



Evaluation of the Big Lottery Fund Improving Futures Programme

Year 3 Evaluation Report: Summary Report



June 2016

James Ronicle and Catie Erskine



The Improving Futures programme was launched by the Big Lottery Fund ('the Fund') in March 2011. The programme provided funding to 26 pilot projects across the UK, to test different approaches to improve outcomes for children living in families with multiple and complex needs. In October 2011, the Fund awarded an evaluation and learning contract to a consortium led by Ecorys UK with Ipsos MORI, Professor Kate Morris and Family Lives.

This is the third interim report for the evaluation. The report focuses on good practice developed by the Improving Futures projects, assessing both models of practice, lessons learnt and the extent to which the projects have shared good practice with public services and other Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise organisations (VCSEs). Specifically, the third report takes a thematic approach and puts a spotlight on the following key aspects of project implementation:

1. Building relationships with primary schools
2. Building community resilience
3. Strengthening families' social and emotional wellbeing

The previous annual evaluation reports can be found at: www.improvingfutures.org.

Progress update

"The project is going from strength to strength." (Improving Futures Project Manager)

The projects have progressed well over the last 18 months. Many project managers feel their projects have now become firmly established in the local area and they are developing their delivery models, tweaking them to build on the aspects that are going particularly well.

As at 7th March 2016, we estimate the Improving Futures projects had collectively supported 7,062 families.¹ On average each project had supported 272 families, ranging from 147 to 496. This variation reflected the project's varied support models and support intensity.

On the whole projects are making good progress with the families that have exited from the support; on average the number of families facing each of the most pressing problems has reduced by a quarter. Particular areas of progress include:

- The percentage of families with children with persistent, disruptive and violent behaviour halved (from 17% [469 families] to 8.5% [238 families] – a reduction of 231 families).
- The percentage of families with parenting anxiety or frustration fell by a third (from 64% [1,786] to 43% [1,188] – a reduction of 598).

The projects are, however, entering a difficult time and sustainability remains a problem. It looks unlikely at this stage that all of the projects will continue after their Big Lottery Fund grants, though considering this was a pilot programme it would have been unrealistic to expect all of the projects to obtain further funding.

¹ In early 2016 the Big Lottery Fund asked all projects to report the number of families they had supported. 21 of the 26 projects responded and provided data. In total, these projects had supported 5,704 families. To estimate the total number of families that were supported, we assumed each of the five projects for which data were missing supported the average number of families per project (272).

Building relationships with primary schools

“The success of having the project was before it was just teachers, school nurse, and we would try to think, ‘What can we put in place for these families?’, and with [Improving Futures], often they can say to us, ‘Oh, that’s something the...project can do’, so straightaway we’ve got something.” (Teacher)

The Improving Futures projects have broken new ground in their work with primary schools. There are very few examples in available research of voluntary educational partnerships where the VCSE provider provides a holistic support package for the whole family whilst being based within primary schools. Given the large number of Improving Futures projects adopting this approach, the evaluation provides a unique opportunity to fully understand the strengths and challenges of such a model. The evaluation has found this approach to be a success. Schools and VCSEs have built strong working partnerships that have had mutual benefits: they have strengthened partnership working, helped families engage in both the schools and the projects and have led to knowledge transfer. Families have achieved significant progress in a number of school-based areas, including improved behaviour, attainment and parental engagement with the schools.

The evaluation has also highlighted some of the limitations of this approach, however. Engaging schools is difficult. Also, some schools do not seem to be prioritising parental engagement or the ‘whole child/family’ approach, according to some of the Improving Futures projects and families in the Family Panels. Projects have, however, learnt a lot of lessons in ‘what works’ in engaging schools, many of which are documented in the full report and can be applied by other VCSE organisations. The research has also warned of the dangers of a project focusing too much on one setting (for example one primary school, which can exclude families either not engaged with that setting or who are moving on to other settings, and of the importance of taking a ‘dual approach’ and working across multiple settings.

Finally, the research has highlighted the challenges that the voluntary sector can face in accessing school funds. Projects need to focus on how they are going to access school funds from the outset, and design the service to meet this goal. In an era in which schools are increasingly going to take on the role of the ‘commissioner’, VCSEs and grant funders like the Big Lottery Fund need to focus more closely on how projects can be commissioned by schools.

Building community resilience

“Sometimes being a parent can be very lonely. Some of these parents - the people they communicate with in the service are probably the only place that they come into contact with. And they go back to their private and lonely living, but they have actually taken away some energy with them...A happy parent makes a happy child. And you look forward to coming back.” (Parent)

The Improving Futures projects have demonstrated the wide range of possibilities in how family projects can build and utilise community assets and link families into these assets. They have succeeded in some areas, and struggled in others, but in their pursuits have learnt a lot of lessons that other projects can build on. The projects have also highlighted the positive impact that community engagement can have on families – reducing their social isolation, increasing their support networks and building their confidence. Utilising community volunteers seems particularly effective; it can engage hard to reach families and act as a stepping stone for families leaving the project to further build their confidence.

However, the work of the Improving Futures projects has also highlighted the limitations of community work – whilst it is possible to build and utilise community assets in a relatively short period of time these are not necessarily going to engage all aspects of the community. The real challenge also lies in the ability to ensure they become self-sustaining. Both these points are echoed in other studies of efforts to build community assets, suggesting that this work risks ‘burn out’ if left to operate on its own. As The RSA point out in their [‘Connected Communities’](#) report², in an era of cuts to local authority budgets, where community services like children’s centres are being disproportionately affected, the ability for services to build community assets is much curtailed. Nonetheless, a number of the Improving Futures projects have used the available spotlight provided by the programme to showcase the benefits of an asset-based model, and some of them show the promise for sustainability.

Strengthening families’ emotional and social wellbeing

“I went to all the courses - strengthening families, and communities, empowerment for parenting, but I couldn’t express myself. Then I started to tap into myself properly and realised that I had lost my confidence, I had met everything I was meant to but I wasn’t myself, so I went to another one which was about self-esteem, which has made such difference.” (Parent)

The mental health support provided by Improving Futures projects can appropriately be divided into two parts:

- promoting wellbeing and resilience; and
- supporting diagnosed mental health illness and signposting to more specialist services.

The projects provide a range of practice examples in promoting emotional wellbeing, from delivering specific courses to children and adults, to arranging activities and days out to improve family relationships. Almost all of the approaches by the projects embedded what is known about what works in promoting positive mental health in families – particularly around:

- addressing the wider environment for the child;
- reducing stressors on the family through practical help; and
- providing courses and training to improve confidence and skills for employment for parents.

The evidence that stress, anxiety and social isolation reduced over the course of the programme reflects the experiences reported by projects: that their approaches supporting families were effective in improving wellbeing. There was also evidence that the prevalence of self-harm decreased slightly by the time families exited the programme. Many of these projects therefore can be used to build the portfolio of different ways to support the wellbeing of whole families through an early-intervention programme.

The other side of mental health support through the Improving Futures Programme relates to providing guidance and support to families with suspected or diagnosed mental health illnesses. This highlights the important role of early intervention services in raising awareness and supporting access within vulnerable groups who may be isolated or not aware of their own needs. Some projects embedded clinical support within their services, such as counselling, which was effective as the support was then easier to access.

² Matthew, P. et al, 2015. *Community Capital: The Value of Connected Communities*. RSA, London. See: <https://www.thersa.org/discover/publications-and-articles/reports/community-capital-the-value-of-connected-communities>

Projects that were not able to provide any direct access to specialist services were limited in how they supported families, as they relied on referring the family to statutory services, which sometimes had long waiting lists.

Almost all projects needed to refer families to a specialist mental health service, such as CAMHS, in some capacity during the course of the programme. This report has highlighted the range of challenges experienced in accessing appropriate support.

Going forwards the Improving Futures projects present learning for preventative and early intervention services in the benefits of promoting positive mental health and in working collaboratively with statutory services. For the support to be more effective though, projects need to have access to reliable specialist services to support individual and families with a higher level of need.

Influencing learning

"There's been a lot of value in the [Improving Futures] experiment...We're working closely and comparing and contrasting approaches....They enhance our understanding." (Local authority representative)

In the main the Improving Futures programme has achieved its aim of improving learning and sharing best practice between public services and VCSEs. The programme provided opportunities for the Improving Futures delivery partners to collaborate with other VCSEs and public services and, although not explicitly pursued by most projects, this led to the sharing of learning between the partners and other VCSEs and public services. The main services to have benefited from the knowledge transfer seem to have been schools, who learnt more about how to support children with behavioural difficulties and how to engage with the whole family, and local authorities, who learnt a lot from comparing their own family support with the approaches adopted by the Improving Futures projects.

In most cases this knowledge transfer was tacit and intangible – leading to a greater understanding about how to support the whole family at an early intervention level but not necessarily changing specific delivery models or approaches. Perhaps because the learning was intangible, coupled with public services prioritising their own 'in house' provision, this explains why there are few examples of where the Improving Futures projects have been replicated or mainstreamed as a whole project.

Conclusions and evaluation next steps

Overall the Improving Futures projects have progressed well in their third year. The projects are becoming firmly established in their local areas and are well regarded by local stakeholders. On the whole projects have made good progress with the families that have exited from the support.

This report provides numerous examples where projects have developed good practice and learnt lessons, leading to positive outcomes. It also seems that the Improving Futures projects have been successful in sharing these lessons with other VCSE organisations and public services, though this has not necessarily changed specific delivery models or led to the replication of these approaches.

The projects are now entering their final year, in which a key focus is securing future funding. Many have been having ongoing conversations with local authorities and schools in particular around how the support can be sustained. However, it looks unlikely that many of the projects will continue after their Big Lottery Fund grants end in their current form, though some aspects of the services could be sustained.

This is the penultimate evaluation report, and the final report will be published in Spring 2017. The final report will provide an overall assessment of the achievements of the Improving Futures programme. It will also report on the extent to which the programme has led to sustained outcomes, based on the longitudinal survey results of at least 100 beneficiaries surveyed two years after their support began. Finally, the final report will review the cost effectiveness of the programme, and will include a detailed Cost Benefit Analysis (CBA) of four projects and an overall CBA for the programme.