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Practice Unit

A partnership of



Changes in local areas as a result of the HeadStart programme:

stakeholder perspectives

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The HeadStart programme

HeadStart was a six-year, £67.4 million National Lottery funded programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK. It aimed to explore and test new ways to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young people aged 10–16 and prevent serious mental health issues from developing. To do this, six local-authority-led HeadStart partnerships in Blackpool, Cornwall, Hull, Kent, Newham and Wolverhampton worked with local young people, schools, families, charities, community and public services to make young people's mental health and wellbeing everybody's business. As a test and learn programme, the funded HeadStart programme ended in July 2022, with the intention being to sustain and embed effective HeadStart approaches locally.

The HeadStart Learning Team

The Evidence Based Practice Unit at the Anna Freud Centre and University College London (UCL) worked with The National Lottery Community Fund and the HeadStart partnerships to collect and evaluate evidence about what does and does not work locally to benefit young people, now and in the future. Partners working with the Evidence Based Practice Unit on this evaluation included the University of Manchester and the Child Outcomes Research Consortium (CORC), a project of the Anna Freud Centre. This collaboration is called the HeadStart Learning Team. Previous partners in the HeadStart Learning Team included the London School of Economics (LSE) and Common Room.

Background and aims of this briefing

Implementation of the HeadStart programme was underpinned by a commitment to changing systems to improve support for young people's mental health and wellbeing in each of the six HeadStart partnership areas. Systems change can be defined as:

an intentional process designed to alter the status quo by shifting the function or structure of an identified system with purposeful interventions. It is a journey which can require a radical change in people's attitudes as well as in the ways people work. [It] aims to bring about lasting change by altering underlying structures and supporting mechanisms which make the system operate in a particular way. These can include policies, routines, relationships, resources, power structures and values. (Abercrombie et al., 2015, p. 9)

In 2018, relatively early in the implementation of the HeadStart programme, we (the HeadStart Learning Team) conducted eight interviews or focus groups with representatives from the six HeadStart partnerships, the Learning Team, and The National Lottery Community Fund to learn about perceptions of what systems change and sustainability could look like in the context of HeadStart (Evidence Based Practice Unit, 2019). Interviewees viewed HeadStart as being a catalyst, tool or lever to reshape the existing system through: workforce, organisational or individual transformation; increasing emphasis on prevention and early intervention; improved joined-up working between organisations, services and individuals; a shift to a shared or embedded language, understanding or approach; a continuation of 'what works' in HeadStart; influencing local and national policy and practice; and increasing emphasis on participation or co-production work with young people.

Facilitators to systems change and sustainability identified by participants were: building relationships, alliances and networks; securing local ownership, buy-in and leadership of HeadStart; use of participation or co-production; embedding HeadStart within existing systems; aligning with and building on local or national policy agendas; securing continued funding; and early thinking and planning.

This briefing extends this earlier work in 2018 by providing an insight into the perspectives of HeadStart staff and wider stakeholders within the HeadStart

partnership areas about their perceptions of local area change, including systems change, as a result of HeadStart, towards the end of the programme in 2021–2022. The findings are intended to be of interest and use to those with a role in funding, designing or implementing programmes like HeadStart and seeking to facilitate area-level or systems change.

Methods

We asked the programme leads at each of the HeadStart partnerships to identify and invite up to 10 HeadStart staff members and local area stakeholders to take part in confidential interviews or focus groups with the Learning Team about local area change as a result of the HeadStart programme. We then contacted staff and stakeholders who responded affirmatively to arrange their interview or focus group over Microsoft Teams. The interviews and focus groups took place in 2021 and 2022. All participants gave their informed consent to take part.

We spoke with 30 HeadStart staff members and local area stakeholders across the six HeadStart partnerships, with the number of participants in each area ranging from two to nine. See Appendix 1 for anonymised information about the staff and stakeholders interviewed in each area. The interviews and focus groups ranged from 25–55 minutes in length. All interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and then transcribed.¹ We asked participants about:

- the role of HeadStart within their local area
- what the mental health and wellbeing support system for young people was like within their local area before HeadStart and what it is like now
- perceptions of any other changes as a result of HeadStart within their local area
- HeadStart's role in bringing about change
- any other ways in which the mental health and wellbeing support system for young people could be improved

¹ Ethical approval for the HeadStart Qualitative Evaluation was received from the UCL Research Ethics Committee (ID Number: 7963/002).

- any drawbacks for their local area as a result of HeadStart
- any ways in which the impact of HeadStart had been more limited
- what helped HeadStart to influence change within their local area
- what hindered HeadStart from influencing change
- anticipation of any changes lasting beyond the funded programme period.

We analysed the transcripts using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify themes across participants' interviews and focus groups.

Findings

In this section, we present the findings from our analysis. These consider the changes that participants identified within the HeadStart partnership areas; the factors that appeared to enable these changes; the areas where limited change had been achieved; and the factors preventing or limiting change. Within each of these sections, key themes are presented and illustrated with quotes from participants.

Perceived changes in local HeadStart partnership areas

Participants described changes that had occurred within the HeadStart partnership areas as a result of the HeadStart programme. We identified three themes: improvements in joined-up working across the system; a shift in focus and awareness around young people's mental health; and an enhanced offer of support for young people. These three themes were evident across all six HeadStart partnerships.

Theme 1

HeadStart led to improvements in joined-up working across the system

Participants had noticed improvements in joined-up working. They highlighted increased cohesion, coordination and consistency in support systems within their local areas, greater collaboration between agencies, and instigation of multi-agency meetings to better identify and support young people to access the help that they needed.

Sub-theme 1: taking a cohesive, coordinated and consistent approach

Participants noted that as a result of HeadStart, there was now a more area-wide approach and common strategy to supporting young people's mental health and wellbeing within their local areas:

Making sure that we operate as a system and are able to provide the right support at the right time for young people and their families. So, it does feel quite different, compared to the very early days of HeadStart.

This included the provision of consistent and standardised services for schools, such as a new personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education programme: "All young people in [area] are getting assistance in what they learn in school about feelings and trusted adults and talking about emotions." This also included the development of a common language to use when talking about and understanding young people's mental health and wellbeing. Participants indicated that the development of a more cohesive, area-wide support offer had helped to minimise gaps in the support system for young people and had facilitated young people in having a smoother journey through the system.

Sub-theme 2: greater collaboration

Participants described HeadStart's role in bringing together different organisations and individuals across the system (such as within the health sector, education sector, voluntary and community sector [VCS] and clinical commissioning groups [CCG]) to work together in supporting young people:

To have separate agencies and people trying to address those needs separately means that there's lots of weaknesses and cracks within the system offer. So that's the bit that I think HeadStart has addressed over the last few years.

Participants referenced networks and collaborations that had developed from HeadStart, with organisations and individuals united around a common interest:

Our relationships with other youth providers probably wasn't as strong as it could have been, but because we're part of HeadStart, and because some of us are seeing the same kids, but in different capacities, then I think that networking has got better.

Sub-theme 3: instigation of multi-agency meetings

A key example of how HeadStart had increased collaboration locally was that the partnership team had initiated or taken on the responsibility of organising and chairing regular multidisciplinary or multi-agency meetings: "We're holding it. HeadStart are sort of holding it, and we're making sure that it happens every week, and we're keeping partners involved." The purpose of these meetings was typically to discuss together the needs of young people who had been referred for support in their local area and determine the best pathway for them through the system:

I have parts of the jigsaw, the school has another and then members of the voluntary sector organisations can also offer thoughts and suggestions. So,

it's a real opportunity to sort of understand the needs of that child.

Participants described how the meetings also represented an opportunity for professionals from different sectors to learn from each other, manage capacity across organisations, and draw on each other's expertise.

Theme 2

HeadStart contributed to a shift in focus and awareness

Participants referenced the shift in focus and awareness within their local areas that HeadStart had contributed to; more widespread understanding of the importance of supporting young people's mental health; the role of contextual factors or the wider environment in influencing young people's mental health; and the value of prevention and early intervention.

Sub-theme 1: widespread awareness of supporting young people's mental health

Participants explained how, due to HeadStart activity, awareness of the importance of supporting young people's mental health and wellbeing had increased within their local areas:

I think it's also impacted on that system-wide approach as well, in terms of completely raising the awareness of the emotional health needs of young people, and their mental health needs, and how we can collectively work to support them.

From participants' perspectives, this awareness had become "embedded into the thinking" or part of the "ethos" of services within their local areas. Participants described how this was evident across sectors and organisations, such as within local authorities' area-wide health and

wellbeing strategies or being prioritised by schools, for example in the form of dedicated new roles with specific responsibility for mental health. It was described as the “golden thread” that ran through the agendas of different services and organisations, with an understanding that “everyone has that responsibility or that opportunity to make a difference.”

Sub-theme 2: greater focus on prevention and early intervention

Within participants’ local areas, implementation of the HeadStart programme was described as giving the concepts of prevention and early intervention greater prominence and enhancing the support offer available to young people across the spectrum of need:

[HeadStart] would be really a key part of the Tier 2 offer, or looking at the i-THRIVE model, that sort of early stages of getting information and getting some initial help. And I think it has sat really well there, and has really bolstered our offer of provision in [area].

Participants described this as a “cultural shift” within their areas, including more widespread understanding that prevention and early intervention activity may be “more cost-effective.” Participants referenced the role of prevention and early intervention work both in terms of preventing the escalation of mental health difficulties and in supporting those whose needs do not meet the clinical threshold required for support from child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS):

I think the needs that we have addressed are probably those that just don’t meet the threshold of CAMHS, but professionals and schools and other agencies within the county don’t quite know where these young people fit or should be referred to. There is almost a gap just below CAMHS in terms of what support young people can access.

² <http://implementingthrive.org/>

Sub-theme 3: understanding the links between mental health and other outcomes

Participants explained that there had been a shift, among colleagues such as senior leaders and school staff in their area, towards appreciating that young people’s mental health and wellbeing, and the factors that affect it, could be key to understanding many other behaviours and outcomes that they were seeking to influence: “There is a recognition now that you don’t fix attendance and attainment by focusing on attendance and attainment, you have to fix what’s behind it.”

Sub-theme 4: consideration of the wider context

Participants felt that the role of contextual factors or the wider environment in hindering or supporting young people’s mental health and wellbeing was being more widely considered within their local areas as a result of HeadStart activity:

[HeadStart’s] role to date has been to look at what is needed to secure a better platform I guess, for young people in terms of their emotional health and wellbeing and their communities that surround them. So it isn’t just about the young people, it’s actually about what do we need to wrap around them.

Participants described how HeadStart had highlighted the need to implement a holistic approach to supporting young people, including providing support for their families, upskilling the workforce, and promoting the mental health and wellbeing of other adults in young people’s lives (such as school staff): “We knew that if we didn’t tackle the workforce, then anything else would end up being quite short-lived”. In addition, consideration of the impact of wider social justice and economic issues on young people’s mental health and wellbeing was noted by participants.

Theme 3

HeadStart enabled an enhanced offer of support for young people

Improvements and enhancements to the support offer available across the six HeadStart partnerships were noted as a positive consequence of the HeadStart programme. Participants highlighted the more varied and accessible support that was now available to young people, the quality assurance that underpinned HeadStart support, and the support and capacity building that HeadStart had provided for staff and organisations.

Sub-theme 1: more varied and accessible support on offer to young people

Participants explained that through the HeadStart programme, *“There are far more services available to young people. Prior to HeadStart we really only had a couple of counselling services and CAMHS.”* This included the development of *“all sorts of help models, both within the school and within the community”* and had resulted in a range of services that were available *“across the spectrum of need.”* Participants described how HeadStart had led to a social prescribing approach being embraced in some areas, such as through the delivery of creative, arts and sports activities for young people: *“I think we’ve been really pivotal in the idea of the social prescribing, having something that complements the clinical approach.”* The new types of support and interventions that participants identified as being implemented through HeadStart included:

- whole-school approaches, frameworks and awards
- extracurricular activities for young people
- digital information resources or tools for young people, parents and carers and schools
- online support services for young people
- peer support or mentoring programmes for young people and parents and carers
- referral tools

- practitioner-led support for young people and parents and carers
- provision of safe spaces within schools.

Participants described how the enhanced level of support available through HeadStart had addressed gaps within the system and potentially reduced the pressure on local CAMHS: *“To a certain extent we’ve increased the capacity of CAMHS to be able to only really focus on those young people with severe mental health issues that none of us could necessarily deal with.”* Participants also referenced support that was available through HeadStart for young people who were on waiting lists for CAMHS support or who had finished receiving statutory support and needed something additional. Participants explained that young people could often access HeadStart services much quicker than statutory services.

Sub-theme 2: quality of support

Participants described not only the increased support that HeadStart had brought, but also the greater assurance about the quality and evidence base of the support that was being offered. HeadStart was seen as bringing *“rigour”* to support delivery in participants’ local areas and making it easier for organisations to identify evidence-based approaches that they could implement: *“[Schools] know that what goes on the [online resource] is evidence based, it’s quality, it’s something they can trust.”* Participants mentioned the increased collection and use of evaluation data that had happened as part of the HeadStart programme, including use of the [Wellbeing Measurement Framework \(WMF\)](#) and pre- and post-outcome measures for interventions.

Sub-theme 3: support and capacity building for staff and organisations

Participants also described how HeadStart had enhanced the support available for young people in their local areas by training staff (e.g., in schools

and community settings) to understand and support young people's mental health and wellbeing, and by providing them with useful tools and resources. Participants described the HeadStart training offer as upskilling staff and increasing staff confidence to support young people:

A whole range of training that enables workers to feel more confident in sitting down with the young person and talking about those issues. Even if they then can't deal with it, they know, again, they know who to refer into.

Another key area of training provided by HeadStart related to participation or co-production work (designing support programmes in partnership with young people):

As a result of their training to the directors, training to the assistant directors [...] we started to get a real grasp of how you improve service user voice in the delivery and design of services.

According to participants, the HeadStart partnership teams had also provided much needed additional capacity for them and their organisations by providing specialist knowledge and supervision, and collaborating in the rollout of new area-wide initiatives, such as helping to establish Mental Health Support Teams (MHST) in schools.

Factors enabling local area change

In addition to identifying local area changes associated with the HeadStart programme, we also explored the factors that had enabled these changes to occur from participants' perspectives. Most of the themes we identified were common across participants' perspectives from all partnerships. The exceptions are noted in the detailed descriptions of each theme.

Theme 1

There was suitable funding available for the implementation of HeadStart

Participants spoke about the advantages that having a large amount of funding for the HeadStart programme had provided: *"Because then you can truly deliver what you're required to deliver, and offer a flexible, responsive type of approach, because you've got the finance to do that"*.

Advantages included enabling the provision of free-to-access support, training and resources for young people, parents and carers, and staff; enabling flexibility in programme design and delivery; facilitating partnership working; and giving the HeadStart programme voice and weight within their local authorities. Participants also described how, through the funding, HeadStart had been able to bring back types of support (e.g., youth mentoring programmes) that had previously been subject to funding cuts within their local areas, and invest in the local community: *"It's great to have funding, but it's, it's allow- it's opened up the conversation to say, 'Let's talk about what's needed in [area], and let's work together around what that looks like.'"*

Participants referenced aspects of HeadStart implementation for which alternative funding sources beyond the life of the programme had already been identified within their local areas. These included those that were particularly engaged with or accessed by young people, parents and carers, and schools, and those with evidence for positive impact:

Schools access it a lot, parents access it as well. So that has been a real success, and it will be one of the things that is retained in terms of the sustainability project and overseen by public health.

Participants described exploring where aspects of HeadStart best fit within their local areas, such as within public health, school health or the NHS, and considering where HeadStart support could be added to or subsumed within existing similar types of support, such as existing youth mentoring programmes. At the same time, participants felt that HeadStart would have a legacy within their local areas in terms of the learning, resources and influence in local policy and practice that it had provided over the course of its implementation.

Theme 2

The positioning of HeadStart within the local authority was advantageous

Participants described how it was advantageous that the HeadStart programme was located within their local authorities, although with a different name and branding to the council to enable HeadStart to retain its own identity: *"The point that they were incorporated into the, for want of a better word, the 'bloodstream' of the [local authority] meant that they had a better opportunity to increase their reach."* The connectivity that being located within the local authority had afforded HeadStart was important in enabling the programme to build the local links required for implementation and embedding: *"They have that link, obviously because they're based within the local authority, they have links in with the education leads within [council]."* Participants felt that this positioning had helped HeadStart to have more influence within their local areas, compared to if it had sat within the VCS. This theme was discussed by participants from five of the six partnership areas.

Theme 3

Recognition and credibility of HeadStart helped it to have influence

Participants described how recognition of the HeadStart brand and its credibility and good reputation within their local areas, which was underpinned by strong programme leadership, had helped HeadStart to have influence.

Sub-theme 1: a recognised brand

Participants spoke about the recognition that stakeholders and organisations had of the HeadStart brand within their local areas:

When you think of HeadStart [area], you're not thinking local authority, you're thinking resilience, you're thinking resources, you're thinking whole-school

approaches, you're thinking opportunities for young people, it's young person-focused.

Some participants felt that the HeadStart brand should be continued beyond the life of the programme, although there were complexities surrounding how to ensure ongoing funding and maintenance of the brand. Other participants stated that the HeadStart brand would not continue beyond the life of the programme to facilitate its integration into mainstream support within their local areas:

I think we will have to lose the brand of HeadStart, partly because I think from a financial position it will be easier for us to make the case under wellbeing, [than] it will under the brand of HeadStart.

Sub-theme 2: reputation of the HeadStart programme and partnership teams

Participants referenced the good reputation, trust and credibility that the HeadStart programme and partnership team had within their local areas. They described how the programme culture of partnership working, 'test and learn', provision of high-quality support and resources, and participation or co-production work with young people, parents and carers, and schools had contributed to this. Participants also felt that the skills, personality and attitude of the HeadStart partnership teams had influenced the programme's credibility and effectiveness: *"They're very visible and accessible. So, I think its personalities and people have made a huge difference. They've got some really, really good people in the team."*

The background of HeadStart staff members was also felt to have contributed to this through their local knowledge and understanding of particular sectors, for example if they had previously worked in education or currently worked within statutory services. HeadStart partnership teams tended to be multidisciplinary in nature, which was considered to be a helpful factor:

It was one of the first teams that actually had people who knew about health, knew about schools, knew about VCS and community, knew about young people's voice, all managed under one manager. And I think that was a real strength in terms of that, because we might not know the answer individually, but collectively, we either did know or we knew someone who did.

Sub-theme 3: leadership

Participants described how HeadStart leaders within their local areas had a key role in making the programme visible and building credibility of the programme. They were described as strong, energetic, persistent and passionate: *"She gets people to follow, because she comes across with so much energy that people want to be part of that."* Their connectivity to different departments and organisations within the local authority was felt to be an important quality. Buy-in from senior leaders across the local authority, organisations and schools was also considered to be an important facilitator to change through HeadStart: *"Very high-level sponsorship. So, from the corporate director and the whole of the senior management team. Open recognition by all parties that children's mental health and wellbeing is of prime importance."*

Theme 4

Communication, collaboration and relationship building facilitated local area change

Participants mentioned that having people who championed HeadStart within their local areas had facilitated programme buy-in, rollout and sustainability.

Indeed, developing good relationships with partners was felt to be key to programme buy-in and success.

Participants described how good relationships were developed over time and through sustained collaborative working. HeadStart having shared goals, knowledge and purpose with other local services and organisations had facilitated this. Effective promotion of HeadStart activities and consistent and regular communication with partners, including using creative methods and the right language, was also deemed important for relationship building: *"You've got to be able to tell the story of why you're doing something, in the language that makes sense to the person that you're trying to bring things on."*

HeadStart was described as a focal point for collaboration within local areas, bringing organisations and individuals together through, for example, instigating multi-agency meetings, multidisciplinary partnership boards and networking events. HeadStart's connectivity with schools, VCS services and young people was seen as a valuable asset by stakeholders, as when they wanted to work with these organisations and individuals, HeadStart could facilitate this: *"Because they've been so willing to build those relationships and really embed themselves into [area], they've naturally ended up as being a bit of a connector."*

Theme 5

Embracing flexibility and learning were important in enabling local area change

From participants' perspectives, local area change was facilitated by the agile, flexible and adaptive nature of the HeadStart programme. This was underpinned by a 'test and learn' ethos, which the six-year duration of the programme had allowed the HeadStart partnerships to implement.

Sub-theme 1: taking a flexible and adaptive approach

Participants described how the HeadStart programme being agile, flexible and adaptive had enabled it to work across different parts of the system and had ensured that it remained responsive and relevant to need over the six-year period of its implementation:

Whilst the main themes and the core tenet of our strategy if you like, has stayed the same, we've been able to flex and adapt depending on what's been happening in the community, what's been happening in terms of the wider system changes.

Participants referenced how the HeadStart programme had evolved over time in response to feedback from partners, local evaluation data and external events, such as the coronavirus pandemic:

And then obviously we experienced the pandemic, and that's when that was a real shift change for HeadStart, because schools literally closed overnight, and then we had to look at, how are we going to repurpose, readapt, flex what we're doing.

Being able to seize opportunities as they arose was seen as helpful to drive the programme forward. HeadStart having its own separate identity and funding within the local authority facilitated its ability to respond quickly.

Sub-theme 2: a 'test and learn' approach

Participants described the 'test and learn' approach of HeadStart as a facilitator to change because it had encouraged the HeadStart partnerships to take creative approaches, evaluate what works and what can be sustained, and then adapt as necessary:

We were learning what to do, and as we went through, and as we got better at it ourselves, we then became more effective. And by being more effective we influenced more people. So I think system change is definitely incremental.

The flexibility that the test and learn approach had afforded was helpful in communicating to partners that HeadStart was about trying things out, rather than mandating change.

Sub-theme 3: having enough time

Participants commented on the six-year duration of the programme, which from their perspectives had facilitated the test and learn approach and the embedding of the HeadStart programme within the system: *"I think the quality and the rigour of the programme, the fact it wasn't rushed through, and it's been in [area] now for a few years."* Participants described how it took time for change to happen, for relationships and trust to be built, and to influence leaders within the system.

Theme 6

Demonstrating best practice in participation or co-production was influential within local areas

Participants described the HeadStart partnership teams as having expertise in co-producing programme design and implementation first and foremost with young people, but also with parents and carers, schools and local area partners. Participation or co-production activity included co-designing resources and tools, consultation, and jointly shaping service and intervention delivery:

How to have clarity about how to approach those needs and how to gain information about what really matters to young people now, what really matters to teachers and parents now, may have been assumed rather than gained from direct feedback. This is what HeadStart provided.

HeadStart were described as leaders within their local areas in terms of best practice in participation or co-production work, which they had the resource and finance to do well. Participants mentioned that current participation or co-production practice and models within their local areas had been influenced by HeadStart: *"I think obviously now the council has a big focus on children's rights and voice and belonging, and I think HeadStart are very much responsible for that focus."* This theme was discussed by participants from five of the six partnership areas.

Theme 7

Aligning with and influencing national or local initiatives contributed to local area change

Participants described how the embedding of the HeadStart programme at an area level had been facilitated through its alignment with related local authority departments and services:

It's been embedded within the early help service [...] and is now much more clearly understood within the social work field as well. So HeadStart has got a lot of fingers in a lot of pies across the emotional health and wellbeing kind of sphere in schools and in the third sector.

Participants noted the contribution of the HeadStart partnership teams to the rollout of new national initiatives and programmes within the local areas, such as social prescribing, MHST and the Wellbeing Return to Education programme in schools, through facilitating learning and providing expertise and staff capacity. The HeadStart partnership teams were also involved in local authority decision-making around new sources of area-level funding and were a partner in developing and implementing local transformation plans and strategies:

I suppose just in terms of strategic influence you can clearly see, in terms of our health and wellbeing strategy, in terms of our children and young people's plan, our early help and prevention strategy, that children and young people's emotional and mental health is in there. And it's a priority, and it's recognised, and I think without HeadStart that's not where we would be.

Theme 8

The coronavirus pandemic acted as a lever for change

The coronavirus pandemic was seen as a lever for change for the HeadStart programme because it had brought people together through more frequent use of alternative forms of communication (e.g., video calls) and because it had raised the profile of young people's mental health and wellbeing:

You've got all of those different organisations and although people may have the contacts, they wouldn't necessarily have got together physically because they'd have meetings in lots of other different places. So just the logistics of us being able to meet now, that's probably helped it move on a lot quicker than it would have done, potentially.

The pandemic had also meant that HeadStart programme had to flex what was delivered, such as through implementation of virtual delivery models or increasing implementation of universal-level support, which had increased its reach:

HeadStart was originally targeted, they didn't actually cover all schools. So it wasn't like-for-like, they couldn't necessarily fulfil the needs universally, it was very particular to certain schools. Covid happened, and the model had to flex and, therefore, that was a catalyst to actually be more visible and more kind of engaged with all schools, by providing aspects that were a universal offer.

This theme was discussed by participants from four of the six partnership areas.

Perceived areas of limited local area change

Participants also described ways in which they felt that local area change had been limited during the HeadStart programme. We identified three themes: HeadStart lacking influence in particular contexts; not everything (in the 'test and learn' approach) worked; and there is still more work to be done. The first of these themes was discussed by participants across all six HeadStart partnerships and the latter two across most partnerships.

Theme 1

The HeadStart programme lacked influence in particular contexts

Some of the HeadStart partnerships had struggled to gain traction within school contexts over the course of the programme due to such factors as staff turnover and competing priorities among school staff members, and difficulties getting buy-in from senior leadership. Moreover, limits to programme capacity and reach meant that sometimes HeadStart had only been able to engage with a proportion of schools in the local area:

I felt like the impact for those who were involved may have been great, but it was limited because of the reach, the kind of population size, the cohort. For me it was significantly smaller than what I would consider to be required in [area].

Participants also felt that it had not always been possible to influence senior leaders or statutory services within their local areas, such as CAMHS:

We've effected change in terms of the demand for CAMHS services in terms of that anxiety, low mood pathway, but I don't think we've had... maybe the impact on how that organisation is led, managed.

Finally, it was not always clear to participants how much HeadStart learning was actually being used to challenge and inform national policy.

Theme 2

Not everything (in the 'test and learn' approach) worked

Participants commented that not all interventions delivered through HeadStart had succeeded or added value, for example if there were too few referrals, if they did not provide anything new, or if they were ultimately found to be too expensive to be sustained: *"When you look at the cost-benefit analysis, it was quite an expensive sort of initiative to run. So we know that that can't be sustained."*

Theme 3

There is more work to be done

Sometimes more work was felt to be needed to maximise the impact of particular HeadStart programme strands, such as embedding whole-school approaches:

I think the traction, in terms of whole-school approach and culture, we're not there yet. I think we're definitely on the way, but it certainly is going to need ongoing support and advocacy and challenge and training.

Some of the HeadStart partnerships also wanted to do more work in particular areas (e.g., within the digital or online world) or with specific groups (e.g., with young people with special educational needs and disabilities [SEND] or minoritised groups). Participants also acknowledged the limitations of trying to effect change to a fixed, established system. They noted that while the system was improved, gaps in support and long waiting lists for CAMHS remained, and better connections were still needed between organisations, such as those in the VCS and statutory sector:

There are still gaps where the young person needs some one-to-one support. Mentoring, wellbeing sort of support and it isn't always available. That was a gap HeadStart really helped fill. So, yeah, there's still big gaps across the system. It's better, but it's still not perfect.

Factors preventing or limiting local area change

Participants identified factors that had prevented or limited HeadStart in influencing change at a local area level. We summarised these within seven themes: ineffective positioning of the programme; competing priorities; relationship and communication difficulties; uncertainty around sustainability and continued funding; structural challenges outside of the HeadStart programme; structural challenges within the HeadStart programme; and challenges associated with the coronavirus pandemic. Each of these themes was discussed by participants from four to six of the HeadStart partnership areas.

Theme 1

Ineffective positioning of the programme can prevent or limit change

Participants described how while it was advantageous that the HeadStart programme was located within their local authorities, being positioned within a council department that was not the best fit for the programme, for example, or being positioned on the periphery of the local authority could limit the impact or reach of the programme:

The governance was a little bit, kind of, very sort of over there, not necessarily intertwined with the wider directorate. So I think that may have hindered, in my view, performance, maybe reach, operations, that sort of stuff.

Theme 2

Competing priorities can prevent or limit change

Participants described how HeadStart's voice and influence within particular organisations was limited by the statutory obligations that organisations have to fulfil, such as meeting Ofsted requirements, and the large, busy workloads of individuals:

They're just dealing with the crisis in front of them, sometimes they're not thinking bigger than their school or bigger than what their social care package is. So we're constantly trying to influence that as well.

Participants' own heavy workloads and limited capacity could also hinder decision-making and implementation processes within the programme: *"In terms of everybody being so stretched that it's not until we have got to this point where there is no more time that someone needs to make decisions."*

Theme 3

Relationship and communication difficulties can prevent or limit change

Participants spoke about the time needed to build trust with stakeholders and to overcome initial scepticism of a new programme. They mentioned not always managing to build effective relationships or communication channels with particular organisations, such as CAMHS or schools:

The lessons learnt are that if you want to have any long-term change, you do need to, again, it's about that time of working with SLT [senior leadership teams], working with the school governors and really owning that.

Staff turnover within organisations (e.g., schools) had been a barrier to relationship building, as well as limiting the ability of the programme to effect change, such as when key decisionmakers or HeadStart trained staff members left their posts:

Leaders change all the time, so it's constantly re-establishing ourselves, isn't it, with the different leaders as well. And that's why it just takes time, as well, we go backwards as well as forwards in the programme.

Participants also described not always being able to effectively communicate everything that HeadStart offered to families, schools and other organisations, suggesting the need for more regular networking events or newsletters. Some participants felt that the HeadStart programme offer in their areas was not always clear, which had limited stakeholders' knowledge and understanding of the programme, thus also limiting its reach and impact.

Theme 4 Experiencing uncertainty around sustainability and continued funding

Participants expressed concerns about the HeadStart programme no longer existing in its current form following its funded period. This included worries about HeadStart staff members' jobs and about the gaps in the support system if HeadStart was not there to rely on, including the loss of support for young people, parents and carers, and schools in local areas, as well as the loss of up-to-date resources and tools, participation or co-production work, training for staff, and multi-agency meetings:

I think sometimes it's maybe just taken for granted that it's there, and it's so good, and without that, there is huge question marks about massive gaps and... if HeadStart wasn't there and wasn't doing that work, who else is doing it?

Participants were not always certain yet how or in what ways the HeadStart programme would be sustained within their local areas:

It is about us being really, really committed to still delivering the best service that we can, up until we know that it might be a change of management process, or it's going to be, actually, where are parts of HeadStart going to be repositioned, or repurposed?

There was also uncertainty about who would continue funding particular elements

of the HeadStart programme in local areas. Not all HeadStart partnerships had sufficient local evaluation data to make a business case for sustaining certain interventions: *"I think it is hard for particular local authorities to find the funding for these sorts of programmes, particularly when it's a struggle to fund some of the statutory elements."*

Theme 5 Structural challenges outside of the HeadStart programme can prevent or limit change

Participants described structural challenges within their local areas which had hindered or limited the impact of HeadStart, including statutory service transformation, competition between different organisations, and local authority budget cuts: *"[Area] has gone through the whole transformation in the health system and that, so sometimes, organisational memory gets lost in those transitions."* Participants also described how the arrival of new national programmes could lead to difficulties rationalising the need for both HeadStart and these new programmes:

The challenge has been, 'Well, why do we need HeadStart if we're now going to have these national...? Don't they just swap?' And it's trying to explain to people, actually, we need both because of the levels of prevalence.

Theme 6 Structural challenges within the HeadStart programme can prevent or limit change

Participants also described structural challenges within the HeadStart programme which had been a barrier to creating change, such as delayed delivery of particular programme strands:

Our workforce offer was very late in the day as well, so we've had limited impact. What we are doing now, we're getting to see the impact, but it has been quite late in the day.

Moreover, despite the programme overall taking a flexible and adaptive approach to delivery, some participants commented on the lack of flexibility of particular elements of HeadStart, which was a barrier to programme implementation and impact from their perspectives. This included having to use tick box rather than discussion-based referral tools, having to use technically demanding digital records systems, and having to adhere to rigid criteria for identifying young people who are eligible for targeted support:

You couldn't have anyone for instance who'd had any sort of external support in some way, shape or form. Who maybe you'd made a referral about before or if you were already doing sort of regular work with in school [...] So, you were actually really quite limited.

Theme 7

The coronavirus pandemic could also act as a barrier to change

Participants highlighted the level of increased need for support among young people, parents and carers, and staff that the coronavirus pandemic had brought, which meant that more resource was needed than had originally been anticipated at the outset of the HeadStart programme. Sometimes this had disrupted planning around the sustainability of HeadStart:

I think our sustainability model from day one was good, and we embedded sustainability throughout the programme. But I think the pandemic's put another layer upon that really, another layer of need on that.

Needing to flex or adapt programme implementation around the new demands that the pandemic had brought had also been challenging:

Every time you're trying to go back to the business as usual and your future planning and transformation, you know, something new in Covid comes along that you've got to focus on, whether deployment of staff, new variants, etc.

The pandemic had also led to some local community organisations closing down, thus limiting the availability of support for young people.

Discussion

Summary of key changes

While the six HeadStart partnerships had adopted distinct approaches to HeadStart programme implementation, there were notable similarities in their experiences, challenges and successes. Staff and stakeholders across the HeadStart partnership areas described HeadStart as improving joined-up working across the system by facilitating area-wide approaches to supporting young people's mental health and wellbeing and bringing together different organisations and individuals – in multi-agency meetings, for instance. HeadStart was also seen as contributing to a shift in focus and awareness at an area level, including embedding widespread awareness of the importance of supporting young people's mental health, and enhancing and prioritising prevention and early intervention activity.

Staff and stakeholders highlighted the more varied and accessible support offer that was available through HeadStart within their local areas. This included new information resources, online support, and peer- and practitioner-led support for young people and parents and carers, which had addressed gaps within the system and potentially reduced pressure on statutory services. It also included support and capacity building for staff and organisations, for example through training and networking events.

In terms of the factors enabling local area change, staff and stakeholders across the HeadStart partnership areas highlighted the advantages that the large amount of funding behind the HeadStart programme conferred. They also acknowledged its positioning within the local authority, which gave HeadStart voice and weight and facilitated partnership working. At the same time, staff and stakeholders felt that buy-in to the HeadStart programme was influenced by widespread recognition and the positive reputation of the HeadStart brand. Staff and stakeholders indicated that relationship building had been key to facilitating change, describing HeadStart as a focal point for collaboration within their local areas. HeadStart's agility and flexibility, test and learn approach, and expertise in participation or co-production work were seen as valuable assets in ensuring that the programme remained responsive to changing circumstances and relevant to need. Aligning with and influencing local policy, decision-making and the rollout of new national initiatives had also enabled HeadStart to contribute to local area change.

On the other hand, staff and stakeholders commented that HeadStart's influence had been more limited in some contexts, with some HeadStart partnership teams

struggling to gain as much traction in school settings, for example. In addition, the limitations of trying to effect change to a fixed, established system were acknowledged – it was noted that although the system had improved, there were still gaps in support and long waiting lists for CAMHS. Some staff and stakeholders commented on the legacy of HeadStart within their local areas and referenced aspects of HeadStart implementation that would be sustained through alternative funding sources, beyond the life of the programme. However, others expressed uncertainty about how or in what ways the HeadStart programme would be sustained within their local areas.

In terms of the factors preventing or hindering local area change, staff and stakeholders felt that not being positioned within a council department that was the best fit for the programme, or being positioned on the periphery of the local authority for example, could limit its reach and impact. Competing priorities, staff turnover and ineffective communication could be barriers to relationship building. Structural changes outside of the HeadStart programme, such as statutory service transformation, the advent of the coronavirus pandemic, and the arrival of competing programmes within local areas, had also caused complexities for HeadStart. Moreover, structural challenges within the HeadStart programme itself, such as delayed delivery, could also be a barrier to creating change.

Strengths and limitations

These findings reflect our earlier work with the HeadStart partnerships about their perceptions of what systems change and sustainability could look like in the context of the HeadStart programme (Evidence Based Practice Unit, 2019). Our findings update this earlier work to provide an insight into changes that actually occurred as a result of the HeadStart programme, from the perspectives of HeadStart staff and local area stakeholders.

In terms of the limitations of our findings, it is important to note that participants were identified and invited to take part by the programme leads at each of the HeadStart partnerships. It is therefore more likely that staff and stakeholders who were invited to take part were already positively pre-disposed to HeadStart and so the perspectives presented here should be considered in this context. We were also only able to speak to a relatively small sample of staff and stakeholders at each of the HeadStart partnerships, due to our own capacity and due to variation in the degree to which staff and stakeholders responded to invites to take part. At three of the partnerships, only two to three participants were interviewed as a result of the latter. Thus, it is also important to note that the findings presented here are based

on more data at some partnerships than others. Moreover, a longer timeframe is required to ascertain the longevity of any changes.

Conclusions

The findings reflect the core elements of the definition of systems change by Abercrombie et al. (2015) outlined at the outset of this briefing. Specifically, the HeadStart partnerships used purposeful interventions that aimed to shift the function or structure of the system, with some evidence from staff and stakeholders' perspectives that HeadStart changed people's awareness, attitudes and ways of working. The HeadStart partnerships also sought to influence the structures and mechanisms underlying the current system so that young people can access support when and where they need it.

The degree to which HeadStart has actually contributed to lasting whole systems or local area change beyond the funded programme period cannot be ascertained yet. Nonetheless, the findings show the key ways in which programmes like HeadStart can usefully contribute to systems change, including facilitating collaboration and improving joined-up working across the system; raising the profile of young people's wellbeing and preventing the onset of mental health difficulties; and addressing gaps in support for young people, parents and carers, and staff in school and community settings.

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Appendix 1

Table 1. Anonymised information about the staff and stakeholders who we spoke with in each HeadStart partnership area.

HeadStart partnerships

Partnership A

Participant job roles

HeadStart Programme Lead
HeadStart Strategic Lead
HeadStart Participation Lead
HeadStart Evaluation Lead
Director of Children's Services
Area Education Officer
Mental Health Support Teams (MHST) Lead and clinical commissioning groups (CCG) representative

Partnership B

HeadStart Programme Lead
HeadStart Strategic Lead
Voluntary and community sector (VCS) representative

Partnership C

HeadStart Programme Lead
HeadStart Strategic Lead
CCG representative
VCS representative
Secondary schools representative
Primary schools representatives
Local evaluation partner
MHST Lead and CCG representative

Partnership D

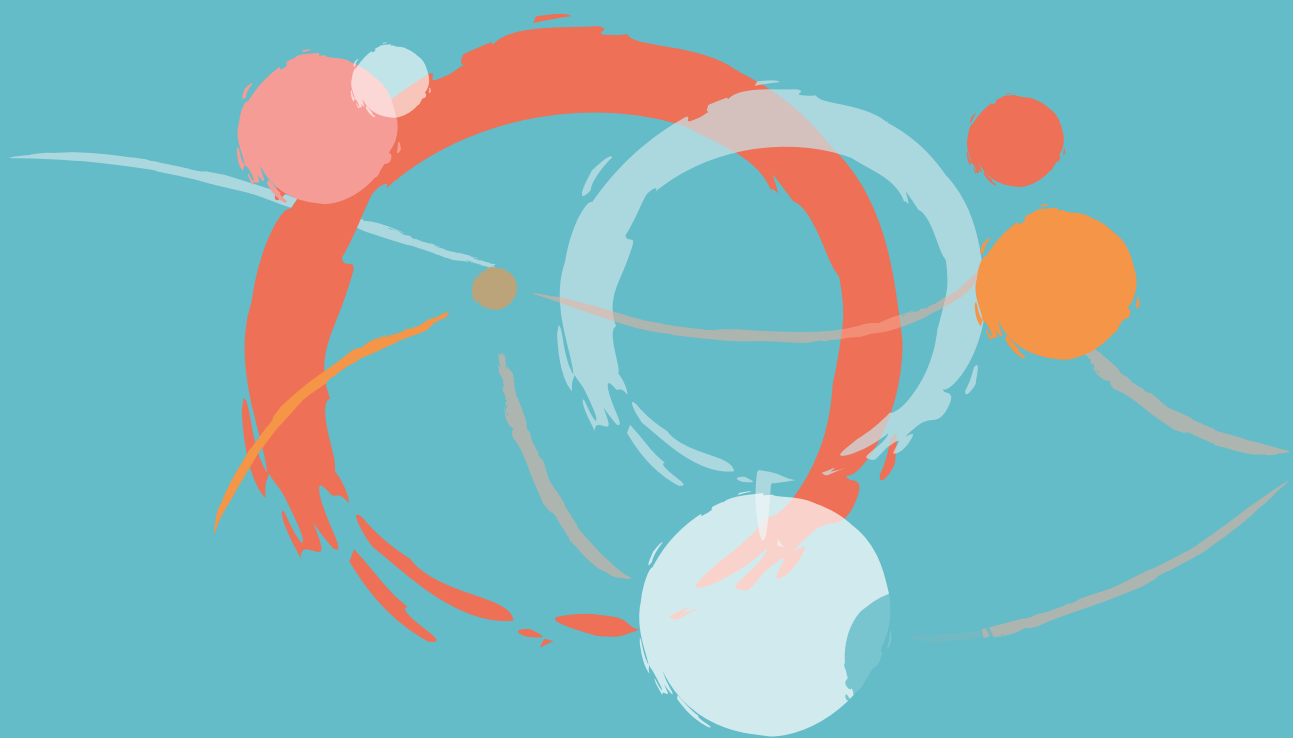
HeadStart Programme Lead
VCS representative

Partnership E

HeadStart Programme Lead
Service Director for Education
Healthy Schools Lead
VCS representative
Consultant in Public Health
Local evaluation partner
GP Clinical Lead for Children and Young People

Partnership F

HeadStart Programme Lead
Chief Executive of Council



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