



JUST ABOUT MANAGING

Supporting Early Years Families with the Cost of Living

The cost of living significantly impacts on early years families, leading to financial and mental strain often leading to challenges providing for themselves and children. At Better Start we developed a holistic response for parents across the town. The aim was to support families to navigate existing support schemes and benefits to maximise their financial income. By bringing together services in Blackpool to ensure support is clear, inclusive and accessible to all.

Understanding the Challenge

Timely and high-quality support during pregnancy and in early parenthood is crucial for laying solid foundations for lifelong well-being. Financial difficulties during this period can lead to parents feeling overwhelmed, develop into mental health difficulties, and impact negatively on their ability to parent.

Growing up in poverty can harm children's life chances, limiting their future opportunities in education and employment and could lead to worse physical and mental health outcomes. Additionally, the World Health Organisation (2018) state that babies, children, are some of those who are at greatest risk of health problems because of living in cold homes and therefore are particularly at risk to the health consequences of poverty.

Blackpool is ranked as the most deprived Local Authority in England (IMD 2019) the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) estimates that 30.7% of children in Blackpool are living in income deprived families which is almost double the national average.

Our challenge was to engage with and provide appropriate support and advice to local families with young children who were impacted by the cost of living and who were negatively impacted by the cost of living. We know from research that there are several barriers that families face when trying to access entitlements and support, such as understanding the criteria for support, completing application forms, and overcoming the fear and shame that is often attached to talking about finances and debt and in asking for help.

Poverty, for me, from the lens of working in Children's Services, is really distinct. It's not neglect. It's where families are suffering adversity where they don't know where the money is coming from to pay for the food for the children or the heating that night.

**Kara Haskayne, Head of Safeguarding
Blackpool Council**



Basically, you are trying really hard to tread water and not being able to keep your head above. I kind of feels we are just working to exist, rather than living. No matter what you do, your just not getting out of the red.

Lisa, Parent of the Revolution

What we did

Our approach was aimed to simplify the information, advice and support available to families and to remove the stigma and shame that some families feel asking for help.

It was critical that we understood the community's needs before developing a strategy to support those living in poverty. We established a co-production group which included parents with lived experience, to tell us what living in poverty in Blackpool is like, the daily challenges, and what would help. This helped to formulate a strategy to deliver support when and where it is needed most, and in a way that is most effective. From the group we also developed a film and toolkit for practitioners on how to speak to families about the cost of living and poverty as they felt that often professionals did not tackle the impact of poverty on parenting.

From speaking to our parents, we develop two different approaches:

- **Aligning existing services and developing effective poverty awareness practices through the workforce to ensure simple and consistent advice and support for families.**
- **Taking practical help and support out into the community to ensure parents were receiving the vital support available.**

To raise awareness of the benefits and schemes available to parents and highlight the local services and national government support schemes, such as benefits, food banks, childcare entitlements, energy bills support schemes and winter fuel payments. A digital communications campaign was launched on social media, to explain, in simple terms, what support families could access. This included cost-of-living films with Community Connectors our paid peer supporters.

Two Community Connectors were allocated roles specifically to support parents. These 'Money Saving and Cost of Living Connectors' provided a bridge between local and national support and parents. They kept abreast of the latest schemes and provided practical support on hints and tips to save money. Through Cost-of-Living Drop-ins at key community locations such as Family Hubs and libraries, the Connectors were able to provide face to face support for families. This included completing forms for families who were unable or not confident with completing the applications themselves. The drop-ins provided a friendly and open space for parents to speak to the team in a non-judgemental way to support these conversations, a set of six cost-of-living postcards were created to be given to parents. These included really simplified signposting and support on how to apply for schemes and benefits that can help their family including energy/keeping warm, child benefit, discretionary support, free childcare hours, Healthy Start, and the priority register.

The weekly drop-ins were complemented by 'Cost-of-Living Roadshows' where local services are brought together to offer a wide range of advice and support to Blackpool families in a very accessible format. Organisations that have attended these events include NHS mental health support, local community food pantries, Blackpool Citizen's Advice Bureau, Local Authority Family Hubs, Public Health, Health Services, Fire Service, Department of Work and Pensions, local Credit Unions, Early Years Team, Active Blackpool, Adult Learning, and Blackpool Football Club Community Trust.

"Thank you so much for your support recently, the voucher was such a big help. Have been awarded the household support fund too. And daughter can get free hours in nursery from September".

Parent

"Thank you so much for sorting the clothes, food and Christmas gifts we are so grateful".

Parent

Hi someone's just rang from the council. Thank you for sorting it for me.

They gave me some help with the gas and also a food parcel, going to send me a couple of links that might be useful to my family Thanks for all your help - very much appreciated.

Parent

Outcomes

The cost-of-living support has played a vital role in protecting families from rising costs; preventing those facing multiple disadvantage from falling further into poverty and helping to build resilience. Leading and coordinating a strategic and focused early years offer has ensured that the local cost-of-living support is inclusive and consistent.

Through linked initiatives such as our Winter Advocacy work and Santa's Grottos and Letter's, we've ensured that families don't feel a sense a stigma or shame attached to asking for support and we have worked with partners to replicate this inclusive approach to speaking to families about their circumstances and what help they need.

Through taking a co-productive approach to better understand our families challenges, we have seen;

Local services have simplified their claim forms, such as Local Authority discretionary payments to reduce the barriers for families in accessing support when they most need it.

An increase in families to apply for childcare funding, supporting more children have access to good quality childcare provision.

More families reached with household support through our Community Connectors who can identify those families struggling with increased costs through the local authority household support fund.

Blackpool Food Bank develop a more inclusive customer facing offer 'Big Food Truck' providing low-cost food direct to the public in community locations.

Blackpool foodbanks accepting the Healthy Start entitlement through their 'Big Food Trucks'.

Joined up services and offers through networking opportunities with; Blackpool Credit Union, United Utilities, DWP and Citizens Advice Bureau.

Organisations being more responsive to the needs of the community based on demographics, reduced duplication, and appropriate support and the right service being provided to families at the right time.

Development of a FYi directory (local directory) of cost-of-living support