

**- CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY -**

**Angela Smith speech to Mentoring and Befriending Foundation and  
Council on Social Action conference – 4 November 2009**

**Introduction**

Thank you Steve for your introduction, and for inviting me to speak today on such an important topic.

There's no doubt that Mentoring and Befriending plays a significant role in our society:

- from helping young people to realise their potential
- to encouraging social integration
- providing much needed support to the elderly
- and generally, many people can need that extra help and support at some point in their lives.

And MBF itself plays a significant role as a government partner.

Not just to my own office, but to departments across Whitehall.

I'm delighted to see that my colleague, Dawn Primarolo, the Minister for Children, is here via video link later, and the Shadow Justice Minister, too. This shows that all parties are getting involved, which is welcome. It shows the increasing recognition of the importance of Mentoring and Befriending in a variety of areas.

But it's also the recognition that you have the experience, ability, and networks to reach parts governments cannot.

Because, while I like to think we're pretty good at the practical support, no government, whatever their politics, can begin to provide the kind of emotional backup that you can.

Not many people want their hands held by an MP.

So it is, indeed, a vital role.

And one that is becoming ever more so, as we deal with the fallout from the global economic downturn.

### **Recession and need for emotional support**

The past eighteen months have already seen a significant increase in the demand for essential services provided by the third sector.

And it is more than likely that, as the longer-term impact becomes apparent, that demand will grow again, with mentors and befrienders finding themselves called on to deliver a large part.

A good example is Home Start, a charity providing support for families struggling with a range of issues.

In some areas the number of referrals for their services has tripled.

But it's not just quantity. The nature of the help they're being asked to deliver is changing too.

Increasingly, volunteers are finding themselves giving emotional as well as practical support to families facing hardship in the recession.

I never cease to be amazed at the difference that something as seemingly simple as the support of one human being for another can make to a person's life.

I've been in this post since June, and in that time MBF have been good enough to share with me some examples of the projects they're involved with, and some testimonials from those who have taken part.

I was particularly struck by the example of the New Hope Mentoring Programme in the West Midlands.

### **Case study – Becky**

Becky, a young woman living in Birmingham, left home at the age of 15 to live with an older boyfriend. She moved into an environment where hard drug use was the norm, and soon became a regular heroin user.

Then she started shoplifting to support her habit. And by the age of 17 found herself in prison.

There she got help with her drug addiction. And, importantly, she was introduced to a volunteer mentor through the New Hope scheme.

This mentor has helped her to turn her life around. Helped her to be a stronger and more confident person. Helped her stay away from crime.

She's now looking forward to her future, to getting back into education, and eventually to getting a job.

That makes it sound easy – you and I know it's not – and in this case it wasn't for either her or her mentor.

This story, which could so easily have turned out very differently, shows the enormous impact that an effective mentor can have on a person's life.

I've also seen for myself the value that mentoring and befriending brings, at The Connection at St. Martins in the Field.

The Connection is one of charities backed by the Government's Hardship Fund, providing essential specialist help to over 200 homeless people in central London, every day.

And Mentoring and Befriending is a key part of this, helping the homeless deal with the serious difficulties they face in their lives, and, where possible, getting them off the streets.

### **Why M&B is so important**

So Mentoring and Befriending makes a huge difference. But why? What is it that mentoring and befriending brings that traditional support systems cannot?

This quote, from a young girl who has changed her life for the better with the support of a mentor, sums it up for me: She said: "it is almost impossible to do it on your own".

Everyone needs help and support from others in their life. Some of us are lucky enough to get it from friends, family and work colleagues, often without even realising what they're doing for us.

But others lack this easy access. They may not live at home. Or be far away from friends and family. They may be out of work.

These are the people who need the kind of help that mentoring and befriending can provide.

### **Volunteers**

Mentoring and befriending in a business context brings great value. But I believe that there's something unique in the value that mentoring and befriending brings when it's provided by volunteers.

When I say this, I'm not talking about cheap labour. As anyone involved in the training and co-ordination of volunteers will know, it is neither a cheap nor simple undertaking.

The unique value comes from the mentee's knowledge that the mentor is providing their time and energy for no personal financial reward, and that the mentor is often someone who has experienced similar difficulties in their life.

These aspects help to encourage empathy and build trust, ensuring a stronger, more effective relationship. Something that would be extremely difficult and potentially impossible to replicate with paid staff.

I would like to take this opportunity to pass on my personal gratitude to those people who give up their free time to support others on a one-to-one basis.

Having said this, the benefits are, of course, not all one-sided. Those providing the support often gain hugely from the experience.

They develop new skills and abilities, and gain a broader perspective on the challenges in our society. Not to mention the immense sense of satisfaction that must come from knowing that you have been able to improve the life of another person.

Another important aspect I've come across is that so many of those individuals who received support through these programmes decide that they want to go on and support others in a similar way. This speaks volumes to me about the value and impact of this kind of work.

**OTS support for third sector and M&B**

It's clear that the third sector must and does take a leading role in providing support for those in difficult circumstances.

In doing so, the sector supports the Government in our aim to build more cohesive communities.

Our role in Government is to support the sector in return. To enable the provision of these essential services.

So, what is Government doing? Well, in my own office, as well as supporting MBF, we're currently engaged in a range of projects that aim to strengthen the third sector, including those involved in mentoring and befriending.

We're working with key partners to improve support for those who manage volunteers.

I have no doubt that this will be a key area for those who co-ordinate mentoring and befriending schemes, and the unique challenges that they must have to deal with.

The Volunteer Managers Programme, currently being rolled out by CapacityBuilders, will help volunteer managers access relevant development opportunities, as well as developing new forms of support.

Just a couple of weeks ago we announced 24 volunteer infrastructure organisations from across the country that will benefit from over £1.4 million of funding as part of this programme.

We're also continuing our work with V to establish a National Youth Volunteering Programme, aimed at getting more young people involved in things like peer mentoring.

And to give you just one last example of our work, the "Generations Together Programme" is working to encourage younger and older people to volunteer in the same schemes, in order to gain from a shared experience.

Mentoring and befriending skills will be essential for forming the effective relationships that will ensure the success of this programme.

### **M&B across government**

And, as I mentioned earlier, it's not just the Office of the Third Sector that knows the value of mentoring and befriending. Across the whole of Government there is an incredible range of work underway with a focus on mentoring and befriending.

The Department for Culture is continuing its youth mentoring programme on media, music and sport.

The programme, with a commitment of £3 million over three years, and delivered by key partners in each sector, provides mentors who can give support and advice to young people, act as effective role models, and help them to achieve their goals in life.

The Department for Children, Schools and Families is working with MBF to roll out the Anti-Bullying peer mentoring pilot. This programme, aimed at tackling bullying in schools, is engaging with 150 primary, secondary and special schools, and will run until 2011.

And, in their recent report “Moving on Together”, the Home Office and UK Border Agency have restated their commitment to giving mentoring a central role in supporting the integration of refugees.

These are just a few examples from a huge range of work.

It seems that, wherever I look across Government these days, there are mentoring and befriending projects taking place.

## **Conclusion**

As I hope I've shown, mentoring and befriending is hugely important to Government. Particularly in these challenging times.

And we will continue to support your vital work:

- through our support for MBF
- through our work to build a strong and thriving third sector
- and through the range of mentoring and befriending programmes that are already underway.

Oscar Wilde famously said "nothing that is worth knowing can be taught".

Although I don't agree wholeheartedly with this sentiment, I believe that there is an element of truth here, and one that is evident in mentoring and befriending.

What can't be taught is the empathy a mentor needs.

Because these relationships are not about instructing individuals on how to live their lives.

They are about helping people to discover for themselves how to cope with the challenges they face; how to be stronger, more confident, successful.

What you do changes lives and you should all be proud of that, and society should be proud of you.

As you all well know, mentoring and befriending is in no way a quick fix. But I believe in its power to change lives, and I hope that I have been able to share some of my belief and passion with you today. Thank you.

(ends)