



**NATIONAL
LOTTERY FUNDED**

Evaluation of the Big Lottery Fund Improving Futures Programme

Synthesis Report



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Foreword

This document is the final synthesis report for the evaluation of the Improving Futures programme, which was carried out by a consortium led by Ecorys UK on behalf of the Big Lottery Fund between 2011 and 2017. This report provides a summative account of the evaluation, and can be read as a stand-alone report.

Those wishing to delve deeper into the evidence should read the annual reports, learning reports and Technical Report, all of which are available on the Improving Futures website: www.improvingfutures.org. Specifically, the associated evaluation reports provide the following information:

- **Improving Futures Evaluation - Summary:** provides a summary of the main findings from the evaluation.
- **End of Year 1 Evaluation Report - Implementation:** summarises the lessons learnt in establishing the projects, and provides an overview of the baseline characteristics of the families engaged.
- **End of Year 2 Evaluation Report - Delivery models and early outcomes:** provides detailed information on the approaches adopted by the projects, drawing upon the year two process evaluation data.
- **End of Year 3 Evaluation Report - Emotional wellbeing, building relationships with primary schools, community resilience and sharing learning:** provides deeper insight into three themes that were a particular focus for the Improving Futures projects: building relationships with primary schools, building community resilience, and strengthening families' social and emotional wellbeing. It also assesses the extent to which the programme achieved its third aim: Improved learning and sharing of best practice between public services and voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations (VCSEs).
- **End of Year 4 Evaluation Report - Sustained outcomes and cost effectiveness:** provides detailed information on the final set of outcomes achieved by the project, the extent to which these outcomes were sustained up to two years after the support began (drawing on the longitudinal survey of beneficiaries), and reports on the Cost Benefit Analysis of the programme.
- **Technical Report:** provides more detailed information on the methodology and underpinning data.
- **Making a Difference for Vulnerable Families - Event Learning Booklet:** documents the learning from a national conference organised to disseminate the interim findings of the evaluation.
- **Improving Futures Learning Event Booklet:** documents the learning from a learning event with the Improving Futures projects in 2014.
- **Learning Paper - Fathers and Families:** provides guidance to parenting practitioners on how to engage and support fathers, based on research and case studies from the Improving Futures projects.
- **Learning Paper - Top Tips for the Voluntary Sector in Establishing Support for Families with Complex Needs:** This short guide provides top tips for other VCSEs wishing to set up support families with complex needs, based on the experiences of the Improving Futures projects.
- **Learning Paper - Strengthening Families' Social and Emotional Wellbeing:** provides guidance to practitioners on how to support families' social and emotional wellbeing, based on research and case studies from the Improving Futures projects.
- **Learning Paper - Working with Primary Schools:** provides guidance to VCSEs on establishing working relationships with primary schools, based on research and case studies from the Improving Futures projects.
- **Learning Paper - Building Community Resilience:** provides guidance to practitioners on building families' links with the local community and developing community assets, based on research and case studies from the Improving Futures projects.

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Executive Summary

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 in order to test different approaches to improve outcomes for children living in families with multiple and complex needs. The programme was originally £26m, though the Fund extended the programme in March 2015, bringing the total value of the programme to £30.5m, providing each project with a total grant of on average £1.07m¹. The programme had three aims:

- Aim 1: New approaches to local delivery that demonstrate replicable models which lead to more effective, tailored and joined-up support to families with multiple and complex needs
- Aim 2: Improved outcomes for children in families with multiple and complex needs
- Aim 3: Improved learning and sharing of best practice between public services and voluntary community and social enterprise organisations (VCSEs)

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. The evaluation was funded over a six-year period, with the aim of providing a robust and independent evaluation of the effectiveness and impact of the programme, alongside continuous learning and dissemination activities.

This document is the final synthesis report for the evaluation of the Improving Futures Programme. It provides an overarching assessment of the programme's achievements against its three aims stated above, and assesses the programme's return on investment.

Progress against Aim 1: New Approaches to local delivery, demonstrating replicable models which lead to more effective, tailored and joined-up support for families with multiple and complex needs

Broadly speaking, the programme did meet this aim. Although not all of the approaches were necessarily 'new', the projects drew upon a range of evidence-based practices from the fields of parenting, family support, play therapy and community development, among others, and adapted them to different local contexts, with a consistent focus on early intervention. The approaches were also, in the main, effective – they engaged families and they achieved a good range of outcomes.

The Improving Futures principles summarise the approaches (see **Table 1**); central to this was the relationship between the families and their key workers, which was dependent on the personal qualities of the key workers, particularly in being respectful, approachable and personable.

¹ Exact figure £1,065,839.92.

Table 1: Improving Futures Principles

1. **Relationship-based:** Having a single key worker building relationships and trust over time, adopting a respectful approach
2. **Participative:** Active participation by families in assessment and service planning
3. **Whole family:** Working with the whole family to identify and address needs
4. **Working at the families' pace:** Flexible and variable support, working alongside the family and responding to their changing circumstances
5. **Strength-based:** Building families' self-belief, resilience and capabilities to manage their own lives
6. **Supported referrals:** Supporting families to engage with other services, including acting as an advocate
7. **Support networks:** Building links with other peers and the community

Progress against Aim 2: Improved outcomes for children in families with multiple and complex needs

The Improving Futures projects achieved a good range of the intended outcomes for children and adults in families with complex needs, and this aim was achieved to a considerable extent. In the short term, the projects achieved an overall reduction in the prevalence of risks that the families were experiencing between the start and end of the programme, and increased the average number of strengths. Outcomes were strongest amongst children, where overall there were large reductions in the number of children with behavioural problems and stress and anxiety. There were also improvements in supportive peer friendships and participation in positive out-of-school activities. There was a positive correlation between time spent on the programme and the extent of the outcomes achieved.

A number of outcomes showed little or no positive change in the short term, including gaining qualifications and entering full-time employment. The outcomes for families with children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) were greater on average than for the wider cohort of families. This provides a strong indicator that the projects were effective in support disadvantaged groups, as FSM provides a useful proxy measure for socio-economic disadvantage.

The follow-up survey with 156 families showed that the majority of outcomes achieved for children were sustained following a period of +24 months after support began. This was the case for children's home life, children's safety and children's wellbeing. However, the results for adults were less positive; employment levels increased only marginally (and most changes in employment were not attributed to the programme); and in a minority of cases there was deterioration in families' status regarding their financial problems, housing problems and adult stress and anxiety.

The analysis was based on practitioner-reported outcomes data, which was recorded in IFMIS in a comparable format for 3,630 families at the start and end of their involvement with the programme. A subset of 156 families were surveyed at +12 and +24 months after support began. Overall, there was a good level of concurrence in the findings generated by the different types of data. However, a quasi-experimental design using matched comparison groups did not prove feasible. As such, we can only hypothesise as to the outcomes that might have been achieved for families in the absence of the programme.

Progress against Aim 3: Improve learning and sharing of best practice between public services and VCSEs

The Improving Futures programme largely achieved its third aim of improving learning and the sharing of best practice between public services and VCSEs. The programme raised the profile of the VCSEs involved, and gave them a platform to share their learning with public services. They generally aimed to increase other services' understanding of families and promote their own approaches. Projects shared learning mainly through participating in local authority (LA) meetings, holding learning events and encouraging visits to their services. There was evidence that this sharing of learning influenced other services and led to changes; almost half (28 out of 57) of those responding to the stakeholder survey agreed that the Improving Futures projects had influenced local strategies, commissioning processes or decisions affecting service provision for families. 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 LAs (who benefited from comparing their own family support with the approaches adopted by the Improving Futures projects).

However, the projects were less successful in achieving this aim compared to the first two aims. It is very difficult to explain why the sharing of learning did not lead to tangible changes in other services, but it is clear that the projects were implemented in a challenging climate of public sector funding cuts and that competition rather than collaboration with statutory services acted as a barrier in some cases. It is possible, however, that more could have been achieved if sharing learning had been built into the project approaches from the outset.

Estimating the return on investment

The Cost Benefit Analysis (CBA) suggests a quantified benefit of 53 pence in every £1 spent by the Big Lottery Fund on the programme, as shown in the table below.

| Cost Benefit Analysis summary | |
|-------------------------------|---------------------|
| Cost to the Big Lottery Fund | £24.7m ² |
| Quantified benefits | £13m ³ |
| Ratio of benefits to costs | £0.53:£1 |

On balance, it is the view of the evaluators that, although the Improving Futures programme did not appear to lead to a net benefit in terms of short-term cost savings, the potential for it to have contributed to future longer-term savings means that it was a worthwhile investment.

² This is an estimate of the costs to the Big Lottery Fund of all 26 projects (see programme costs sub-section in the End of Year 4 report).

³ This is based on the benefits estimated per family (adjusted for deadweight and the likelihood of effects being sustained into a second year) which have then been grossed up the total number of families estimated to have been supported by the programme (9,279).

Conclusion

The Improving Futures programme was funded to test whether VCSE-led partnerships could improve outcomes for children in families with multiple and complex needs, by developing tailored and joined-up support to families and sharing best practice with public services. The evidence from the evaluation is that the programme was largely successful in meeting these objectives, albeit with a large degree of variation in what was tested and rolled out across the 26 local projects. The programme was an effective showcase for VCSE capabilities in service design and delivery, rather than playing an ancillary role to public services. It also provided numerous case studies of effective local problem-solving, and demonstrated the importance of schools and family services working together in partnership.

In looking ahead, the evaluation offers a number of recommendations for future policy and practice development in this area. We have listed these throughout the report. The main recommendations are as follows, structured around the themes of funding and service delivery:

Recommendations for funding:

- Recommendation 1: Build bridges between schools and family services
- Recommendation 2: Create space for innovation and reflective practice

Recommendations for service delivery:

- Recommendation 3: Invest in the early intervention workforce
- Recommendation 4: Track and compare outcomes to understand change for families
- Recommendation 5: Develop a stronger role for adult services
- Recommendation 6: Engage local commissioners to ensure sustainability
- Recommendation 7: Increase focus on support for adults, particularly fathers

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Improving Futures programme

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. The programme was originally £26m, though the Fund extended the programme in March 2015, bringing the total value of the programme to £30.5m, providing each project with a total grant of on average £1.07m⁴.

The Improving Futures programme was established to test three areas: whether there was a gap in support for families with children aged 5-10; whether family support was effective when VCSEs were put in the lead; and whether the learning from this could infiltrate into public services and lead to the roll-out of the most effective approaches. Specifically, the programme had three overarching aims:

- **Aim 1:** New approaches to local delivery that demonstrate replicable models which lead to more effective, tailored and joined-up support to families with multiple and complex needs
- **Aim 2:** Improved outcomes for children in families with multiple and complex needs
- **Aim 3:** Improved learning and sharing of best practice between public services and voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations (VCSEs)

Two criteria in particular influenced the approaches taken by the projects to identify families and assess their eligibility for support:

- **A discretionary approach towards assessing needs:** The Fund allowed grant holders to identify those families most in need of support. This meant that, although the projects supported families with broadly similar challenges, some focused on specific sub-sets of families. This included families suffering from or escaping domestic abuse, or families from specific minority ethnic communities. In the main, projects supported families whose needs were beginning to escalate and could not be met by universal services. A small number of projects focused on families whose needs were becoming more acute but who did not meet thresholds for statutory provision.
- **An age-based criterion for eligibility:** An age range of between five and ten years was initially placed on the oldest child at the entry stage. The rationale was to focus the programme on those children who fell between the gap for 'early years' and 'youth' provision. It was also to ensure a strong focus on partnership working between family-focused organisations and primary schools. This resulted in less involvement of youth sector organisations and providers with a focus on older age groups. In March 2015 the Fund removed this age restriction, following feedback from projects about the limitations this placed on the families they could support, as has been reported in the previous evaluation reports.

The age limit, coupled with the possibility of engaging at a lower level of need, combined to give the programme an 'early intervention' feel.

⁴ Exact figure £1,065,839.92.

1.1.1 The Improving Futures projects

The projects were diverse in their structure, target groups, and models of support and intervention. They ranged from 'whole family' assessment, planning and support, to classroom-based provision for pupils, mentoring activities, and capacity building actions such as the provision of training for families as community practitioners and 'asset' or resource mapping at a local level.

In the majority of cases, the projects operated within clearly defined geographical areas, such as school and community clusters or localities / wards with a high level of socio-economic disadvantage.

The projects operated for, on average, five years and seven months.

In **Table 1.1** we detail some of the broad approaches adopted by some of the projects, and in **Box 1** we provide examples of two of the Improving Futures projects.

Table 1.1: Delivery models adopted by projects

| Delivery model | Description |
|--|--|
| Community volunteers | Training community volunteers to support families, such as to undertake outreach work, one-to-one mentoring, or running peer-led groups. |
| Co-located multi-agency teams | Co-locating practitioners with specialist expertise from different services into a central team. |
| Basing projects in universal settings | Using universal settings as a 'base', including locating practitioners there, or having a room to run drop-in sessions. Settings included primary schools, GP surgeries, children's centres and community centres. |
| Spot purchasing / personalised family budgets | Allocating each family case a specific budget, which could be used to purchase specialist services and/or goods. |

Box 1: Examples of Improving Futures projects

Tyne Gateway

Tyne Gateway recruited and trained parents from the local community to be Family Entrepreneurs. These provided whole family support to other vulnerable families in the community. Referrals came from schools, professionals and self-referrals.

Sunderland Neighbourhood Alliance

This project was run by the Foundation of Light, based out of Sunderland Association Football Club's stadium. The project mapped 'micro-enterprises' in the local area to create a 'neighbourhood menu' from which families could access support. They also worked with local services, particularly schools, to train up 'neighbourhood friends' to act as an advocate for families.

1.1.2 Number of families supported

As of 3rd March 2017, we estimate the Improving Futures projects collectively supported 9,279 families.⁵ On average each project supported 357 families, ranging from 112 to 580. This variation reflected the projects' varied levels of funding, support models and support intensity.

1.2 Evaluation aims and methodology

The Fund commissioned a consortium led by Ecorys UK and including Family Lives, Ipsos MORI and Professor Kate Morris to evaluate the programme.

The primary aim of the evaluation was to rigorously assess the effectiveness (in terms of implementation and cost-effectiveness), impact and outcomes of the 26 Improving Futures projects and the programme as a whole. The evaluation supported the projects with identifying outcomes and measuring progress over time. It also focused on capturing and sharing learning across the programme, and disseminating to policymakers and practitioners across the UK.

The evaluation was sub-divided into three distinct work streams to achieve these aims:

- Project-level evaluations
- Programme evaluation
- Learning activities

These are described in further detail below.

The 26 bespoke **project-level evaluations** delivered as part of the national evaluation included case study visits to all 26 projects and agreeing a self-evaluation plan to generate information to feed into the programme evaluation. The nature of the case study visits was tailored to reflect the delivery of each project, but generally included:

- Interviews with project manager and director
- Interviews or focus group with core project staff
- Interviews or focus groups with partner organisations
- Interviews with families

⁵ In early 2017 we asked all projects to report the number of families they had supported. 15 of the 26 projects responded and provided data. In total, these projects had supported 5,353 families. To estimate the total number of families that were supported, we assumed each of the 11 projects for which data were missing supported the average number of families per project (357).

The overall **programme evaluation** drew on the project-level evaluations and other data sources, including:

- **Longitudinal survey of beneficiaries:** A total of 368 families were interviewed face-to-face on a rolling basis during the first four months of their support (baseline), with telephone and paper-based surveys scheduled at an interval of 12 months (310 interviewed) and 24 months (156). The baseline survey explored satisfaction with referral arrangements, support and key worker relationships, and the follow-up survey points sought to establish the extent to which outcomes sustained over time.
- **Monitoring data:** Analysis of outcomes data on families inputted by projects to the Improving Futures Monitoring Information System (IFMIS) – a bespoke database developed for the evaluation to record the characteristics of families alongside risk factors and strengths recorded by practitioners. IFMIS data were held for a total of 5,035 families at the time when the analysis took place for this report, including 3,630 who had exited from the support.
- **Project Survey:** A survey with the projects to gather information on their delivery models, and which aspects of their models they perceived were contributing the most to family outcomes. 21 out of 26 projects responded.
- **Stakeholder survey:** A two-wave self-completion survey with a sample of 20 local partner organisations and other local stakeholders for each of the Improving Futures projects (achieved sample in 2013: 340 respondents; achieved sample in 2015: 57). The survey aimed to gauge satisfaction with the programme, and to capture views on the impact it achieved at a local level.
- **Family Panel:** This brought together a sample of families receiving support from the Improving Futures projects to provide an overarching view of the programme. The panel met annually and included families from a range of the projects.

The evaluation consortium also oversaw a programme of **learning activities** for projects to exchange good practice within the programme, and to learn from and share best practice with other stakeholders. This included:

- annual learning events for all the projects;
- a series of webinars;
- a series of learning papers;
- a conference to disseminate the findings to an external audience; and
- annual policy roundtables to disseminate and discuss the findings with policymakers.

1.3 Report Structure

The report structure is devised so that the individual chapters map to each of the aims of the programme, as follows:

- In [Chapter 2: Programme design and implementation](#) we review the extent to which the programme's first aim was achieved: 'New Approaches to local delivery, demonstrating replicable models which lead to more effective, tailored and joined-up support for families with multiple and complex needs'. The chapter details some of the main approaches the projects adopted to support families, including the principles they worked towards, the types of support they provided, and some of the main delivery models. The chapter also summarises the main successes and challenges the projects faced during delivery.
- In [Chapter 3: Outcomes from the programme](#) we review the extent to which the programme's second aim was achieved: 'Improved outcomes for children in families with multiple and complex needs'. This chapter includes an analysis of the outcomes drawn from IFMIS, case study visits and Family Panels, and sustained outcomes reported in the longitudinal survey of beneficiaries.
- In [Chapter 4: Improved learning and sharing of best practice](#) we review the extent to which the programme's third aim was achieved: 'Improved learning and sharing of best practice between public services and voluntary and community sector organisations'. We firstly assess whether the Improving Futures programme fostered opportunities for public services and VCSEs to work together, before exploring the impact from this partnership working, including an analysis of what public services and VCSEs learnt as a consequence of being involved in the programme and what changed as a result.
- In [Chapter 5: Estimating the return on investment](#) we report on our Cost Benefit Analysis (CBA) of the programme, examining whether the programme generated cost savings in the short term.
- Finally, in [Chapter 6: Conclusions and recommendations](#) we bring together the preceding chapters to conclude on the overall success of the programme, and suggest recommendations for future early intervention programmes.

2.0 Programme design and implementation

“They [project workers] engage with these communities like nobody else can. They bridge between the communities and statutory services.” (Project manager)

This chapter reviews the extent to which the programme’s first aim was achieved: ‘New Approaches to local delivery, demonstrating replicable models which lead to more effective, tailored and joined-up support for families with multiple and complex needs’. It predominantly draws on the evidence from the case study visits to each of the 26 projects, consultations with the project managers, stakeholder surveys, Family Panels, and discussion groups with projects at the evaluation learning events.

Aim 1: New Approaches to local delivery, demonstrating replicable models which lead to more effective, tailored and joined-up support for families with multiple and complex needs

Did the programme meet this aim?

Broadly speaking, the programme did meet this aim. Although not all of the approaches were necessarily ‘new’, the projects drew upon a range of evidence-based practices from the fields of parenting, family support, play therapy and community development, among others. Furthermore, they adapted them to different local contexts, with a consistent focus on early intervention. The approaches were also, in the main, effective – they engaged families and, as we show in the next chapter, they achieved a good range of outcomes.

One of the objectives of the Improving Futures programme was to test whether VCSEs had the capability to ‘lead’ holistic family support services, rather than play an ancillary role as they had done in other family support programmes. The fact that the projects were effective and achieved a good range of outcomes demonstrates that the VCSEs were able to lead holistic family support services.

Despite the variation that existed, the projects demonstrated some common ground, as they generally worked to a set of consistent ‘principles’ for supporting families at an early intervention stage. Central to the approach was the relationship between a single practitioner (a ‘key worker’) and the family. Other important principles included: active participation by families in assessment and service planning; working with the whole family; working at the families’ pace; focusing on building strengths; supporting families to engage with other services; and building links with other peers and the community.

The evaluation found some good practices in joining up different services, particularly universal services and VCSEs. However, a number of areas for development were identified. Specifically, more could have been done to engage with partner organisations specialising in support for adults, especially in relation to employment and social care. There was also mixed success in engaging fathers. Finally, comparatively few (5 out of 15 of those that provided information) of the projects were sustained or replicated, despite being highly regarded by other local services. The rarer exceptions included where projects had secured follow-on funding from local authorities (LAs), Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) and schools.

Aim 1: New Approaches to local delivery, demonstrating replicable models which lead to more effective, tailored and joined-up support for families with multiple and complex needs

What are the key recommendations?

Recommendations related to funding:

- The evaluation evidence indicates that there should be a continued focus on supporting families requiring early support whose children are aged 5 – 10; the programme confirmed its initial assumption that there is a gap in support for this group of families.
- The Fund should consider structuring multi-annual programmes around two stages, as follows:
 - An initial testing and experimentation stage - enabling projects to refine their original design and to 'innovate' without the risks associated with rolling out a new and untested model; followed by
 - A subsequent main implementation stage – scaling up and rolling out some of the more promising models. This would involve implementing two to three models across multiple sites, using a more standardised approach including supporting families with similar needs and using the same measurement tools. This would enable more robust comparisons between the models, and lead to a stronger understanding around which are most effective. It is not possible to compare the efficacy of different approaches without this structure.
- The Fund might also wish to include an area-based element in grants, to enable a more strategic approach to filling gaps in provision.
- The Fund should experiment with different funding approaches that could lead to greater sustainability, such as involving local commissioners in distributing the grants to achieve more buy-in.

Recommendations related to organisational learning:

- Future programmes should have a stronger focus on sustainability, identifying future potential funders and designing the project specifically with their needs in mind.

Recommendations related to service delivery:

- Future early intervention projects should recruit and train practitioners to adopt a strengths-based approach for engaging and working with families. This should begin with a trusting and open approach to engage and build relationships with all family members, including both adults and children; a thorough understanding of different issues that may affect families with complex needs; and support for families to actively participate in shaping their intervention.

2.1 Were the approaches 'new'?

Key finding: Although not all of the approaches were necessarily 'new', the projects drew upon a range of evidence-based practices from the fields of parenting, family support, play therapy and community development, among others. Furthermore, they adapted them to different local contexts. This adaptation added something new to local provision, and the projects were in high demand.

The approaches adopted by the Improving Futures projects drew upon a range of models that were developed and consolidated through previous programmes. For example, the key worker model and co-locating practitioners with different specialisms were key aspects of the Family Intervention Projects (FIPs), introduced in 2006, and the spot-purchasing approach was trialled by Budget Holding Lead Professionals Pilot, which was also launched in 2006.

The additionality of the programme was in combining and reapplying these approaches to different contexts: adopting them at an early intervention level (as many of these approaches had typically been used within, or on the edge of, statutory services); providing a more therapeutic focus; bringing together services that may have not worked as closely before; and delivering the services through VCSEs, rather than public services. The projects did not, in the main, duplicate other support available, and in fact clearly filled a gap in support. Both referring services (particularly schools) and families felt that the services were offering something different.

The projects found that the families requiring early intervention support were not necessarily 'different' from families requiring more intensive and/or specialist support; their needs were less presenting, but the underlying complexity was similar. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that similar configurations of support were required to meet their needs, albeit at a lower level of intensity.

Recommendation:

- The evaluation evidence indicates that there should be a continued focus on supporting families requiring early support whose children are aged 5 – 10; the programme confirmed its initial assumption that there is a gap in support for this group of families

2.2 Was the support more effective?

Key finding: The approaches were, in the main, effective – they engaged families and achieved a good range of outcomes, albeit with some limitations. Despite the variation that existed, a number of common elements were consistently reported as being the most important when supporting families at an early intervention stage. Central to the approach was the relationship between a single practitioner (a 'key worker') and the family.

Overall, the Improving Futures projects were viewed by local stakeholders and families to be effective. In particular, they were well regarded in their ability to engage families, due to their informal and participative approach. In addition, many projects built strong links with universal services (particularly schools), which meant that families were familiar and comfortable with the support. In some areas this was recognised by local authorities (LAs), who referred families with whom they were struggling to engage. As we describe in the following chapter, the projects were also effective in addressing the majority of the families' most pressing needs.

One of the objectives of the Improving Futures programme was to test whether VCSEs had the capability to 'lead' holistic family support services, rather than play an ancillary role as they had done in other family support programmes. The fact that the projects were effective and achieved a good range of outcomes demonstrates that the VCSEs were able to lead holistic family support services.

In the smaller number of cases where the projects experienced less success, there was often a mismatch between the range and capacity of support offered by projects and the needs of the families who were referred. Project workers in particular described how families' needs were more complex than they envisaged. Consequently, projects struggled with ensuring a sufficient throughput of cases to reach all of the eligible families who were identified for support. In most cases this was due to changes in the local context – the case study visits identified that local organisations were referring more complex families to the projects than they envisaged. This was attributed to both the increased reputation of the projects, and reduced budgets and capacity in the statutory sector, resulting in families who previously would have been supported by these agencies being referred to the Improving Futures projects instead. In the main this was unavoidable, though projects also discovered that families with less complex *presenting* need still exhibited complex *underlying* needs, and so required more support than they originally envisaged. This resulted in some projects either providing less support to these families than they needed, or supporting fewer families overall. The learning point for future projects is not to underestimate the complexity of families, even at an early intervention level.

2.2.1 Improving Futures principles

A number of elements of the projects stood out as being consistently important, based on feedback from project staff, partners, and families. The evaluators were able to identify seven core 'principles' based on this feedback, refined by the projects during themselves during a learning event, which reflect the work of the projects. These are summarised in **Table 2.1**.

Table 2.1: Improving Futures Principles

1. **Relationship-based:** having a single key worker building relationships and trust over time, adopting a respectful approach
2. **Participative:** active participation by families in assessment and service planning
3. **Whole family:** working with the whole family to identify and address needs
4. **Working at the families' pace:** flexible and variable support, working alongside the family and responding to their changing circumstances
5. **Strength-based:** building families' self-belief, resilience and capabilities to manage their own lives
6. **Supported referrals:** supporting families to engage with other services, including acting as an advocate
7. **Support networks:** building links with other peers and the community

At the centre of the principles was the relationship between the frontline practitioner and the family members. The vast majority of projects adopted a 'key worker' approach, where a single practitioner was the main point of contact for the family. Families reported that their relationship with the key worker, and the trust they placed in them, were the most important factors in determining the success of the support. This was alongside the emphasis on empowering the family to make key decisions regarding the support they received.

"They're all so lovely and compassionate and you need that. The most important thing is to have a heart and that really helps because it gains trust, and once you've got that you feel a lot more comfortable."
(Parent)

The qualities of project workers were key to achieving this strong relationship, as is illustrated in the word cloud based on the qualitative interviews with families (**Figure 2.1**). In particular, project workers who had succeeded in engaging families were frequently described as being respectful, approachable and personable. They were also described as being ‘open’ in their approach and having a ‘neutral’ status. This was often contrasted favourably with social workers, Young Offending Teams and other statutory services.

Figure 2.1: Qualities necessary in practitioners to build strong relationships with families



Source: Family interviews during project case study visits. Size of adjectives generally represents the frequency of which they were used by families during the interviews.

Because of the weight projects placed on these attributes, for many projects finding the right members of staff was seen as essential in determining the success of the project. This was alongside ensuring that the training and professional development reflected the qualities and competences that were in demand.

Recommendation:

- Future early intervention projects should recruit and train practitioners to adopt a strengths-based approach for engaging and working with families. This should begin with: a trusting and open approach to engage and build relationships with all family members, including both adults and children; a thorough understanding of different issues that may affect families with complex needs; and support for families to actively participate in shaping their intervention.

2.2.2 Improving Futures delivery models

As we reported in the previous section, there was substantial variation in the delivery models and approaches that were adopted by the individual projects. Whilst each delivery model had its own strengths and challenges, no single model stood out as being universally more effective than the others, and the local context and needs of the families played a significant role. In **Table 2.2** below we summarise the main approaches adopted by the projects, and list their main strengths and challenges.

Table 2.2: Improving Futures delivery models and their strengths and challenges

| Delivery model | Description | Strengths | Challenges |
|--|--|--|--|
| Community volunteers | Training community volunteers to support families, such as to undertake outreach work, one-to-one mentoring, or running peer-led groups. | Able to engage and build relationships with families; they could relate to the families because they originated from the same communities and had experienced similar situations. | Can be difficult to recruit and retain. Male volunteers in particular were difficult to recruit, due to the stigma attached to working with children. Many volunteers that became involved did so whilst out of work; when they started work again they would cease volunteering. |
| Co-located multi-agency teams | Co-locating practitioners with specialist expertise from different services into a central team. | Created “ <i>merged expertise</i> ”; team members were able to draw on each other for specialist knowledge and support, whilst operating within a common structure, and shared arrangements for line management and supervision. This helped to overcome ‘silos’ in how different professionals operated. | Was difficult at times to agree clear processes on how practitioners from different organisations worked together. Practitioners needed continued contact with seconding organisation to avoid loss of specialist skills. |
| Basing projects in universal settings | Using universal settings as a ‘base’, including locating practitioners there, or having a room to run drop-in sessions. Settings included: primary schools, GP surgeries, children’s centres and community centres. | Led to services referring families earlier, as there were earlier opportunities to identify needs as they arose. Increased engagement, as families were more familiar and comfortable with the project setting. | Becoming too dependent on specific agencies potentially excluded families who had a negative relationship with that agency. This included schools, when parents had negative experiences of their own schooling. |
| Spot purchasing / personalised family budgets | Allocating each family case a specific budget, which was used to purchase specialist services and/or goods. | Enabled support to be flexible and responsive to families’ needs, whilst also empowering families by giving them a choice over what type of support they accessed, and from which services. Was used to purchase support difficult to access for free (e.g. counselling). | Was difficult for services to become adjusted to this way of working: spot-purchasing made referral numbers uncertain, and some VCSEs struggled to manage their capacity; there were also conflicts of interest as VCSEs were incentivised to use the budgets on their own services. |

The evaluators' ability to analyse the relative effectiveness of the different delivery models was hampered by the level of variation within the programme. Specifically:

- The projects provided a combination of different types of support, so it was not always possible to isolate the effects of one type of support from another.
- The projects supported families with different levels of need and circumstances. This meant that when one project made more progress in achieving outcomes than another it was not always possible to determine the extent to which this reflected the methods used, or the different types or levels of need.
- Although the evaluators introduced a standard monitoring tool (IFMIS), projects used different assessment tools, which meant that the underpinning data were not always captured consistently.

This is not a criticism of the programme design per se, as strong variation is needed to encourage innovation. However, some standardisation is necessary to test the relative effectiveness of different models. The following recommendation shows how this balance might best be achieved.

Recommendation:

The Fund should consider structuring multi-annual programmes around two stages, as follows:

- 1) An initial testing and experimentation stage - enabling projects to refine their original design and to 'innovate' without the risks associated with rolling out a new and untested model; followed by
- 2) A subsequent main implementation stage - to support the rollout of a smaller number of the more promising models. This would ensure better value for money, by re-focussing the grant expenditure on those projects that stand to achieve the best results. It would also lead to more standardisation in the programme, which would enable comparisons to be made between the approaches.

It will not be possible to compare the efficacy of different approaches without this structure. The Fund already structures some programmes in this way, and we would encourage the Fund to continue and further develop this approach.

2.3 Was the support joined up?

Key finding: The evaluation found some good practices in joining up different services, particularly universal services and VCSEs. However, a number of areas for development were identified. Specifically, more could have been done to engage with partner organisations specialising in support for adults, especially in relation to employment and social care. There was also mixed success in engaging fathers.

Many of the projects were effective in joining up elements of support. They were often seen as a 'bridge' between universal services and more specialist services. The strong links they developed with universal services (e.g. schools and GP surgeries) often ensured that there was earlier identification and a smoother transition into Improving Futures support. Furthermore, the projects were also effective at linking with some elements of more specialist support when it was necessary, such as medical services to diagnose ADHD/ASD, or with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) for a specialist assessment.

While the support was seen to be effective overall by families, some gaps and areas for development were identified. While these gaps tended to be project-specific, there were two common themes at a programme level:

- **Gaps in provision:** Projects sometimes encountered a lack of capacity among partner organisations. This meant it was not always possible to access the range of services that were needed (e.g. housing, health, or other specialist support). High service thresholds and the impact of public sector cuts were cited as two factors.
- **Limited support for adults:** Many of the projects were less successful overall in brokering access to support for adult family members. This issue partly reflected the child-centred aims of the programme, and the organisations they were working with (e.g. schools and child-focussed organisations).

These issues are further detailed in turn below.

2.3.1 Gaps in provision

Projects and families consistently reported that they struggled to find suitable affordable childcare, mental health provision (particularly for adults, therapeutic support and counselling), support for kinship carers, and support for children with additional needs.

To a degree, gaps in wider services were beyond the control of the projects. However, these gaps were identified in the [End of Year 2 evaluation report](#)⁶, and there was limited evidence that the projects adapted their approach significantly to fill these gaps in subsequent years. In particular, the extension funding provided an opportunity to reshape provision to ensure these gaps were filled, and there was no major evidence to suggest this was done. Some projects used spot-purchasing to buy in support that was not available through public services, and this approach could arguably have been utilised more. Given the length of the projects, and how early on these gaps were identified, it was possible that the projects could have done more to fill these gaps, particularly in how the extension funding was used.

Furthermore, the gaps in provision highlighted one of the challenges of providing the funding direct to individual/small consortia of VCSE organisations. Although the projects were linked in to local policy groups, the projects themselves lacked the strategic ability to fill gaps in provision identified. If the programme had a wider area-based approach, the Improving Futures grant could have been used to plug gaps in provision.

Recommendation:

- Include an area-based element in grants, to enable a more strategic approach to filling gaps in provision.

⁶ See pg. 31.

2.3.2 Limited support for adults

Some families interviewed felt that the support often focused on addressing the children's needs at the expense of the adults' needs. They reported that, whilst they received support for children-related factors, such as parenting skills, they received less support to address their own non-children related difficulties, such as their own mental health.

"Best thing for me, what people look at is children, children, children, but they don't take care of the foundation, that if they want better children, the mother needs help." (Member of Family Panel)

This in part reflected the child-focused aims of the programme, as the main objective was increasing outcomes for children. However, it is possible that this could have been mitigated through ensuring greater buy-in from adult services from the outset; project bids had to be endorsed by the local Director of Children's Services, but a similar endorsement from a Director of Adult Services was not required.

Moreover, projects and families reported that the projects tended to focus more on supporting the mothers than the fathers. To a certain degree this reflected the demographics of the families, many of whom consisted of single-parent families with absent fathers. However, where fathers were present projects generally reported that they struggled to engage them. Furthermore, parents interviewed felt that the services were not always fully geared up to support fathers, due to the limited support available outside working hours. The evaluation did find some examples of good practice in this area, with a small number of projects proactively seeking ways to engage fathers and boys in more innovative ways (see the learning paper: [Fathers and Families](#)). However, these were often 'add-ons' to the core service, instead of focusing on how the core service could be more father-friendly.

Additionally, most projects reported that they did not focus on supporting adults into employment to the same degree that they focused on other areas. Some projects interviewed were of the view that employment was beyond the scope of the project, particularly as the families' needs were too complex to be supported into employment in the time period they were engaged with the project. These projects felt that their support needed to be seen as *"just one piece of the jigsaw"* (project manager). Others, however, recognised that they had not made as much progress with employment outcomes as they had hoped, and had underestimated how challenging it would be to support families into, or even towards, employment.

Furthermore, comparisons with other similar programmes suggest that the Improving Futures programme could have done more to join up the family support with employment support. When the employment outcomes achieved by the Improving Futures programme are compared with other family-based support programmes occurring over the same time period (e.g. European Social Fund Support for Families with Multiple Problems⁷ ('ESF Families')), the Improving Futures programme made much less progress; 12% of participants towards the end of the ESF Families programme had achieved a sustained job outcome⁸, compared to 2% of families in Improving Futures. In addition, although the evaluation of the Troubled Families programme showed that the programme had no significant impact on employment, there were pockets of good practice in relation to linking up family and employment-focused support.⁹ In particular, the Troubled Families Employment Advisers (TFEAs) had more success in some areas, where they helped to broker access to the knowledge and data held by Job Centre Plus. They also worked alongside key workers to build their knowledge of employability issues and options.

⁷ Atkinson, I. et al (2016), Evaluation of the Department for Work and Pensions European Social Fund Support for Families with Multiple Problems, January 2016

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Day, L. et al (2016), National Evaluation of the Troubled Families Programme, Final Synthesis Report, October 2016

However, wider research also suggested that most family-support programmes struggled to help families into employment, compared to the progress they make against other indicators. This suggests there is still more work to be done in finding an effective solution to supporting vulnerable families into work.

Recommendation:

- Ensure equal engagement from adult as well as children's services, by requiring that Directors of Adult Services, as well as Directors of Children's Services, sign project bids
- Ensure the projects meet the needs of fathers by consulting with fathers during the project design stage
- Focus more on funding pilots examining how to join up family- and employment-support for vulnerable families, possibly through further testing the Families Employment Advisor approach developed in the Troubled Families programme

2.4 Did they demonstrate replicable models?

Key finding: Despite being generally well regarded by other local services, the evaluation evidence suggests that comparatively few of the projects were sustained or replicated within the funding period. The rarer exceptions of this included where projects had secured follow-on funding from LAs, CCGs and schools.

In principle the Improving Futures projects had the ability to be replicated. However, despite being well-regarded by local stakeholders, few of the projects were rolled out. In addition, comparatively few of the projects were able to lever in alternative sources of funding, or to persuade statutory agencies to commission the types of support that had been delivered during the programme. At the time of writing (February 2017) only 5 out of 15 projects that provided information had received follow-on funding, and two of these received funding from The Big Lottery Fund. Of the three that had secured follow-on funding outside of Big Lottery funds, they received funds from an LA, CCG and charitable foundations.

"Everyone has said how successful the programme has been but no one has actually been able to take it up." (Improving Futures Project manager, comment during project consultations)

It is very difficult to explain why the majority of the projects were not sustained. Many of the projects described how the funding landscape changed over the course of the programme – that when the projects began there was an assumption that if the projects were successful they would be funded by the LAs, but as local government cuts were introduced this was no longer possible. This assumption was confirmed by LA representatives interviewed. During the period the Improving Futures projects broadly operated (2010-11 to 2015-16) The Children's Society calculated that spending on children's centres, young people's and family support services reduced by 31%¹⁰.

¹⁰ See: <http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/news-and-blogs/our-blog/early-intervention-funding-faces-70-cut>

However, during the programme period funding was introduced specifically to provide early intervention support, which in the main the projects were not fully able to utilise – most notably phase 2 of the Troubled Families programme in England (which had an early intervention focus) and Families First in Wales. Based on consultations with the projects and with external stakeholders involved in the early intervention sector, there could be two possible explanations:

- **Support was too broad for specific funders:** Most Improving Futures projects were delivering a broad range of support and lacked a straightforward ‘delivery model’ that could easily be replicated. In the school context, for example, other VCSE support that received Pupil Premium funding (e.g. Achievement for All and Place2Be) was much more school-focused than Improving Future – they were almost completely school-based and focused predominantly on the child. Some stakeholders hypothesised that, as Improving Futures was not specifically school-focused, schools would struggle to justify using their funds. Indeed, the Improving Futures interventions that were funded by schools were more school- and child-focused (e.g. play therapy) than the broader Improving Futures support. Also, one project did report that they struggled to encourage schools to fund their provision because they were not offering universal whole school provision:

“We have learnt that the diversity of our offer, while a strength in terms of meeting the needs of different BME communities, may appear disparate to schools. We need a simple way to market the diversity of VCS provision. Schools are interested in services which are either one-to-one support or are run from a whole class or the whole school. They are reluctant to purchase initiatives which benefit a particular cohort, e.g. a short term programme for BME children or parents.”

(Comment made in Project Monitoring Report)

- It could be that the **projects were not sufficiently focused on sustainability:** All the projects received additional funds in 2015 to focus on sustainability. However, the majority of projects used most of this funding on project delivery. When interviewed the projects struggled to articulate how they were using this funding to focus on sustainability. Additionally, one non-Improving Futures VCSE interviewed that successfully encouraged schools to fund the provision themselves had sustainability built into the very design of the service. This included:
 - ▶ *Encouraging grants to be funnelled through the school:* They discouraged commissioners/funders from providing the VCSE with the funding, as this created the perception to the school that the support was free. Instead, they encouraged commissioners to provide the grant to the school, who used it to pay the VCSE.
 - ▶ *Tapering out the costs, so schools gradually paid for it themselves:* If the charity did receive funding for the provision, they discussed with the commissioner/funder and the school the possibility of tapering the funding. So for example the grant would cover 100% of the support in its first year, but in the second year the grant would cover 75% of the costs and the school paid the remaining 25%. Eventually the grant is fully tapered out, and the school pays for all the support.
 - ▶ *Ensuring the school was fully engaged with the support:* One way they do this was the VCSE and the school jointly appointed the practitioner working in the school.

It is understandable that this level of sustainability was not built into the Improving Futures projects designs from the start, considering they were pilot projects. However, there were lessons here that the projects and the Fund can learn from, including that projects could have focused more on sustainability as part of the extension funding. Some projects clearly did this, by for example asking schools to match-fund the Fund’s contribution. However, other projects seemed to focus more on continuing their service in a streamlined model rather than on securing follow-on funding.

Recommendations:

- Future programmes should have a stronger focus on sustainability, identifying future potential funders and designing the project specifically with their needs in mind.
- The Fund should experiment with different funding approaches that could lead to greater sustainability, such as involving local commissioners in distributing the grants to achieve more buy-in.

3.0 Outcomes from the Programme

“Everything has fallen into place and I’m able to get on with day-to-day things. She has really built my confidence back up.” (Parent)

This chapter reviews the extent to which the programme’s second aim was achieved: ‘*Improved outcomes for children in families with multiple and complex needs*’. The findings draw upon a detailed analysis of the outcomes drawn from the Improving Futures Monitoring Information System (IFMIS), case study visits and family panels, and sustained outcomes reported in the longitudinal survey of beneficiaries.

Aim 2: Improved outcomes for children in families with multiple and complex needs

Did the programme meet this aim?

The Improving Futures projects achieved a good range of the intended outcomes for children and adults in families with complex needs. This aim therefore was achieved to a considerable extent. In the short term, the projects achieved an overall reduction in the prevalence of risks that the families were experiencing between the start and end of the programme, and increased the average number of strengths. Outcomes were strongest amongst children, where overall there were large reductions in the number of children with behavioural problems and stress and anxiety. There were also improvements in supportive peer friendships and participation in positive out-of-school activities. There was a positive correlation between time spent on the programme and the extent of the outcomes achieved.

A number of outcomes showed little or no positive change in the short term, including gaining qualifications and entering full-time employment. The outcomes for families with children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) were greater on average than for the wider cohort of families. This provided a strong indicator that the projects were effective in supporting disadvantaged families, as FSM provides a useful proxy measure for socio-economic disadvantage.

The follow-up survey with 156 families showed that the majority of outcomes achieved for children were sustained following a period of +24 months after the support began. This was the case for children’s home life, children’s safety and children’s wellbeing. However, the results for adults were less positive. Employment levels increased only marginally (and most changes in employment were not attributed to the programme); and in a minority of cases there was deterioration in families’ status regarding their financial problems, housing problems and adult stress and anxiety.

The analysis was based on practitioner-reported outcomes data, which was recorded in IFMIS in a comparable format for 3,630 families at the start and end of their involvement with the programme. A sub-set of 156 families were surveyed at +12 and +24 months after support began. Overall, there was a good level of concurrence in the findings generated by the different types of data. However, a quasi-experimental design using matched comparison groups did not prove feasible. As such, we can only hypothesise as to the outcomes that might have been achieved for families in the absence of the programme.

Aim 2: Improved outcomes for children in families with multiple and complex needs

What are the key recommendations?

- Early intervention services should consider tracking and comparing outcomes achieved for families over varying periods over time. These data might be used to determine the optimum length and scaling of interventions, beyond which there are diminishing returns on investment.
- Undertake a meta-review of evaluations of UK family programmes, to determine their relative strengths and drawbacks with a view to informing policy development.

3.1 Are the findings reliable?

Key finding: The analysis was based on practitioner-reported outcomes data, which was recorded in IFMIS in a comparable format for over 3,630 families at the start and end of their involvement with the programme. A sub-set of 156 families were surveyed at +12 and +24 months after they first entered the programme. Overall, there was a good level of concurrence in the findings generated by the different types of data. However, a quasi-experimental design using matched comparison groups did not prove feasible. As such, we can only hypothesise as to the outcomes that might have been achieved for families without the programme.

It is possible to have a good level of confidence in the evaluation findings. Aspects of the design allowing for a good level of confidence in the results include:

- **Sample size and representativeness:** The Improving Futures Monitoring Information System (IFMIS) - a bespoke database developed for the evaluation to record the characteristics of families alongside risk factors and strengths by practitioners – held data for 5,035 families, including 3,630 who had exited from support. This enabled the evaluation team to undertake very detailed analysis. Furthermore, 368 families participated in a longitudinal beneficiary survey, including 156 providing information at least two years after their support began. This sample is small and not representative of all families supported by the Improving Futures. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalised to all families. It nevertheless gives insight into the potential sustained effect of the programme. Because of the missing data the findings on outcomes achieved at the end of the support is stronger than the follow-up data.
- **Triangulation:** The findings from the different data sources (IFMIS and qualitative research) all 'triangulate', i.e. their main findings are all consistent. This suggests they may be regarded as reliable.
- **Confirmed by participants:** The headline findings were 'tested' by project practitioners at a learning event and beneficiaries through Family Panels. Both groups agreed that the findings correlated with their own experiences of the programme.

Despite, these strengths, there are limitations to the research which mean the findings should be treated with some caution, and may overstate the outcomes achieved. Particular limitations include:

- **Professional bias:** All IFMIS data was based on the professional judgement of the project case workers and therefore inevitably carried some risk of bias. However, all risk and strength indicators corresponded with the assessment tools and frameworks adopted by the individual projects for their work with families.
- **Missing data:** Exit data was not available for 1,405 of the 5,035 families. This was either because these families were still receiving support when the data was analysed, or the project did not complete the exit record. While the families for whom exit data was available were broadly similar to the overall set of families who were signed-up to the Improving Futures programme, some differences remained.
- **Lack of counterfactual estimate:** One cannot infer that the changes recorded were due to the interventions received and may have been due to other factors such as changes in context.
- **Bias in sampling:** Both the qualitative interviews and longitudinal survey with families were based on voluntary and informed participation in the evaluation. A degree of response bias should therefore be anticipated, as those families with a more negative experience of the programme would also be less likely to respond to requests to participate in the research.

As with any primary research study of this kind, challenges were sometimes encountered with accessing and interviewing vulnerable families, particularly over long periods of time. This is because they can be wary about speaking to researchers, and can have transient lives. Even when families do engage in research, research techniques do not always capture the full picture (including practitioner assessments); families may be unwilling to disclose some information, they may simply not be aware that certain issues exist, and situations and issues may change quickly – so any information captured is only ever a snapshot. All of this means that the evidence gathered for any social study should be treated with some caution.

Further information on the methodology can be found in the Technical Report.

3.2 Did the projects support families with multiple and complex needs?

Key finding: The projects supported a vulnerable cohort of families, typically headed up by lone parents, and facing a range of risk factors. Risk factors mainly related to parenting difficulties, child behavioural problems, domestic abuse, educational underachievement, worklessness and stress and anxiety. Families often had more complex needs than the projects were expecting.

The majority of families supported by Improving Futures projects were lone parent families (61%). This was much higher than the share of lone parent families among all families in the UK (15%)¹¹, and more than the share of lone parent families in other programmes, such as the Troubled Family programme (48%)¹² or the most disadvantaged families registered with the Children Centres in England (53%)¹³.

¹¹ ONS (2016), Statistical bulletin: Families and households in the UK: 2016, 4 November 2016, [report here](#), accessed 25.01.2017

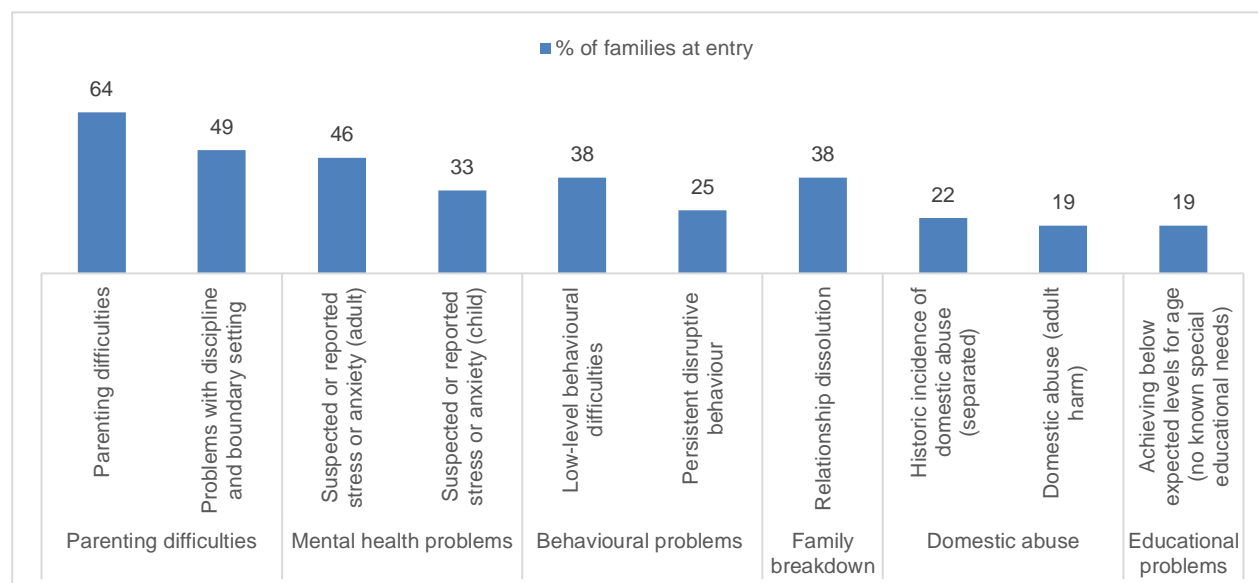
¹² Whitley, J. (2016), National Evaluation of the Troubled Families Programme, Final Report on the Family Monitoring Data p. 48; please note that this is based on a sample of the monitoring data collected by local authorities. A survey conducted in the context of the same evaluation found that 67% of families who participated in Troubled Families were lone parents.

¹³ Sammons, P. et al (2015), The impact of children's centres: studying the effects of children's centres in promoting better outcomes for young children and their families, DfE Research Report, December 2015: p. 103

The majority of families supported by Improving Futures were eligible for free school meals (FSM, 57%). Additionally, FSM status was unknown for 27% of families. This illustrates the relatively high-level of socio-economic disadvantage of Improving Futures families, which is higher than school-meal eligibility in all four nations: 14% of pupils were eligible for and claiming FSM in England in 2016¹⁴, 18% of pupils aged 5-16 were eligible for FSM in Wales in 2015/2016¹⁵, 38% of pupils were eligible for FSM in Scotland in 2016¹⁶ and 31% of pupils were eligible for FSM in Northern Ireland in 2015/2016.¹⁷

On average families faced eight risks when their support began. The ten most prevalent risks are shown in **Figure 3.1** below.

Figure 3.1: Ten most prevalent risks at entry



Source: IFMIS data, extracted 23.01.2017, based on 3,685 families for which entry and exit data were available

As mentioned in the previous chapter, projects reported that families' needs were often more complex than the projects were anticipating. Projects cited that they would quite frequently be referred families that appeared to be facing only parenting difficulties, but when the support began it became apparent there was a large set of underlying and unmet challenges. There was a general view amongst the projects that the needs of the families referred to them had increased over the projects' duration, as we explained earlier.

"It's meant to be early intervention, but in reality the families have more complex needs." (Project manager)

¹⁴ DfE (2016), Schools, pupils and their characteristics, January 2016, SFR 20/2016

¹⁵ Stats Wales (2016), Pupils aged 5-15 eligible for free school meals by local authority, region and year

¹⁶ Scottish Government (2016), School meals and PE supplementary data, healthy living survey 2016

¹⁷ DoE Northern Ireland (2016), Statistical Bulletin 4/2016, School Meals in Northern Ireland 2015/2016, 14.04.2016

3.3 Did families' outcomes improve during their support?

Key finding: For a substantial proportion of families their outcomes improved during their support. There was a reduction in the number of families experiencing the most prevalent risks between the start and end of their involvement with the programme. Moreover, the average number of family strengths increased from 10 to 14 over the corresponding monitoring period.

3.3.1 Changes in risks

Table 3.1 shows the progress made against the ten most prevalent risks. The findings are positive: in 8 out of 10 of these the number of families exhibiting the risk reduced from entry to exit.

Table 3.1: 10 most prevalent risks at baseline, exit and percentage change

| Domain | Risk factor | % of families at entry | % of families at exit | % change |
|------------------------|--|------------------------|-----------------------|----------|
| Parenting difficulties | Parenting anxiety or frustration | 64 | 43 | -32% |
| | Problems with discipline and boundary setting | 49 | 30 | -39% |
| Mental health problems | Suspected or reported stress or anxiety (adult) | 46 | 37 | -20% |
| | Suspected or reported stress or anxiety (child) | 33 | 24 | -27% |
| Behavioural problems | Low-level behavioural difficulties | 38 | 36 | -7% |
| | Persistent disruptive behaviour | 25 | 15 | -40% |
| Family breakdown | Relationship dissolution | 38 | 39 | +3% |
| Domestic abuse | Historic incidence of domestic abuse (separated) | 22 | 23 | +4% |
| | Domestic abuse (adult harm) | 19 | 13 | -33% |
| Educational problems | Achieving below expected levels for age (no known special educational needs) | 19 | 15 | -20% |

Source: IFMIS data, extracted 23.01.2017, based on 3,685 families for which entry and exit data were available

Most progress was made in reducing parenting difficulties, and the number of families with problems with discipline and boundary setting nearly halved. During the qualitative research there were numerous examples showing how the projects helped parents make significant changes in their households, improving their communication with their children and their confidence in their own abilities as parents.

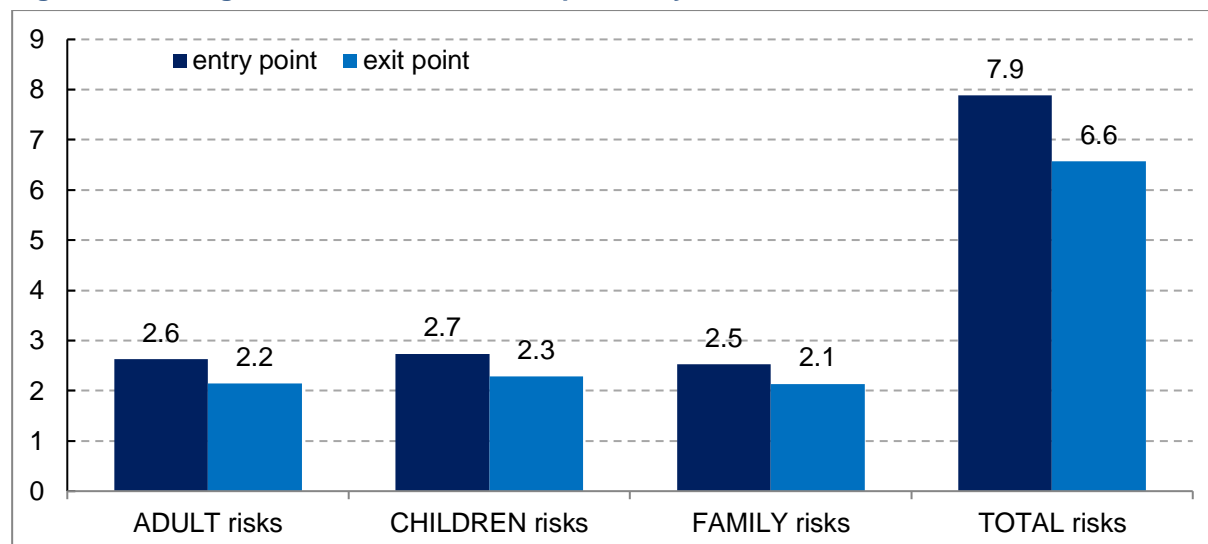
"The project has helped a lot as I was quite shouty, didn't really spend a lot of time with them. It shows you another way of dealing with them, wording things differently, and the difference is amazing." (Parent)

There was also a good reduction in the number of children facing behavioural problems, with the number of children with persistent disruptive behaviour also almost halving. During the qualitative research parents talked about their children being happier and more settled at school, receiving good feedback from teachers. One parent remarked during a family panel:

"I've got a different kid." (Member of family panel)

The total number of risks families exhibited decreased from entry to exit by 1.3 (from 7.9 to 6.6). However, this is quite a crude measure as it masks the fact that the *severity* of risks also reduced (e.g. children displaying persistent violent and disruptive behaviour at entry only exhibiting low-level behavioural difficulties at exit) (**Figure 3.2**).

Figure 3.2 Average number of risks factors per family

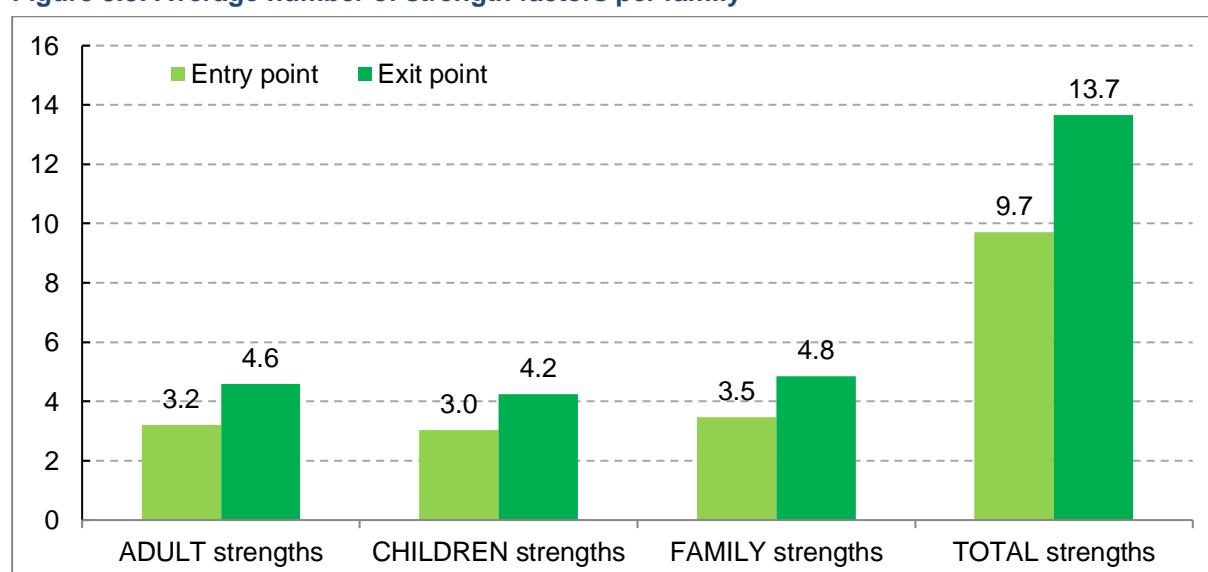


Source: IFMIS data, extracted 23.01.2017, based on 3,685 families for which entry and exit data were available

3.3.2 Changes in strengths

The total number of strengths families exhibited increased from entry to exit by 5.0 (from 9.7 to 13.7) (**Figure 3.3**). More progress was made in increasing families' strengths than was made in reducing risks. Whilst this can be partly explained by the masking of the reduction in severity of risks (as described above), this also likely reflects the strength-based approach adopted by most of the projects. This is a lesson learnt for future providers of early intervention support: a strength-based approach may manifest in a greater increase in strengths over a reduction in risks.

Figure 3.3: Average number of strength factors per family



Source: IFMIS data, extracted 23.01.2017, based on 3,685 families for which entry and exit data was available

The areas where strengths increased the most matched closely onto where risks reduced, namely in relation to parenting skills, supportive peer friendships, participation in positive out-of-school activities and finance. **Table 3.2** shows the strengths where the biggest percentage increases were made between baseline and exit.

Table 3.2: 10 strengths with the biggest percentage increase between baseline and exit

| | | % of families at entry | % of families at exit | % change |
|--|---|------------------------|-----------------------|----------|
| Parenting skills | Regular bedtimes, mealtimes and school routine | 40 | 60 | +48% |
| | Appropriate boundary-setting for children | 34 | 53 | +56% |
| | Moderation of TV watching and computer use | 29 | 45 | +56% |
| Supportive peer friendships | Active and regular supportive contact with friends or community members | 29 | 46 | +58% |
| | Supportive peer friendships at school | 46 | 62 | +34% |
| | Regular contact with friends outside of school | 31 | 46 | +49% |
| Participation in positive out-of-school activities | Regular participation in sports or leisure activities | 23 | 39 | +68% |
| | Regular participation in play opportunities | 36 | 51 | +41% |
| Finances | Family budget in place, and being actively managed | 33 | 50 | +53% |
| | Adult family members accessing appropriate benefit entitlements | 46 | 61 | +33% |

Source: IFMIS data, extracted 23.01.2017, based on 3,685 families for which entry and exit data were available

3.3.3 Areas of limited progress

Families made limited progress with regards to 'harder' outcomes such as gaining qualifications and employment. Only a fairly small minority of families (15%) had at least one member of the family in full time employment at entry; this figure only marginally increased upon exit, to 17%. As we described in the previous chapter, employment support was not a strong focus for the projects.

3.4 Which families saw the most improvements?

Key finding: Outcomes were strongest amongst families eligible for Free School Meals (FSM); this is particularly positive given FSM is often taken as a proxy for socio-economic disadvantage, demonstrating that the projects were particularly effective in supporting the most vulnerable families. The projects also may validate a longer-term approach, as families who stayed longer on the programme achieved greater outcomes.

As part of the analysis the evaluation team tested whether any particular groups of families achieved greater outcomes. This included assessing different genders, ethnicity, lone-parent status, teenage parents, child age, FSM, whether families accessed support previously and time spent on the programme. Most of these groups of families did not stand out as achieving more outcomes, with two notable exceptions, as we detail below.

Families eligible for FSM had greater outcomes than families not eligible for FSM. They were more likely to see decreased risks for children and the whole family (albeit not for adults), and were more likely to experience increases in children's strength factors. This is significant in that it shows the programme achieved the intended effects on socially disadvantaged children, and because FSM is a measure that holds currency among schools – a principal partner for the projects throughout the programme.

The longer a family spent on the programme, the more outcomes they achieved. Families who received longer support had a greater reduction in adult and family risks, and greater improvements in adult, children and family strengths. This is also significant, in that project workers who were interviewed for the evaluation regularly spoke of the need to have sufficient time to gain families' trust and to understand the relationships and dynamics within the family. At a time when services are under increasing pressure to increase caseload sizes and improve efficiencies, the data may help to validate a longer-term approach, and is a lesson learnt for future similar projects to avoid providing short-term support.

The case study below from the qualitative research provides an example of one family supported by the programme.

Family case study

Background: The family was made up of a single mother (30) and one son. The family were referred to the Improving Futures project by CAMHS. The mother was struggling as the son was refusing to attend school and had behavioural difficulties. The family was also socially isolated and the mother had a large amount of debt.

Support: The practitioner at the project helped the mother put in place a 'treat box', to reward the son for attending school and behaving well, including small weekly treats and a larger monthly treat. The project also organised monthly day trips for the family to attend, with other families, including skiing and pottery painting. The practitioner worked with the parent to explore options to repay the debt, and what government support she may be able to receive.

Outcomes: The son's school attendance and behaviour improved. The family were able to move house and started receiving government funding, which was helping to pay off the debts. The family felt a lot more settled in the local community:

"It really helps as we're so isolated, so it helps us build connections with other families going through similar things, so we don't feel so alone." (Mother)

Recommendation:

- Early intervention services should consider tracking and comparing outcomes achieved for families over varying periods over time. These data might be used to determine the optimum length and scaling of interventions, beyond which there are diminishing returns on investment.

3.5 To what extent did outcomes sustain?

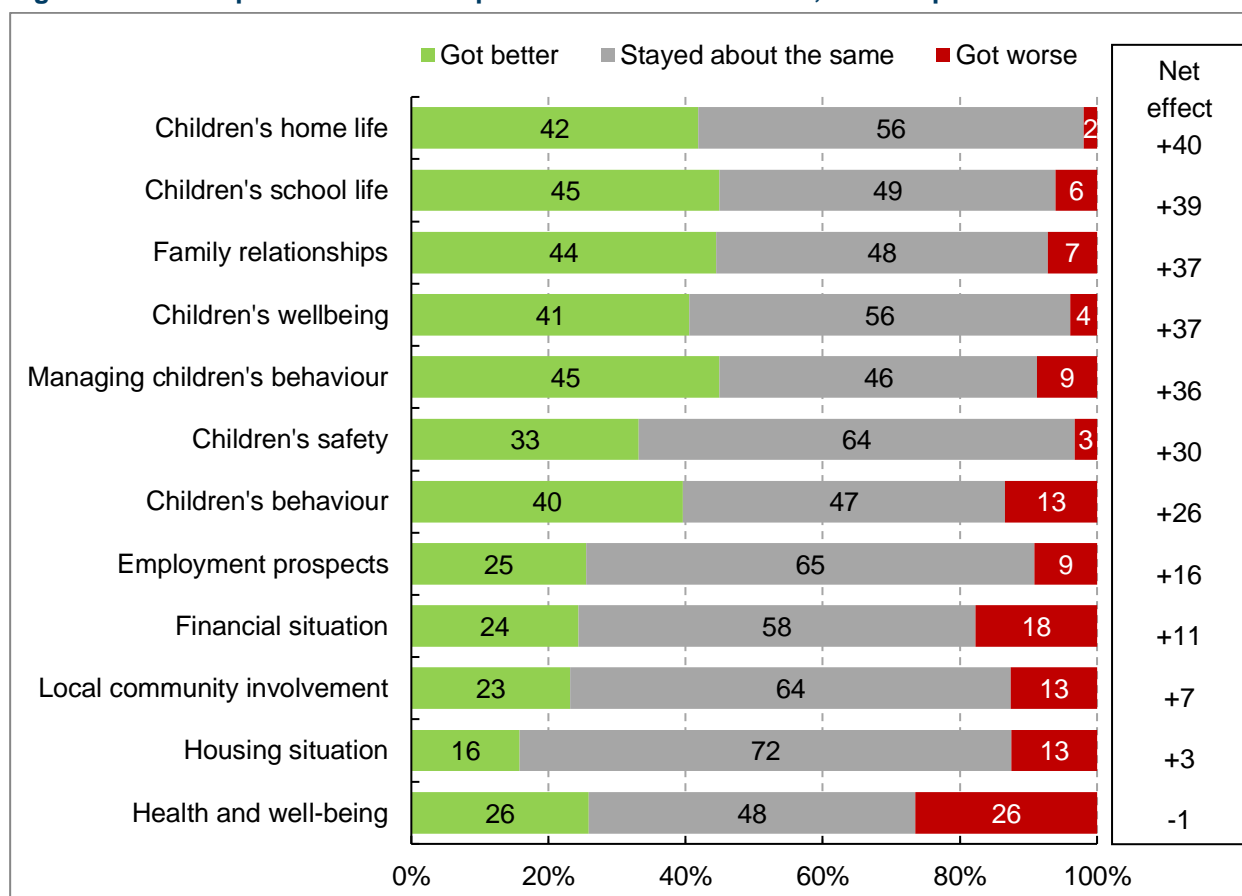
Key finding: The follow-up survey with 156 families showed that the majority of outcomes achieved for children were sustained 24 months after the support began. However, the results for adults were less positive. Employment levels increased only marginally; and in a minority of cases there was deterioration in families' status regarding their financial problems, housing problems and adult stress and anxiety.

In general, the situation of families was relatively stable two years after their support began (see [Figure 3.4](#)). Depending on the outcome, between 46% and 72% of families reported to not have experienced any change to their situation. Furthermore, for all but one indicator there was a net positive change – i.e. more families reported an improvement in their situation than a deterioration (see the numbers on the right hand side of Figure 3.4). The largest improvements all related to children's outcomes and family relationships: children's school (45% reported their situation improved) and home life (42%), the management of children's behaviours (45%) and family relationships (44%). Families were also asked how much they attributed these changes to the programme; in the majority of cases, families attributed the positive changes experienced at least partly to the support received, though they were less likely to attribute changes in their financial situation or employment prospects to the programme. Given the relatively light-touch nature of the support, and given that the survey was completed two years after the support began, this level of sustained outcomes, and the extent to which it is attributed to the support, is very positive.

However, a relatively large proportion of families saw a deterioration in some outcomes. Two in three main carers had suffered from anxiety or stress-related problems in the six months prior to completing the survey, and 26% reported that their health and well-being had deteriorated. 18% of families stated that their financial situation got worse, and 13% reported that their children's behaviour had got worse. Perhaps linked to this, over a quarter (26%) stated that they needed further help and support in the future, though it is possible that the families valued support, and as their children's needs developed they wanted to access more support.

The areas of deterioration mainly relate to adult outcomes, and most likely reflect the child-focused nature of the support, which were considered earlier.

Figure 3.4: Self-reported outcome improvements at +24 months, % of respondents



Source: Improving Futures panel survey +24 months, based on 149-154 respondents depending on question item, question referred to improvements seen 6 months prior to being surveyed

3.6 How do these outcomes compare to other, similar programmes?

The different contexts, time periods, data sources and methodologies adopted for the evaluations of other family programmes mean that there are limitations in drawing a direct comparison between their results. Even so, striking similarities can be observed in the types of outcomes achieved by Improving Futures and other UK-based programmes such as the Family Pathfinders¹⁸ and Troubled Families Programme¹⁹.

The main commonalities related to 'softer' outcomes, such as improved wellbeing, family functioning and reductions in parental anxiety, where outcomes were consistently positive across most of the programmes in question (e.g. Troubled Families evaluation, evaluation of Children's Centres in England²⁰).

¹⁸ See: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/182428/DFE-RR154.pdf

¹⁹ See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-evaluation-of-the-first-troubled-families-programme>

²⁰ See: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/485347/DFE-RB495_Evaluation_of_children_s_centres_in_England_the_impact_of_children_s_centres_brief.pdf

Equally, a lot of these programmes consistently made less progress against 'harder' outcomes, such as employment and housing: the Troubled Families evaluation, for example, found that the programme had no significant impact on a range of hard outcomes, including benefit receipt, employment, housing situation, adult offending and children's education outcomes. Some of these programmes did make more progress against employment outcomes than Improving Futures, however, as mentioned previously.

These findings suggest that there is a good case for a meta-review of evaluations of UK family programmes, to determine their relative strengths and drawbacks, with a view to informing policy development.

Recommendation:

- Undertake a meta-review of evaluations UK family programmes, to determine their relative strengths and drawbacks with a view to informing policy development.

3.7 Conclusions

Overall, the outcomes achieved by the Improving Futures projects were positive, and the programme broadly achieved its aim of improving outcomes for children in families with multiple and complex needs. In the short term, the projects achieved a good level of progress in reducing the risks that were the most prevalent when families first entered the programme, and in increasing strengths. For the families completing the beneficiary survey, in the main outcomes were sustained in the longer term, particularly outcomes related to children.

There was more limited progress against 'harder' outcomes, particularly those related to adults, such as employment and housing. Both adults and children were also still facing high levels of stress and anxiety two years after the support began. To a degree, there were signs that the projects could have strengthened these outcomes by focusing more on adult issues. The IFMIS data showed that many of the families were experiencing the effects of poverty and disadvantage at the outset of the programme, such as poor housing conditions, unemployment, long-term physical and mental health problems. The evaluation findings suggest that the support provided to individual families, while often hugely beneficial, was not sufficient to entirely counteract these more structural issues. They also found that similar programmes might benefit from being more strongly joined up with local employment and housing initiatives, and with a more prominent role for partner organisations specialising in work with adults.

4.0 Improved learning and sharing of best practice

"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)

This chapter reviews the extent to which the programme's final aim was achieved: *'Improve learning and sharing of best practice between public services and VCSEs'*. The information in this chapter is predominantly drawn from the stakeholder survey of both delivery partners directly involved in Improving Futures and local stakeholders (such as local authorities and schools, referred to as non-partners); consultations with project managers of 25 of the 26 projects; and consultations with the projects and stakeholders during the case study visits.

Aim 3: Improve learning and sharing of best practice between public services and VCSEs

Did the programme meet this aim?

The Improving Futures programme largely achieved its third aim of improving learning and the sharing of best practice between public services and VCSEs. The programme raised the profile of the VCSEs involved, and gave them a platform to share their learning with public services. They generally aimed to increase other services' understanding of families and promote their own approaches. Projects shared learning mainly through participating in LA meetings, holding learning events and encouraging visits to their services. There was evidence that this sharing of learning influenced other services and led to changes; almost half (28 out of 57) of those responding to the stakeholder survey agreed that the Improving Futures projects had influenced local strategies, commissioning processes or decisions affecting service provision for families. 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 LAs (who benefited from comparing their own family support with the approaches adopted by the Improving Futures projects).

In most cases the effects of this knowledge transfer were 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, or resulting in further commissioned work from the projects.

However, the projects were less successful in achieving this aim compared to the first two aims. It is very difficult to explain why the sharing of learning did not lead to tangible changes in other services; it is clear that the projects were implemented in a challenging climate of public sector funding cuts and that competition rather than collaboration with statutory services acted as a barrier in some cases. Also, whilst this was a programme aim it was not necessarily an aim for most projects from the outset. However, they did begin to focus on this towards the end of the project. It is possible that more could have been achieved if sharing learning had been built into the project approaches from the outset.

4.1 To what extent did Improving Futures improve learning and sharing of best practice between public services and VCSEs?

Key finding: The programme raised the profile of the VCSEs involved, and gave them a platform to share their learning with public services. This was apparent from the stakeholder survey, which showed over three quarters (44 out of 57) of those responding agreed that in the last 12 months the Improving Futures project had facilitated collaboration between local statutory and third sector organisations. Equally, in the qualitative interviews VCSE representatives consistently reported having valued the opportunity to work intensively over a sustained period with their counterparts in public services.

Public services showed a good level of interest in the Improving Futures programme, and the projects were well regarded. Consequently, the projects fostered opportunities for public services and VCSEs to work together. In particular, there were strong links between the projects and the Troubled Families programme in England and Families First in Wales.

The Improving Futures projects undertook a range of activities to build relationships and share learning with other VCSEs and public services. This included:

- representatives from public services (such as schools and children's Social Care) sat on the board or steering group of the projects, and representatives from the projects sat on the boards of public services;
- representatives from the projects sat on multi-agency meetings, such as those run by Children's Services or MARAC²¹ meetings;
- practitioners from Improving Futures projects either delivered training to, or attended training with, practitioners from public services;
- practitioners from Improving Futures projects were seconded to Children's Services;
- projects fed into LA change groups about how to redesign family services;
- Directors of Children's Services and elected members visited the projects;
- a LA analysis team linked Improving Futures project data into their own analysis to understand what outcomes were being achieved; and
- projects wrote reports on lessons learnt that were shared either internally within their organisation or externally.

²¹ A MARAC meeting is a "multi-agency meeting where statutory and voluntary agency representatives share information about high risk victims of domestic abuse in order to produce a coordinated action plan to increase victim safety". (Home Office Violent and Youth Crime Prevention Unit and Research Analysis Unit, 2011). For more information see: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/116538/horr55-technical-annex.pdf

As a consequence of these increased links there was a good level of knowledge transfer between the Improving Futures projects 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 LAs (who learnt a lot from comparing their own family support with the approaches adopted by the Improving Futures projects). Specific aspects of learning included new approaches to supporting:

- families at an early intervention level;
- the whole family; and
- families generally.

4.2 To what extent did the learning lead to changes in family support?

Key finding: Almost half of local stakeholders felt that the learning from Improving Futures had changed local practice, such as changing approaches to supporting families and influencing local strategies, commissioning processes and decisions affecting service provision for families. Most of these were intangible changes around approaches to supporting families.

Almost half (28 out of 57) of those responding to the stakeholder survey agreed that the Improving Futures projects had influenced local strategies, commissioning processes or decisions affecting service provision for families. There was evidence that a small number of organisations altered their support for families as a result of this learning. For example, 9 out of 57 stakeholders responding to the 2015 wave of the stakeholder survey reported that learning from Improving Futures led to them improving their family assessments. Five reported that they had changed their approach to supporting families as a result of the learning.

A small number of organisations described how they were embedding some of the approaches they developed during the project across their organisations. This included assessments, referral criteria, models of working and approaches to support. In the main, though, there were very few examples of where there were tangible changes – instead most examples related to more ‘softer’ changes around approaches to supporting families.

It is difficult to explain why the learning did not lead to more tangible changes within other organisations. But the backdrop of large funding cuts in public services during project delivery cannot be ignored, and projects reported that this inhibited partnership working. For example, it crowded out a lot of the space for taking on board lessons learnt from other programmes. Another explanation could be, as we mentioned earlier in our possible explanation as to why projects were not replicated broadly, that most Improving Futures projects were delivering a broad range of support and lacked a straightforward ‘delivery model’ that other organisations could easily adopt.

4.3 Conclusion

Sharing learning between the Improving Futures projects and other VCSEs and public services was a core aim of the Improving Futures programme. However, the projects were less successful in achieving this aim compared to the first two. Despite this, this third aim was broadly met, and there was good evidence that there was knowledge transfer between the projects and other local organisations. The programme provided the participating VCSEs with a platform, and they used this platform to share their knowledge around early intervention approaches for vulnerable families, particularly with schools and LAs.

Projects and stakeholders provided evidence of how this knowledge transfer led to intangible changes within other organisations, particularly around increasing understanding of vulnerable families. But the evaluation identified very few examples of where other organisations made tangible changes to their services as a consequence. It is very difficult to explain why this did not occur, but projects did report that the funding cuts taking place at the same time inhibited partnership working; this likely also inhibited the ability of other services to take on board fully the learning stemming from the programme.

5.0 Estimating the return on investment

The Cost Benefit Analysis (CBA) suggests a quantified benefit of 53 pence for every £1 spent by the Big Lottery Fund on the programme, as shown in **Table 5.1** below.

Table 5.1: Cost benefit ratio

| Overall summary | |
|------------------------------|----------------------|
| Cost to the Big Lottery Fund | £24.7m ²² |
| Quantified benefits | £13m ²³ |
| Ratio of benefits to costs | £0.53:£1 |

Information on direct costs was sourced from project-level reporting to the Big Lottery Fund. Information on the 'benefits' (i.e. the presence or absence of risk factors and strengths) was sourced from the IFMIS database as reported earlier. Only a sub-set of these indicators were included in the analysis due to the need to match them to credible estimates of fiscal savings or other monetised benefits.

The data presented consider the distance travelled between the baseline (entry to the programme) and follow-up (six months after exit) stages and was based on records for 1,276 families. Follow up data was used rather than exit in order to provide an indication of where changes had been sustained beyond the life of the intervention. The analysis also included an adjustment for deadweight and the likelihood of effects enduring beyond the IFMIS reporting period based on survey evidence. Further information on the method used to calculate this figure, including the assumptions made, can be found in the End of Year 4 report.

The interpretation of the CBA can be seen from a 'glass half empty / glass half full' perspective. The 'glass half empty' perspective would be that the programme did not, overall, create a net fiscal benefit. This therefore casts some doubt on the 'financial argument' around early intervention – that intervening early saves money later on due to reduced demand for services. The analysis suggests that it did not, overall, save money. This was partly because the support uncovered unmet need, such as the need to bring children into care. Although other evidence would suggest that this intervention would ultimately lead to better outcomes in the long term, it also led to more support being provided in the short term – and therefore an increased cost to the state.

The 'glass half full' perspective would be that, although the programme expenditure when the CBA was undertaken was £24.7m, in fact a high proportion of that figure was already estimated to have been realised as savings by the state within two years – and so the 'net' cost of running the programme was only actually £11.7m.

²² This was an estimate of the costs to the Big Lottery Fund of all 26 projects (see programme costs sub-section in the End of Year 4 report).

²³ This was based on the benefits estimated per family (adjusted for deadweight and the likelihood of effects being sustained into a second year) which were then grossed up the total number of families estimated to have been supported by the programme (9,279).

In considering which perspective to take, it is also important to recognise that limitations of the approach mean this is likely to be an underestimate of the true savings from the programme. Although the approach also underestimated the true cost of running the programme (because not all indirect costs were captured), on balance we believe the CBA under-reported on the programme savings. This was because:

- **The monetary benefits of some outcomes were not included:** The calculations for the benefits were based on figures taken from the unit cost database compiled by New Economy²⁴. The rationale for this was because the figures in the unit cost database were widely accepted and regarded as credible. However, they capture only a small proportion of all outcomes achieved within the Improving Futures programme, and therefore the monetary benefits stemming from these other outcomes were not included in the model.
- **The model did not include long-term sustained outcomes:** Our model assumed that some of the outcomes would sustain for two years after the programme. This was based on the evidence generated from the longitudinal survey of beneficiaries. It could be argued that, if outcomes sustained for two years after the support began, they would continue to sustain, and therefore lead to longer-term savings. However, this assumption was unsubstantiated and therefore was not included in the analysis.
- **The long-term benefits of increased support was not included:** As mentioned above, in some cases the fiscal cost of supporting families increased, rather than decreased. This is because the support uncovered unmet need and led to other services being involved. It was also reasonable to assume, based on other evidence, that this would likely lead to better outcomes, and therefore fiscal savings, in the long term. However, this assumption was again unsubstantiated and therefore was not included.
- **The CBA included the savings from *reduced* risks, but not *avoided* risks:** Other evidence suggests that the removal of some risks amongst the Improving Futures families is likely to direct families away from further, higher cost, risks. For example, participation in positive activities, such as sports, can help prevent children and young people becoming socially excluded and/or ending up in criminal environments. However, without the presence of a robust counterfactual, and without long-term monitoring beyond two years, it was not possible to include the cost savings from these avoided risks.

Had a different set of assumptions been included in the analysis (such as including cost figures for more outcomes, assuming outcomes sustained for longer, and estimating the risks avoided in the long term), it is possible the programme would have shown to have paid for itself through fiscal savings. However, the evaluation team chose to undertake as robust a CBA as possible, using credible evidence, as to include more unsubstantiated assumptions would undermine the exercise.

5.1 Conclusion

On balance, it is the view of the evaluators that, although the Improving Futures programme did not appear to lead to a net benefit in terms of short-term cost savings, the potential for it to have contributed to future longer-term savings means that it was a worthwhile investment.

²⁴ See: <http://www.neweconomymanchester.com/our-work/research-evaluation-cost-benefit-analysis/cost-benefit-analysis/unit-cost-database>

6.0 Conclusions and recommendations

This report has presented the summative findings from the evaluation of the Big Lottery Fund Improving Futures programme, based on a mixed methods evaluation carried out by a consortium led by Ecorys between October 2011 and March 2017. In this final chapter, we reflect upon the overall achievements and lessons learned from Improving Futures, and we present a set of recommendations for policy and practice.

6.1 Reaching and engaging families with complex needs

The programme originally targeted children in families with complex needs where the oldest child was aged between 5 and 10 years upon first receiving support from Improving Futures. The rationale was to focus on those children who fell between the gap for 'early years' and 'youth' provision. It was also to ensure a strong focus on partnership working between family-focused organisations and primary schools. The evaluation found that this partnership was developed with considerable success, and that the targeting of the programme helped to focus on developing VCSE and school partnerships in real depth.

The learning from the projects was that the strict application of age-based criteria could be too inflexible at times, however, and risked excluding families where the oldest child fell beyond this limit. The requirement was subsequently relaxed to provide greater flexibility. This change was generally welcomed, and working with older children allowed the projects to bridge the gap in support upon transition from primary to secondary at 11+. It also boosted the numbers of families falling within scope for support.

6.2 Developing and implementing appropriate support

The Improving Futures projects varied considerably in their design, configuration of partner organisations, and the type and intensity of support that was provided to families. This variation had both advantages and disadvantages. It certainly allowed for greater flexibility to test and learn, but at the same time it meant that the learning from the 26 projects was highly diffuse, and examples of good practice were often more challenging to capture and quantify within a programme-wide evaluation.

Setting aside this high level of variation, there were some common threads to the projects that reflected both the influence of the programme criteria and the ethos of the organisations that were successful in applying for funding. A common success factor for many of the projects was the voluntary basis of engagement, and the discretion to work with families on their terms. Improving Futures showcased the capabilities of VCSEs 'in the lead'; it provided VCSEs with an opportunity to lead on early intervention support, and their projects were well regarded locally. This resulted in quite a different dynamic, including providing a more therapeutic and strength-based approach. It also helped to ensure that VCSEs carried greater weight in local decision making, albeit for a limited period of time in some cases.

On the basis of the evaluation, it was also possible to identify a set of common 'principles' for Improving Futures, to help understand the features of the support provided by the projects most valued by families and practitioners. These were tested with project staff and families who received support, and include:

1. Relationship-based: Having a single key worker building relationships and trust over time, adopting a respectful approach
2. Participative: Active participation by families in assessment and service planning
3. Whole family: Working with the whole family to identify and address needs
4. Working at the families' pace: Flexible and variable support, working alongside the family and responding to their changing circumstances
5. Strength-based: Building families' self-belief, resilience and capabilities to manage their own lives
6. Supported referrals: Supporting families to engage with other services, including acting as an advocate
7. Support networks: Building links with other peers and the community

6.3 Outcomes and cost savings from the programme

The programme set out to improve outcomes for children in families with complex needs, and there is convincing evidence from the evaluation that it did so across a wide range of measures, during the period when families were supported (i.e. typically 6-12 months). The projects consistently recorded improvements to children's behaviour and adjustment at school, their emotional wellbeing, and engagement in positive activities, using the IFMIS tool. Outcomes were also evident for adult family members, although the projects generally had a main focus on the child within the family, and the findings reflected this. The positive effects from the programme were often cumulative, with an overall reduction in the average number of risks per family, and an overall increase in the average number of strengths.

The IFMIS data further allowed us to conclude that the outcomes were greatest for children qualifying for Free School Meals (FSM), when compared with the non-FSM group. This is significant in that it shows the programme achieved the intended effects on socially disadvantaged children, and because FSM is a measure that holds currency among schools – a principal partner for the projects throughout the programme. The IFMIS data also showed a positive correlation between the length of time supported and outcomes achieved for families. At a time when services are under increasing pressure to increase caseload sizes and improve efficiencies, the data help to validate a longer-term approach.

The IFMIS data was supported by the qualitative evidence, which showed that the projects regularly played a significant role in helping families to overcome isolation, strengthened family relationships, improved their financial capability, and gave them greater control over their lives. The project workers often helped to build families' competence in navigating the sometimes challenging world of dealing with professionals – something they would need to learn to do independently following their exit from the programme.

There were promising signs that many of the child outcomes were sustained at 12 to 24 months after support, based on the survey evidence. In particular, there were lasting improvements to children's home and school lives and wellbeing. However, more than one quarter of families had reported deterioration in their circumstances at the two year point after support began, especially with regard to housing and health issues. A similar proportion of parents reported a continuing need for professional support in relation to parenting. These findings sound a note of caution and 'reality check' regarding the limits of what can be expected from individual family support without structural reforms to address underlying issues of poverty and disadvantage, such as poor housing conditions, and unemployment.

The findings suggest that the effectiveness of this type of intervention might possibly be improved by strengthening the involvement of adult services, to rebalance the emphasis of Improving Futures on the child within the family. They might also be improved by developing a stronger labour market dimension through closer links with appropriate partners such as Jobcentre Plus and VCSEs specialising in pre-employability training.

The Cost Benefit Analysis (CBA) suggested a quantified benefit of 53 pence for every £1 spent by the Big Lottery Fund on the programme. On balance, it is the view of the evaluators that, although the Improving Futures programme did not appear to lead to a net benefit in terms of short-term cost savings, the potential for it to have contributed to future longer-term savings means that it was a worthwhile investment.

6.4 Final thoughts, and recommendations

The Improving Futures programme was funded to test whether VCSE-led partnerships could improve outcomes for children in families with multiple and complex needs, by developing tailored and joined-up support to families and sharing best practice with public services. The evidence from the evaluation was that the programme was largely successful in meeting these objectives, albeit with a large degree of variation in what was tested and rolled out across the 26 local projects. The programme was an effective showcase for VCSE capabilities in service design and delivery, rather than playing an ancillary role to public services. It also provided numerous case studies of effective local problem-solving, and demonstrated the importance of schools and family services working together in partnership.

In looking ahead, the evaluation offers a number of recommendations for future policy and practice development in this area. We have listed these throughout the report. The main recommendations are as follows, structured around the themes of funding and service delivery:

Recommendations for funding:

1. **Recommendation 1: Build bridges between schools and family services:** The evaluation supports the case for intervening early for families with complex needs, where the oldest child is aged 5-10 years. Opportunities should be identified for schools and family services to work closely in partnership to secure positive outcomes for these children and their families. The potential use of Pupil Premium funding in England might be considered, given the success of the projects in achieving outcomes for socio-economically disadvantaged children.
2. **Recommendation 2: Create space for innovation and reflective practice:** The Fund should consider how best to balance 'innovation' with a need to maximise the longer-term return on investment from grant-funded projects. This might entail a clearer distinction between an initial testing and experimentation phase, and a subsequent consolidation phase where grant funds are channelled into those models showing the greatest merit.

Recommendations for service delivery:

3. **Recommendation 3: Invest in the early intervention workforce:** Early intervention projects should recruit and train practitioners to adopt a strengths-based approach for engaging and working with families. This should begin with: a trusting and open approach to engage and build relationships with all family members, including both adults and children; a thorough understanding of different issues that may affect families with complex needs; and support for families to actively participate in shaping their intervention.
4. **Recommendation 4: Track and compare outcomes to understand change for families:** These data might be used to determine the optimum length and scaling of interventions. Services should be mindful that the Improving Futures evaluation found a correlation between the duration of support and positive outcomes for children, and that more sustained engagement may be required, even at an 'early intervention' stage.
5. **Recommendation 5: Develop a stronger role for adult services:** Organisations and partnerships working with vulnerable families might wish to take into account the development areas highlighted by the evaluation. These included the need to strengthen the involvement of adult services; developing a stronger labour market dimension through closer links with appropriate partners such as Jobcentre Plus; and prioritising work with fathers. A stronger place-based dimension was also warranted, building on local networks and resources.
6. **Recommendation 6: Engage local commissioners to ensure sustainability:** Future funding programmes should have a stronger focus on sustainability, identifying potential longer-term investors and developing outcomes frameworks with their needs in mind. The Fund might experiment with different funding approaches that could lead to greater sustainability, such as involving local commissioners in distributing the grants to achieve buy-in.
7. **Recommendation 7: Increase focus on support for adults, particularly fathers:** The Improving Futures projects made more sustained progress towards children outcomes than adult outcomes. Although this was the focus of the programme, it is likely longer-term, sustained impact would have been achieved if families' housing, finances and well-being also improved. In particular, VCSEs would benefit from focusing more on how they can engage fathers.