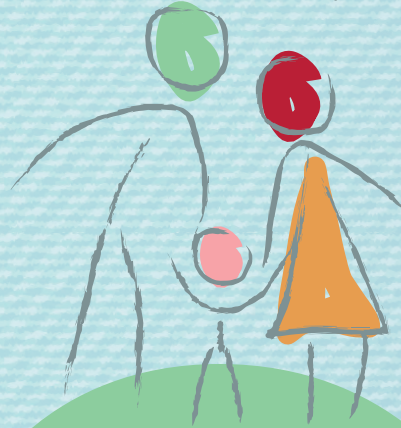BIG
LOTTERY
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December 2015

The Neighbourhood Alliance

Independent Evaluation Report

Contents

1.0 Introduction

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The Improving Futures programme was launched by the Big Lottery Fund (The Fund) in March 2011. The £26 million programme provided up to £900,000 to 26 pilot projects across the UK, to test different Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) led approaches towards achieving the following outcomes:

- Improved outcomes for children in families with multiple and complex needs.

- 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.

- Improved learning and sharing of best practice between public services and VCS organisations.

In October 2011, Big Lottery 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 is funded over five years, to assess programme effectiveness and impact, alongside continuous dissemination. Further information on the national evaluation can be found on the website: www.improvingfutures.org.

This report, written by Ecorys UK, presents the evaluation findings for the Sunderland Neighbourhood Alliance Project. The findings are based on:

- A desk review of various documents including business plans, application forms, locally-collected evidence on outcomes achieved and mid-year and annual monitoring reports

- Analysis of project monitoring data inputted by project staff and collected through the Improving Futures Monitoring Information System (IFMIS)

- A qualitative case study visit, during which researchers interviewed staff, stakeholders and families

- A depth interview with the project coordinator.

The views expressed in this report are those of the independent evaluators, based on a review of the available evidence, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the project or the Big Lottery Fund.

1.1 Project Overview

The Neighbourhood Alliance Project was awarded £900,000 by the Improving Futures Programme to cover a four year period between 2012 and 2016. In 2013 they secured a further £178,000 as part of an extension to the Improving Futures programme. This extension allows the Neighbourhood Alliance Project to support families until April 2017.

The Neighbourhood Alliance Project aimed to bring together local services to deliver intensive and tailored support to families with complex needs. The project engaged with primary schools to identify and refer families and then with a range of local partners to deliver bespoke and intensive support packages. The Foundation of Light, the official charity of Sunderland Football Club, led the partnership for the Neighbourhood Alliance Project, building on an existing reputation of delivering positive work within the community.

The Neighbourhood Alliance Project was designed to be rolled out across five areas in Sunderland. This ensured that the approach could be tailored to the needs of the area and lessons from each site could be implemented in each new area to improve delivery.

1.1.1   Key aspects of the model

The key components of the Neighbourhood Alliance model include: Governance and partnership working, information sharing, family led provision and tailored support packages. Each aspect of the model was implemented to ensure that families received appropriate support for their needs as well improving the efficiency of service delivery.

Governance and Partnership working

The Neighbourhood Alliance Project is governed by a Project Board, which oversees the project at a strategic level, and a Working Group, which is made up of representatives from the relevant partners. The Working Group meets regularly to discuss the progress of the project and plan interventions for individual cases. Only partners involved directly in the cases remain for the second part of the meeting. The meetings are always attended by the local Troubled Families coordinator to avoid duplication.

The project aims to encourage organisations that do not always work together to share information and support families in a joined up way within a partnership. The partners involved have a range of expertise supporting families, and include Sunderland City Council (Children's Services), Sunderland Children's Trust, Gentoo Group (housing), Sunderland North Community Business Centre (employment) and Sunderland Voluntary and Community Network (voluntary organisations). These agencies, alongside schools, form an extensive network, which work together to quickly respond to families with a range of needs. Most of the organisations in the partnership are locally based, as these have a trusted reputation within the community.

While commissioning services was part of the project, some agencies offered their support to the project for free.

Information sharing

Underpinning the Neighbourhood Alliance Project is *Information Space,* an innovative and unique online case management system. This system is facilitated by the User Permissioning Protocol, a data sharing agreement to allow services across sectors to share information. Information Space enables families to be in control of what data they share with agencies, and supports information-sharing between all partners working with families. This system aims to improve the coordination of services, increase efficiency and remove duplication in processes, as well improving communication between families and partners.

Family led provision

At referral families are encouraged to complete a Pen Portrait to describe their situation. This is to help an agency become aware of an issue that may need a multi-agency response. The Pen Portraits place emphasis on capturing a families' perspective on their needs and expectations from agencies. Some additional screening questions about risk and protective factors are included in the Pen Portrait, as a lighter touch version of the CAF.

The project assigns a *Neighbourhood Friend* to each family. A Neighbourhood Friend is a professional who receives training and supervision to become a supportive advocate for the family. Most commonly the professional is from the school working with the family, but the Salvation Army and Community Forum have also trained professionals as Neighbourhood Friend's with the project. Throughout their involvement with the project the family works with the Neighbourhood Friend to access different services, remove barriers to engagement and discuss progress.

The families' involvement in the project is monitored using the *Neighbourhood Pathway*, which shows relationships between the family, lead partner and the Neighbourhood Friend, and the *Family Star*, a monitoring tool that tracks families' progress out of poverty. Individuals and families are assessed at the beginning and at the end of each intervention. The routine monitoring allows the project to track progress and ensure that adequate provision is in place. The project finds this information useful, as it enables them to share information with the governance groups monitoring the overall project.

Tailored support packages

The Neighbourhood Alliance Project offers families flexible support depending on their needs. The inclusion in the project did not involve any additional eligibility criteria, beyond the age criteria set by the Improving Futures project (eldest child aged between 5 and 10 years). Nor is the support for families' time limited: *'Families can have as a long as they need, 10 weeks, longer, whatever they need'* (Project Manager). The intention is that families access the most appropriate support using existing services, but new services can be commissioned on a case-by-case basis. Specific interventions the project offers include: Breakfast Clubs, counselling support, homework clubs and Read and Write Army, a literacy club which targets children and parents. There has been particularly high demand for counselling support and schools offer blocks of sessions with counsellors for children and parents to use.

1.2 Report Structure

The remainder of this report is structured as follows:

- **Chapter Two** gives a profile of the families supported, drawing upon both the monitoring data and practitioners' accounts of the main presenting issues for families, including risks and strengths.

- **Chapter Three** reviews the main lessons learned from project delivery. The chapter starts by examining the key learning points from each strand of the project in turn, before going on to consider the overall messages in terms of partnership working, challenges and how these were overcome.

- **Chapter Four** considers the main achievements of the project, including the type of outcomes that were recorded and reported and the strength of this evidence, and assesses the extent to which these outcomes have been sustainable. It also considers sustainability in the context of the wider project.

- **Chapter Five** draws the report to a close, with a set of overall conclusions and a number of recommendations for the project partners to consider in potentially developing the model further.

2.0 Profile of the families supported

2.0 Profile of families supported

The Neighbourhood Alliance Project did not implement an eligibility criterion for referrals in terms of the complexity and level of the needs a family. The project engaged families through local primary schools, which placed an emphasis on families with children aged between 5 and 10 years, the eligibility criteria for the Improving Futures programme.

All Improving Futures projects were required to submit monitoring data to the national evaluation team through the IFMIS database. At the time of writing (December 2015), the IFMIS database held details on 341 families (485 adults and 757 children) supported by Neighbourhood Alliance. This is well above the original target of 160 families for the project. Table 2.1 sets out the basic demographic information for the adults worked by the project. It shows that the majority of adults were parents (93%); White British (94%); and female (68%). Data from the Local Authority shows that around 94% of the population in Sunderland identify as White British[1]. This demonstrates that the Neighbourhood Alliance engaged with families that are broadly representative of the wider community.

Table.2.1 Adults supported by Neighbourhood Alliance	
Caring Role	
Parent	445
Grandparent	20
Foster parent	2
Carer	2
Other	16
Gender	
Female	328
Male	157
Ethnicity	
White – British	452
White – Other	20
Asian or Asian British	7
Black or Black British	3
Other ethnic group – Other	4

There were differences in demographics across the five areas. The first area, Southwick in Sunderland North, was mainly White British; whilst the second area, Sunderland East, was mainly African and Polish families. This had implications for the project, as the team needed to work with schools differently and provide information in different languages. In schools with a large African population there are cultural differences in relationships within families. In a school with a large Polish population, there was an issue with homework as parents in that local community understood less English. To meet this latter need the project arranged for an interpreter to go into the school and run an after school club to help parents and students with their homework and levels of English.

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[1] http://www.sunderland.gov.uk/index.aspx?articleid=8451

The project was designed intentionally with an early intervention focus, i.e. to work with families below the threshold for statutory services intervention. This model has broadly remained throughout the delivery period and the effective partnership between the Neighbourhood Alliance Project and statutory services has meant that the agencies can communicate with each other and work in a joined up way. However, there was a higher than expected number of families refusing to engage with statutory services, which increased demand for the project. This high demand is reflected in the number of families engaging with the project (341), which was well above the original target (160). Fortunately the systems and working practices of the Neighbourhood Alliance ensured all families were still able to receive an intervention within a month of referral.

Table 2.2 indicates the most prevalent risks and strengths recorded at baseline by the staff through the IFMIS. Anxiety and stress were common features presenting to the project for children and adults. Also significant were risks relating to adult worklessness, parent relationship difficulties, parenting discipline and behavioural issues in children.

There was also a difference in the type of issue presenting across the six areas – for example, bullying was more prevalent in some places and cultures than others. To be sensitive to cultural differences, the project aimed for the person offering the family support within the school to have the same background; so that families trusted the advice they were given.

The most prevalent strengths were largely linked to schools and relationships within them. This is likely influenced by the fact that referrals come through the Neighbourhood Friend, a trained professional within schools, and therefore the families who engage with the project may be more likely to have existing good relationships within the school.

Table 2.2 Baseline data - most prevalent risk and strengths	
Risks	No. of families presenting at baseline
Achieving below expected levels for age (no known SEN)	172
Parenting anxiety or frustration	113
Suspected or reported stress or anxiety (child)	131
Strengths	No. of families presenting at baseline
Regular contact and positive relationships with school staff	22
Supportive peer friendships at school	37

2.1 Identifying and referring families

The project uses primary schools as 'brokers' to identify and refer families. The Neighbourhood Friend, normally working at the school, engages the family to complete a Pen Portrait with a description of their current needs and the monitoring tools. This process is led by the family and only information shared on the Pen Portrait is included in the decision making for the family action plan. As an Improving Futures project, the families engaged with Neighbourhood Alliance needed their eldest child to be aged between 5 and 10 years, and for there to be no current involvement with statutory services. However, there are no additional eligibility criteria for the project and the support is designed to be bespoke. The school can refer families with a varying level of need and it is intended that they will receive support within a month.

3.0 Lessons learned from project delivery

3.0 Lessons learnt from project delivery

This chapter of the report will explore the delivery model for the project and lessons arising from its implementation. In this chapter we also report on the project's relationship and influence on key stakeholders and partners.

3.1 Delivery model

The Neighbourhood Alliance Project started in Southwick, in Sunderland North, and was then sequentially implemented in Sunderland East, Sunderland West, Coalfields and Washington. Three years into implementation the evidence indicates that the Neighbourhood Alliance Project is successful in working with families and has implemented a new way of working for local agencies in Sunderland.

Implementation

The roll-out approach of the project meant that the team could plan and tailor the response in each area to meet the different needs of the communities. To initiate the project in each area, the team arranged a meeting with brought together representatives from schools and key agencies. The aim of this meeting was to explain the project, the referral process and find out information about the local needs. It was also an opportunity for agencies to come together, thus initiating the network of support that the project aimed to build in the area.

The roll-out also ensured learning from the early sites was used in each area to improve delivery. Key lessons learnt from the first area included: allow a longer lead-in time for schools to identify families; routinely maintain the information on locally available services; plan support around the school timetable; and engage head teachers at the school early on.

Pen portrait

At referral all families completed a Pen Portrait. This was a family-led record that summarised current needs and could be added to over time. The Pen Portrait only included information that the family wanted to disclose, allowing families to work at their own pace. Analysis of the Pen Portraits found that the narrative could be quite limited; however, it was by design that the project only targeted areas of needs that the families were willing to address. It was also the aim to keep the record as simple as possible.

The project reported that, overall, families tended to add to their descriptions as they developed a relationship with the practitioner and they felt less rushed to speak about their situation. Headteachers that were resistant to the approach in the beginning, as it was intrusive to personal issues, reported positively to the project about the step-by-step approach to disclosure. Statutory partners, including CAF professionals, also liked the Pen Portraits, as it worked well as an alternative to their process, particularly with families who were resistant to work with statutory services.

Working Group

The Working Group of key partners meets regularly to review Pen Portraits and create intervention action plans. The project reported that the regularity and focused nature of these meetings ensured that issues in referrals were responded to quickly and that action plans included a tailored package of support. By bringing together the relevant professionals to work on cases, there was less duplication across the agencies in the processes to provide support.

Initially the Working Groups met fortnightly to discuss issues, but this was demanding for smaller agencies with less capacity. Now the group meets monthly, but continue to have weekly contact with schools via email and telephone (still visiting when required). This ensures that the group can involve a range of providers without having too much of an impact on the agencies themselves.

Neighbourhood Friend

To help families connect with key agencies, the project identified a Neighbourhood Friend to represent the family. These roles were more about processes to co-ordinate support and discuss progress, than a new professional position. Initially the role was held by individuals in schools, who the parents and children were comfortable to speak to. If the role was given to the deputy head teacher parents felt anxious about sharing their issues and it did not work as well.

The project learnt that the Neighbourhood Friend was integral to the family engaging with a range of services. It was more challenging to work with families from schools that had not identified a Neighbourhood Friend, as the project had to put in place additional steps to ensure the same access to support. The project made an effort to ensure that the Neighbourhood Friend felt valued in their role, as it was additional work for the professional.

The project identified that some parents preferred to engage with services without involving the school and therefore the project brought in the Salvation Army and Community Forum as outside agencies that could perform the role of Neighbourhood Friend as well.

Neighbourhood Menu

To showcase the range of local agencies, the project developed a Neighbourhood Menu of services for each locality. The Menu detailed each agency's strength, expertise and catchment area for families. To be part of the Menu, each agency completed a proforma describing their support and their scope for offering services on a subsidised basis. The mapping work has shown that many organisations have a similar offer, and there is good potential to streamline this. Overall the Neighbourhood Menu has captured the interest of the Strengthening Families group (the local response to the Troubled Families programme) and the final inventory has the potential to add real value for family support services in Sunderland.

Information Space

A central component to the original model for the Neighbourhood Alliance Project was the Information Space, an online platform for agencies to share information and families to engage with services. The system aimed to enable: data to be logged and shared; interventions to be put in place quickly for families; and for other agencies to share information with each other.

The process to set up this Information Space took longer than expected. The delays related to identifying an appropriate provider to design the system, ensuring that the processes were compatible with existing systems, and then testing the data security processes. The information to be shared was highly confidential and therefore it was essential that the processes were tested and reliable.

By the third year the system was fully tested and the system was an example of promising practice for the whole Improving Futures programme. The platform allowed agencies to share and transfer information, speeding up the process of supporting children and their families, reducing duplication of services working with families and allowing agencies to see who is supporting and elements of the work being conducted. Specifically this real-time case management system added value to the Troubled Families Programme data, which was found to become out of date very quickly.

In summary, the key factors ensuring success of the Neighbourhood Alliance delivery include:

- The **roll-out** implementation of the project ensured that the approach in each area was tailored and improved with learning from delivery.

- **Pen portraits** were an effective way to gather information from families at referral. It gave the families control over their information and ensured that the action plan addressed only the areas that the families wanted.

- The **Neighbourhood Friend** was an important professional role to identify and coordinate support with the families. It was more challenging to work with families that did not have a Neighbourhood Friend, as additional steps had to be implemented involving other services.

- The **Neighbourhood Menu** effectively mapped a wide range of local agencies working with the project. This was integral to providing tailored support packages to families and streamlining provision in each locality. The Menu has positive implications for provision to families more widely.

- Once implemented, the online **Information Space** was effective in supporting the delivery of appropriate support to families, as well as sharing information securely between agencies.

3.2   Working with partners and other services

A success of the project has been to develop relationships between local organisations in Sunderland.

Initially only a small number of the 600 Voluntary Community Organisations in Sunderland were involved with the project. There was some reservation by organisations to engage, as previous efforts from other projects had proven not to be sustainable. There was also a worry that the project would take work away work from local agencies.

To garner support from different agencies the team learnt to share the positives from the project quickly with the organisations. The Information Space was a major draw, as the platform offers updated information in a centralised and secure way, for mutual benefit to service providers and families:

"Voluntary Organisations are sick to death about requests for information, and they are sceptical... so there is an emphasis that the Information Space will be updatable and refreshed…it will be used for mutual benefit." Project Manager

The commissioning of the services was flexible, which enabled the project to rapidly mobilise a package of support. While some of the work was done via commissioning or 'spot purchasing', a lot has been done for free, with partners taking responsibility and going above and beyond what was required. The joined up working between different agencies meant that family issues could be resolved faster as it is easily identified where information may be inconsistent between services.

3.2.1   Working with schools

Overall, engaging families through primary schools was a success of the project. Some schools have approached the project, but had to be turned away, as the team prioritised working with schools with families with the highest need.

The engagement worked well because the staff knew the families and could build on this existing relationship for the project. The Neighbourhood Friend could also informally meet parents at coffee mornings or in the playground to discuss the support. This flexible approach reflected the ethos of the project, allowing families to engage in a way that suited them, at their own pace, and with fewer barriers.

While many schools were positive or thought the offer was '*too good to be true'*, the team were aware that the project required schools to open up, share information, and adopt a new way of working. To ensure schools understood their role and responsibilities, and to make staff aware of how the project could help children, the team held additional meetings and staff briefings for the school to attend. They also found it helped to share achievements in previous schools to demonstrate the benefits of the project. In return for providing information on families referred, the project asked for monthly updates from the schools, as well as case studies on families that are being helped by the project.

Despite the strengths of the approach, it has been a challenge to raise the profile of the project within the school. Teachers do not necessarily see the project in action on a day-to-day basis and can forget the offer for children who could benefit. To sustain engagement and train teachers the Neighbourhood Alliance team attended school meetings and invited school staff to attend their meetings. Bringing schools together at meetings was also an opportunity for schools to make connections and to share information/good practice with other schools involved.

3.2.2   Working with statutory services

The Neighbourhood Alliance Project provides support for families who are resistant to engaging with statutory services, as well as delivering services quickly where the is a substantial waiting time. The Neighbourhood Alliance team strategically positioned themselves to influence decision making and commissioning. Members of the team sit on the Strengthening Families Board, as well as other local area groups.

The strong lines of communication with statutory services mean that the Neighbourhood Alliance Working Group can cross-reference families to ensure there is no duplication in cases and escalate or de-escalate families depending on their need. If there are child protection issues, the group can immediately identify a social worker referral to be involved in the case. The project has gained the trust of the Strengthening Families panel (formally CAF local multi-agency meetings) as there has always been sufficient support in place for referrals that haven't gone any further.

The timeliness of the Neighbourhood Alliance intervention is able to fill a gap in provision for some families, particularly in relation to waiting times for services (e.g. Community and Adolescent Mental Health Services). They have also been suited to offer provision alongside other programmes, including Troubled Families. This joined up working alleviates capacity within statutory services, whilst avoiding duplication or confusion across the different offers. There is concern, however, that as Troubled Families engages more intensively with primary schools it will be harder to distinguish between the purposes of the two services.

3.3   Challenges and lesson learnt

There were a few aspects of the Neighbourhood Alliance model that were challenging. The lessons learnt from each area were used to continually improve each model and alternatives were introduced to solve the issues.

Firstly, it was observed that as children progressed from primary to secondary school, families frequently disconnected from the project. Following the move the family lost contact with the previous Neighbourhood Friend, normally a role within the primary school, and the relationships between the families and the project diminished and contact lost. To overcome this issue additional funding has been secured to introduce the project formally into secondary schools. The Neighbourhood Alliance team will inform secondary schools when children who have received support at primary school will be joining and discuss the potential for continuing support if there are ongoing issues. The secondary schools will also be visited to ensure they have a sound understanding of the project and services/opportunities available.

A second issue related to exiting the project involved monitoring families. Throughout the project families completed monitoring forms to identify needs and track their progress. However, as families felt their issues had been addressed, they tended to engage less with their Neighbourhood Friend and there was a concern around the number of exit surveys being completed. To overcome this issue an alternative approach to capturing this data was developed.

The third challenge for the project was the level of counselling support required. The amount of counselling required by schools was a potential funding threat for the project. To overcome this issue, the team met with the counselling team and the schools to put in place a package that fit within the funding budget parameters and supports the children. The schools have also looked to their own budgets to ensure additional support is in place and children will receive the support they require.

4.0 Outcomes and sustainability

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The project gathered a variety of sources of evidence to demonstrate both outputs and outcomes for children and families, which was supplemented with evidence captured through the evaluation case study work and Improving Future Monitoring Information System tool (IFMIS). In this chapter, we consider the extent to which the project achieved the intended results.

4.1 Project outputs

At the time of reporting (December 2015), 341 families were supported over three years of delivery, comprised of 485 adults and 757 children. This is well above the original target of 160 families. At the time of writing there were 207 live cases currently engaged with the Neighbourhood Alliance Project. All children referred to the service received at least one form of intervention support; 70% received more than one; 22% received more than 2; and 8% received more than 3.

Monitoring data shows that ten schools in five areas in Sunderland are engaged with the project, two schools per area. As shown in Figure 1, the area with the highest number of recorded interventions is Sunderland North (1564), followed by Sunderland East (900), Washington (387), Sunderland West (245) and Coalfields (74). This order reflects the time the project has been operating in each area, as the project has been operating in Sunderland North the longest. In all areas child-focused interventions were delivered the most out of the three intervention types (child-focused, adult-focused and family-focused).

Figure 1. Number of interventions delivered in the six areas in Sunderland
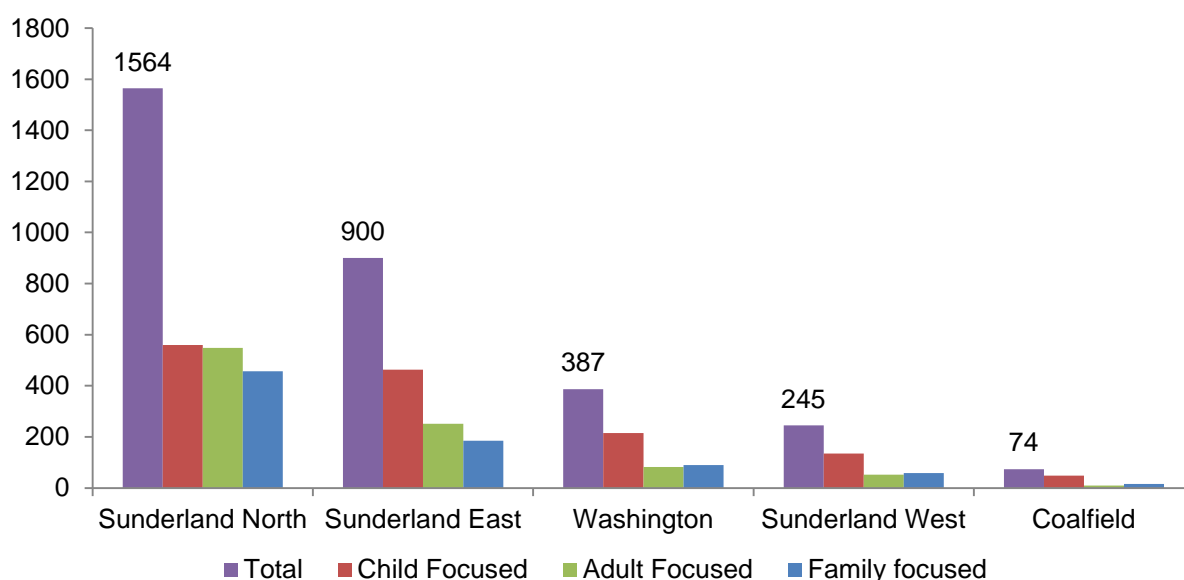
4.2 Project outcomes

The IFMIS tool captures strengths and risk factors for each family, based on the evidence recorded by practitioners within the service plan. In the charts that follow, the before/after comparison is restricted to those families for whom both entry and exit data was available. The IFMIS can be used to infer positive and negative outcomes from the project, but it does not include a comparison group and therefore does not show 'impacts'.

Broadly speaking, the evidence from IFMIS indicates that the project helped to improve child and family wellbeing and functioning. From entry to exit, there was improvement on eight out of the 10 measures of adult strengths; 5 out of 6 of the child strengths; and 6 out of the 7 family strengths. In terms of risk factors, the project improved 14 out of the 22 risk factors relating to children; and 6 out of the 7 risk factors relating to families. For adults there was less of a positive change – only improvement on 4 out of 15 risk factors. Although there was less improvement for the group, the remaining 11 risk factors for adults remained the same, i.e., they did not deteriorate.
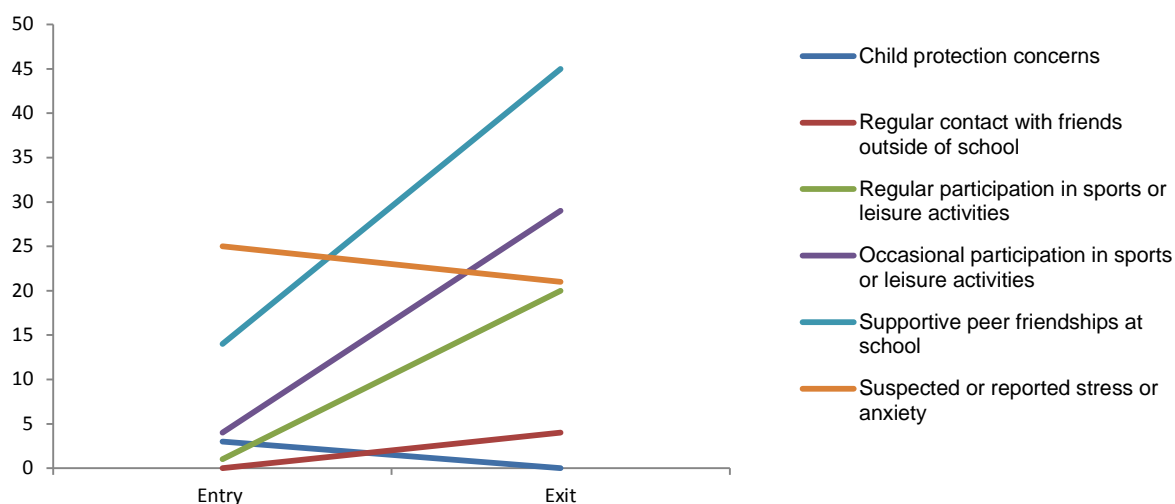
More specifically though, the Neighbourhood Alliance Project identified the following outcomes in their evaluation plan as outcomes for project:

- Improvements to children's self-esteem and wellbeing;

- Improvements to children's school behaviour, attendance and attainment;

- Improved family situations; and

- Stronger and more resilient families.

4.2.1 Improvements to children's self-esteem and wellbeing

As figure 2 indicates, there was improvement through the IFMIS data on measures relating to children's self-esteem and wellbeing. Compared to other domains this was the area that showed the most improvement from entry to exit. Peer friendships and participation in activities had the greatest improvement. There was also positive change in levels of child stress and anxiety, but the change was less in comparison. This may be because large changes in mental health domains are unlikely within the timeframe of the intervention. There was also a decrease in child protection concerns, which was another aim of the project in this area. As one mother reported in the projects' monitoring report to the Big Lottery, the project provides tailored support to each family member to have their own individual outcome:

"Improving Futures has been a big help to me and my children and have supported me through some very difficult times, providing counselling for my daughter as well as educational support. My youngest daughter attends an after school club provided by the project, which has enabled her to socialise with friends as she can't play out where we live because of the busy roads. Without Improving Futures my family wouldn't have made the progress they have." (Mother. Quote taken from the project's monitoring form submitted to the Big Lottery Fund)

Figure 2. Improvements to children's self-esteem and wellbeing

Legend:
- Child protection concerns
- Regular contact with friends outside of school
- Regular participation in sports or leisure activities
- Occasional participation in sports or leisure activities
- Supportive peer friendships at school
- Suspected or reported stress or anxiety

4.2.2   Improvements to children's self-esteem and wellbeing

Figure 3 shows improvement on IFMIS outcomes relevant to attainment, attendance and behaviour at school. Reports received from the school also indicate that interventions such as breakfast clubs, one to one support, literacy projects (e.g. Read and Write Army) and counselling had an impact on making the children more likely to attend school and be there on time.

"Of the 22 children attached to the Improving Futures project, 18 attend the breakfast club and comments from their teachers say that their attention span is greater as they have full stomachs and they are more focused and ready to learn." (Head Teacher, Coalfield school, quote taken from the project's monitoring form submitted to the Big Lottery Fund)

For attainment, all schools reported improvements in numeracy and literacy. At one school In Sunderland East 90% of children had improved numeracy and 84% had improved literacy. At a school in Sunderland North, 75% of the children had improvements in both, and at a school in Washington, all 6 children receiving support improved in their numeracy and literacy.

Figure 3. Improvements to children's school behaviour, attendance and attainment.
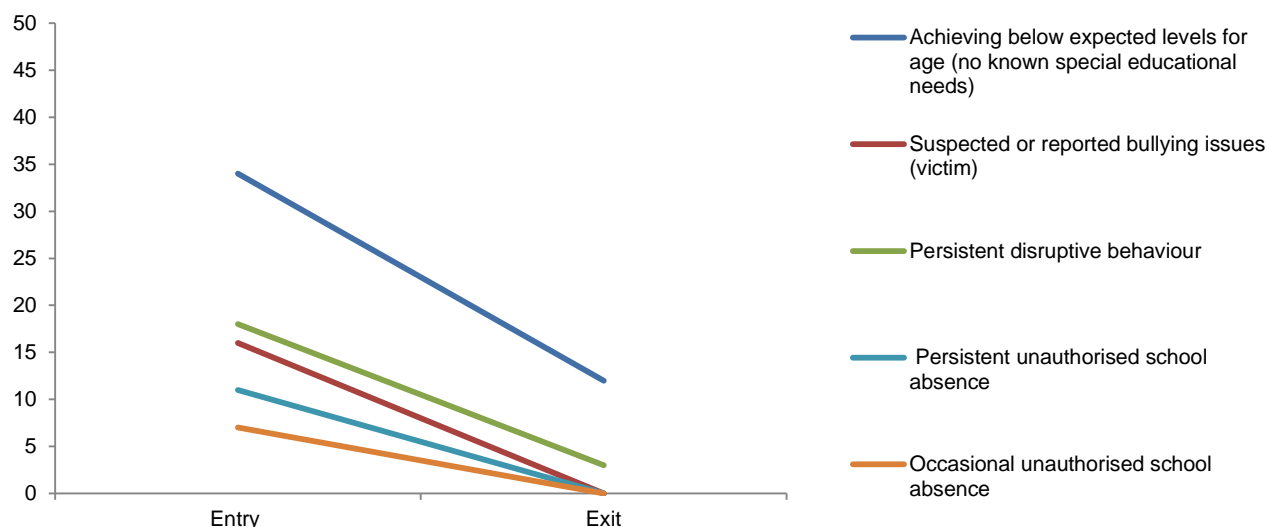

4.2.3 Improved family situations

Figure 4 shows that there were positive outcomes for families in their relationships (within and outside the family) and behaviours (regular routines in place and less TV watching). An example of a specific intervention that helped parents become more involved with their children was the Mum's Allowed literacy project, which was set up for hard to reach parents so they could actively engage in school life, learning the importance of reading and how it supports everyday life. The outcomes of the club are improved confidence and self esteem as well as a better understanding of school and government procedures.

The area with the greatest change in family situation was related to economic welfare: 35 were accessing the right benefits at exit, compared to only 3 at entry; and 28 were actively managing a budget for their household, compared to 1 at entry. This is positive as it shows that families were learning skills from the support that could be used to readily improve their day-to-day lives.

Figure 4. Improved family situations
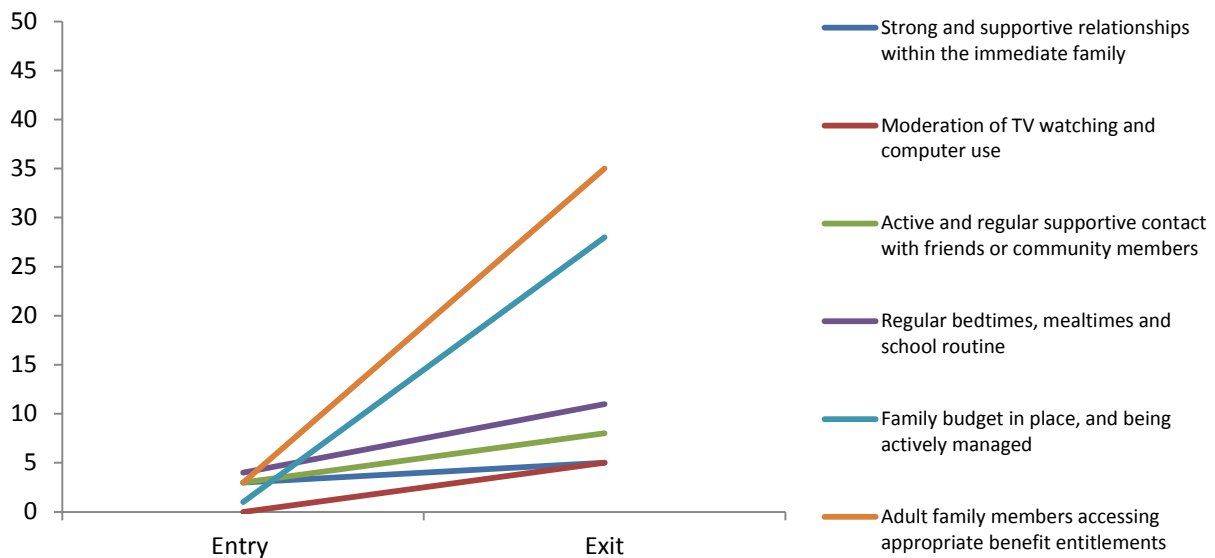
4.2.4   Stronger and more resilient families

Figure 5 indicates that there improvements in areas relating to family strength and resilience there was improvement in, but it was less overall compared to the other domains. The greatest improvements related to reducing parenting anxiety and improving boundary setting and discipline. Families were less socially isolated and there were fewer incidences of domestic violence at exit but the change was relatively small compared to other outcomes. This is possibly because skills to reduce anxiety and improve boundary setting can be applied directly from the intervention; whereas in areas like domestic violence the solution may not result in immediate change.

Figure 5. Stronger and more resilient families
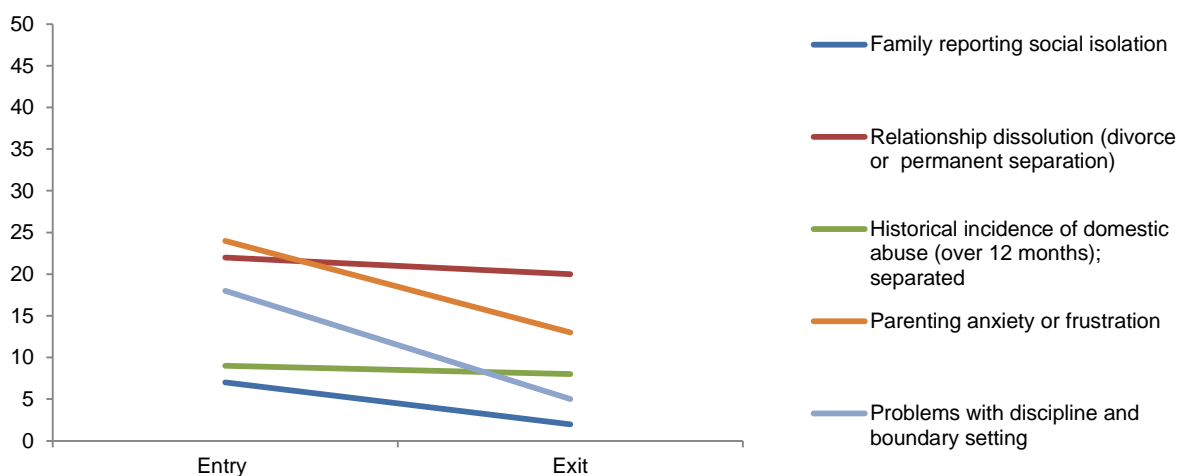
4.3   Meeting the needs of the locality

One of the aims of the project was to identify common issues affecting families in each locality, and commission or plan services accordingly. This was to ensure that where possible services could be offered as a block of support to families.

IFMIS data indicated that at entry for children the most common issues related to low attainment (51%), stress and anxiety (39%), and disruptive behaviour (28%). The outcome data suggests there were significant improvements for children in attainment and behaviour. For issues relating to mental health, counselling support had a significant role to play in supporting children. Currently all schools have a dedicated counsellor working in their school, giving the children the opportunity to access support via pre-arranged appointments or via a drop in during break times or lunch. In Southwick over 60% of the children are receiving dedicated support from a counsellor. At a school in Sunderland East all 14 children are receiving support from a counsellor. To accommodate the need the Head Teacher has dedicated a room for counselling and has already approached the counsellor regarding future work when the project ceases.

"Children that attend weekly sessions have improved confidence and self-esteem with an impact on learning and the ability to maintain relationships. Greater confidence has enabled them [children] to ask questions within the class reflect on their behaviour and cope with challenging circumstances." (Head Teacher, Sunderland East, quote taken from the project's monitoring form submitted to the Big Lottery Fund)

For families, the most common issues related to worklessness (28%), divorce and separation (26%), debt repayments and domestic abuse (21%). For adults specifically, the most common issues were parenting stress (30%), issues with boundary setting (22%) and physical health problems (20%). As discussed previously, the outcome data indicates that these areas were improved at exit from the project. There was particular gain for parenting stress and welfare management within families.

Specifically there was effective support related to debt reduction, improving tenancy status and addressing incorrect advice from other agencies. For example, the project worked very closely with Gentoo housing, a private landlord and one of their partners, to ensure improved tenancy stability and issues with housing. A representative from Gentoo checked information on families with their system and hosted regular 'drop-in' session to speak with the parents and deal with their issues directly.

Areas where there was less change related to life style choices (smoking, drinking and substance misuse) and physical health problems. Although it was intended for the support to be holistic, these areas are related adult issues specifically rather than parenting or family issues.

4.4 Sustainability

The whole approach of the Neighbourhood Alliance Project is geared towards sustainability – both for families and the infrastructure. There was a piece of working to look at the phasing of the intervention costs across the years of up to 2016, to ensure its sustainability.

"The legacy is to build a model in the local area to be self-sufficient when the project moves on…the right systems in place". Project Manager

Some of the smaller service intervention has been provided to families free of charge, including, running advice sessions, group work and advocacy. However, the more bespoke counselling work and speech and language therapy costs more.

The project would like to compare between schools they have worked with and schools they have not. There is anecdotal evidence that they have saved the local authority money, but they do not have the formal measures of Social Return on Investment to prove this.

The project has considered whether it could be rolled out to other schools. The need is there but it would require school buy-in and a financially sustainable model. One idea has been to introduce a Bronze, Silver, Gold system, where the more money schools are able to put into the project, the more they get back in terms of services. This has potential as some schools already adopt a similar approach with other services, but receive little in return. It would also be possible to embed some of the services, like the breakfast club and counselling support, in mainstream school provision.

5.0 Conclusion

5.0 Conclusions

In the previous chapters of this report we examined the context in which the Neighbourhood Alliance Project was developed and the lessons learned from setting up and implementing the different strands of the project. We then went on to consider the main achievements and outcomes. In this final chapter we draw together the evidence to reflect on the overall conclusions and to present a set of recommendations.

5.1 Concluding thoughts

Overall, the partnership for the Neighbourhood Alliance Project has developed an impressive portfolio of work with families and communities in the local area, pulling together different local agencies to provide bespoke and intensive support packages for families. The partnership operated well under the leadership from the Foundation of Light and its association with the Sunderland Football Club has been effective in engaging hard-to-reach families.

The project has also positioned itself well and worked closely with statutory agencies during the three year period, influencing and shaping the future of local provision. Despite high demand from families resistant to engaging with statutory services, the project was able to continuously provide appropriate and timely support to families. Testament to the project's success is the 341 families supported, far above the original 160 target.

Whilst implementing the model almost to the original business plan, the project set up an approach that embedded learning and improvements into the delivery across the five areas. This ensured that the model improved over time and practices could be adapted where needed. Furthermore the project was able to tailor its response to each area and provide support packages appropriate to the different needs and demographics.

The Information Space and the Neighbourhood Menu are two aspects of the model that stand out as being particularly noteworthy amongst elements within the project. Information Space introduces a reliable and robust case management system to share confidential information securely and encourage multi-agency and efficient working across all sectors. The Neighbourhood Menu has mapped local services available for families, identifying areas of overlap and potential to streamline services more efficiently. This has important implications at a time of restrictive funding for services. Both models have proven to have wider implications for services offering support to families.

The evaluation research demonstrates that the Neighbourhood Alliance Project has built a model of support for families with complex needs, which is highly valued by participants, partners and schools. There have been good outcomes for children and adults in the areas of wellbeing, functioning and behaviour as planned for the model. In particular the project has helped to improve child attendance and attainment at school, access for adults to welfare support and improved housing solutions, and generally improved parenting styles and family behaviours.

Recommendation 1: Explore further the potential for a financially sustainable model and the use of Social Return on Investment tools. The Neighbourhood Alliance Project has proven to be effective in its way working with schools, services and families. However, funding for the Improving Futures programme is finite and it is imperative that the promising elements of practice are supported with sustainable funding. The Bronze, Silver Gold system suggested in this report, whereby schools pay and receive services through the model, should be investigated further through conversations with schools. Social Return on Investment tools would also help to demonstrate the benefits of the project, which will strengthen the case for funding in the future.

Recommendation 2: To design a long-term solution to offer counselling support in schools. As noted, anxiety and stress were common features for adults and children presenting to the project. There was also a high demand for counselling services in schools, which was expensive for the project to commission. This indicates a significant need to be met, an important finding for this age group of children in particular. As such, the Neighbourhood Alliance could explore formalising further the relationships with counsellors in schools, either through introducing the service into mainstream provision or another way that does not reduce how much service is provided.

Recommendation 3: Investigate the potential to share learning from the Neighbourhood Menu and Information Space. Other programmes delivering multi-agency partnership working would benefit from tools to map provision and support information sharing between agencies and families. As the Neighbourhood Alliance Project has developed two successful products, they are in a position to share the learning from implementation and possibly benefit financially in return for sharing the products they have developed.

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The Neighbourhood Alliance

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