



INVESTING IN EARLY LITERACY

# Blackpool Libraries and library led activities in the community

Encouraging the use of libraries is a key priority for Blackpool as research suggests that sharing stories, songs and rhyme can support children’s speech language and communication development. Through Better Start, two Early Years Library Engagement Workers were recruited to ensure that there was a specific focus on children under four accessing library spaces. Additionally, they delivered activities in the community, with the aim of increasing library engagement and membership and to supporting parents to share stories, songs and rhyme with their babies and children every day.

## Understanding the Challenge

The Bercow Report (DCSF, 2008) stated that 50% of children in some socio-economically disadvantaged populations have speech and language skills that are significantly lower than those of other children of the same age. The follow up report, Bercow: Ten Years On (2018) identified that not enough has been done in the ten years and called for the need to ensure that any new initiatives identify and spread evidence-based home learning environment programmes which involve experts in early years practice and speech, language and communication, as well as parents and carers in their development and implementation. It was with this in mind that the partnership made the decision to invest in libraries when considering the development of the Universal Speech Language Communication and Literacy approach in Blackpool.



Blackpool demographic data suggests that a large proportion of household’s experience hardship with over 40% of households been categorised as the most deprived in England. With the Early Years Foundation Stage Results for the academic year 2023 - 2024 indicating that 73.2% of children reach the expected levels of development in the communication and language early learning goal, compared to 79.3% nationally.

The Blackpool wide co-produced Super Six Strategies to support children’s speech, language, communication and literacy development, were developed to ensure that all children across Blackpool have consistent support from all professionals. One of these strategies is encouraging early language development through care givers, this can include everyday communication opportunities, story sharing, trips to the park and libraries.

## What we did

- Employed two dedicated Early Years Engagement Workers
- Ensured every library in Blackpool has staff that are trained in approaches which support Early Years Literacy.
- Library teams were involved in the production of Blackpool Early Years Story sharing framework and were then able to model this to care givers.
- Held weekly evidence-informed Early Years sessions for parents and their children across the nine Blackpool libraries.
- Literacy activities held outside traditional library spaces, at community events and venues, parks, and in Family Hubs.

## What we did

Sessions and activities are all based on the National Literacy Trust's Chat, Play, Read methodology and promote innovative story sharing support for parents and children. Staff have been trained in Speech and Language UK's Early Talk and the Blackpool Super Six Strategy which aligns with the approach within Family Hub teams, Community Connectors, Speech, Language and Communication Teams and Early Years Practitioners across the town.

Prior to this investment, Blackpool Libraries ran 1 or 2 Baby Bounce and Rhyme sessions a week, of varying quality, and provision was based on individual team members' interests and willingness to run the sessions. The service now runs Early Years activities across six days in all nine libraries across the town, ensuring those families only able to attend on Saturdays are not excluded. The sessions are delivered by staff who have had speech and language training and receive support and mentoring from the Early Years Engagement Workers. The service has increased the number of early years activities available to families by 35%.

The team additionally deliver sessions for children and families independently and with partners at community events and through literacy weeks and town wide reading festivals. Libraries also support the town wide distribution of Booktrust resources through the increased focus on Early Years all town wide literacy events, approaches or campaigns consider the needs and engagement with Early Years families.

The groups have been welcomed by local care givers, it has been recognised that children's library spaces are being used more often by parents as a space to come and play and read together. This has led to the library service investing in the refurbishment of some children's areas across the town and other library users have formed volunteer groups in some libraries to improve outdoor areas for families to use. The increased use of libraries has also let to partners delivering services within libraries, such as infant feeding support and Community Connector drop in session.



## Outcomes

Families report that they feel more welcome at libraries and understand that libraries are for them, and that they don't need to be quiet. Once they have got through the door for a Baby Bounce and Rhyme session and feel comfortable in the space, they can use it as a 'third space' outside of sessions, to meet friends or spend time reading and playing with their children. Positive relationships have built up with staff, families can be signposted to further support if they have any concerns or worries, with staff supporting with applications for discretionary loans, and signposting to Family Hubs.

*These sessions are so important for children's social and emotional development, and their speech and language – but they are also important for the parents/carers too. There are studies about how Baby Bounce and Rhyme can support maternal mental health. I'm proud we have such a successful session at Layton Library.*

**Library Manager**

*My daughter is quite reserved but has recently made friends with two other children here. It will help her make friends when she goes to school.*

**Parent**

*I brought my little boy here before he went to school and now I bring my little girl. We love it, the staff are so good.*

**Parent**

*It is good for the social aspect eg mixing with other children. My children don't go to nursery so this helps.*

**Parent**