

Blackpool Council



BLACKPOOL BETTER START SCRUTINY REVIEW FINAL REPORT

CONTENTS	PAGE
1.0 Foreword by Chairman	3
2.0 Background Information	4
3.0 Methodology	5
4.0 Detailed Findings and Recommendations	7
5.0 Summary of Recommendations	15
6.0 Financial and Legal Considerations	16

1.0 Foreword

- 1.1 As Blackpool Better Start reached its five-year half way point, Committee members felt it was an appropriate time to undertake a review of how the first half of the £45 million funding had been used and to determine how effective the projects had been, as well as looking ahead to proposals for the remaining five years.
- 1.2 Members recognised the importance of reviewing the projects undertaken by Better Start over the past five years and were eager to assess the impact of the work on Blackpool families.
- 1.3 In addition, the working group wished to consider the planned projects for the remainder of the scheme and to gain information on proposals for continuation and sustainability at the end of the ten year funding period.
- 1.4 As Chairman of the Children and Young People’s Scrutiny Committee and Lead Member of the review I would like to thank my fellow members who participated in the review for their thought-provoking contributions, all the staff and volunteers at Blackpool Better Start and the families who accessed the services and provided valuable feedback on their experiences.



Councillor Jane Hugo
Chairman, Children and Young People’s Scrutiny Committee

2.0 Background Information

- 2.1 At its Workplanning Workshop in July 2020, the Children and Young People’s Scrutiny Committee identified Blackpool Better Start as an area which they wished to review in order to ascertain the success and impact of the initiative since its inception in 2015.
- 2.2 A working group was subsequently formed and members were invited to attend the ‘Five Years of A Better Start Virtual Conference’ as well as being granted access to recordings of any sessions they had missed. This provided a wealth of background information and gave a real insight into the far reaching work undertaken by Blackpool Better Start.
- 2.3 The working group recognised the importance of engaging with users of Better Start services and despite the restrictions in place due to the Covid-19 pandemic, members sought feedback from Blackpool residents on their experiences of Better Start via the distribution of questionnaires. The results of which were reviewed and utilised to further inform the recommendations contained within this report.
- 2.4 The working group comprised of the following Scrutiny Committee members:
- Cllr Kim Critchley
 - Cllr Jane Hugo
 - Cllr Peter Hunter
 - Ms Helen Sage (Statutory Co-opted Member)
 - Cllr Andrew Stansfield
- 2.5 This review relates to the following Council priority:

Communities: Creating stronger communities and increasing resilience

3.0 Methodology

3.1 The working group held a total of five meetings, in addition to attending the ‘Five Years of A Better Start Virtual Conference’ and conducting a survey of end-users of Better Start services. The meetings drew on data and experience from a wide range of contributors, as detailed below:

Date	Attendees	Purpose
4 November 2020	<p>Five Years of A Better Start Virtual Conference</p> <p>Access was granted to all members of the working group and Elaine Ireland, Senior Democratic Governance Adviser as the supporting officer. Any missed sessions could be watched at a later date.</p>	To provide an introduction and broad overview of the achievements and aspirations of Blackpool Better Start.
2 December 2020	<p>Councillors Jane Hugo (in the Chair), Andrew Stansfield, Peter Hunter, Kath Benson and Ms Helen Sage</p> <p>Merle Davies, Director, Centre for Early Child Development Clare Law, Deputy Director, Centre for Early Child Development Colette Golcher, Senior Manager Early Years/SEN Mel Farman, Development Manager Colin Smy, Community Engagement Officer Simone Moore, Health and Community Connector Sarah Peers, Health and Community Connector Vicky Walker, Development Manager Emma Lowrie, Senior Manager, Research and Evaluation Jo Mills, Better Start Trainer Rebecca Calvert, Better Start Trainer</p> <p>Elaine Ireland, Senior Democratic Governance Adviser</p>	Initial information gathering session.
9 December 2020	<p>Councillors Jane Hugo (in the Chair), Kim Critchley, Peter Hunter and Ms Helen Sage</p> <p>Professor Leon Feinstein, Oxford University Merle Davies, Director, Centre for Early Child Development Clare Law, Deputy Director, Centre for Early Child Development Emma Lowrie, Head of Research</p>	Further information gathering and data review.

	Elaine Ireland, Senior Democratic Governance Adviser	
1 February 2021	<p>Councillors Jane Hugo, Don Clapham, John Wing and Ms Helen Sage</p> <p>Robert Arrowsmith, Performance, Systems and Intelligence Manager</p> <p>Sharon Davis, Scrutiny Manager Elaine Ireland, Senior Democratic Governance Adviser</p>	Presentation on a data study into Children Born Into Care.
11 February 2021	<p>Councillors Jane Hugo (in the Chair), Kim Critchley and Ms Helen Sage</p> <p>Vicki Smith, Investment Funding Manager for the National Lottery Community Fund</p> <p>Emma Whitty Haddock, Volunteer Academy Manager</p> <p>Elaine Ireland, Senior Democratic Governance Adviser</p>	<p>Gathering feedback from the Lottery Community Fund as to their levels of satisfaction with Blackpool Better Start.</p> <p>To learn more about the work of the Volunteer Academy in connection with Blackpool Better Start.</p>
19 April 2021	<p>Councillors Jane Hugo (in the Chair), Peter Hunter and Ms Helen Sage</p> <p>Elaine Ireland, Senior Democratic Governance Adviser</p>	Review of findings and drafting of recommendations.

4.0 Detailed Findings and Recommendations

4.1 Context of the Review

4.1.1 The Better Start partnership in Blackpool was awarded £45 million over a ten year period and is led by the NSPCC. The partnership is made up of the Centre for Child Development, Blackpool Council, NHS, police and the community.

4.1.2 Better Start is funded by The Big Lottery and partners with the aim of delivering sustainable change to make Blackpool a place where parenting and child development is prioritised and communities are empowered to reduce risk and raise happy, healthy children.

4.1.3 Seven wards where families faced the greatest challenges were identified as the focus for the available funding:

- Bloomfield
- Brunswick
- Claremont
- Clifton
- Park
- Talbot
- Victoria

4.1.4 Blackpool Better Start delivers services for families from the point of pregnancy until the child reaches four years old.

4.1.5 Throughout the undertaking of this review, the working group wished to note the cooperation, support and helpfulness of the whole team and to extend recognition of the excellent work implemented across the town by Better Start.

4.2 Better Start Wards

4.2.1 The seven wards identified as being in the greatest need of support were acknowledged by the Lottery Fund, with these areas to exclusively be in receipt of funded intervention. Members were informed that projects are often piloted within one of the seven wards and then rolled out to other non-Better Start wards in order to implement town-wide improvements.

4.2.2 Whilst the working group recognised the beneficial 'ripple effect' which inevitably impacts neighbouring wards, data indicated that the initial focus on the original wards had been diluted.

- 4.2.3 By examining ward data covering the period of April 2015 to September 2020, the working group noted that 57 per cent of residents accessing Better Start services resided in non-Better Start wards.
- 4.2.4 In total, Blackpool Better Start has made £1.6 million of investment in eight parks and open spaces and six Children Centres since its launch. The Gardening Club was launched in April 2016 and the Early Years Park Rangers service was launched in June 2019, which includes a Forest School and outdoor engagement activities with green spaces. Not all wards have benefitted equally from this investment however, for example figures for Talbot ward reported that a total of only 29 children had attended a park ranger event in the developed parks and green spaces, compared to 606 children in non-Better Start wards. Similarly, a total of 1,865 children had taken part in Gardening Club activities across non-Better Start wards, compared to zero from Talbot¹.
- 4.2.5 Locality will clearly have an impact on the accessibility of such activities and other Better Start wards did report better outcomes with regards to the uptake of Gardening Club and park ranger activities. Victoria for example reported a total of 1,673 children engaging in park ranger activities and 52 children taking part in Gardening Club sessions. However, the disparity across the wards and between Better Start areas and non-Better Start wards was of concern to the working group.
- 4.2.6 Since its launch, Better Start has funded and delivered many activities for families and children across Blackpool, in a variety of community venues such as Blackpool Children’s Centres, libraries and parks. The data revealed that across non-Better Start wards a total of 3,681 children had attended 15,306 activities during that time. This compares to a total of 3,419 children accessing 13,743 activities combined across all seven Better Start wards. During the five year period, Talbot ward reported just 240 children had accessed a total of 708 activities. This would indicate that the focus has shifted from the original seven wards. Talbot data has been included as an illustrative example as this ward demonstrated the least overall take up of activities.
- 4.2.7 The data revealed a similar pattern across a number of funded initiatives, for example in September 2017 Better Start hired seven Community Connectors to connect families into local services. Then in July 2018 the team was expanded to include seven Health Connectors to support health initiatives across the town. When a Connector has made meaningful contact with a parent, offering advice or signposting to services, this is considered to be a contact point. Data on the number of parents who had generated a contact point revealed that 47 per cent of these parents who had made a meaningful contact with a Community Connector and 46 per cent of those making contact with a Health Connector lived in non-Better Start wards. The remaining parents were split across all seven Better Start wards with Talbot parents making up just 3.4 per cent of

¹ From ‘Blackpool Better Start by Ward: A Visual Representation.’

parents accessing Community Connectors and 4.8 per cent utilising the services of the Health Connectors.

- 4.2.8 Whilst the overall positive impact on Blackpool as a whole was recognised and applauded by the working group, members felt that services should be refocused to meet the needs of those residents living within the seven wards originally identified as needing the most support, with members questioning whether residents living in Better Start wards who have been identified as failing to adequately access programmes would benefit from the services on offer, or the methods used to promote them, being revisited.

Recommendation One

That Better Start should target funds to the seven wards originally identified for funding and in cases where residents of these wards are failing to access Better Start provisions the services on offer should be reviewed to ensure they are suitable and accessible.

4.3 Measurable Impact of Blackpool Better Start

- 4.3.1 'A Better Start' is a national ten-year programme running from 2015 to 2025 costing a total of £215 million. It was set up by the National Lottery Community Fund. Five Better Start partnerships were established across the country based in Blackpool, Bradford, Lambeth, Nottingham and Southend-on-Sea with the aim of supporting families to give their babies and very young children the best start in life.
- 4.3.2 The following outcomes form the basis of the Better Start partnerships:
- Improving children's diet and nutrition to support healthy physical development and protect against illness in later life;
 - Supporting children to develop social and emotional skills so they can develop positive relationships and cope with difficult situations;
 - Helping children develop their language and communication skills, so that they can engage with the world around them;
 - Bring about 'systems change', that is to change, for the better, the way that local health, public services and the voluntary and community sector work together with parents to improve outcomes for children.
- 4.3.3 The Centre for Child Development informed the working group that 'effectiveness factors' are in place to ensure the delivery of services which demonstrate evidence of supporting change. For example, Universal Baby Steps is an evidence-based antenatal programme which is delivered across Blackpool by Midwives, Health Visitors and Family Engagement Workers. Also, the enhanced Health Visiting programme, which was co-designed with Health Visitors and parents, incorporates eight family contact visits and continues until the child is 3.5 years old, concluding with an integrated school readiness assessment. This service has been developed with global experts to implement

- new ways of working, bringing Behavioural Activation and awareness of the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences into universal delivery.
- 4.3.4 As part of the review, the working group met with Professor Leon Feinstein, Professor of Education and Children’s Social Care at Oxford University. Professor Feinstein had been commissioned by the Centre for Child Development to undertake an impact assessment of Blackpool Better Start and as such members felt he would be a useful source of information when trying to assess the beneficial impact of Better Start interventions.
- 4.3.5 Professor Feinstein provided valuable insight into the complex nature of data collection and analysis; the requirements in place around the secure use of information and the need to de-personalise and anonymise personal data, as well as the necessity to submit data protection application requests in order to release data from the NHS. He also explained that impact could only be fully measured alongside the inclusion of a comparison group that received no intervention, but that this generated additional ethical issues around only providing interventions in certain geographical areas.
- 4.3.6 When seeking evidence of beneficial impact, the working group was informed that as a long-term system change, Better Start aimed to embed support for families and should not be considered a short-term solution.
- 4.3.7 Findings presented to the working group on Children Born into Care highlighted that the number of children under one year old entering the care system in Blackpool was extremely high when considered alongside national statistics and that a consistent pattern over the past six years was evident. Members were informed that the Council was reviewing which Better Start services were most beneficial for supporting vulnerable parents and that work was ongoing in conjunction with Better Start with regards to a service model redesign for this group of parents. The data also suggested that this group of parents could prove difficult to engage with and as Better Start interventions are reliant upon voluntary engagement, this could be problematic.
- 4.3.8 Key findings from the town-wide research² highlighted the following feedback from partners:
- Eligibility criteria for access to services resulted in many not being eligible
 - Services focussed on specific issues rather than on the whole person
 - Difficulty in achieving engagement from parents with complex issues
 - Insufficient communication between agencies
 - Too much time spent assessing and not enough direct work addressing issues
 - Insufficient work with parents after separation from their child
- 4.3.9 A meeting was held with the Investment Funding Manager for the National Lottery Community Fund in order for the working group to ascertain if the Lottery Community Fund was satisfied with the work to date of Blackpool Better Start. The feedback received was overwhelmingly positive, with Blackpool being praised for its commitment to partnership working and its engagement with the community. The requirement for

² From ‘Born Into Care – Blackpool 2019/2020’ Presentation.

- Blackpool Better Start to provide quarterly reports and Key Performance Indicator data to the Lottery Community Fund was in place and the Investment Funding Manager regularly undertook visits to Blackpool to meet with the Better Start team. With regards to outcome data, members were informed that there was no expectation from the Lottery Community Fund for evidence of significant impact until closer to the end of the ten year period in order to allow for interventions to become securely embedded.
- 4.3.10 Whilst the working group recognised that system change and longer-term interventions required sufficient time to make a measurable impact, they also noted that Better Start was at its five year point and anticipated that meaningful performance data would be available by this stage. Members were unsatisfied with the suggestion that impact could only be measured at the end of the ten year period and felt that the effects of interventions should by now be reflected across the town.
- 4.3.11 Examples of informal feedback from end-users of a range of Better Start services were presented to the working group and these provided a positive and complimentary appraisal of those activities accessed by a number of residents. The working group recognised the value of such feedback but raised concerns over whether those residents more desperately in need of support were able to access the services on offer and whether they were being adequately reached by the interventions in place.
- 4.3.12 The analysis work undertaken on Children Born into Care provided a valuable and detailed insight into the background of parents requiring support from a number of partners and the pattern of outcomes for very young children within the town. The working group strongly supported the service model redesign and welcomed Better Start's involvement, as well as improved consultation with those parents whose children had been removed to allow their involvement to co-produce and redesign these services.

Recommendation Two

That Better Start works in conjunction with the Council's Performance, Systems and Intelligence Manager to target future interventions, where appropriate, more specifically to those parents identified as being at risk of having their children taken into care, with a periodic review of the subsequent impact on the data of children born into care.

4.4 Communication

- 4.4.1 Blackpool Better Start holds an annual conference to inform stakeholders of its achievements and successes over the past year and to promote planned projects for the year ahead. There is also an active Twitter account with almost 2,000 followers and a Facebook page that is regularly updated. Blackpool Better Start's website is a comprehensive source of information and contains details of how families can get involved, as well as information videos and links to other services.

- 4.4.2 A driving force behind engaging with families is Better Start’s use of Community and Health Connectors. The Community Connectors work with families to let them know about events taking place at Children’s Centres. Two male Dad Community Connectors are also in post to help connect with dads in the community. The Community Connectors would usually attend Family Hubs, nurseries and community events to raise awareness of Better Start programmes, but have been unable to do so due to Covid-19 restrictions and unfortunately it became necessary to cancel all events during the pandemic. In response to the restrictions, the Community Connectors delivered over 600 Blackpool Better Start packs to parents of children aged 0-36 months which contained books, activities and guidance.
- 4.4.3 The Health Connectors provide information on health services and activities aimed at improving family health and wellbeing, such as dental hygiene guidance and advice on keeping fit and improving nutrition.
- 4.4.4 The working group produced a survey and utilised the services of the Volunteer Centre Blackpool, Wyre and Fylde to seek feedback from end users of Better Start. The responses provided many positive examples of residents accessing a number of provisions and highlighted the beneficial and worthwhile projects in place across the town. A recurring comment however was that of poor communication and a lack of available information about events.
- 4.4.5 Ward Councillors also raised the issue of communication, claiming that events in their wards were not adequately communicated to them and as such they were unable to inform their constituents of forthcoming opportunities which may be of benefit to them.
- 4.4.6 During the review, the working group was informed of the great many projects and positive programmes being implemented by Better Start across Blackpool, but prior to the review they had not been aware of many of the interventions in place. Concerns had previously been raised by Councillors as to the allocation of the Better Start funding and whilst much excellent work has clearly been going on, a lack of communication locally about such work was identified.
- 4.4.7 In recognising the excellent work undertaken by Better Start, the working group felt that wider publication of positive outcomes and community projects would help to raise awareness across residents who had not previously accessed Better Start services, along with a regular bulletin update to Councillors to keep them informed of upcoming events and ways in which they could get involved.
- 4.4.8 A lack of communication with the Voluntary, Community and Faith Sector (VCFS) was identified as a missed opportunity to engage more widely, particularly with faith leaders and was an area the working group felt could be improved upon. Links with homeless

charities was also identified as a potential route for Better Start to connect with young pregnant women who may otherwise not be reached.

- 4.4.9 There was an acknowledgement from the Centre for Early Child Development that more needed to be done in order to strengthen links with the VCFS, but Merle Davies, Director highlighted that Better Start had committed £125,000 to the refurbishment of a centrally based volunteer centre within Blackpool as well as having a commission to the value of £125,000 with the sector to grow volunteering roles and to inform communities about the work of Blackpool Better Start through Blackpool Community Voice.

Recommendation Three

That Better Start should produce a Communication Strategy within the following six months outlining how best practice will be better shared locally, with the aim of raising awareness of the positive outcomes of Better Start interventions and of upcoming events. This should address how communication will be improved with the Voluntary, Community and Faith Sector.

Recommendation Four

That Better Start should introduce within the next six months a regular update bulletin to Councillors informing them of recent achievements and forthcoming events, as well as information on how they can get involved in any programmes.

4.5 Future Sustainability

- 4.5.1 The working group discussed concerns over future sustainability of Better Start projects and questioned whether plans were in place to ensure the longevity of programmes once the funding ceased in 2025.
- 4.5.2 Members were reassured to hear that sustainability and legacy planning had been built into many of the Better Start programmes with a succession plan embedded into the training of volunteers and partners to allow for the continuation of selected projects once funding ended.
- 4.5.3 The working group was informed that as Better Start was half way through its funding, the focus of the programme would now be shifting to place more emphasis onto securing future sustainability.

Recommendation Five

That the Children and Young People’s Scrutiny Committee receives annual updates from Better Start on the progress of sustainability planning of Better Start programmes.

5.0 Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation One

That Better Start should target funds to the seven wards originally identified for funding and in cases where residents of these wards are failing to access Better Start provisions the services on offer should be reviewed to ensure they are suitable and accessible.

Recommendation Two

That Better Start works in conjunction with the Council's Performance, Systems and Intelligence Manager to target future interventions where appropriate more specifically to those parents identified as being at risk of having their children taken into care, with a periodic review of the subsequent impact on the data of children born into care.

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Recommendation Four

That Better Start should introduce within the next six months a regular update bulletin to Councillors informing them of recent achievements and forthcoming events, as well as information on how they can get involved in any programmes.

Recommendation Five

That the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee receives annual updates from Better Start on the progress of sustainability planning of Better Start programmes.

6.0 Financial and Legal Considerations

6.1 Financial

6.1.1 The recommendations resulting from this review do not impact on Blackpool Council budgets.

6.2 Legal

6.2.1 There are no legal implications arising from this review.

Blackpool Better Start Scrutiny Review Action Plan

Recommendation		Cabinet Member's Comments	Rec Accepted by Executive?	Target Date for Action	Lead Officer	Committee Update
R1	That Better Start should target funds to the seven wards originally identified for funding and in cases where residents of these wards are failing to access Better Start provisions the services on offer should be reviewed to ensure they are suitable and accessible.				Director of Centre for Child Development	
R2	That Better Start works in conjunction with the Council's Performance, Systems and Intelligence Manager to target future interventions where appropriate more specifically to those parents identified as being at risk of having their children taken into care, with a periodic review of the subsequent impact on the data of children born into care.				Director of Centre for Child Development Performance, Systems and Intelligence Manager	

Recommendation		Cabinet Member's Comments	Rec Accepted by Executive?	Target Date for Action	Lead Officer	Committee Update
R3	That Better Start should produce a Communication Strategy within the following six months outlining how best practice will be better shared locally, with the aim of raising awareness of the positive outcomes of Better Start interventions and of upcoming events. This should address how communication will be improved with the Voluntary, Community and Faith Sector.				Director of Centre for Child Development	
R4	That Better Start should introduce within the next six months a regular update bulletin to Councillors informing them of recent achievements and forthcoming events, as well as information on how they can get involved in any programmes.				Director of Centre for Child Development	
R5	That the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee receives annual updates from Better Start on the progress of sustainability planning of Better Start programmes.				Director of Centre for Child Development	