


# Improving Futures Evaluation: Summary



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For more information about the programme and  
evaluation, visit: [www.improvingfutures.org](http://www.improvingfutures.org)



# The Programme

## Improving Futures

- Big Lottery Fund, UK-wide programme
- Grants of up to £1.08m over 3 to 5 years for 26 pilot projects
- Improving life chances for children in families with multiple and complex needs
- Early intervention support
- New local delivery models
- Public sector and VCS collaboration and learning

## Map of funding

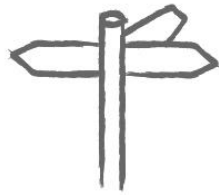


# The Support

**9,279 families supported**

**Diverse types of support:**

Average duration:  
**7**  
months



**Information, advice  
and guidance**



**Family support services**



**Parenting support**



Average amount of  
support per week

**1<sup>1/2</sup>**  
hours

## Improving Futures **THE SUPPORT**

Support delivered through a range of different approaches:



**Key Worker**  
(providing single  
point of contact for family)



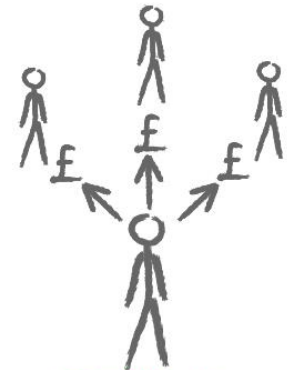
**Volunteers**



**Co-located  
multi-agency teams**  
(bringing together professionals  
with different specialities)

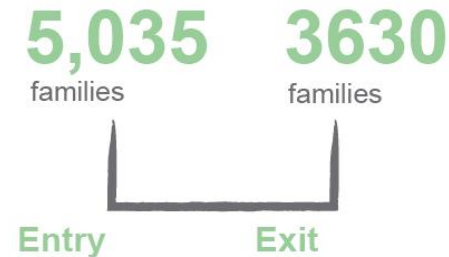


**Basing professionals  
in schools or GP surgeries**

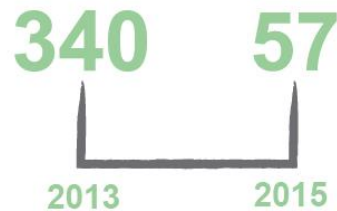


**Flexible or  
discretionary budgets**  
(spot purchasing other services for families)

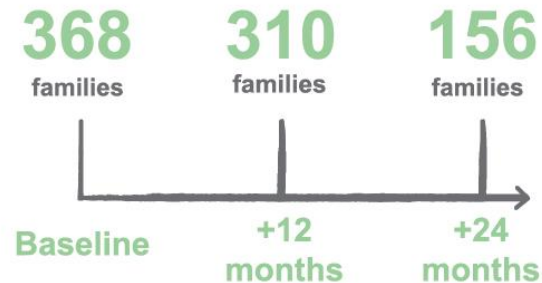
# The Evaluation



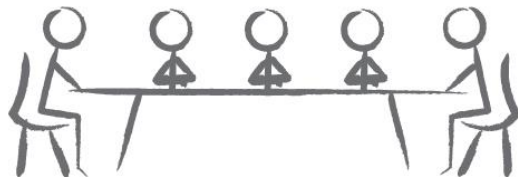
**Outcomes data**  
on families collected by practitioners at entry and exit to support



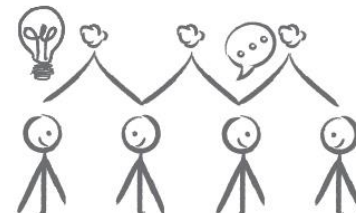
**Stakeholder survey**  
of local partners



**Longitudinal tracking**  
of families through a survey



**Family Pannels**



Series of **learning activities**  
for projects and wider sector



# Improving Futures Principles

Despite the variation in support, a number of common factors were consistently reported as being most important when supporting families at an early intervention stage.

## Principles of Best Practice

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

Central to the approach was the relationship between a single practitioner and the family.



Word cloud showing adjectives used by family members to describe their key worker during qualitative interviews

# The Outcomes

The **intended outcomes** were achieved to a considerable extent. The projects increased families' strengths and reduced the influence of the main risk factors. **Child outcomes performed the strongest**, with socio-economically disadvantaged children (those accessing Free School Meals) benefitting the most of all.

## Changes in risks



## Changes in strengths



**8 / 10**

In 8 out of 10 of the most prevalent risks, there was a reduction of families experiencing these risks at the end of the support

↓ **41%** Reduction in problems with **discipline & boundary setting**

↓ **40%** Reduction in **persistent disruptive behaviour**

↓ **33%** Reduction in **domestic abuse**

↑ **68%** Increase in regular participation in **sports or leisure activities**

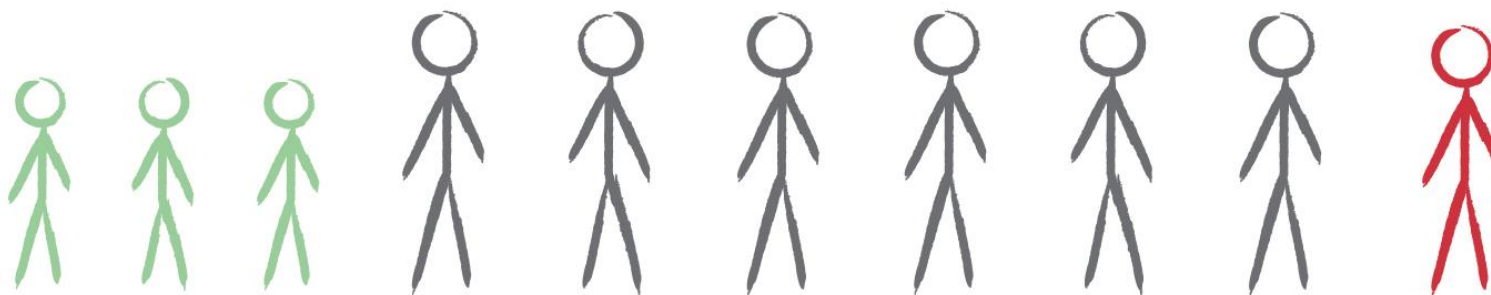
↑ **58%** Increase in active & regular supportive contact with **friends or community members**

↑ **53%** Increase in **family budget** in place, and being actively managed

# The Outcomes: Sustainability

There was some evidence that child outcomes were sustained, but adults fared less well, with mixed results in terms of adult wellbeing, employment, housing and finance.

**2 years after support began on average...**



For  
**3 in 10**  
**families**  
outcomes got better

For  
**6 in 10 families**  
outcomes sustained

For  
**1 in 10**  
**families**  
outcomes got worse

# 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..

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

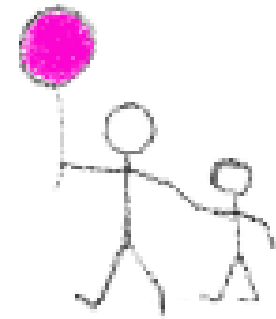
On balance, it is the view of the evaluators that, although the Improving Futures programme did not appear to lead to a net benefit in terms of short-term cost savings, the potential for it to have contributed to future longer-term savings means that it was a worthwhile investment.



# Conclusions

## Programme successes

- The programme **achieved its first goal of developing tailored and joined-up support for families with multiple and complex needs**: the programme showcased the capabilities of VCSEs leading multi-agency partnerships, and produced a range of effective practice models. It also highlighted a set of principles effective for early intervention support.
- The programme **broadly achieved its second goal of improving outcomes for families**: There was considerable success in building family strengths and in improving children's wellbeing, behaviour, and engagement with school and out of school activities



# Conclusions

## Lessons learnt and challenges

- Despite ongoing collaboration between VCSEs and statutory services during the programme, **comparatively few projects were able to secure funding to scale-up, replicate, or ensure their continuation as a commissioned service**. It is difficult to explain why this happened, though it is likely that the funding cuts to early intervention services during the programme delivery inhibited partnership working and statutory services' ability to absorb learning from the programme.
- The projects focused predominantly on achieving child-related outcomes, and there could have been a **stronger focus on adult-related outcomes**, particularly employment and engaging fathers. This child focus could explain why adult outcomes were sustained to a lesser degree than child outcomes.
- Projects reported that progress against some outcomes was limited by **gaps in local support**: namely mental health support (particularly for adults) and affordable childcare. The projects struggled to fill these gaps; it is possible that providing an **area-based element in the grants**, distributing them across a broader range of services, would have helped plug these gaps.
- Applying a **strict age criteria (5-10) was found to be too inflexible** and risked excluding families in need of support; in particular it prevented support during the crucial transition from primary to secondary schools. The age criteria was relaxed in the later years of the programme.
- Due to the varying nature of the projects the **evaluation struggled to draw robust comparisons between the different delivery models**. A two-tiered programme, beginning with an 'innovation' round and then creating a more structured programme with the most promising models could have alleviated this.



## Main conclusion

Overall, the evaluation **strengthened the evidence base for early intervention support with families**, highlighting that many of the **outcomes can be sustained**, where support is provided for a sufficient duration and intensity, and that **VCSEs should be at the forefront of service design**.

# Recommendations

## ***Planning and funding family support:***

- 1. Build bridges between schools and family services:** The evaluation supports the case for intervening early for families with complex needs, and where the oldest child is aged 5-10. Opportunities should be identified for schools and family services to work closely together. The potential use of Pupil Premium funding might be considered.
- 2. Create space for innovation and reflective practice:** Funds should consider how best to balance 'innovation' with structured programmes that allow rigorous testing and evaluation.

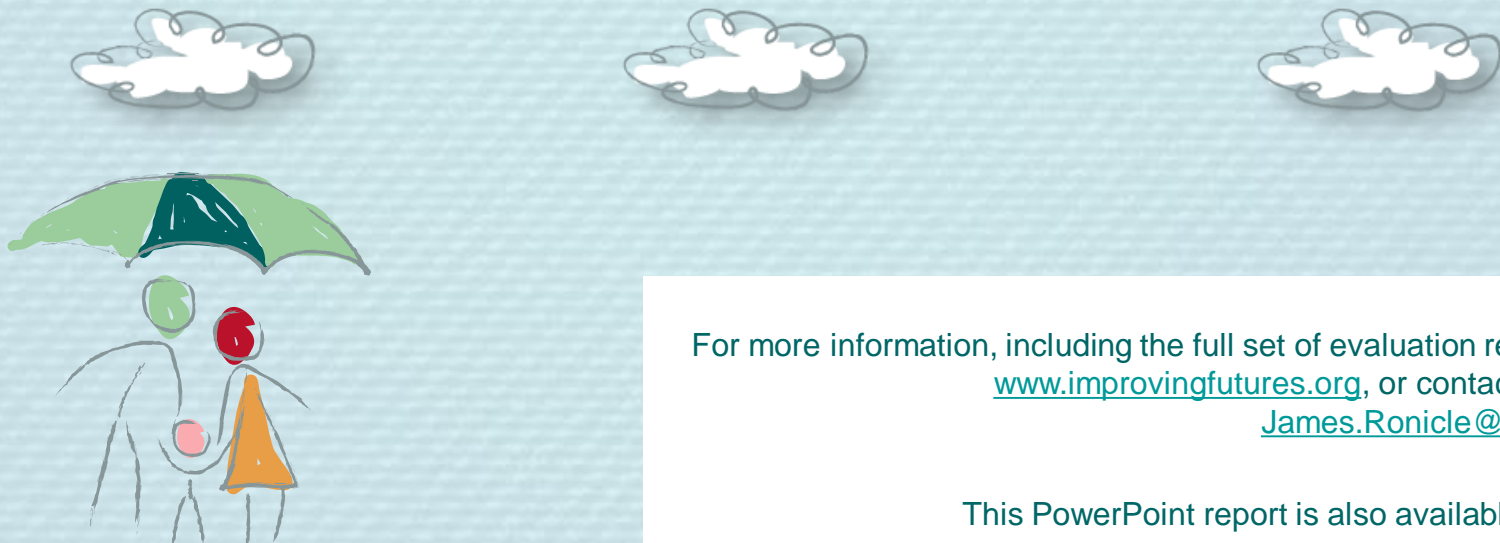
## ***Organisational delivery:***

- 3. Invest in early intervention workforce:** Central to the projects' successes were the relationship between a single practitioner and the family. Early intervention services should prioritise the recruitment and training of practitioners.
- 4. Track and compare outcomes to understand change for families:** This would help understand the 'optimum' length and scaling for different interventions; services should be mindful that the evaluation found a correlation between the duration of support and positive outcomes.
- 5. Develop a stronger role for adult services:** The evaluation found there was a 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 would have been beneficial.
- 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.
- 7. Increase focus on support for adults, particularly fathers:** It is likely longer-term, sustained impact would have been achieved if families' housing, finances and well-being also improved.

# About this report

This PowerPoint report summarises the findings from an independent evaluation of the Improving Futures programme, which was carried out by Ecorys UK in partnership with Ipsos MORI, Family Lives and Professor Kate Morris.

James Ronicle (Ecorys Associate Director) managed the evaluation and led on preparing the final report, with contributions from Anja Meierkord and Laura Kirchner-Sala. Laurie Day (Ecorys Technical Director) was overall project director.



For more information, including the full set of evaluation reports, visit:  
[www.improvingfutures.org](http://www.improvingfutures.org), or contact James at:  
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This PowerPoint report is also available in Welsh.