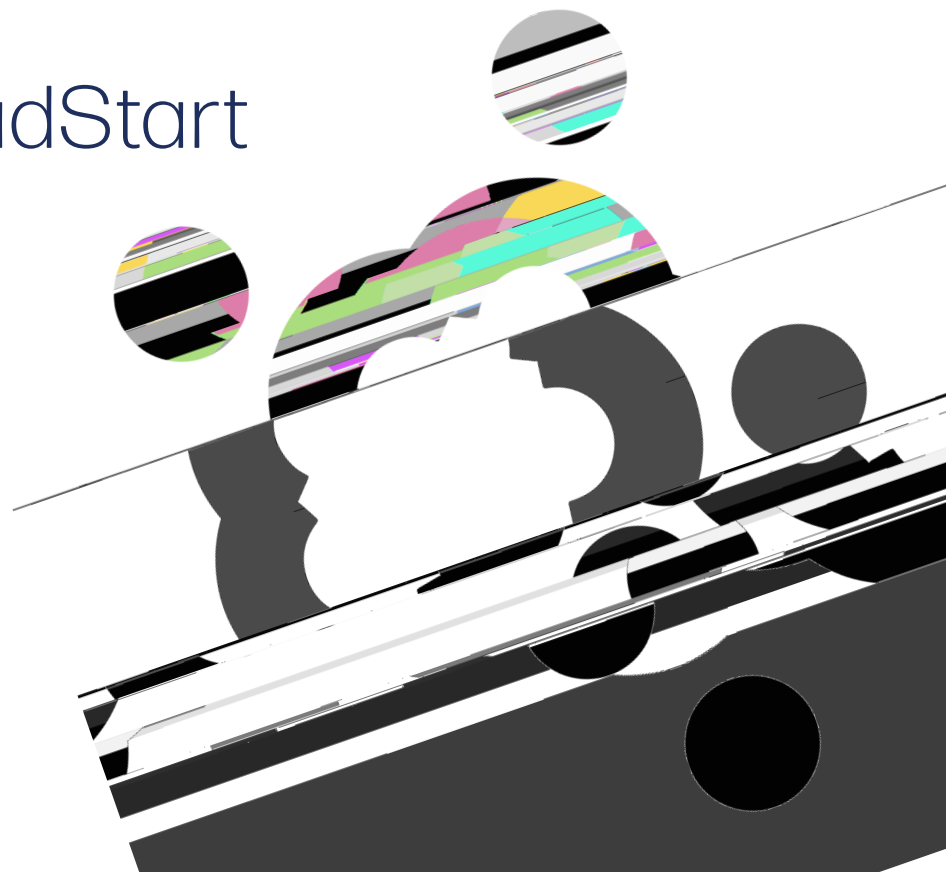


# HeadStart national evaluation final report executive summary

Supporting the mental health  
and wellbeing of children and  
young people:  
the role of HeadStart

May 2023



# Executive summary

## Background

In recent years we have witnessed an escalation in mental health problems for children and young people and a corresponding decrease in investment in mental health services. We believe this should be seen as an area of concern that they believe requires more prominence and greater investment.

## What was HeadStart?

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 services and public services to make young people's mental health and wellbeing everybody's business. The programme was designed to test and learn – to try new approaches and be innovative – with the intention being to sustain and embed effective approaches locally. The HeadStart programme ended in July 2022.

## This report

This report describes the reach, implementation and impact of the programme, and our learning about the nature of mental health and

## Findings

### Context and need

Data from the large-scale self-report survey indicated that

bearing on their mental health, showing a cumulative effect of challenges, circumstances and experiences. The quantitative and qualitative research also highlighted a range of protective factors that reduced the risk of experiencing a mental health problem. Key protective factors included having multiple and trusted sources of support (e.g., from family, friends and school), being able to successfully regulate emotions and having low levels of stress.

Our data also showed that mental health and wellbeing are related but distinct constructs meaning that while there was a strong relationship between the two, it was possible to experience mental health problems while also experiencing positive wellbeing and, similarly, to experience

Our qualitative research showed a range of approaches young people took to help them cope in the face of challenges to their mental health and wellbeing. Frequently this involved turning to trusted others for support, drawing on different people depending on what was troubling them. Young people also engaged in positive thinking and favourite activities (e.g., creative activities and reading books) which could help them feel better and/or distract them from their concerns.

## **Implementation and reach**

HeadStart reached 24,500 children and young people through targeted support, 246,000 young people through universal provision and 5,200 parents and carers. Over 24,000 professionals and staff across school, local authority and community settings have been trained in ways to support young people's mental health and wellbeing.

## Conclusions and implications

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