



The Warwick Consortium Evaluation

A Better Start Evaluation Implementation Workstream Report 5b

Community engagement and participation: Blackpool

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**Warwick
Consortium**



Contents

Executive Summary	1
Background.....	1
Methods.....	1
Results.....	1
Conclusions	1
1. Introduction - Community Engagement And Participation: Blackpool	3
1.1 Fulfilling Lives: A Better Start.....	3
1.2 Evaluation Of Abs	3
1.3 Community Engagement In Early Childhood Services – The Research Context.....	4
1.4 Blackpool – The Local Context	5
1.5 Blackpool Better Start – Vision For Community Engagement	5
3. Methods	7
2.1 A Case Study Approach	7
2.2 Selection Of Case Study Locations	7
2.3 Recruitment	7
2.4 Data Collection	7
2.5 Data Analysis.....	8
2.6 Limitations	8
3. Learning From The Case Studies	9
3.1 Overview	9
3.2 Engagement Of The Community In The Co-Design And Co-Delivery Of Abs Services	9
3.2.1 The Process Of Commissioning And Co-Design Of Abs Services	9
3.2.1.1 <i>Involvement In Decision-Making.....</i>	<i>9</i>
3.2.1.2 <i>The Process Of Co-Commissioning And Design Of Services</i>	<i>10</i>
3.2.1.3 <i>Involving Voluntary Organisations As Service Delivery Partners.....</i>	<i>12</i>
3.2.1.4 <i>Managing Differences Of Opinion</i>	<i>12</i>
3.2.1.5 <i>Maintaining The Momentum Of Community Engagement.....</i>	<i>13</i>
3.2.2 Engagement Of The Community In Service Delivery	14
3.2.2.1 <i>Developing Volunteer Providers - The Volunteer Pathway.....</i>	<i>14</i>
3.2.2.2 <i>Providing Personal And Peer Support.....</i>	<i>15</i>
3.2.2.3 <i>Building On The Life Experiences And Existing Skills Of Volunteers</i>	<i>16</i>
3.2.2.4 <i>Developing Sustainability</i>	<i>19</i>

3.3 Engaging Service Users (Including Those Who Are ‘Hard-To-Reach’) In Abs Services	19
3.3.1 Engagement Through Children’s Centres, Other Services And Public Events	19
3.3.2 Engagement Through Relationship-Building	20
3.3.3 Engagement Through The Development Of Strategic Posts.....	23
3.3.4 Engagement Via Other Public Services	24
3.3.5 The Need To Further Strengthen Connectivity	25
4. Emerging Messages.....	27
4.1 Creation Of Formal Structures And Mechanisms For Engagement	27
4.2 The Importance Of Relationships	29
5. Conclusion	30
6. References	31
7. Appendices	33
Appendix 1 - Semi-Structured Interview Guide	33
Appendix 2 – Chart Of Bbs Governance Structure	34

Executive Summary

Background

A Better Start (ABS) is a 'test and learn' programme that aims to improve the socio-emotional development, language and learning, and diet and nutrition of young children by improving preventive services targeting pregnant women and parents of children up to age four years who are living in significantly disadvantaged areas. To this end, between 2015 - 2025 an investment of £215 million was made across five disadvantaged local area partnerships within Bradford, Blackpool, Lambeth, Nottingham and Southend-on-Sea. These areas were chosen for their innovative and forward thinking approach to improving services for young children.

The national evaluation of ABS involves two key workstreams:

- a) an **impact and economic evaluation** of the programme addressing whether ABS has improved the target outcomes and whether it is cost-effective;
- b) an **implementation** evaluation that focuses on depicting the changes that have been made in terms of the delivery of local services and the processes by which these were achieved.

This case study is part of the implementation evaluation aimed at capturing: (i) the degree to which community engagement, participation and transition towards ownership is being achieved within ABS sites; (ii) the processes involved; and (iii) the lessons learned to date.

Methods

This research comprises an embedded case study that involved the analysis of data from a number of sources, the focus being community engagement in ABS within the context of Blackpool.

A total of 33 interviews (formed of one-to-one interviews and focus groups) and three visits to projects were conducted with key stakeholders involved in the delivery of Better Start Blackpool (BBS). Interviewees included Board members, operational partners, volunteers and senior and frontline staff members. Other sources of data included observations and site documents. Interview data were transcribed and a thematic analysis undertaken.

Results

Two themes were identified:

- 1.) **Engagement of the community in co-delivery and co-production of ABS services:** Part one of this theme describes the process by which the community is involved in the commissioning and co-design of ABS services, including their involvement at all levels of decision-making; and part two describes the process by which the community is engaged in service delivery, through the development of the volunteer workforce.
- 2.) **Engaging families in ABS services:** this second theme describes three key methods of engaging the community through: relationship-building; the development of strategic posts; and through active liaison with other public services including the police and housing.

Conclusions

This case study resulted in the identification of two themes that appear to be important to the successful engagement of the community in the delivery and receipt of ABS services in Blackpool. Key lessons emerging from the case study are:

- 1.) **The need to create formal structures and mechanisms to promote engagement** including board structure; mechanisms for the integration of key stakeholders; the development

of service level agreements and mechanisms for resolving conflict; the provision of training pathways and strategic posts; and the use of experiential learning;

2.) **A focus on relationships** including relationship-building at all levels of an organisation and addressing both physical and emotional barriers to community members' participation.

1. Introduction - Community Engagement and Participation: Blackpool

1.1 Fulfilling Lives: A Better Start

A Better Start (ABS) is a 'test and learn' programme the aim of which is to improve the socio-emotional development, language and learning, and diet and nutrition of young children by improving preventive services targeting pregnant women and parents of children up to four years of age who are living in significantly disadvantaged areas. To this end, between 2015 – 2025, an investment of £215 million was made across five disadvantaged local area partnerships within Bradford, Blackpool, Lambeth, Nottingham and Southend-on-Sea. These areas were chosen for their innovative and forward thinking approach to improving services for young children.

Specifically, ABS aims to facilitate system change locally in terms of moving towards the delivery of more preventative services. It is intended that this systems change should be accompanied by shifts in culture and spending aimed at enabling local health and other public services, voluntary and community service enterprises (VCSEs) and the wider community to work together to co-produce and deliver less bureaucratic and more joined-up services, for young children and families living in the area.

These new pathways of care aim to improve both the use of local resources and outcomes for children in three key developmental areas as follows:

- **Social and emotional development:** promoting optimal functioning across all aspects of the child's social and emotional adjustment; preventing the onset of early problems by supporting parents (i.e. their mental health and wider wellbeing); and improving their parenting (i.e. attitudes and practices regarding childrearing).
- **Communication and language development:** developing skills in parents to enable them to provide an optimal home learning environment (e.g. to be able to talk, sing, read to, and praise their babies and toddlers) and to ensure local childcare services emphasise language development.
- **Diet and nutrition:** encouraging breast-feeding and promoting good nutritional practices, giving practical advice on healthier meals for young children and portion sizes.

1.2 Evaluation of ABS

The evaluation of ABS comprises a mixed-methods design including impact, cost-effectiveness and process evaluation components. Essentially, the evaluation comprises two parts:

1. An **Impact and Economic Evaluation** that aims to assess whether changes in the delivery of early years services to families living in disadvantaged areas improves their outcomes in terms of socio-emotional development, communication and language, and diet and nutrition, in addition to assessing the related costs and cost-effectiveness.
2. An **Implementation Evaluation** aimed at examining the processes that are involved in bringing about change, and capturing the nature of the new forms of provision.¹

¹ For further information see: <https://www.abetterstart.org.uk/content/evaluation-and-learning>.

This report presents the findings of a case study of Blackpool and is part of the Implementation Evaluation. The overall aim of the case study is to: capture (i) the degree to which community engagement, participation and transition towards ownership is being achieved within ABS sites; (ii) the processes involved; and (iii) to identify lessons learned to date.

1.3 Community Engagement In Early Childhood Services – The Research Context

Community involvement in the design, management and delivery services is a core feature of ABS. Community participation has been a key theme in UK policymaking since the 1980s, as the limits of ‘top down’ creation and delivery of public services became increasingly evident (Bovaird, 2007). Successive governments have defined citizen-state relationships in a sequence of policy documents that have set out guidance for consultation and participation, and a range of measures have been designed to promote ‘voice’ – the process by which people engage in decision-making - particularly in relation to neighbourhood regeneration (Durose and Rees, 2012). The rights of citizens to co-shape local authority services was enshrined in the 2011 Localism Act.²

Service-user participation in decision-making and management has been a consistent theme in guidance on the delivery of early childhood services over the past two decades. For example, Department for Education (DfE) guidelines (2013) stress that encouraging and increasing parental, family, and wider community involvement in the running of children’s centres can lead to greater innovation and flexibility, thereby making better use of resources as well as leading to greater community cohesion. Similarly, the national evaluation of Sure Start (an early intervention programme that was established in 2003 by the Labour Government) found that programmes that were better at empowering parents resulted in more stimulating home environments, which in turn contributed to children’s wellbeing and development, and better outcomes for parents themselves (Williams and Churchill, 2006). The process of empowerment within Sure Start involved a progressive pathway of development in service planning and delivery through engagement in services, volunteering, targeted training, employment opportunities and formal participation in decision-making committees and boards.

Underpinning the stated commitment of successive governments to the empowerment of communities is the literature on ‘social capital’ and, linked to this, ‘community resilience’. At its simplest, social capital (Putnam, 2000; Bourdieu, 1983, 1992; Coleman, 1988; Portes, 1988; Portes and Vickstrom, 2011) refers to social networks that work to create bonds between people who are similar and to build bridges between people who have less in common with one another (Dekker and Uslaner, 2001). ‘Bridging capital’ aims to help individuals to access information and resources, including economic, educational and cultural resources that can improve the overall quality of life. Social capital also refers to the establishment of relationships that link people who have less power to those who are more powerful, thus enabling them to shape decision-making. ‘Linking capital’ is defined as the connection of people within a hierarchy - for example between citizens and political leaders, or between service users and professionals - that enable the exercise of influence in decision-making (ibid).

Social capital has been extensively studied within public health, and the importance of social relationships for physical and mental health is now well established (Rocco and Suhrcke, 2012). For example, there is evidence that ‘bonding capital’, involving networks of relationships with family and close friendships, are associated with better physical and mental health particularly for individuals in socioeconomically deprived areas (Poortinga, 2006, 2012). However, there is also evidence that dependence on networks of close relationships alone can be harmful because peer pressure may

² <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2011/20/contents/enacted>

reinforce harmful practices (ibid), although people typically have a range of ties (i.e. some stronger and some weaker) with different groups.

There is also evidence, in studies with various designs, sample sizes and settings, that people with a lower socio-economic status generally have lower levels of social capital (Uphoff et al 2013). Portes and Vickstrom (2011) concluded that economic conditions and the level of education within the population are much more predictive of population wellbeing than civic association (ibid). This suggests that efforts to create resilient communities need to simultaneously strengthen economic wellbeing and education while promoting social capital.

1.4 Blackpool – The Local Context³

Blackpool is a coastal resort with a population of 139,195 in 2016 that scores very poorly on a range of social and economic indicators including alcohol and substance misuse, teenage pregnancy, low GCSE results, high numbers of looked after children, domestic violence, mental health problems and poor life expectancy. Blackpool's once flourishing tourist industry has declined since the 1970s with the emergence of cheap package holidays abroad. Of the 6000 guest houses in operation in Blackpool's heyday, only 1500 remain open for business. Many of these now provide accommodation for people on housing benefit in need of emergency housing. The steep drop in tourism has paradoxically worked to the benefit of private landlords and 'buy to let' speculators willing to take on tenants on income support. The availability of cheap and plentiful, but often very poor quality, accommodation is advertised as far afield as Scotland. The plentiful supply of private rental accommodation has resulted in people who arrive in Blackpool often not staying where they were first placed which, in turn, leads to 'churn' around the town, with children being caught in this. One of the defining characteristics of Blackpool is the existence of a large transient population, many of whom experience serious difficulties and are also physically 'hard to reach' as a result of this constant movement.

In respect to the voluntary sector, in late 2017 there were estimated to be around 900 registered third sector groups in Blackpool and a strong tradition of volunteering. According to Mitchell and LaGory (2002), Blackpool appears to have had a plethora of small groups that provided meaning and support in everyday life, but lacked coordination ('bridging capital') that could bring about real change (ibid). There have been difficulties over the years in achieving coordination of this large and disparate voluntary sector and it has fallen to the Council, specifically the Director of Health, to co-ordinate the third sector. As a result of the absence of an overarching umbrella organisation to coordinate it, the local voluntary sector is not formally represented on BBS's boards. However, some individual voluntary agencies are contracted to deliver services and are represented on working groups and the Operations Board (see Appendix 1).

1.5 Blackpool Better Start – Vision for Community Engagement

Blackpool Better Start (BBS) states as its vision for community engagement that '*Blackpool is a place where communities feel heard, are empowered to be involved and aspire to change in their local area*'.⁴ This aligns with and has fed into the Blackpool Council's strategy of '*giving individuals and communities tools to deliver their own objectives and development*'.⁴ BBSs' focus on early years is critical within

³ Information in this and the following section was largely obtained from site documents including: <https://democracy.blackpool.gov.uk/documents/s10400/Appendix%2010a%20Blackpool%20Deprivation%20Report.pdf>

⁴ See: <https://www.blackpoolbetterstart.org.uk/about-us-blackpool-better-start/our-partners/community-voice/> [Accessed 12/12/2017]

this, because it aims to *'impact on people early enough to make a difference which lasts for the whole of their lives'*.⁵

Council members who helped develop the BBS bid were also involved in designing the Council Strategy for 2015 – 2020. The overarching goal of the Council Strategy is for Blackpool to be *'a family resort with a thriving economy that supports a happy and healthy community who are proud of this unique town'*.⁶ This has two interdependent components: (i) development of a stronger, diversified economy that does not rely primarily on seasonal tourism (for example, there is a strong emphasis on becoming a centre for energy technologies); and (ii) the creation of stronger communities and increased resilience within the population. This approach combines a focus on education, economy, infrastructure and environment as well as community organisation, all of which are identified as being critical to community resilience in the 'five capitals' model used in international community development (Porritt, 2005).

The Council's vision recognises happiness as a goal in itself, as well as the importance of contributing and being part of a sound economy, while the reference to pride of place recognises how important 'place-attachment' - belonging to a particular place - is to psychological functioning and well-being. This is consistent with wider research that has identified the importance of place-attachment in terms of psychological functioning and wellbeing (Kroll, 2008; Rodriguez-Pose and von Berlepsch 2013; Rollero and De Piccoli, 2010a).

⁵See: <https://www.blackpool.gov.uk/Your-Council/Creating-a-better-Blackpool/Blackpool-Council-plan/Documents/Blackpool-Council-Plan-2015-to-2020.pdf> [Accessed 12/12/2017]

⁶ *Ibid.*

3. Methods

2.1 A Case Study Approach

This research comprised an embedded case study (Yin, 2014), in which the research undertaken was embedded within a larger implementation evaluation. A case study approach involves gathering contextual data from multiple sources focusing on a particular issue or phenomenon. Its use is recommended in research that investigates something that is happening in the present where little is known about the boundaries between the phenomenon under investigation and the context (ibid). The use of multiple sources and perspectives enables triangulation of data and the identification of numerous, sometimes conflicting perspectives, which in turn strengthens validity. As a result, embedded case studies are considered to be one of the most rigorous qualitative methods and are widely used as an aid for organisational learning (ibid). Data collection is guided by 'appreciative inquiry', which focuses wherever possible on strengths and successes (Cooperrider, Whitney, Stavros, 2008).

The above design was thought to be the most appropriate to address the following study objectives to:

- Identify BBS's approach to community engagement;
- Assess how community engagement has been achieved: and
- Identify the lessons learned to date.

2.2 Selection Of Case Study Locations

Blackpool was selected to be involved in a case study because of its history in terms of the strength and structure of voluntary and community centres. When ABS was introduced, Blackpool's voluntary sectors lacked consistent coordination and leadership.

2.3 Recruitment

Letters of invitation were sent by BBS management to a range of key stakeholders on behalf of the research team. Interviewees who were willing to take part had to be available during the five-day data collection period. Written consent was obtained from interviewees and included use of their anonymised interview data in this report.

2.4 Data Collection

Data collection was conducted in November to January 2017-18. Primary sources of data were face-to-face and telephone interviews and focus groups, which were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix 1). Secondary sources included site documentation and field notes from non-participant observation.

BBS staff contacted and arranged meetings and focus group discussions with local stakeholders. Additionally, BBS provided access to supplementary documents detailing relevant information about the site. These documents included maps of site-wide governance structures, strategy documents and staffing information. As well as providing key contextual information regarding the sites, this data also provided supporting evidence for interview data.

Interviews: Face-to-face interviews were conducted with members of the Executive Board (chief executives of public services), staff, some key service delivery partners and an elected official from one

of the ABS wards. One-to-one interviews were also conducted on the telephone with stakeholders who were not available for face-to-face meetings.

Focus group discussions: Focus group discussions were conducted with: (i) Staff, including senior managers and frontline workers from both the statutory and voluntary sectors; (ii) a number of service delivery partners and project partners; and (iii) Members of the Community Voice group, who were both service users and active volunteers.

Observation (moderate level participant observation): Observational activities involved visits to an environmental regeneration project (Revoe Park); fathers involved with the Dads Group (a carpentry project); a visit to two libraries recently adapted for better use by very young children; and a children's centre. Field notes were written, and relevant sections transcribed.

Site documents: Access to relevant BBS documents was obtained via the BBS website: <https://www.blackpoolbetterstart.org.uk/support-and-resources/academics-researchers-strategic-leads/EAG/>

2.5 Data Analysis

The relevant documents were read and appropriate contextual information was selected for use. Similarly, the notes that were made as part of the participant observation were used to provide contextual information for the report.

The interview and focus group data were transcribed verbatim. A list of potential codes was created using the initial research questions and deductive codes developed. Coding comprised an iterative and incremental process involving different levels of abstraction. All evidence from multiple sources was included (i.e. different and possibly conflicting explanations were considered and the most important findings are presented).

2.6 Limitations

Although this qualitative study was designed to explore the process of community engagement and community development from the perspective of a range of stakeholders, the interviews conducted represent a relatively small proportion of the overall group of stakeholders. Furthermore, voluntary sector organisations arranged some of the meetings with interviewees, which may potentially have led to an element of bias due to the allegiance of the interviewee with the voluntary sector organisation.

3. Learning From The Case Studies

3.1 Overview

Analysis of the interview data resulted in the identification of two overarching themes addressing the way in which the community is engaged in BBS:

- Part 1 – Engagement of the community in the co-design and co-delivery of ABS services;
- Part 2 – Engaging service users, including those who are hard-to-reach, in the uptake of ABS services.

Quotations from the data have been used to support the description of the themes. It should be noted that the following nomenclature has been used: [...] indicates the removal of text that complicates the clarity of the quotation but without affecting its meaning; [TEXT] indicates the insertion of one or more word to the quotation with the aim of enhancing clarity.

3.2 Engagement Of The Community In The Co-Design And Co-Delivery Of ABS Services

This part of the report describes the engagement of community members in the co-design and co-delivery of ABS services: Part one describes the process by which the community is involved in the commissioning and co-design of ABS services, including their involvement at all levels of decision-making; and part two describes the process by which the community is engaged in service delivery, through the development of the volunteer workforce.

3.2.1 The Process of Commissioning and Co-Design of ABS Services

This section examines the processes by which members of the community are engaged in the commissioning and co-design of ABS services including the following – their involvement in decision-making at all levels of BBS; the process by which services are co-produced; the way in which differences of opinion are managed; the way in which voluntary organisations are involved as service delivery partners; and the way in which momentum was maintained.

3.2.1.1 *Involvement in Decision-Making*⁷

BBS has, from the outset, involved local people in addition to representatives of third sector organisations, in governance. Chart 1 (see Appendix 2) outlines the structure of the three boards – Executive; Community; and Operations. Community representatives are primarily involved in the Community Board, with occasional representation at the Executive board.⁸

The Community Board (Community Voice) comprises about 200 members. This includes all volunteers and elected representatives from each of seven children's centres. It also includes an elected Chair and Vice Chair who liaise on a regular basis with the Executive Board. Community Voice and the Executive Board share *equal* responsibility for decisions on planning and commissioning, and all

⁷ Data for this section was obtained from both BBS documents and interviews.

⁸ The Executive Board is comprised of senior managers within the public sector – including the Chief Executive of the Council, who is the Chair - and senior project staff. In addition, there are working groups where frontline workers can address specific areas and identify what the gaps are. The members of the Executive Board lead on different areas of work, such as commissioning, evaluation, communications or workforce development.

decisions need to be signed off by both boards and by Finance. Individual Board members also chair specific working groups (for example, Workforce Reform, Health and Wellbeing - see Chart).

BBS is the only ABS site that has two separate Boards for the Executive and Community, and the decision to create this structure appears to have been hard-fought for on the part of BBS management, because it was felt to be right for *their* community:

We've been very clear that we're not going down the same route as the other four sites in the way they consult the community because we needed for it to be about our community and the way they want to engage. (Staff member)

Community engagement *at all levels*, including formal representation on the Executive Board, was a central goal of the funders of ABS and, as such, this two board structure contravened one of the guiding principles of the initiative. Senior staff explained that the rationale for this structure is that their early experiences of a joint board were that it inhibited the open and frank discussions that are needed to make difficult decisions:

We have had some very difficult and bloody questions – like the health visiting review – holding everyone to account – challenging them – you need to have these conversations to make it work. [The Chief Executives] were not going to wash dirty linen in front of community members. [...] For me having the chief execs on their own I can say things bluntly to them that I can never do with community reps. (Staff member)

It was also felt that the time and process required for careful decision-making was not the same for chief executives, on the one hand, and community members on the other. This belief was underpinned by a perception that senior managers can make executive decisions quickly, while community members need to have time to consult others before a final decision can be made. In the end the decision to have two Boards was made by community members themselves.

We took the lead from our community, who said 'we want to come to the Board sometimes – but not necessarily all the time'. So it was interesting, an interesting journey. Community Voice signs off on everything, and get all the papers that everyone else gets. They co-design [...] but they can discuss them in a forum that they are comfortable in. (Staff member)

The arrangement is perceived as giving the two groups the space in which to freely discuss and debate. As one staff member observed. *"It is about how you use community voice most effectively."*

As described above, there was a clear rationale for establishing two Boards and the need for such an approach is supported by a Children's Society report (2012)⁹ in relation to Sure Start Centres, specifically with respect to parental involvement in co-design and management of children's centres.

In addition to their involvement in governance, community members are involved in decision-making at all levels of the organisation as will be described in the next section of this report.

3.2.1.2 The Process Of Co-Commissioning And Design Of Services

In addition to having a role in governance, the community were also engaged in decision-making regarding the design and commissioning of services. The following reflections by a staff manager

⁹ The Children's Society response to Increasing Parental and Community Involvement in Sure Start Children's Centres. Available online: https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/july_2012_-_parental_and_community_involvement_in_childrens_centres_response.pdf (Accessed 25/05/2018)

describe the process by which the Community Board engages in co-design and the co-commissioning of new services:

We take that initial point at a concept meeting, and I then bring that back in and I am then required to write that up into a PID [Project Initiation document] document which then goes to the Operations, Finance and Executive Board for approval, so that's just you taking that initial concept and kind of formalising it and looking at what are the operational links that you can make in the town around it, where does it sit financially, is the money there, has it got a sustainability strategy attached. And then it goes, finally, to the Executive Board too.

The example below outlines how community members were involved in the development of a concept and its delivery, in relation to increasing resilience, as explained by one staff member:

We wanted to look more around the kind of resilience model and what can we do around the town to improve access to resilience therapies that are available in the town and how do we link our age range to that. [...] [We] took the concept of having resilience coaches, volunteer resilience coaches and paid [...] resilience coaches, [...] to our parents. (Staff member)

This staff member then moved on to describe the community members response to this initial concept, their suggested alternatives, and the resulting outcome:

First of all, they didn't want them to be called resilience coaches because they just felt that that implied somebody's resilience was broken, so they didn't want that, and that was really interesting, the kind of learning for us. They also didn't want them to be volunteers because they felt that volunteers do a lot of resilience work anyway and they felt that, actually, what we wanted to do with these posts was a bit of a step up from that, so they wanted them to be paid posts, and they changed the name to Community Connectors, of which we've just employed ten.

This example also reveals the importance of language, and how language has been reframed when representatives from the community did not like the use of particular terms relating to new roles that were being developed or being used by specific programmes. One service delivery partner emphasised the importance of this:

Language is [...] a massive barrier [...] language reinforces the class bias and prejudice [...]. The semantics and the language that we use with families [...] [must be a] way of holding a hand out and saying, "Let's walk together in this".

A further example of how community members were included in the commissioning and development of services is provided by the case of 'Survivor Moms', an intervention for women who have experienced unresolved early childhood trauma and whose pregnancy has triggered symptoms of trauma, anxiety and/or depression (Sperlich, 2011). The programme had been developed by the University of Michigan and was supported by evidence developed in the US. One staff member describes how community members initially supported this idea:

There was huge community interest in [working with mothers who have experienced trauma] and there's a couple of reasons for that: one is that we know that trauma and those histories is [...] prevalent in our communities; and the other being that, the concept of this, Survivor Mums, it was just something completely new and that we'd never really tested out in the community before. (Staff member)

However, as community members explored the 'Survivor Mom's' model in greater depth, they came to the conclusion that it was not appropriate for Blackpool in its current form, due to differences in the population in Blackpool and Ann Arbor, Michigan, where the programme was first delivered:

I discussed with community members, their initial thoughts, shared the programme with them that got sent over from the University [of Michigan]. Our populations [in Blackpool] are very different [than in] Ann Arbor in Michigan, I think there's 10% or 15% of that population have a PhD. [...] Our community just said, "This is just not accessible – this will not work in our community", and actually, what we could have done was just tried and tested it out, but we'd got that insight from them right at the earliest point...So, they were really involved in that process, right from the start. Then, as concept papers get developed, we go back out and speak to them. Certainly, with Survivor Mums, they came onto teleconferences with the University of Michigan, with Buffalo, and really, I mean, the professors there were quite taken aback by [the input of community representatives], you know, [...] really gave them some things to think about. (Staff member)

This input from community representatives and timely feedback meant that this programme could be modified by community and CECD staff to make it a better fit and thereby more acceptable to the Blackpool community. This process is also being implemented with other programmes:

We try and replicate that process for as many of our interventions as possible, and then it does mean that, as we offer services, we have to provide regular updates to the community because [...] we are accountable to them, ultimately, for what we're delivering. (Staff member)

This process of consultation with stakeholders had led to what is, to date, one of BBS's flagship achievements - the development of the new health visitor service. The new model expands, at no extra cost, the number of post birth visits by health visitors from five to eight, including a visit just before children start school. As a result, health visitors can address problems such as children starting school without having been potty-trained or the fact that the child is still using comforters. While the service was initiated by BBS management and the Council's Director of Health, community members had the time and space to analyse proposals for change in the health visiting service and the mechanisms to ensure that their views were integrated into decision-making.

3.2.1.3 Involving Voluntary Organisations As Service Delivery Partners

In addition to involving the community at senior levels of the governance structure, BBS also involves local voluntary organisations as service delivery partners by contracting service delivery to suitably qualified third sector organisations. The procurement process stipulates that all providers of BBS services are to have delivery premises in Blackpool thus giving local voluntary organisations the opportunity to bid for a wide range of contracts. Where a single competent local agency has the skills to deliver the required contract then an exception can be requested to grant a contract to a local provider. Where there are a number of agencies who have the ability to deliver a programme, the contract is offered through a competitive quotation process or tender process. In line with wider Council objectives, attempts are made to provide work to local people and organisations. This is only possible by creating smaller contracts for services that can be provided by local people. The aim of this is to avoid 'path dependence' (i.e. the way that events in the past constrain what is possible in the present) (Portes and Vickstrom, 2011).

3.2.1.4 Managing Differences Of Opinion

While, on the whole there were few differences between the decisions made by the community and BBS project leaders, such differences occasionally materialised. One such disagreement focused on the idea of a 'Beach School':

One of the things the community had really highlighted was – and this was before we [i.e. ABS] went live – was that they wanted a Beach School, based on the Forest School [model]¹⁰ [...] so it would have been people working with families around what they could do on the beach, and some of the downside of that was [from the perspective of professionals with responsibility for commissioning services], you know, November, December, January here isn't really when people want to go on the beach, and a lot of our families don't go anywhere near the beach. (Staff member)

Staff realised that community members felt frustrated on occasions when their expressed desires were not delivered, and that there was a need for careful negotiation. In relation to the Beach School, negotiations were facilitated by an external consultant, who helped to find a satisfactory solution by identifying the underlying issues:

And when you got down to the essence of what the Beach School was, it was actually about doing things as a family. [...] Fundamentally, what the families were saying is they wanted more organising around resources that was at their fingertips, resources that they walked past or resources that they didn't use, and the beach and parks pretty much fell into those two categories for our families. [...] In their opinion, they weren't fit for purpose, so they generally didn't go there, so that was something that they didn't do as a family activity. (Staff member)

The process of addressing differences of opinion thereby enabled staff to identify that the fundamental issue was access to safe, pleasant spaces in which to enjoy themselves as a family at low or no cost. In response, BBS worked on the regeneration of parks and organising enjoyable and free seasonal activities, in addition to developing the 'Sandborn Card', which provides families with at least one child under the age of four big discounts on public transport and on entry to recreational facilities such as the zoo and Blackpool Tower.

This example suggests that differences of opinion that are successfully resolved have the potential to increase engagement. Furthermore, it is important to note that while an external consultant mediated this disagreement, the final decision was made by all parties. As a result, the balance of power between the two boards remained aligned.

3.2.1.5 Maintaining The Momentum Of Community Engagement

Volunteers highlighted that it was necessary to maintain the momentum of community engagement, since busy service delivery partners could fall back into habitual practices of 'doing things for', rather than 'with', the community.

There is a huge need for me to [...] "gatekeep" that process in the town, so that people don't drift too far into doing things on behalf of families - because that's not, fundamentally, what families have asked for. (Staff member)

While volunteers recognised that BBS managers and leaders wanted to ensure community engagement in planning and delivering services, there were times in which volunteers described feeling excluded from decision-making regarding such services. The example given was of volunteers arriving to help plan a Christmas event for families and having the impression that volunteers were not wanted as they would slow activity that staff had already planned.

¹⁰ Forest Schools offer all learners regular opportunities to achieve and develop confidence and self-esteem through hands-on learning experiences in a woodland or natural environment with trees (<https://www.forestschoollassociation.org/full-principles-and-criteria-for-good-practice/>)

Volunteers also shared their perception that momentum can be lost because ‘operational’ or middle level people (i.e. those individuals beneath the ‘people at the top’) don’t really understand how to engage the community – or necessarily want to do it, with a resulting return to old ways:

People at the top [...] tend to write the project documents [...] and I think, sometimes, they are a bit of an “ideal world” type of thing...The people in the middle are kind of like [...] the ones that set the wheels in motion [...] and then there’s us [...] ...the family engagement workers and Community Voice and the other voluntary [...] organisations. Sometimes things just go missing – they’ve started at the top, and then sometimes it’s got translated differently in the middle ...and then it gets back to us and then we [...] interpret it differently. (Volunteer)

3.2.2 Engagement Of The Community In Service Delivery

This section of the report describes the processes by which the community is involved in service delivery including – the way in which volunteer providers are developed through a ‘volunteer pathway’; the provision of support to volunteers; the way in which the programme builds on the life experiences and existing skills of volunteers; and recognition of the need for local leadership to promote sustainability.

3.2.2.1 Developing Volunteer Providers - The Volunteer Pathway

The data suggest that the volunteer pathway consists of two parts – moving from being a service user to a volunteer; and moving from being a volunteer to a paid member of staff.

A number of parents who were interviewed described the way in which they began volunteering by engaging in activities at Children’s Centres and, from this, moving through a structured pathway for personal development via the BBS’s Volunteer Academy (VA). This comprises a training and coaching programme developed by one of the BBS service delivery partners, Blackpool’s Volunteer Centre. At the time of writing, approximately 150 people are enrolled at the VA. As people’s capacity to give time for volunteering varies, there is a reported core group of about 50 highly active members. The VA does not just involve parents of children under four years of age; it capitalises on the experience of older people and people without children, who want to be engaged in serving their community.

The Volunteer Centre aims to develop the VA and support the Community Voice group. It is also tasked with ensuring that all BBS’s service delivery partners work to the Investing in Volunteers (IiV) standards:

Where any [early years] organisation doesn’t meet those standards yet, then our commissioned volunteer service will work with them and look at, [and think] “well, how far away are you from that and how can we work with you to achieve those standards?” and it’s really just a bit about sending the message out that volunteering is hugely important and hugely significant on people’s journey. (Staff member)

The VA offers a personalised pathway for volunteers with a range of options so that volunteers can train without necessarily becoming involved in other ABS-related projects:

We have the parks, Baby Rover, baby clothes recycling, dad’s engagement, children’s centres, events, community action projects. [...] Also [volunteers working] in the [ABS] office. But not every parent that comes through us will want to volunteer on ABS project. (Staff member)

This personalised pathway includes a one-to-one review at least twice a year:

[A staff member] will sit down with every volunteer and say, “Where are you at? Are you getting what you need from volunteering? Are you still gaining things from it? Is it still connecting you to something that you’re passionate about? Are you still on the right path or do you want to look at something else?”. (Staff member)

The review process provides the opportunity for those members of staff who wish to do so, to move into paid employment in terms of the delivery of ABS services. The data suggests that this takes time, as people need to be able to develop the confidence to apply for jobs, and to enable them to stand a good chance of success. For example, all volunteers have been encouraged to apply for Community Connectors jobs. Although for some, this was not compatible with the demands on their time and others needed to gain the necessary confidence, they were still involved in other levels of decision-making including recruitment:

We asked and did encourage quite a few of our volunteers to apply for those roles, but [...] they evaluated that it wasn't the right time for them to do that, but they were then involved in the recruitment process, in the interviewing and the induction of the Community Connectors. And now some of those volunteers have said "Oh, I've kind of missed an opportunity there – I should have done that, I should have applied". So, I think some of it is a bit about just the unknown, and the fear of the unknown, and people's confidence. They deselect themselves from certain things because of their confidence. (Staff member)

3.2.2.2 Providing Personal And Peer Support

The VA not only provide people with practical skills but also plays a role in accompanying volunteers and helping them link into services when latent problems arise. One staff member described how the senior management team had not envisaged the amount of support volunteers would need:

Sometimes we're working with volunteers who present as quite organised and quite together [...], they look like they're functioning and they look like they're doing all the right things, but, actually, you know, once you kind of get behind that, it's not as strong as you would like it to be. So, it's [...] about how do you then support that, rather than saying, okay, you need to stop volunteering now because there's issues around your parenting [...]; we would then consider any of the range of programmes that are available and actually would they benefit from going onto Mellow Dads [for example]? (Staff member)

One member of the VA staff reflected on the need to build up the confidence and skills of people who don't feel at ease in dealing with others in their volunteering capacity:

I am thinking about T, who has been with us for years. She was almost ready to leave after a little while because she felt intimidated but she stayed [after] we had a chat. You have to recognise that [it's about] making people feel at ease. And now she is good at building up relationships because of her own journey [...]; you have to sit down with people who are more shy and quiet but once they have been volunteering for a while, confidence grows. (Service delivery partner)

There was a perception among volunteers that those who were balancing volunteering with the demands of home-life found that volunteering was beneficial despite the difficulties involved: "volunteering helps them manage better at home – a sanctuary, normality. Occupation is a very positive thing (Volunteer). Volunteering was also perceived to be a potential source of dependency and a careful balance had to be achieved between providing enough support for people to become confident and not too much to avoid creating dependency:

For some people, hand-holding to build confidence and deal with their social isolation is necessary, and it's about getting that relationship right so that you don't hand-hold for too long and then it becomes a dependency. So, there are elements [...] where we have to test to see are people ready to move on to the next step or are they not. (Staff member)

The VA also involves teaming up more experienced volunteers with newcomers who are taking their first steps as a volunteer:

There are people who are just dipping their toe in volunteering and are unsure about whether it's for them. They generally get buddied up with people who have been volunteering for a while and they critique amongst themselves: "Is this a good thing, is this not a good thing, or what have you done with your volunteering and where do you think the best opportunities lie?".
(Service delivery partner)

3.2.2.3 Building On The Life Experiences And Existing Skills Of Volunteers

All five volunteers who were interviewed had been in paid employment for most of their adult lives. They provide examples of the ways in which the volunteers share learning from their life experiences and develop practical skills in the community (see Box 1).

Box 1: Examples of Volunteers Drawing on their Life Experiences¹

Matt moved from another city when he was offered a job working in Blackpool. His relationship had broken down and, like many other people who migrate to the area, Blackpool offered a new start. Matt has a long history of volunteering. Similarly, Joe was made redundant in his early 50s from a managerial post. His marriage ended a few years later. Matt and Joe volunteer in numerous ways, with a particular focus on work with young fathers. Both men have found a purpose and an outlet for their skills through their engagement with BBS. They enjoy working with young fathers and watching young men grow in confidence, some of whom had struggled with addiction, and who had rarely been well enough to work.

For Matt and Joe, who had lost jobs in middle age, volunteering has helped them to experience being valued and respected in their new community. Matt regards himself as a conduit between the senior people in the town and the grassroots, and as such feels himself to be an advocate for the latter:

I've been able to sort of attend a lot of the high-level meetings [...] and mix with the managers and [other senior professionals] [...] so I've got the linkage between the very top and the very bottom [and] obviously part of the community. [...] So if I need something done, I don't abuse it [laughing] but [...] I've got the contacts there that I can make use of.

Similarly, Joe, who worked in paid employment for decades, realises he can be a role model for younger fathers who never had a father themselves. He now uses his experience of sports management to support activities in the local parks.

Michelle is in her 30s and a mother of young children. She is a childcare professional who moved to Blackpool when her husband secured a job there. She works part-time at the BBS office and spends time organising events in addition to volunteering in the children's centre where she is a member of the Parents Forum. She is perceived by others to be a natural leader and, because of this, she is approached and encouraged by children's centre staff to volunteer. Volunteering has increased her love for the town and has helped her make good friends. She is motivated by wanting the best for other parents in the town, and by the training and opportunities that will help her get back into paid work when her children are older:

Because it's nice to not feel like I'm [...] not "just a mum", but like that's how sometimes you get treated, especially because I'm just [...] someone's wife, someone's mum. [...] They (BBS) appreciate everything I do. [...] They support me with childcare, with any training requirements. [...] and I feel like, because I've been able to volunteer for the past however many years, I've probably volunteered too long but [...] that means that I've got like skills still, rather than going from just being at home to then having to go back to work.

The data from these volunteers suggests that the VA appears to be helping to harness and further develop the skills of community members for the benefit of the community. Volunteers who were interviewed also appeared to experience satisfaction from doing something they believe in. As Matt says, he is proud of having helped shape BBS: “[I feel] in quite a privileged position, myself, because of what we was doing when we started all this [A} Better Start”. They also appear to feel treated with consideration and respect. Michelle, for example, feels that her work is valued:

They appreciate everything I do. I get like [...] they support me with childcare, with any training requirements [...]. If you want to volunteer, then they'll support you in finding like a role that [...] is of interest to you“

BBS is also benefiting from the experience of volunteers from organisations that are already established in the area. For example, the Food Bank and Food Partnership is an independent grass roots organisation, started by a church not funded by ABS but who work with BBS:

We wanted to see whether or not we could be [...] do something in the town that was practical and so, [...] just over six years ago now, we formed Blackpool Food Bank. The Food Partnership, [...] is an umbrella organisation to try and have other organisations across the town who are involved in this line of work; [...] collaborate. (Volunteer)

The nature of their work means that BBS can bring added value to the work of the Food Partnership and vice versa; the Food Partnership provides food and BBS's community-based programmes help people cook and eat things that are unfamiliar. A consistent perception of volunteers, service delivery staff and Board members is that many local people did not eat vegetables, but this loss of skills extends to staple foods as well:

“We supply food in bags, and people get a bag of rice, and they...they don't know what to do with it, right? [...] they've never had it shown to them [...] how to cook it.” (Volunteer).

Similarly, the Food Partnership provides hygiene packs to those who need them. This began after staff at schools and children's centres spoke to volunteers about the physical condition of many children who arrived not only hungry, but also dirty.

I had a friend of mine who worked in [a children's centre], and she was telling me terrible stories about the state the children were [in] when they arrived at school in the morning, they hadn't eaten, maybe hadn't eaten for the whole of [...] a day, [...] children with no [...] white teeth, all rotten teeth, and they're seven years old. Now, I thought she meant that that was because they were eating too many sweets, right, and she said, “No [...] they've never owned a toothbrush”. (Volunteer)

As one Food Bank volunteer observed: “there's lots of problems in life skills out there and that's why the Tooth Fairy [an oral health programme funded by BBS] is going round the children's centres”. Food Partnership is therefore meeting an immediate, urgent need while BBS's oral health and related programmes are designed to bring about long term change in people's knowledge and behaviours:

Because [parents have] grown up not knowing about [for example, good oral health], it's just like a vicious circle of not looking after their teeth, so they don't know how to teach their children how to look after their teeth. (Volunteer)

3.2.2.4 Developing Sustainability

The interview data suggests that the VA managers are aware that ‘*money will not last forever*’ and that for ABS to be sustainable, an increasing number of people in the community need skills and confidence to take leadership roles. As one senior staff member explained:

We have seven years to make the transition – [which would mean that] parents have more responsibility for their communities. [...] it’s a massive thing.

There is therefore need to develop local leaders from within the community but also to ensure that as many people as possible have the opportunity to develop the structured opportunities and personalised support that the VA offers. This requires having an explicit ‘volunteer pathway’, the expectation being that those who are currently volunteers will not remain indefinitely in the same roles but will move on to paid work or other responsibilities within the locality. A turnover of volunteers also means that VA staff have the opportunity to train more people. Without a ‘volunteer pathway’, volunteers can get stuck in a role:

Sometimes, when people get into systems, they get stuck and [...] exit strategies aren’t clear enough, and we do have to [...] look at that as part of our gatekeeping [...]: how long people are in services for and, you know, how we [...] move people on from services, and that’s really important in the community, because it isn’t about people being a volunteer for ten years. (Staff member)

3.3 Engaging Service Users (Including Those Who Are ‘Hard-To-Reach’) In ABS Services

The second theme identified involves the way in which service users were encouraged to become engaged in the uptake of BBS services. The interview data indicated that this was achieved through a range of strategies including contacting families through children’s services and community groups; developing community engagement workers; and focusing on the building of relationships.

There are families who are potential ABS service users that services find ‘hard to reach’. As noted by Barlow et al (2005), these include those who, for conscious or unconscious reasons, avoid early intervention services. This section of the report describes a number of ways in which uptake of services is promoted, including through the involvement of community volunteers.

3.3.1 Engagement Through Children’s Centres, Other Services And Public Events

Interviewees described how all parents expecting a baby or with a pre-school child are encouraged to become involved in the children’s centres by BBS volunteers or staff. This involvement is perceived as making engagement in other services and programmes much easier:

[Children’s centres are the] [...] kind of “go-to group” to kind of allow your [parents]voice to be heard [...] looking at [...] what resources are on your doorstep, how do you access them, how can we improve your access, how do we get families using them? (Staff member)

Frontline workers described how parents involved in the children’s centre were encouraged to bring neighbours and friends who were perceived to be more isolated (see below for further discussion). In addition, a number of frontline workers described accessing or bridging with other parts of the community through groups that work with children:

A way in for us, very early on, was through Brownies, Scouts, and Guides, and actually, all of the people who voluntarily run those groups are from the community and are very much

connected to so many other things, and if you get those people on side, they will often be the person who will go, "Oh, have you met this person?". (Frontline worker)

The way ABS services are delivered has been influenced by the Council Early Years' previous experience in interagency collaboration and approach to working with families, including families with serious and complex needs. Members of this team had helped develop the Springboard Project, a cross-agency initiative that delivered specific support to families and young people that placed the highest demands on services (Ravey, 2008, 2010). The fundamental ethos of Springboard was that staff from different services would work together to address the myriad needs presented by these families, but that they would remain within their seconding services (Ravey 2010: 6). A staff member who had helped develop Springboard emphasised the way that agencies sought to work alongside families, who had considerable scope to decide what kind of support and services they wanted.

We'd set up Springboard 15 years ago now, where we'd actually gone to the community to find out what kind of services they wanted [...]. So we had to engage families in a very different way. They had to agree the services that would work with them, but they also had to agree that we could turn up in their house [...] at any time. (Staff member)

Public events were also perceived to be key to contacting and motivating people who were not aware of BBS as well the 'hard-to-reach'. However, as the following exchange among volunteers taking part in a focus group illustrates, the challenge appears to be in maintaining the contact following the event:

Volunteer 1: So, I think, by having more like family engagement people and holding events, like not in children's centres, having them in like different places – like we had quite a successful dads' thing, didn't we, at the library the other week?

Volunteer 3: Actually, that's got people involved who wouldn't necessarily get involved.

Volunteer 1: But then the hard part is keeping them... You can get them out, but then keeping them [...] focused. Yeah, I think they need – you get them to the big event, and then they need something more to be able to stay engaged.

Other services such as libraries have proved particularly good venues for events and for volunteers to befriend other parents. Interviewees described how libraries have been made more family-centred and more comfortable for young children, which was perceived to have increased their use. One volunteer described how the library was one of the places in which she was able to engage with more isolated families:

So, then, now, through what I've learned over six years, now, when I'm sat in the café in the children's centre or I'm in the library or I'm just talking with mums in the playground, when they say things like, you know, oh, such a thing, like Bright house or whatever, and I'm like, "Do you know, there's this really helpful person at Citizens' Advice" [...] and it just makes people think a bit more.

3.3.2 Engagement Through Relationship-Building

Interviewees identified the importance of developing relationships with families and the factors that facilitate this process.

The Role Of Volunteers In Engaging 'Hard-To-Reach' Families

Volunteers perceived themselves to often be better equipped to approach 'hard to reach families than professionals, primarily because of shared life experiences and also perceptions that their involvement

is driven by their own experiences, unlike professionals whose involvement may be perceived to be driven by targets and the need to tick boxes:

Sometimes, people like [us] are probably better at reading that than the doctor or the Mental Health worker or the health visitor because they're, you know, pushing you – targets, data and ticking boxes! Whereas, [...] a mum I know, you know, she looks a bit upset, you [the volunteer] can go and talk to her, and you know when it's time to just be like "I'm just over here if you need me" kind of thing [...], and I think like people who are in the community can do that better than people in like paid professional type roles. (Volunteer)

Some volunteers expressed the opinion that many parents are not able to trust professionals. The reasons given for this include the effect of chronic stress, and in particular the insidious humiliations that people living in poverty experience in their interactions with state agencies, that are then extrapolated more widely to other groups of practitioners and professionals. Volunteers, including those from more advantaged backgrounds, therefore felt that they understood the importance of protecting people's dignity, and that working in the local area, had taught them to understand how very small things can make the difference in terms of whether people leave an interaction feeling respected, or slightly humiliated. A Board member also reflected upon this:

[Volunteers] really look at it from their neighbours' point of view: "how will my neighbour get into these services? How will my neighbour get into these resources? And how can we change the access points or the access routes so that people's access into these resources in the town is improved and increased?" and, that when they're there, they can then get linked to another project.

Relationship-Building

Many of BBS's services are run from children's centres, and service delivery partners stressed the need to 'hang out' at children's centres, *building* relationships both with people who are already active in the community and encouraging others who need motivation to try something new:

'I'll be in there, just working, just simply I'll have my laptop there and I'll just start speaking to people, and that is the way that – the people that I've got through the course so far and have done well and have engaged and they're there, and when there's something ongoing, you know, we need some help doing an event or we're trying to get an activity running in the children's centre, those are the people that you can turn to and those are the people that are following through. (Frontline worker)

Being seen regularly in children's centres was also recognised to be important, alongside the value of unstructured time with people:

The value of free association and the value of just having unstructured, unplanned "I'm just going to be here" [time]. [...] We used to have nearly 30 youth workers in Blackpool, and we had afterschool engagement officers, and we had play workers and so on and so forth, and I think we can't underestimate the value of a person [...] or people who are freely there, in an unplanned way, getting to know people. (Frontline worker)

Resources provided by BBS were described as having enabled some organisations to employ a consultant with strong community engagement skills:

There is a worker who [is] very, very skilled at community engagement [...] and formed these relationships with a great, a really good group of people. I know, before, they wanted to do this, but I think she actually was the catalyst to get that going. (Frontline worker)

Anticipating Resistance

The data indicate that, even within children's centres, outreach workers who have become 'familiar faces' still need to find ways to overcome parents' initial reluctance to try out things that they have not done before, such as spending time with their children planting vegetables or getting involved in an exercise class. One volunteer frontline worker explained how they worked with parents who were reluctant to let their children get 'dirty' outdoors by keeping a supply of Crocs in a cupboard for children who have no suitable shoes:

I've got the veg, I've got the seedlings, I've got the garden, they've got an expert there that can help you, but I've had children that have been sent to groups without shoes on because they're in a group and you say, "Well, you can't come outside with no shoes", well, [...] I've got some shoes in the cupboard, some play-shoes. (Frontline worker)

Although it could take time to build relationships and trust, once people had tried new activities, the results were often experienced as thrilling new discoveries:

I went into the one of the schools and I asked "Where does your fruit and veg come from? Where do carrots come from? Where do veggies come from?". You got told Asda, you got told Lidl, you got told Morrisons. Nobody said it came from out of the ground. [...] I'm going round to all the children's centres and putting in seedlings with the children, getting them to take them home, put them on the windowsill in a sunny area, see them growing, and then bring them back to the centres and then we're taking them out into the gardens and then they're seeing them grow in the gardens and then taking them home, hopefully, to eat themselves and to cook themselves. So, we're making them aware of something that they haven't seen for ages... We had carrots in and we got little kids coming round, and we took a carrot out of the ground, during the summer, cleaned it all up and gave it to a child and his mother said "He'll never touch that". Couldn't take it off him – he took a bite out of it. (Frontline worker)

Focusing Upon Parents' Self-Defined Priorities

Research on the reasons why parents deemed 'hard to reach' are reluctant to engage in early intervention services highlights the fact that these services often do not offer what parents themselves want (Barlow et al, 2005). Data from the current evaluation suggests that frontline practitioners perceived many BBS services to have been commissioned with this issue in mind. For example, the Parents Under Pressure (PUP) programme was depicted as being a model that is designed to respond to service users' priorities.¹¹ One of the defining features of PUP is that parents identify what their priorities are and practitioners work on these issues before moving on to anything else. There is also flexibility regarding the programme's duration. Although PUP was designed to be delivered over 20 to 24 weeks. Practitioners were able to spread sessions out over a further ten weeks if this worked best for the family. The following quotation presents a practitioner's comparison of this approach with that of a less flexible programme designed to address neglect:

[The other programme] is [...] manual-based [...] around neglect, so you'll be measuring, at the beginning [...] levels of neglect, and then [...] you'll be going through the house [...] with the parent, looking at hazards in the home and [trying to] reduce them. [...] It's [...] quite authoritarian [...]. In comparison with PUP [...], I get more [people] dropping off [the programme].

¹¹ Parents under Pressure (PuP) is a manualised home visiting programme that is delivered by specially trained practitioners to parents experiencing a range of stresses including substance dependence.

Practitioners believed that one of the reasons that there was much less attrition from PUP was because the programme enables parents to address the issues that *they* want to work on:

[People in] PUP don't [drop off] once you've got them in. Some of them have been really reluctant to engage at first and said "I'm only doing this because it's a CP [child protection case]", and then you say, "Well, okay, let's start with that one [...] but why don't we rather than waste your time, why don't we see what we can get from this?" and because it's so personal [to the person], you tend to win them round. (Practitioner)

Working With Complexity And Risk

The interview data also suggest the importance of practitioners being able to manage complexity and risk. Practitioners described how during receipt of the PUP programme one couple relapsed in terms of their drug use. The practitioner suggests that to manage this, it was essential that the practitioners working with this family needed to stay focused and work on the underlying reasons for the relapse:

The reason why they relapsed, and that was a learning for me really, was because of how we'd implemented structure and routine for the family [...] When we put this structure in place and the kids were going to bed by eight, the parents found they had nothing to do from eight o'clock till their bedtime. [...] [drugs] were the glue for them in their relationship, and without that, they sort of dwindled and they were just two separate entities living together. (Practitioner)

Factors That Hinder Relationship-Building

A number of institutional factors were identified as being antithetical to relationship-building. For example, the process of filling in forms was perceived as undermining building relationships with a person who has found it difficult to walk into a children's centre in the first place:

The barriers are up already because they're worried about talking about the child's diet, and then suddenly we're asking them to fill out all this paperwork, which a lot of families struggle to fill it out. Then, we've got to input all that data, and then we've got to send it to Better Start, and then Better Start send it to the NSPCC, and it's just a big chain of [...] figures that, okay, at the end of the year, it's nice to know all that [what information the figures provide], but what it actually [is] in the first instance, [is] a barrier to people coming back the next week. (Service delivery partner)

Suggested reasons for this are that it is the first thing with which families are confronted when they step through the door, and also that they may have low levels of literacy:

Finally get them through the door and they've got, eh, six pages of A4 to fill out, and another page of A4 to read, and we've got a really low literacy rate in Blackpool. (Service delivery partner)

3.3.3 Engagement Through The Development Of Strategic Posts

BBS employs **Family Engagement Workers** and **Community Connectors** to support the process of connecting with families. Family Engagement workers specifically provide support to families during the transition to parenthood, and to parents who have registered for the Baby Steps perinatal programme, which is run from the children's centres. Baby Steps involves seven, weekly sessions in the third trimester of pregnancy and three in the weeks following birth. The Family Engagement Worker visits the family in their home and discusses programme content, encouraging parents to be to explore their hopes and ideas about parenthood. Family Engagement Workers have detailed knowledge about support and resources available within the local community and signpost parents to these where appropriate.

The ten newly-appointed **Community Connectors** are frontline extension workers whose primary role is getting to know and guide local people through various opportunities that are offered not only by BBS but by other projects as well, such as pathways into adult education. Community Connectors work in all wards and in public spaces such as parks and libraries where they can develop conversations with people who may be isolated, to enable them to share their experiences:

It's building relationships. [...] It's all relationship-based. It's a bit like [...] if our Community Connector sits in the children's centre café area and just talks to people and has cups of tea with them, eventually, the issues and experiences of those families will start to get spoken about. (Staff member)

All Community Connectors are local people and most have formerly been volunteers. This move from volunteer to paid worker was perceived as conveying an important message about local involvement in volunteering:

[For local people] the proof is the pudding [...] for us, it was about making sure that we had volunteers in paid roles, and that all the paid roles weren't going to all of the other people outside the town... changing lives for everybody and using the skills that are there. (Staff member)

The appointment of Community Connectors fits with the ethos not only of BBS but of the Council's vision for Blackpool as a place where *local* people have the skills to apply for jobs that are open to them. This was also perceived to be important for sustainability:

One of the things around the sustainability of A Better Start, right from the beginning, we were aware of the fact that we import a lot of professionals into Blackpool because we have very low skill levels, and part of this was about skilling up our workforce and having jobs that we could get people into so that we could actually then skill them up. [...] Our parents weren't being "done to", they were actually trained. (Staff member)

3.3.4 Engagement Via Other Public Services

Health services, housing and community police all seek ways of meeting and engaging with more vulnerable and transient populations. The Chief Executives of these services are members of the ABS Board, which contributes to them seeking routes to connect expectant parents and families of young children to children's centres and early childhood services. The following provides detail about some of the strategies and lessons learned by these services:

Housing

Two companies manage social housing in Blackpool; *The Blackpool Housing Company* buys properties that are in poor condition, both empty or with tenants and converts these properties to a good standard and *Coastal Housing* is contracted for the maintenance and management of Council housing and is also responsible for the management of Council hostels for very vulnerable people. Managers connected to both services reported high levels of: "*social isolation, debt issues, mental health problems, people who can't access services – people who are out of work or who have never considered it*". Both companies see their responsibility as much more than the care of infrastructure and have frontline staff who work alongside tenants sometimes beginning with simple tasks such as cleaning and clearing out the property through to more complex activities such as thinking about and preparing for work:

There aren't great jobs in Blackpool, but it is more about thinking of work as a lifestyle and opportunity. Developing aspirations [...] and that will motivate children and grandchildren. (Staff member)

The data suggest that the real challenge is reaching people in *private* rental accommodation. To clamp down on unscrupulous landlords Blackpool has introduced a Selective Licensing Scheme. This provides the Council with the right to visit any rental property and ensure that it complies with the necessary standards. Staff make spot checks and have a statutory right of entry, and sometimes the police are involved:

It is also an opportunity to find out [...] about [...] who the tenants are in the rented accommodation and [...] something about them [...] with a view to trying to help when necessary. [...] It's a good form of outreach really [...] and [staff] get to talk to people that perhaps many other routes wouldn't be able to [facilitate]. (Political leader)

The Licensing Scheme is therefore a way in to reach transient families, including expectant women and parents of young children. Some landlords, who are cooperative with the scheme, also encourage their tenants to seek opportunities to secure support.

Despite this positive progress, one senior Board member who had worked in housing outlined how workers from these housing agencies would find that the families with whom they were working had moved, thereby necessitating the process of re-engagement with them.

Police

The police in Blackpool are closely involved in ABS because the Chief Inspector of Lancashire Constabulary sits on the Executive Board of BBS, and there is also close coordination at community level between Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) and BBS staff. There are around 80 PCSOs spread over Blackpool and the surrounding areas who seek to build relationships with, and work alongside, the local community. One way of doing this is through regular events:

Reaching harder to reach using the 'world café approach'¹² – different tables that highlight issues for discussion. People write down their thoughts and then you move to another table. You end up with a stream of consciousness – people do it in their own way. (Board member)

From the perspective of the police, community outreach has been “*partially but not completely successful.*” as there is still a lot more to do. The police's work has been strengthened by BBS as the Community Engagement Officer has brought new organisations to community meetings: “*Parks, schools... and I am not sure that we would have previously had those relationships*” (Board member). As a result, an officer has been appointed to coordinate police outreach activities and a system of incentives – such as vouchers – has been encouraged to encourage community members to become involved with the local schemes.

3.3.5 The Need To Further Strengthen Connectivity

Despite the significant effort to strengthen connectivity among public services one Board member felt there was still a disconnect between sections of the community, and that different projects still “*need to pull together more*”. They went on to say:

¹² See: <http://www.theworldcafe.com/>

BBS does really well in terms of selling its brand, the niche area that it addresses [...] but we need to work out “a Blackpool offer”. People don’t live their lives in silos, and the message ‘if your children are over four we are not interested’ is off-putting. (Board member)

This view was echoed by another Board member, who recommended an overarching Chair to coordinate all the leading organisations in the town.

There is also a perception that interagency collaboration and networking may need to be strengthened at ward level particularly with neighbourhood associations that are not linked into ABS. One ward councillor in a poor ward with a high proportion of transient parents referred to a Local Neighbourhood Partnership that meets on a monthly basis with the aim of addressing this problem.

What we call the Local Neighbourhood Partnership, and the Local Neighbourhood Partnership is just that: it’s the Council, it’s the residents, it’s the voluntary sector, it’s anybody who’s doing anything in that area, that meets once a month to try to make sure that all the different initiatives are all talking to each other and know what each other’s doing, and avoiding duplication or...and maybe getting the positives of working together. (Board member).

4. Emerging Messages

The data collected as part of this case study about the nature of, and the processes involved in, community engagement has resulted in the identification of two overarching themes: a) the engagement of the community in co-design and co-production of ABS services; and b) engaging service users, including those who are hard-to-reach, in the uptake of ABS services.

The final section of this report describes the two overarching lessons that appear to have emerged from the data:

- a) the importance of creating formal structures and mechanisms for engagement;**
- b) the importance of relationships and relationship-building at all levels of the organisation.**

4.1 Creation Of Formal Structures And Mechanisms For Engagement

It has been suggested that efforts in the UK to encourage localism have not necessarily been accompanied by the creation of structures and mechanisms to enable real participation, especially participation by hard-to-reach and excluded groups (Donoghue, 2016, 2018; Chanan and Miller, 2011; Sullivan, 2012). Increasing the power of local people to shape planning and decision-making without creating the means by which *all* people can take part, can easily result in more power accruing to those who are better-off, more organised, and articulate (Donoghue, 2016). This suggests that given the intense, systemic exclusion of poor people from power, it is essential to create *structures and mechanisms* that enable community members to engage productively and that this then enables access to services, secures rights and creates a sense of mutuality and solidarity (Grant, 2001: 87). By working in collaboration with the council and community, BBS appears to have successfully developed both *structures* that enable community participation at local level, and *mechanisms* through which members of the community are formally represented in consultation, planning and governance. These include the following:

- **Board structures:** BBS's 'separate boards' system of governance differs from the structures of other ABS sites, and indeed from the funder goal of ensuring that community members are actively involved in the Executive Board in each site. However, the decision to create two separate Boards with equal roles in designing and commissioning services was made by community members and the data suggest that it enables meaningful community participation. The rationale for this structure was the belief that the two groups make decisions at a different pace. It was also felt to allow for more democratic decision-making because CV was perceived to be large, and also open to anyone who wanted to train with the VA, including elected representatives from the Children's Centre Parent Forums. Decisions that were reached by CV appear to have been the result of real, detailed consultation with a wide range of other people – and in particular the parents at the heart of the project.
- Although the structures that are in place in Blackpool provide good examples of explicit, formal processes of communication and debate between chief executives and the community, the community members are not included in the professional BBS Executive Board, and without consulting more widely, it is difficult to know to what extent community board members are all happy with the current structure of the two Boards. Furthermore, integrated (i.e. professional and community members) executive boards appear to be operating successfully in the other ABS sites. This form of 'linking social capital' is essential to generate political efficacy and trust, which are in turn linked to community participation and mobilisation.

- **Integration of key stakeholders:** The formulation of structures and mechanisms to enable integration of the Council and other key stakeholders within BBS means that their strategic goals are aligned, and have multiple short- and long-term benefits. The representation of senior public-sector leaders on the Executive Board (and as leaders of working groups) enables a 'circuit' of communication that in turn enables services to work together efficiently. For example, the Directorate of Place – Housing and Environment – plays a key role in outreach and referral of families in social housing, and is also working on ways to contact families in private rented accommodation. Chief executives on the Executive Board have the power to implement decisions quickly, and once an agreement has been reached with the Community Board and Finance on a course of action it is quickly operationalised, meaning that systems change also happens quickly.
- **Service level agreements** provide another example of the development of structures and mechanisms for engagement in accordance with the council strategy to create work for local people, BBS seeks wherever possible to offer service level agreements to organisations in the area. By offering a range of contracts on a scale that local partners can manage, BBS avoids 'path dependence' (see section 3.2.2 above) and helps to upskill local organisations. Although this takes considerably more effort than contracting-in a national level service provider to deliver a single, large project, it fosters a great deal of local community involvement.
- **Mechanisms for resolving conflict and dissent:** Any resilient community requires space for open dissent; where power is unequal, it is extremely important that decisions are not imposed on those who disagree. A study addressing the processes that aid participation concluded that participants' satisfaction was increased if they believed that their comments were taken seriously and that the resulting decision-making reflected their considerations (Halvorsen, 2003 in Johnson 2004). This case study shows that formal mechanisms and structures for resolving conflict (i.e. such as the use of mediation) were frequently used.
- **The provision of training pathways:** the development of formal mechanisms and structures for training volunteers was also in evidence. For example, the training for volunteers – which already met the national 'Investing in Volunteers' (IiV) standards prior to the implementation of ABS – was developed to include personalised coaching and guidance, including referral to other BBS programmes where latent difficulties (e.g. domestic violence, family mental health issues) emerged in the process of volunteer training, in addition to the provision of peer support.
- **The development of strategic posts:** The data also highlights the value of making investments in strategic posts that are explicitly focused on outreach and engagement.
- **The use of experiential learning:** The data suggest that volunteers have not only been enabled to become progressively engaged with the project but that they are then encouraged to lead implementation, and that this progression has been enabled by their involvement in activities that involve experiential learning. Experiential learning theorists have consistently observed that one 'cycle' of experiential learning usually leads to the desire to acquire more skills as "successive portions of reflective thought grow out of one another and support one another" (Dewey, 1933). The Blackpool case study shows how, for example, families experienced such experiential learning as a result of transitioned from hearing about 'five a day', to learning to make soup, and to actually providing their children with vegetables to eat on a daily basis.

4.2 The Importance Of Relationships

The findings of this case study suggest that while the board and management structures have provided the opportunities for staff to work together at all levels of the organisation, beyond this there has also been a significant focus on the importance of relationships and relationship-building. Across the four themes that were identified by this case study, relationships and relationship-building at all levels of the organisation, appears to be of primary importance. Although this is in part about having the necessary mechanisms in place to promote relationship-building (see 4.1 above), it focuses more explicitly at an individual level on issues related to the building of trust as well as addressing barriers to engagement and includes relationship-building at all levels, and identifying/addressing practical as well as emotional barriers to participation.

- ***Relationship-building at all levels:*** Relationship-building appears to extend from the executive boards through to the volunteers and service users. At executive level, community members are invited to fully participate in CV and are provided with the opportunity to contribute (including through the co-design and commissioning of services), although it is not possible to know at this point, to what extent having separate boards might be a missed opportunity for further relationship-building. At the level of the volunteers there is a focus not only on the development of personalised pathways but providing appropriate interpersonal support when it is needed, including support from peers. At the level of service users there are opportunities provided to develop trust through the skilled one-to-one work of staff and volunteers, many of whom draw on their own life-experiences to reach out to others in the community.
- ***Identification of practical as well as emotional barriers to participation:*** The findings of this case study indicate that effective relationship-building involves not only addressing the emotional barriers to engagement, but also the practical barriers to engagement, such as the difficulties associated with physically moving infants across town on public transport, even when transport is subsidised. Practical difficulties were addressed by strategies that included having events that were close to people's homes, easily accessible and free, and sometimes physically accompanying people to an activity for the first time. The findings also point to the importance of attention being given in terms of programme delivery to addressing the issues that are of primary concern for the parents, alongside flexibility in terms of other aspects of the programme such as its frequency and duration.

5. Conclusion

This case study involving interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders in BBS in addition to observation and documentary analysis, has identified a number of messages that are key to the successful engagement of the community in ABS services, regarding both its delivery and the receipt of services. Two key lessons emerging from the data are:

- 1) ***the need to create formal structures and mechanisms to promote engagement*** including board structures; mechanisms for the integration of key stakeholders; the development of service level agreements and mechanisms for resolving conflict; the provision of training pathways and strategic posts; and the use of experiential learning and;
- 2) ***a focus on relationships including relationship-building at all levels*** of the organisation and addressing both physical and emotional barriers to participation.

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7. Appendices

Appendix 1 - Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Please note, the items in this schedule were used selectively based on the interviewee

Introduction

(i) The context of the project

- What is the background and context of community organisation and networking in the area up to 20 years before ABS initiated? How has this shaped the ABS strategy and theory of change?

(ii) Objectives and strategy

- What is the vision for community engagement with ABS that has been developed by the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE)?
- Has this vision/goal changed since ABS began?
- What is the theory of change that has shaped the community engagement strategy?

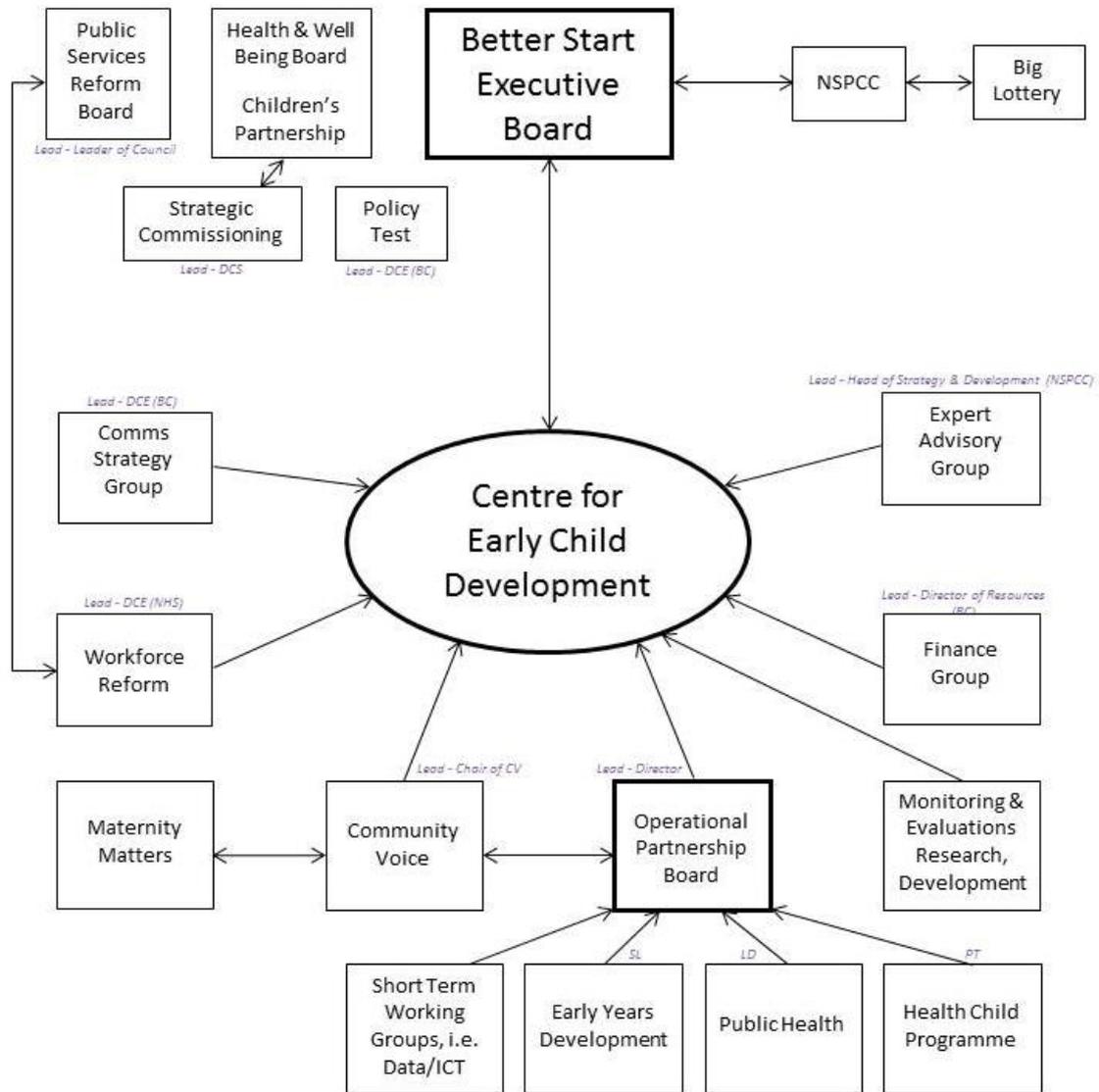
(iii) Mechanism/Process

- How did the VSCE identify key community organisations/stakeholders? On what basis were organisations prioritised for engagement?
- What strategies were used to engage, retain and optimise involvement of the community?

(iv) Outcomes and lessons learned to date

- What has been the 'progression' in community engagement since ABS was introduced?
- What are the levels of engagement (information, consultation, shared decision-making, shared action, support of independent action) (map onto a framework ladder for participation) at present?
- From the perspective of community organisations/stakeholders: what motivated engagement? What helped deepen their engagement? What hindered limited their engagement?
- What is the quality of engagement the quality of engagement (as perceived by participants in the process)?
- What challenges and difficulties have there been? Why?
- What are strategies to deepen community engagement and increase community ownership of ABS?
- What are the lessons learned?

Better Start Governance Structure



KEY
 BC - Blackpool Council
 CV - Community Voice
 DCE - Deputy Chief Executive
 DCS - Director of Children Services