



A Better Start: Five years of learning

Giving young children the very best start in life

Delivered by





Foreword



This year we celebrate A Better Start's fifth birthday - half a decade of National Lottery funding transforming the lives of thousands of children across England. Each of the five partnerships works closely with statutory services, voluntary and community sector organisations, and, most importantly, local families to meet the needs of the area, and ensure that parents, babies and communities thrive. From Southend's 'Let's Talk' project to Blackpool's support services for mothers who experienced childhood trauma, no two partnerships are exactly alike, and so far, more than 23,000 families have engaged with the programme.

Involving parents and carers as equal partners is critical to the success of A Better Start and is at the heart of everything we do at The National Lottery Community Fund. That's why they are involved in every aspect of A Better Start; sitting on partnership boards, making decisions, delivering and promoting activities, and getting involved with local families who could benefit. There is a wide range of opportunities for parents across the partnerships, such as Nottingham's 'Family Mentors', Bradford's 'Parents in the Lead' Activities Fund, and Lambeth's 'Pathways for Parents' volunteering project. You can read more about these projects, and reflections from some of the inspiring parents involved, later in this 'five years of learning' publication.

There have of course been challenges to overcome, such as finding ways to engage those families most in need, or streamlining referral pathways between services, however there are also numerous lessons to be learned from A Better Start. For me, five stand out:

1. Effective preventative services require not just allocating resources but fostering a culture centred on identifying problems before they occur.
2. Better trained, informed, and supported employees and volunteers mean better, more sustainable services for local families.
3. Working in partnership is not just about delivering a service together; it's about sharing information and data too.
4. Building parents' skills and confidence will help to ensure the legacy of a project - beyond its lifetime.
5. Real co-production means ensuring families' voices and ideas, including those of children, genuinely shape how services are designed and delivered.

Looking ahead to the next five years, partnerships will continue to refine their pathways and services, sharing what works with local authorities, and building sustainability into their plans so their knowledge and learning can influence and improve child outcomes for years to come, even beyond the ten-year programme. I hope this 'five years of learning' publication gives you a flavour of the breadth of work ongoing across partnerships, and the impact this work is having on the children, families and communities involved.

*Dawn Austwick, Chief Executive
The National Lottery Community Fund*

A Better Start is the ten-year (2015-2025), £215 million programme set-up by The National Lottery Community Fund. Five A Better Start partnerships based in Blackpool, Bradford, Lambeth, Nottingham and Southend are supporting families to give their babies and very young children the best possible start in life. Working with local parents, the A Better Start partnerships are developing and testing ways to improve their children's diet and nutrition, social and emotional development, and speech, language and communication. The work of the programme is grounded in scientific evidence and research. A Better Start is one of five major programmes set up by The National Lottery Community Fund to test and learn from new approaches to designing services which aim to make people's lives healthier and happier.

The National Children's Bureau is designing and delivering an ambitious programme of shared learning and development support for A Better Start, working within, across and beyond the five partnership areas.



1. Improving young children's diet and nutrition

Healthy diet and nutrition in the early years not only supports physical development, but contributes to much wider health and wellbeing outcomes for children across the life course. Healthy nutrition should be a priority, not only in the early years, but from pregnancy and even before. Within the A Better Start Partnerships, a number of different approaches are being taken to supporting healthy diet and nutrition. These include helping parents to make healthy choices in pregnancy; promoting and supporting breastfeeding; supporting good oral health; and increasing parents' skills and knowledge regarding appropriate nutrition and physical activity for young children. Interventions are delivered via a range of methods, including information and communication campaigns, peer support, one to one and group work, practitioner training, and practical activities for both parent and child.

Blackpool Better Start (BBS)



BBS has taken a public health information approach to supporting diet and nutrition. The main focus has been on reducing alcohol use in pregnancy, and on improving oral health, as these were identified as key issues in the town. Campaigns have included billboards, online content, bus advertising, targeted posters in early years settings, and resources for practitioners to use with families with young children. Campaigns were designed in partnership with professionals and community members to ensure the content and approach was tailored to the local audience for maximum impact.

Evaluation of the campaigns has shown good levels of message recall and understanding of the key message elements, as well as changes in attitudes and knowledge on the subject areas. The increased focus on oral health has also led to other town-wide policy changes such as extension of the supervised tooth-brushing scheme within nursery settings, and milk fluoridisation. In addition, Public Health England chose Blackpool as a 'Starting Well Site' to promote early intervention in the early years within dental practice due to the existing focus on prevention and local engagement with the town.

There have been noticeable improvements in dental health in five year olds overall; the number of Blackpool children with one or more decayed, missing or filled teeth has fallen from 42.5% (2014/15) to 24.9% (2016/17).

Better Start Bradford



Within their range of services, Better Start Bradford runs 'Cooking for a Better Start', delivered through six weekly, practical sessions where parents learn to prepare healthy, low cost meals for their families. The project is a universal service for all families with children aged 0-3 within the Better Start Bradford wards, Bowling and Barkerend, Bradford Moor and Little Horton, and aims to improve the family's knowledge of healthy meals, and increase their confidence in preparing them.

The programme is designed to support families with varying levels of existing skills and knowledge, from those with low-level cooking skills through to those who have higher confidence in preparing familiar foods. Facilitators therefore have flexibility to adapt recipes and approaches to support the skills of each group. The sessions are supported by a crèche facility (Cook & Play) to support engagement. The project also acts as a means through which to engage parents in the wider range of Better Start Bradford projects offered, through signposting to other services, therefore enhancing their overall knowledge and parenting behaviours.

The Cooking for a Better Start course is popular with around 200+ families on the waiting list. 65 families have completed the course since it started 18 months ago. Following the sessions, parents report increased skills and knowledge, for example on estimating healthy portion sizes and in interpreting food labelling, and feel more confident to make healthy choices in preparing family meals, all making a positive contribution to overall outcomes.



1. Improving young children's diet and nutrition

Lambeth Early Action Partnership (LEAP)



LEAP is implementing a suite of diet and nutrition services aimed at creating a holistic approach to establishing and maintaining healthy behaviours known to affect a child's long term wellbeing. Services balance the practical considerations of how families live their lives, alongside the public health evidence supporting healthy diet and nutrition. Close partnership working has been a priority, ensuring LEAP services complement and add value to the existing Lambeth-wide offer and, where appropriate, enhance these services, aiming to tackle health inequalities associated with economic disadvantage. The package of diet and nutrition services combines peer support, information and awareness raising, and practical activities through group and one to one sessions, and address themes of breastfeeding, oral health, environmental health, family nutrition and activity.

Learning to date has informed the current priorities. In particular, the team are currently focused on increasing engagement of parents, carers and relevant organisations by removing barriers to participation (for example offering breastfeeding peer support in the new mum's home), and working to ensure that services reflect the diverse population, and are understanding of unique cultural beliefs and the circumstances in which families live.

Small Steps, Big Changes (SSBC), Nottingham



SSBC takes a system wide approach to diet and nutrition, working with public health colleagues on Nottingham's 'Eating and Moving for Good Health'. This cross-partnership approach aims to enable more people to eat well and move more, and adds value by building networks and relationships, mapping current provision, and determining required actions at individual, community, policy and relationship level to achieve lasting system-wide change.

High rates of childhood dental decay are a concern in Nottingham, affecting 17% of three year olds. In response, the SSBC Parent Obsession Group (POG) was established. This group of parent volunteers is working to: support increased dental attendance for pregnant women and children aged 0-4, increase knowledge of and confidence in child oral health, and distribute 1500 toothbrushes across targeted areas starting in March 2020.

The POG has started to build relationships with local schools and nurseries, spreading awareness of the importance of good oral hygiene. It has also turned its attention to lobbying local MPs to gather support for fluoridisation in the water. Plans to evaluate impact are in development. There have already been some notable improvements in levels of obesity at reception level across all target wards with SSBC currently exploring attribution against current SSBC activity and service attendance.

A Better Start Southend (ABSS)



ABSS has three key programmes delivering support to parents wishing to breastfeed their baby. '121 Breastfeeding' provides one-to-one support in the mother's home during the first six weeks post-birth, by trained Infant Feeding Support Workers. Mothers are then offered support for up to one year from birth via the 'Bump to Breast' breastfeeding group. Alongside this, a wider media campaign, 'Southend Supports Breastfeeding' has been established to encourage venues across the Borough to welcome families who want to breastfeed. A coproduction approach has been used to ensure that all breastfeeding services meet the needs of their potential service users.

Alongside this direct support, ABSS has also been building an integrated approach towards breastfeeding support, between NHS partners, the third sector, and local businesses, resulting in positive outcomes for parents who choose breastfeeding for their baby. Overall, there are measurable differences in terms of breastfeeding initiation, with an increase of 11.2% since the beginning of the programme in ABSS areas, compared to an increase of 8.5% in non-ABSS areas. Attendees at breastfeeding groups have also reported increased knowledge, such as on the importance of skin to skin contact, and have highlighted the benefits of the social opportunities provided by the group and peer support sessions.



A word from practitioners...

Cooking and eating together is a great way for people to build relationships. Our network of Food Ambassadors work as a team to cook lunch in their communities and create a buzz around vegetable-based meals: a cheap, healthy and sustainable way to eat. We have seen that people are happier when they are better connected and eat healthy food.



**Sue Sheehan - Director
Healthy Living Platform, LEAP**

2. Developing young children's social and emotional skills

Healthy social and emotional development in the early years provides a child with the necessary building blocks to engage with the world around them, and contributes to a wide range of longer term outcomes. Evidence from the clinical and social science fields shows that the areas of the brain controlling social and emotional development are most active during the first 3 years of a child's life (and particularly active in the early months). Careful nurturing of a child's social and emotional health at this early stage is vital to provide them with the skills necessary to form relationships throughout their lives. The relationship between a child and their primary caregiver is central to this process; poor parent-child interaction at these early developmental stages can lead to a child experiencing problems in building relationships throughout life. Approaches taken across the A Better Start partnerships focus on strengthening the parent-infant relationship and attachment in a number of ways.

Blackpool Better Start (BBS)



Blackpool Better Start is testing the use of video feedback as both a standalone intervention (Video Interaction Guidance), and as an integral part of a number of other evidence based programmes including Parents under Pressure, Mellow Dads, For Baby's Sake and Baby Steps, in order to improve children's social and emotional development. The method promotes strengths-based practice where there is a focus on individual capabilities rather than their deficits, echoing the overarching theory of change for BBS.

Having video feedback is a very positive experience for parents. Using a strength-based approach which is goal orientated and collaborative has led to parents across services reporting feeling empowered by being able to set their own objectives and priorities. Evaluation data has shown positive effects on decreased parental stress, increased parental confidence, reduced hyperactivity and increased prosocial behaviour. Parents report that the focus on strengths has a positive impact on their relationship with the service practitioner, increases their general trust in professionals, and gives them optimism for future outcomes. They also report a renewed sense of confidence in their parenting ability and particularly enjoy being able to physically see moments of attunement between themselves and their children.

Better Start Bradford



Research by Born in Bradford (BIB), the research partnership within Better Start Bradford, found significant inequality in the disclosure, detection and treatment of perinatal mental ill health, with women from deprived areas or from an ethnic minority background being far less likely to have their needs detected and/or cared for appropriately. In response, Better Start Bradford, in partnership with Bradford Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust and BIB, has developed a specialised personal midwifery model of care with reduced caseloads, extended appointment times and continuity of care from midwives. Care is provided by a named midwife or buddy for ante-natal and post-natal appointments, and each midwife has a maximum caseload of 55 women, compared to 80 for standard care.

The model aims to address low attendance at appointments, poor birthing experiences and perinatal mental health concerns. It is built on evidence that a stronger parent/midwife relationship leads to improved pregnancy, birth and early babyhood experiences, which supports perinatal mental health and contributes to a stronger parent/child relationship.

The evaluation of this model showed numerous positive impacts on both midwives and women; women were more likely to disclose mental health concerns and to receive appropriate care. Additionally, midwives reported having more time in an appointment allowed them to have discussions and respond appropriately.



2. Developing young children's social and emotional skills

Lambeth Early Action Partnership (LEAP)



The Parent and Infant Relationship Service (PAIRS) is the first specialised parent-infant team in south-east London, one of only 27 in the UK, and currently the main provision within Lambeth's Children & Adolescent Mental Health Services for under-fives. The PAIRS model provides a tiered system of preventative intervention with the potential for families to move between group and one-to-one support. Interventions include: two universal access groups (Together Time and Circle of Security Parenting™), enabling families experiencing difficulties to access psychodynamic support in the community without a formal mental health referral; parent-infant psychotherapy for families with more complex difficulties, delivered by specially trained child and adolescent psychotherapists or clinical psychologists; and a programme of workforce development.

Positive feedback has been received in terms of raising awareness of early infant relationships, social-emotional development, and the benefits of psychodynamic intervention. Direct links with families (who can self-refer) are made through LEAP's Parent Champion programme and community-facing activities. Cross-agency collaboration is proving critical to engagement and recruitment of families, and to effective delivery of sessions, therefore the team is placing significant effort into networking with practitioners to build referral pathways.

Small Steps, Big Changes (SSBC), Nottingham



The Family Mentor service is a paid peer workforce, co-produced with local families. Mentors are drawn from the community and recruited for their values and

qualities rather than qualifications and therefore understand the challenges and aspirations of local people. A key element of the service is the delivery of Small Steps at Home, a manualised programme of evidence-informed interventions designed to support childhood development. The responsive visits begin antenatally, occur weekly until the infant is six months, and then monthly. After two, a monthly telephone rather than face to face visit is offered.

Since 2015, 1,916 children have enrolled in the programme and currently 1,097 children across four Nottingham wards are receiving the service. Nottingham Trent University has recently evaluated the Family Mentor's Small Steps at Home Programme, finding it to be an effective model for parents facing multiple challenges. The evaluation also found that children from SSBC wards who participated in the programme for more than 18 months had the highest mean 24 months Ages and Stages questionnaire and overall scores. Parents have reported high levels of satisfaction with their family mentor; they valued the consistent relationship, and appreciated advice being given informally by a peer rather than a professional. Family Mentors have established themselves as a trusted, complementary and valued workforce across the SSBC wards and the Small Steps at Home programme is a valuable initiative.

A Better Start Southend (ABSS)



ABSS is one of several areas trialling adaptations to the Family Nurse Partnership programme (FNP Adapt), an intensive home visiting service for first time young mothers (aged 21 or under) and their babies. Fathers and wider family are also invited to take part with the mother's permission. The service is provided through structured home visits by highly trained family nurses, that take place weekly during pregnancy and the first six weeks following birth, and fortnightly thereafter until the infant turns two.

Women are normally enrolled on the programme by the 16th week of pregnancy and no later than the 28th week. In Southend, the eligibility criteria have been altered to include mothers who present late for booking (up to 32+6 weeks gestation). Mothers who have concealed their pregnancy can be enrolled at any point in their pregnancy and immediately post-birth.

The FNP ADAPT programme in ABSS is also testing the use of the Graded Care 2 Profile assessment tool to identify neglect, highlight parent's strengths and weaknesses, and collaboratively support planning for change. Additionally, the New Mum Star tool is being used to better understand the mother's journey, and inform a more holistic approach to supporting families. Since 2015, 87 mothers have benefitted from the programme, with 87.4% from the most deprived areas in Southend.



A word from practitioners...

The Family Mentors have really worked hard on building relationships with parents whose confidence has grown and have then been eager to learn more to support their children to be the best they can be. I have seen people in communities who have never met form friendship groups to further support each other. Recruiting from the communities that we work in has built confidence in the Family Mentors and the parents know that they are understood and listened to. I think this is what makes the Family Mentor Service as special as it is.

Stacey Lochhead
Assistant Manager, Small Steps, Big Changes



3. Developing young children's language and communication skills

We know that babies can hear the rhythm and sound of their mother's voice while in the womb, and they are primed and ready for communication from birth. In the early days and weeks, babies communicate through cries, babbles and facial expressions, and by turning their heads towards sounds that attract them. As communication skills develop, infants learn to respond to simple instructions, to communicate their needs, and eventually to take part in simple conversations. To support communication development in babies and young children, research shows that activities such as face to face time, talking directly to them and being responsive to their communication attempts all contribute, as does reading books to babies and then alongside them as they get older. The A Better Start partnerships deliver a wide range of activities to help parents support the development of strong communication skills.

Blackpool Better Start (BBS)



Blackpool
Better Start

The focus of BBS work in this area is on early identification of speech, language and communication needs (SLC) in children, and supporting parents and carers to address these by accessing the services they need. Through a "no wrong door" policy, BBS aims to provide multiple opportunities for families.

Following the redesign of the Health Visiting service, training is now provided for all health visitors to use the WellComm Assessment, a speech and language toolkit for screening and intervention in the early years. All children in Blackpool are now offered screening at 9-12 months, 24 months and 36 month checks. There were 2161 WellComm assessments completed in 2018/19, demonstrating strong buy-in from health visitors. Practitioners across several early years settings have also received the training and resources to enable them to use the WellComm tool; settings have also been encouraged to increase their SLC capacity and to develop quality assurance through the 'Communication Commitment and Blackpool Quality Mark', a quality mark for early years education and childcare providers to recognise their work in providing high quality care and support.

Children with SLC needs are now being identified and referred for support earlier, which has resulted in increased referrals to NHS speech and language therapy services. In response, BBS has worked with NHS and other partners delivering this support to develop a triage system, aiming to address SLC needs without clinical intervention through an improved home learning environment as well as through support in early years settings.

Better Start Bradford



'Talking Together' is a six-week home visiting programme commissioned by Better Start Bradford and delivered by BHT Early Education and Training. It aims to develop parents' knowledge of the importance of a good language environment and to improve parent-child interactions. All two-year-olds in the Better Start Bradford area are offered a language assessment, then families identified as potentially benefitting from additional support are offered the programme. Weekly sessions cover five topics related to improved language and communication, including: what is communication; play; attention and listening; turn taking; praise and encouragement. Parents are given information on the week's core topic and then have an opportunity to discuss with the learning development worker what activities they can do at home.

The Talking Together team has worked closely with Born in Bradford and the University of York to develop a pragmatic approach to evaluating this project. The team has tested different ways to assess language skills using measures that are meaningful to the practitioner and accessible to local families, and has worked together with practitioners to design a study to explore the success of the project.

Of families offered the language development assessment, the project is now assessing 85% of eligible children (target 70%). Of these, around 50% are assessed as requiring the intervention and around 80% of the parents take it up. This is higher than anticipated and is stretching the project's capacity. Sufficient data to evidence impact is expected to be available shortly.



A Better Start journey in numbers

5 YEARS



24
WARDS

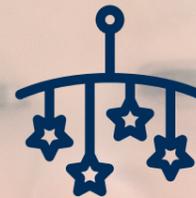
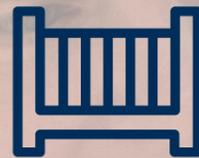


26,161
CHILDREN



834
VOLUNTEERS
ENGAGED

5
PARTNERSHIPS



143
PROGRAMMES



£215
MILLION

220
PARTNER
ORGANISATIONS

23,145
FAMILIES

4,539
PRACTITIONERS
TRAINED



3. Developing young children's language and communication skills

Lambeth Early Action Partnership (LEAP)



Talk & Play Every Day is delivered by the Evelina London Children's Community Speech and Language Therapy Team and is central to LEAP's communication and language strand. The programme has three aspects: Chattertime, a group-based intervention delivered by specialist speech and language therapists; health promotion through the development and dissemination of consistent communication and language messages; and the 'Evelina Award for Communication Friendly Environments'. The supportive approach of the Evelina Award to early years workforce development provides a goal towards which settings can aspire during their continuous journey of self-evaluation.

The award scheme includes training and coaching, offered to whole staff teams, and any new staff members joining an Evelina setting. Settings achieve the foundation or enhanced Evelina Award by completing training and coaching in the use of adult-child Interaction strategies, and progress is monitored to evidence change in behaviours and environmental features to support Communication and Language Development

All coaching and training is delivered by a speech and language therapist, who becomes the setting's link person. Once an award is achieved, the link therapist quality assures progress annually to ensure expected standards are maintained. This focus on workforce development is giving staff the knowledge and confidence to identify speech, language and communication needs, and to signpost or refer the child/parent for support in a timely manner. Since the programme started referrals for specialist support have risen by as much as 50 children from the LEAP wards within one academic term.

Small Steps, Big Changes (SSBC), Nottingham



SSBC has committed to a partnership approach to improving communication and language across the four SSBC wards and wider system, working alongside National Literacy Trust, nurseries, libraries and others.

SSBC supported the City Council's ambition to roll out Dolly Parton's Imagination Library book gifting scheme across the city, with books provided for all children in the SSBC wards up to their fifth birthday. Currently, over 4,500 children are registered on the scheme and 39 public, voluntary and independent nursery settings have also received books. The evaluation by Nottingham Trent University has shown children who receive the books are more likely to have longer reading and dialogical reading sessions. SSBC also commissions community-based groups delivered by the Family Mentors; Story and Rhyme Time and FRED (Fathers Reading Every Day) have been designed to help parents build confidence to read and sing with their child. SSBC is the key funder in the National Literacy Trust's 10 year partnership hub 'Read On Nottingham'. The hub has delivered 'Early Words Together at 2' to 13 settings, benefitting 104 families in SSBC wards and aimed at building nursery workforce capacity to support parents to improve the home learning environment. It has also recruited 40 Literacy Champions to work in communities.

A Better Start Southend (ABSS)



ABSS has a long-established suite of speech and language interventions under the banner 'Let's Talk', delivered by the Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust. Between 2015 and 2019, 1,770 beneficiaries have engaged in 'Let's Talk' activities. The focus on prevention has resulted in a significant drop in the number of children being referred to statutory speech and language support and an improvement in the appropriateness of referrals to speech and language therapy services. Importantly, parents with concerns about their child's language development now receive early support. Overall, data demonstrates significant improvements in speech and language for children in ABSS wards, with 85.6% of children achieving at least the expected level of development in speaking compared to 77.9% previously.

Significantly, this ABSS work has led to success beyond the A Better Start areas, with ABSS lead-partner, the Early Years Alliance, securing funding from the Department for Education to roll out innovations nationally in an initiative called 'First and Foremost'. The ABSS team will play a central role in delivering support on children's early language and communication development, working with 10 early years settings in each area. Through this work, 1,600 children and families will benefit from targeted support and 3,200 will access expert guidance, online support and community language information.



A word from practitioners...

We are pleased with the emerging findings of the Communication and Language outcomes of the Let's Talk activities. Since 2015 we will have made a significant difference to the children and families in the areas in which we work.



***Isobel Wratlaw, Highly Specialised Speech and Language Therapist
A Better Start Southend (EPUT)***

4. Enabling place-based systems change

A system is defined as a set of multiple components working together as part of an interconnecting network. Children and families live within a wider system involving multiple organisations, individuals, services and resources, as well as the rules and pathways governing their interaction. Efforts to change systems aim to help the components work together more efficiently.

This is a central priority of the A Better Start programme. Alongside direct impact on children and families within the A Better Start wards, partnerships aim to influence how things work across the wider systems in a way that will be sustainable beyond the lifetime of the programme. Various elements of systems change are built into the A Better Start programmes and initiatives. Approaches include: upskilling of the wider workforce to ensure practice reflects the most contemporary evidence and developments; building systems to share data and other information so that practitioners' work is fully informed by a knowledge of the child and family they are working with; or through joint delivery and integrated working across organisations and professions to ensure smooth transitions between services.

Blackpool Better Start (BBS)



A priority for BBS over the last three years has been the redesign of the Health Visiting service, ensuring it is parent-led and meets the needs of Blackpool families. This was based on a review which identified a need for all parents in Blackpool to be offered high quality contacts with their Health Visitor. The new model is strengths based, and was designed collaboratively with parents and health visitors. Alongside increased home visits, and the universal delivery of the Baby Steps antenatal programme, changes include the development of agenda-matching (ensuring the service meets the individual needs of the family) and collaborative-planning tools. The work has also introduced new assessments including conversations around early adversity and trauma at the antenatal contact, and the implementation of clinical, safeguarding, one to one case and peer to peer supervision models.

BBS has contributed to sustainable systems change beyond the target wards, as the model is now being delivered universally right across Blackpool. Throughout the process, partners including health professionals, parents, the BBS team and public health representatives worked together through review, planning, and development, and this partnership working has continued in the delivery of the new service. There are some promising signs of impact; for example, those attending Baby Steps are showing increased breastfeeding rates. Over the next four years, this model and other BBS services will be evaluated with a commitment to expanding the reach and ensuring sustainability of those new services demonstrating impact. In addition to this BBS has also implemented an Integrated Workforce Development Strategy which cuts across all direct and indirect workforces with the view to raise awareness on the importance of Early Child Development and deliver key messages in this area.

Better Start Bradford



The Better Start Bradford Innovation Hub is a partnership between Better Start Bradford and Born in Bradford, which aims to integrate academic research professionals with service development and delivery partners to build evaluation approaches which are embedded in delivery, therefore supporting the application of research into practice. One example is the ongoing evaluation of the Talking Together programme, where the team has tested ways to assess language skills using validated measures that are meaningful to the practitioner and accessible to local families.

A pragmatic randomised controlled feasibility study of the project has been co-designed, using innovative randomisation methods to ensure all families that need the programme still receive it, either immediately (intervention) or following a short time delay (waiting control). To ensure that the evaluation process doesn't cause additional burden for families taking part, study consent is taken by the Talking Together language worker and outcomes are assessed using the standard project assessments, rather than having families complete further evaluation-specific assessments. The evaluation has considered elements such as recruitment and retention rates, sample representativeness, and appropriateness of measures. A qualitative evaluation has also explored fidelity of delivery, time and resources for training, and barriers and facilitators to engagement with the programme.

This study highlights collaborative efforts to deliver an evaluation within usual practice that is acceptable to all key partners and, most importantly, to the families themselves. Integrated evaluation processes will support services to make informed decisions; indeed, evaluations have already supported the Better Start Bradford partnership board to make difficult re-commissioning decisions with confidence.



4. Enabling place-based systems change

Lambeth Early Action Partnership (LEAP)



To effect place-based systems change, LEAP is undertaking the challenging process of developing a shared measurement system to track progress towards LEAP's shared impact and outcomes; both in individual services and as a collective impact initiative.

The early process of reconfiguring and aligning LEAP's activity to shared outcomes and goals, rather than only monitoring the performance and impact of individual services, has, in itself, been valuable and helpful for LEAP. Work has:

- helped us understand how services and initiatives are working together to achieve shared outcomes
- encouraged more collaborative working
- anecdotally increased referral pathways between services
- enabled effective practice to spread more rapidly
- informed commissioning and delivery decisions

Going forward, a shared measurement system, captured on an integrated data platform, will be an invaluable tool for Lambeth and local organisations, which will support them to pool data and effectively monitor the progress of collaborative work towards outcomes, and enable longitudinal study.

Small Steps, Big Changes (SSBC), Nottingham



Positive father-child relationships have far-reaching implications for child outcomes, and fathers should be supported to care for their child and treated as equal partners in the parenting dynamic. SSBC's ambition for Nottingham is that father-inclusive practice becomes everyday business for everyone.

Central to this is SSBC's 'Think Dads!' training, which is evidence informed and developed with expert support. The project has received over £7,000 investment, with training delivered to 246 participants across 21 statutory, voluntary and private organisations. Sessions use interactive and experiential activities to highlight the evidence for and advantages of father-inclusive practice. Participants develop a father-inclusive action plan for their workplace, and this is followed up three months' later to review progress. A 'train the trainer' model is being implemented, allowing partners to take ownership, increase reach and support sustainability. A new phase has been commissioned, providing the partnership and individual organisations with a maturity rating on their ability to be father inclusive. Service Level Agreements with partners have been adapted to ensure father inclusivity is a key element in delivery of services and how they market these. Nottingham Trent University is evaluating the impact of the strategy and Think Dads! across the workforce. Initial evaluation has been positive and a longer term evaluation is in place.

A Better Start Southend (ABSS)



The disjointed nature of child and family data remains a barrier to effective family support. To address this, ABSS has developed 'The Southend Family Network' to facilitate data sharing between partners and ABSS stakeholders. The team have integrated GDPR and data compliance systems and developed comprehensive 'live' data dashboards which capture the range of outputs and outcomes being achieved, and aggregate reach across ABSS programmes. This is one of the ways in which progress against key developmental outcomes is being evaluated.

The Joint Controller Agreement for the Network has been agreed between the participating partner organisations. Parent Champions and ABSS Core Team members have been closely involved in co-producing this digital transformation, including the first Joint Strategic Needs Analysis for the Early Years. The work will continue to be developed in terms of monitoring and innovation, while contingency plans are being made to 'future proof' the joint agreement. This agreement has changed the way services operate; partners as "joint controllers" can now access and share personal information regarding users of Children's Centre services in Southend-On-Sea, as well as other services commissioned by ABSS. This will contribute to seamless and effective family support, whilst complying with all relevant data privacy laws.



A word from practitioners...

We know that early intervention is the best way to improve the life chances of children and reduce health inequalities, but we don't always know the most effective way to intervene. Working with Better Start Bradford has allowed us to develop truly pragmatic research methods to provide much needed evidence of what works in practice. This collaboration represents true partnership working to deliver evaluation that is acceptable and meaningful to service providers, commissioners, evaluators and, most importantly, to the families themselves. We're excited to be able to share these methods and some of our early findings at the halfway point of the A Better Start programme.

Josie Dickerson, Director of the Better Start Bradford Innovation Hub



5. Championing parent and community-led services

A growing body of evidence shows that higher levels of community engagement in the design and delivery of interventions, particularly around health, is linked to better outcomes for those involved. While the model and extent of engagement will vary, services designed in collaboration with users are more aligned to addressing needs and are delivered in a way that better suits the users. This model of engagement is commonplace in emerging strategies, and a priority for many working with children and families.

The ongoing engagement of parents and communities to develop and deliver services is core practice across all A Better Start work. Parents and community members can be engaged throughout the process, from identifying a need or concern, to identifying the most appropriate elements and delivery model of the service, through to supporting delivery and governance. Within the A Better Start partnerships, there is evidence of parents and communities involved at each step, and the learning is being used to encourage partners to take such an approach, therefore influencing the wider system. Partnerships are also moving towards community-led funding models; again, this will support efforts to ensure that changes are sustainable beyond the lifetime of the project.

Blackpool Better Start (BBS)



Blackpool
Better Start

Volunteers are central to any parent and community-led services. In Blackpool, this movement is supported by the Blackpool Early Years Volunteer Academy delivered by the Volunteer Centre, providing a universal offer for all to become active within their community. A supportive 'volunteer learning and development pathway' has been developed to remove participation barriers and improve volunteer skills and knowledge. A 'volunteering standards framework' has also been developed to ensure a consistent high quality volunteer experience across the town. Organisations across Blackpool are using the toolkit to self-assess and improve the volunteer's journey with them, increasing the likelihood of continued volunteer engagement.

To encourage the growth of the Academy, engage with the community, and capitalise on the success of BBS's Participatory Budget scheme to involve local people in decision making on spending, BBS has piloted Streets to Scale, a mechanism to help residents fund ideas within their communities with minimal bureaucracy. Participating community members are asked to generate ideas with a value of up to £1000. Groups are formed of three to six individuals who receive a box containing pre-paid bank cards to spend on their idea. Initial feedback has been positive, and the scheme will be scaled up next year to offer more residents the opportunity to be part of decision making and volunteer activities within their communities.

Better Start Bradford



Better Start Bradford has involved parents in decision-making from the beginning, including equal board representation where they contribute a different and valuable perspective. In 2015, they challenged Better Start Bradford to recognise and value parent expertise, and the new and exciting ideas they have in their communities to support child development. A small group of community board members developed the Parents in the Lead Activities Fund, which invites applications from groups of parents for up to £2500 to run activities focused on A Better Start outcomes. All funding decisions are made by a panel of parents, supported by Better Start Bradford staff.

Up to the end of 2019, £83,000 has been used by 2000+ parents and children in the Better Start Bradford area for more than 64 local activities, including a community garden, intergenerational singing and story-telling, and toddler football. Many activities have involved vulnerable and under-represented groups, allowing for wider dissemination of A Better Start messages and facilitating links to services. Some of the Parents in the Lead volunteers have also signed up as Community Champions and taken up other volunteering opportunities across the programme. The model has demonstrated wider systems change through its adoption by partners such as the NHS, and there is ongoing work to encourage other partners to do the same. Additionally, many of the groups have used their funding to build a base upon which to secure other funding, therefore contributing to a lasting legacy.



5. Championing parent and community-led services

Lambeth Early Action Partnership (LEAP)



The LEAP Parent Champions Team has embedded coproduction throughout its programme culminating in the development of two initiatives which respond to specific needs voiced by the local community. A befriending service emerged from Parent Champion feedback that LEAP was only reaching parents already engaged with services. The service focuses on parents with children aged 0 - 18 months who are identified as isolated by LEAP partners. Parents are matched with a Parent Champion volunteer who gives one-to-one support which facilitates their engagement with local early years' services. So far, nine parents have benefited from this service. The service has the direct impact of connecting isolated parents whilst also supporting families holistically, contributing to wider outcomes related to the wellbeing of the child.

The "Pathways for parents" project has been piloting support for 12 parents to move from volunteering into employment. Parents receive one-to-one mentoring and support for practical and psychological barriers. A parent-employer round table event, taking place at the end of March, will feed into work with the local authority to create a family-friendly toolkit for employers.

Both projects have been coproduced with LEAP parents and partners, statutory bodies and community organisations, using a test and learn approach, to ensure families are at the heart of service development.

Small Steps, Big Changes (SSBC), Nottingham



SSBC's 'Ideas Fund' is a new approach to place-based commissioning, aligned to Public Health England's call for place-based local solutions which utilise

community assets and build community resilience. The fund, administered via Nottingham Community Foundation, allows up to £6000 for partner providers to test and refine new ideas which complement existing services. Ideas are moderated for grant compliance then passed to the evaluation panel of senior workforce representatives and parents to ensure the initiative is complementary to existing provision and supported by the wider partnership. Inbuilt evaluation supports decision making on whether to continue funding after the initial 12 months, or 'Scale Up' promising ideas.

Since 2016, £126,036 has been allocated to 36 local projects, with three of these now being supported through funding for a further four years, these include 'Learning to Love Books', 'Pregnancy Yoga' and 'Twiglets' - this additional funding has enabled 'Twiglets on Tour' to be developed. This forest pre-school, developed and led by a qualified and experienced Forest School practitioner, allows children to try new things e.g. "climb a tree", "get dirty and not worry about it" can therefore, now be enjoyed by more children with the expansion into two of the four SSBC wards.

A Better Start Southend (ABSS)



ABSS commissions the Southend Association for Voluntary Service to deliver engagement activities including the recruitment and training of Parent Champions and Parent Ambassadors. As part of the programme, parents are able to bid individually or in groups for small amounts of funding to deliver local engagement activities. All approved activities are led and delivered by Parent Champions working with ABSS partners in order to build capacity in the community. One such community-led project began with a parent bringing concerns to an ABSS Parent Forum regarding the condition of her local park. The ABSS Parent Engagement Team facilitated connections between parents and local representatives (e.g. the council and police), who formed a group and successfully secured funding from various sources to enable them to transform the park space. The group sought park users' feedback via a survey to inform improvements.

The group's success has led them to form a new charity, 'A Better Space', aimed at improving the quality and accessibility of outdoor public spaces in the borough, for children and families. The group now receives funding from various sources including Southend-on-Sea Borough Council, and will be taking forward a number of large and small projects across the area to help local communities improve public spaces, making them accessible for all.



A word from practitioners...

We have been involved in the programme since its inception and are delighted that, through our Volunteer Academy model of support, learning and development, we have been able to provide parents with opportunities to become more empowered and embedded within service development.



Lynn Saggerson - Chief Executive & Emma Whitty-Haddock - Volunteer Academy Manager, Volunteer Centre Blackpool

The voice of parents

Children, parents and families are at the heart of all the work happening within the A Better Start Partnerships. Whether participating in programmes, holding governance roles, informing and designing services, or taking up one of the multitude of volunteering opportunities, there is no doubt that the direct involvement of parents and community members has helped to shape the way services are delivered for the better. However, those involved also report having benefitted themselves, learning new skills, making new friends, and building confidence. Below, you can hear directly from the parents themselves about their experiences with the A Better Start partnerships.



I didn't know who A Better Start was when I started going to the children' centre. Since I met Jade - one of the Community Connectors - it has completely changed my life. From day one since I first left my baby at a nursery and went on courses, I just felt I could spread my wings and fly again. It was fabulous. Jade found the light in me that I couldn't find.

Margaret Marcinkiewicz
Blackpool



As a first time mum the project has given me so much confidence and I now reflect the test and learn ethos of the project in my parenting as I continuously adapt to my child's developmental needs.

Natasha
Southend



I gained a lot of confidence through receiving the money and leading on our Parents in the Lead project (community growing project). I am developing skills all the time and my confidence keeps growing. I even do freelance interpreting now as my confidence of working with people has grown so much.

Teodora Orosz
Bradford



My best experience within LEAP so far is becoming a Parent Rep. It's been therapeutic as I am unemployed and has been a way to begin channelling my skills into doing work which is beneficial to my community. I'm part of an amazing team who have supported me endlessly. It brings fulfilment that I am in a position to push for improvements that will help families and their children access valuable early years services.

Kimberlin Dunkley
Lambeth



I started as a Parent Ambassador and then was voted in as a Parent Champion. Through this involvement I have really gained confidence e.g. chairing meetings, and speaking at conferences. I have also become a 'Read On Nottingham' Literacy Champion and will soon be running story sessions with younger children and a young reader's book club with older children at one of my local schools.

Rachael Haynes
Nottingham



I've got two children and since giving up work I was very isolated and alone. I've been coming to Better Start events for four weeks; it's given me a chance to build a support network with like-minded people in a similar situation to myself. We have good banter and it's nice to be with a group of men and have a good laugh. It's something that I've massively missed and I've found it a real benefit.

Sam Berry
Blackpool



I would recommend that parents and carers do the [Cooking for a Better Start] course. They should know about the levels of sugar and fat in foods and what the healthy alternatives are. There was so much information and it wasn't too long a course - in fact I enjoyed it so much I wish there had been more weeks.

Zara Imtiaz
Bradford



A Better Start has made a big difference to me, it has helped me develop my social skills and I now have more confidence. I do have dyspraxia and dyslexia and feel the project has helped me. I find paperwork difficult but ABSS have engaged me in various practical events, which I really enjoy. This has definitely increased my friendships and networks in the local area.

Rebecca
Southend



My experience with LEAP has been so unreal. I see parents and carers coming to activities and getting signposted and me seeing the relief on their face makes my whole experience a rewarding one.

Diana Gabi
Lambeth



Working with LEAP I have learnt so much about myself and it's also helped me to rethink and know for sure what I will like to do in terms of a career in the future. I have found my love and passion for making a difference by working within early years.



It's been really great to be part of the programme since before it was funded. As a Parent Champion and Vice-chair of SSBC Partnership Board, my involvement has included chairing Board and Community Partnership Meetings, presenting at conferences, representing SSBC at Nottingham City Council's Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee, and meeting with my local MP. I've just been re-elected for another year as a Parent Champion which is really great.

Steph Brannigan
Nottingham



Delivered by



A Better Start

A Better Start is a ten-year programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund. Five A Better Start partnerships based in Blackpool, Bradford, Lambeth, Nottingham and Southend are supporting families to give their babies and very young children the best possible start in life.

For more information visit:
tnlcommunityfund.org.uk

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