



CO-PRODUCED WITH THE COMMUNITY

Early Years Park Rangers

The Early Years Park Rangers service was co-produced with the community to give Blackpool families who previously may not have visited local parks access to the evidence-based forest school approach. This work aims to encourage and educate parents around early years play, as well as the benefits of the outdoors and supporting children to engage with nature.

Our Offer

The rangers deliver weekly activities, in both parks and on the beach, tailored to different age categories. The forest school principals being a long-term engagement approach to supporting children to play, explore, take risks and engage with outdoor spaces. Supporting families to learn together, activities are modelled by the team and families encouraged to continue to use parks and beaches outside of groups, with digital and printed activities provided.

The rangers also support wider community involvement within Blackpool Parks Regeneration. They offer volunteering in a range of areas to support the maintenance and development of parks by individuals and community groups and have developed a successful Junior Park Ranger scheme.



Understanding the Challenge

The impact of having accessible, quality green spaces for early years families is widely recognised as being positive on parent-child interactions and child development. However, in areas of deprivation, there can be reduced access and a lack of age-appropriate play equipment. During the development of the bid alongside the community voice parent representative group, a lack of accessible green space and suitable play equipment was identified. The group also highlighted a lack of understanding from their peers on how to use green spaces outside of structured play equipment and the benefits for children, and that simply building play equipment did not capture the essence of encouraging families to interact with outdoor spaces.

The charity **Groundwork Lancashire West & Wigan** undertook a green space audit from November 2013 to January 2014. This highlighted publicly accessible green space in the Blackpool Better Start wards was limited, fragmented and a prevalence of minor open spaces inadequate for physical activity. Early Years families also highlighted that they did not prioritise going to the park with their children, some commented that the play equipment was not suitable or for older children, that littering and dogs were a problem, and that they did not feel confident in using outdoor spaces.

“Baby Rangers was truly a magical, amazing set of outdoor classes for little ones! It made me make special memories with my little one outside which we would have never done!”

Parent

What we did

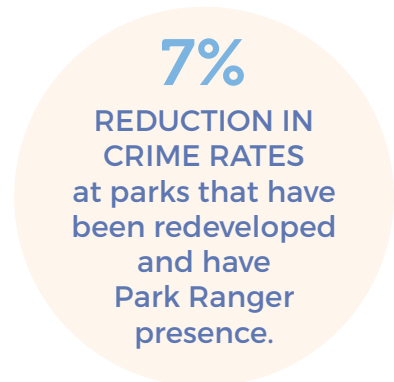
Alongside £1.36m National Lottery Community Fund capital investment to enhance green spaces, the Early Years Park Ranger service was introduced in the Blackpool Council Parks Department in July 2016. The ambition was that this service would employ local people who knew the community and could support communities to use and become proud of their local parks.

The team was initially all trained in Forest School. This has now been expanded to include Beach School and Early Years Woodworking, enabling the team to offer a variety of different activities and groups for families. All rangers also have training in child development and the impact of trauma through the Brain Game, enabling them to give consistent messages to families around child health and development.

The rangers have been a key element of the universal community offer within Better Start. The team works closely with wider partners such as Family Hubs, community connectors, library services, Active Blackpool, early years teams and early years settings. It supports town wide events, signposting families between services and providing consistent early years messaging.

The team offers activities through all four seasons. To support families to use parks in poorer weather, it provides wellies and waterproofs for children both when attending sessions and to borrow from Family Hubs when needed. Community stores have also been established near the beach for families to borrow wellies, buckets and spades to take to the beach and then return for other families to use.

In their volunteer offer, the service provided a range of roles and groups including: gardening and maintenance groups; a dads shed; youth and neighbourhood groups; and group support roles. The Blackpool Parks Regeneration Strategy included the ambition that all new parks must contain volunteer roles, evidence community consultation, feature an early years element and a community offer. Recognising the value of working with local residents to generate community engagement in parks.



Parent Feedback

My son has met new friends and all the while they are talking in the fresh air and getting to learn about nature. **Parent**

I don't feel comfortable in traditional playgroup settings, but spending time outdoors with other parents has had a huge part in improving my mental health, especially after giving birth twice during Covid. **Parent**

It helped develop my baby's physical strength through tummy time and senses introducing to sights, sounds, smells and textures he wouldn't have been exposed to without coming to the session. **Parent**

They finally have friends to play with and they are learning English which we don't speak at home. **Parent**

[They] started to talk loads more...well lots of babbling that [they] didn't do before. **Parent**