasonable period. Starting something new without giving it sufficient time to evolve, mature and take families views into account throughout the process is not a sustainable way of engaging and supporting families.

Lack of confidence and stigma

Many new parents lack knowledge and confidence. Parents with more than one newborn baby often struggle with feeding, including breastfeeding, and can have concerns about being a good enough parent to older siblings while preoccupied with the challenges posed by their multiple newborns. There is often reluctance to seek help for fear of being judged to be a poor quality parent.

Home-Start experience:

“One particular family we supported had boy/girl twins – first babies for this family – and were overwhelmed, referred by their health visitor as Mum was tired, Dad worked shifts (2 weeks on/2 weeks off) and the girl twin wasn’t feeding very well, suffering with reflux, leading to Mum feeling anxious.

Our volunteer, a parent of three and granny of several, formed an immediate positive bond with Mum, recognising her tiredness and anxiety, particularly regarding the girl twin. Despite approaching the health visitor for advice on the reflux, Mum felt fobbed off and that the health visitor wasn’t very understanding or had any empathy for her situation, offering no practical solution/support. [With volunteer support] the Mum sought the advice of a second health visitor, and took her wee girl to see the GP, with both offering a more sympathetic ear and understanding. Gradually, the reflux improved [...] As Mum’s anxiety decreased, she gained in confidence, and as the twins grew older, her need for support lessened [...] At the time of our support ending, Mum stated that she wouldn’t have been able to get through the initial first year, and particularly anxious first months, without the support of our volunteer.”

“It is so much better for when families feel confident about asking for help. One successful outcome was when an expectant mum approached us herself. She already had a non-walking toddler and anticipated how hard things would become.

One practical thing the family asked for was the chance for dad to stay at work later one day a week as his job was crucial to the whole family's wellbeing. Help provided at bath time once a week, so he could work longer on a regular occasion was a simple thing we could do with them. This supportive relationship lasted about a year until the family moved to be nearer their extended family."

"Specialist ante-natal twin sessions are available in Edinburgh but not in, for example, East Lothian. There should be more help at an earlier stage in preparing families for the challenges of multiple births."

Recommendation:

There should be more specialist peri-natal information and support provision. Home-Start has experience of running several services which, while not specifically targeting women facing multiple births, have crossover potential. These are:

1. Breast Buddies – a peer mentoring programme to help women start and sustain breastfeeding.
2. Bumps and Beyond – a service designed to pair volunteers with women with higher than average support needs during the ante-natal period.
3. Partnership work with organisations focused on peri-natal mental health support in which specialist counselling and peer support is run alongside family support at home.

Stigma related to the issue of "good enough" parenting is a barrier to seeking help. We are very interested in the potential of working with others on a "See Me" style campaign to convey the message that every parent needs help sometimes. This could be of particular benefit to multiple birth families who often feel under pressure to simply deal with all that life throws at them for fear of appearing weak or incompetent.

Lack of knowledge or consideration amongst professionals

In our experience some multiple birth families feel that their situation is not helped by the ways in which professional services operate. This ranges from inconsistent advice on breastfeeding to inflexibility in arrangements for meetings. There are few specialist ante-natal groups and, as some of the comments from families included in this paper show, not all health visitors and midwives are meeting the needs of these families.

Parent feedback:

“[There should be] better support from community midwives. I may have just been unlucky, but I felt pressure to be seen at home when my twins were in neonatal. I was told they could see me at hospital while my twins were in neo natal care but my midwife said no. I was trying to establish breastfeeding and needed to be there. She then arranged to come when babies were home and didn’t turn up but that’s another story!”

“More breastfeeding support for mums of multiples is needed. Many health professionals have mixed views on breastfeeding twins which can lead to mums giving up breastfeeding before they are ready to.”

Home-Start experience:

“I think referrals in pregnancy would benefit families. Twin and multiple pregnancies are high risk, there is a higher percentage of babies being born earlier than single pregnancies, lots of babies need neonatal care, there is risk of Twin to Twin Transfusion. Multiple births are much riskier, there is a higher percentage of twins being born by c-section or natural birth for the 1st twin and emergency c-section for the 2nd twin. Many babies are born with low birth weights, there can be feeding issues and a higher risk of postnatal depression.

“If support was in place throughout a multiple mum’s pregnancy this would benefit mums rather than waiting until these issues have already happened and caused mums emotional stress which can lead to post-natal depression.”

Recommendation:

If input from multiple birth families to inform initial and CPD training of professionals has not been sought and used in training, it should be.

Lack of support for fathers

Fathers have not been very well included by most professionals working in the early years health and education sector and this is now widely recognised to be a problem. Research into the rate of post-natal depression in men is revealing a previously undiagnosed and currently largely untreated mental health problem in men. This combined with the additional pressures, financial and domestic, of multiple births suggests a need for support tailored to the needs of fathers. Home-Start is working on this in relation to all its family support services.

Family feedback:

“Support for Dads [is needed] I don’t know stats but I’d bet PND is more common for dads with multiples. I know my own husband struggled initially”

Home-Start experience:

“I think that multiples should be offered specific support in the prenatal stage looking at the specific difficulties associated with multiples and the risk of becoming isolated. Many parents of multiples attend ante natal groups so they can establish that network of support in the ante-natal stage. I also think it is important to not forget Dad in the process as I think they are often out at work, as childcare is so expensive for twins/triplets there is often a decision for mum to stay at home and dad then works longer hours to cope with the lack of finances.”

“Parents of multiples we have supported often do have more stress especially in the first year with lack of sleep and the extra amount of work looking after two or more babies, especially if they have no other help e.g., family nearby, and if they have additional children. They do report that there is no extra help available.”

Recommendation:

Year of the Dad saw a significant support and encouragement being exerted on organisations across the statutory and Third Sectors to review and improve services to ensure better inclusion of fathers. Employers also need to be encouraged to be responsive to the needs of fathers in this situation through initiatives such as Family Friendly Working Scotland. Work of this nature should be continued as there is a lot still to do and consideration given to ensuring family support is available to non-resident parents not just primary carers.

ENDS

If any further information is required we will be happy to respond. I would like to add my appreciation and gratitude to our network volunteers, staff and families for providing the feedback contained in this paper at very short notice.