

# St. Mark's Family Centre

Funding needed: £30,000-£60,000 per annum

May 2007



- People living in deprived areas often struggle to improve their lives
- St. Mark's Family Centre provides support that helps people change and develop
- Through long-term support, St. Mark's builds trust and watches people grow
- NPC believes this inventive family centre has a key role to play in its community

## Issue: People living in deprived areas often struggle to improve their lives

South London is one of the most diverse areas in the UK. Affluence and poverty exist side-by-side, with wealthier areas like Wimbledon and Putney close to run-down neighbourhoods. Mitcham is an area within the Borough of Merton, and is in the most deprived third of all neighbourhoods in the UK. It has higher than average levels of families claiming benefits, unemployment and low-paid jobs.

Deprivation and low incomes affect families in many ways. Research shows that poverty is linked to higher levels of stress in families, and associated with limited life skills and parenting. Relationship breakdowns and financial issues can lead to crisis points, when families are desperately in need of help.

It is harder to live a healthy lifestyle on a low income. Parents can find it difficult to buy food and cook healthy meals on a budget, and their family's health can suffer as a result. As well as physical health, mental health can suffer in times of stress and crisis.

Just dealing with daily life can take up most of a parent's energy. Finding the time and opportunities to make major changes, like starting a new career, or getting help with unmanageable debt can be even more difficult. Parents, families and individuals need support and advice to help them gain confidence and make the most out of the opportunities that are out there.



Mitcham is in the most deprived third of neighbourhoods in the UK.

### Case study:

Dawn, a single mum with six children was referred to the centre in 2005, suffering from chronic depression. She was suicidal, had lost her job, was in debt and about to be evicted, had problems with her boyfriend and struggled to look after her children. She was totally unable to cope.

St. Mark's worked with Dawn on a daily basis, helping her deal with her problems one at a time. They accompanied her to the doctor to organise medication and arranged appointments with a Citizens Advice Bureau to sort her finances. They also held discussions with the housing association and bailiffs and encouraged her to come to the mental health support group.

Over time, with St. Mark's support, Dawn managed to get on top of her problems and was able to cope independently. She recently started part-time work.

## Response: St. Mark's Family Centre provides support that helps people change and develop

St. Mark's Family Centre is a family drop-in centre in Mitcham, offering social activities, advice and support to over 600 people each year. Established by the local church over 20 years ago, it works on the principle of bringing the support people need right to their doorstep. Its targeted work focuses on three main areas:

- Children and families—parent and toddler groups focus on fun, socialising and food. Once people are drawn in, staff identify problems they face, and help them avoid reaching crisis point. 200 people are helped each year through these groups. One unique feature of St. Mark's work is its family workshops. These build parenting and life skills, and are fun, practical sessions for all, not lectures for poor parents. For example, the popular Easy Cook course teaches parents how to cook healthy meals on a budget.
- Mental health—the centre runs an innovative scheme where people with mental health problems come together weekly to write and publish a magazine, called Chit Chat. For parents with mental health problems, who often find it difficult to juggle looking after their children with their illness, there is also a mental health group—unique to the Borough—which includes a crèche. 60 people on average benefit from the mental health services.
- Older people—a regular social group helps maintain the independence of 50 local residents. Staff provide friendship and advice, while other services are available on-site, like internet access and a pharmacist.

St. Mark's income was £338,000 in 2006, 50% of which was public funding. It employs three full-time staff, and on average ten part-time staff.

## Results: Through long-term support, St. Mark's builds trust and watches people grow

St. Mark's Family Centre, like many local community organisations, often acts in place of the family and friends that most of us rely on for support. It provides practical advice, a listening ear and help. It is difficult to measure the results of such varied support, as it deals with a huge range of different problems.

The charity does not, at present, systematically collate data about the actual results of its work. This is common among small, local charities, partly because it has limited resources to develop ways of measuring and recording its results, and partly because its funders do not ask for this information. Instead, they require it to collect data on its outputs—the number of users attending and the type of sessions provided.

NPC believes that St. Mark's Family Centre is effective, based on anecdotal evidence about the results of its work, and individuals' case records. Staff are able to talk about results in detail for the individuals and families they support. Because their approach is built on developing long-term trust, staff see first-hand the changes in people they work with over time. They talk compellingly of increased self-confidence, growth of friendships and peer support, and decreased stress.

An important aspect of the charity's approach is how centre members sometimes move on to become volunteers, and receive training that can help them into employment. For example, a mother who came to the parents and toddlers' group then became a volunteer, and has now qualified as a professional crèche worker.

For some of the centre's users, like those with mental health problems, the goal may be less ambitious—simply to remain on an even keel, and to stay in control of their condition.

### Feedback

*"The centre means so much to me as I would never see anyone all week if I didn't come here."*

*"I come to the mental health groups. They are very important to me and without them I'm not sure I could cope each week."*

*"I only realised what the word community meant when I left work to look after my first child and began to feel part of this community when I first came to St. Mark's Family Centre."*

Centre users

*"St Mark's Family Centre...has become an essential element in our bid to deliver family learning to disadvantaged families in this area. This has become our most successful venue to date."*

Merton Adult Education

### Geographical coverage

Local ..... National  
● .....

### Focus of approach

Indiv- Comm- Services Society  
- idual - nity .....

### Life stage

Innovation Established  
or pilot ..... approach  
..... ●

### Replicability or scalability

Little Considerable  
scope ..... scope  
..... ●

### Annual income (£'000s)

2004	2005	2006
286	363	338

### Staff

Full-time	Part-time	Volunteer
3	10	10

## Recommendation: NPC believes this inventive family centre has a key role to play in its community

St. Mark's Family Centre is in some ways a very traditional community organisation, and in others unusual and progressive. Its central principle of building up trust through long-term support and social activities is common in local charities. Its difference lies in the way its activities are shaped and targeted to members' lives—family workshops, Easy Cook, and the Chit Chat magazine are all good examples. The centre's director, Ray Hautot combines his 30 years of experience of charity management with an appetite for innovation in a way that seems to work well.

Private funding could help to expand and develop the following programmes:

- £10,000 would pay for one year of family workshops (each involving 10 parents), with 10 sessions delivered each term.
- £15,000 would fund a full year of Easy Cook sessions, and would help St. Mark's to gain recognised accreditation for the programme. Parents going on the course would then be able to obtain a recognised qualification in food hygiene or health and safety.
- £30,000 would fund the mental health service for a year, to meet growing local demand and pay for other activities like education and training.

This charity presents a medium risk to donors due to the lack of concrete data on results. However, its model has been well-tested over the years, and its finances are relatively stable in a difficult funding environment. Its ability to innovate while continuing to deliver what is needed makes it a good opportunity for donors.

**St. Mark's Family Centre is at the heart of its community, acting as the friends and family that many of us rely on.**

New Philanthropy Capital (NPC) is a charity that advises all types of donors on how to ensure their money has high impact.

This document describes one of the charities recommended by NPC based on its report on community organisations in the UK. For more information see our report *Local action, changing lives* at [www.philanthropycapital.org](http://www.philanthropycapital.org).

To discuss this or any of our other recommendations, please contact Harry Charlton on 020 7785 6309.

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## Glossary

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<b>Funding needed</b>	amount or range of funding required
<b>Results</b>	impact of this charity's work on people's lives – NPC looks at results in terms of three dimensions:  <b>Breadth</b> – number of people affected <b>Depth</b> – intensity of results for each individual affected (greatest depth means a life-saving intervention; lowest means a minor interaction) <b>Change</b> – degree of systemic change brought about by this work; equivalently whether it tackles causes (high) or treats symptoms (low)
<b>Risk</b>	level of risk threatening the delivery of specified results
<b>Difficulty of fundraising</b>	level of difficulty associated with fundraising for this charity (may be due to unpopularity of field of work or lack of fundraising capacity)

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<b>Geographical coverage</b>	charity's area of work – local, regional or national – or a number of these levels
<b>Focus of approach</b>	main groups with which the charity works:  <b>Individual</b> – working directly with individuals, providing services and support to improve their quality of life <b>Community</b> – working with communities and/or families, providing activities to strengthen community life <b>Services</b> – working with organisations, funders and policymakers to improve services <b>Society</b> – working at a national level to change attitudes and tackle causes
<b>Life stage</b>	organisation's developmental stage – from pilot/start-up to mature, established organisation
<b>Replicability or scalability</b>	potential for replication of the charity's model, or growth of the charity itself

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## Good giving principles

- **Pro-active selection of charities based on results:** Donors should support charities that are achieving excellent results for the people that they serve, rather than charities that have the most effective and professional fundraising teams or the lowest administrative costs (all organisations need administrative costs in order to be effective; low admin costs may in fact be a sign of an inefficient organisation).
  - **'Light touch' engagement with charities:** In most instances we recommend that donors minimise the demands on the time and resources of the charities they fund. In practice, this means not imposing arduous reporting requirements and limiting visits and contact with charities.
  - **Funding organisations, not projects:** As a donor, it is tempting to stipulate that a grant can only be used for a particular project, because this makes it much easier to see the direct charitable impact of the donation. However, we believe that this practice can limit the impact of the donation. Firstly, it may cause charities to propose projects that meet the donor's objectives but which stray from their core mission. Secondly, if circumstances change then charities are unable to respond. We believe that the charities we recommend can and should be trusted to make decisions in the best interests of the people they serve, and so in general we recommend that donors fund organisations, not projects. Practically, this means giving unrestricted funding.
  - **'Just right' donations - not too big, not too small:** Judging the right size for a donation to a charity is an art, not a science. If a donation is too big, there is a risk that rapid growth will create significant organisational problems, particularly when the donation runs out. At the other end of the scale, if a donor makes a small donation and requires a charity to go through application and reporting processes then the administrative burden may outweigh the benefit of the donation. Of course, small donations with no strings attached are always welcomed by charities. Our researchers work with charities to understand their financial needs, and recommend a suitable size for a donation. In general, we work on an assumption that contributing more than a third of an organisation's annual income may create problems. However, if a charity is looking to grow significantly and it has a robust strategy for growth, a larger grant may be entirely appropriate.
  - **Multi-year support:** We recommend that donors should provide multi-year support for charities, rather than giving them a lump sum in a single year. Choosing the right length for a grant depends on the specific case – as a guide, grant-making trusts often give three-year grants. Multi-year support gives charity leaders the opportunity to make long term plans to improve their organisations and build projects that will create and sustain improvements in the lives of the people they serve. It also allows donors to build longer-term relationships with the charities, if they wish.
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