

Better Start Bradford Innovation Hub

Better Place End of Contract Report August 2024

This is a report provided by the Better Start Bradford Innovation Hub (BSBIH) for the Better Start Bradford (BSB) and the Better Place team. The document provides findings from qualitative and quantitative data collected in 2023. The design of this evaluation is described in more detail in the Evaluation Plan Summary, which was approved by key stakeholders from the BSBIH and BSB in September 2020.

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Version 1

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Produced for Better Start Bradford

Executive Summary

Project purpose and function

High quality urban greenspaces are important in promoting good health and wellbeing, however, families living in urban, deprived areas tend to have less access to these spaces. The Better Place project, part of the Better Start programme, was commissioned to co-produce interventions to improve local urban green spaces with communities in the Better Start Bradford area. By improving these spaces, it was anticipated that communities would use them more frequently, leading to improvements in health behaviours and wellbeing.

Since 2019 Better Place have been implementing a series of changes in the three Better Start Bradford wards; Little Horton, Bradford Moor, and Bowling and Barkerend. The focus of the changes has been on improving spaces such as parks and playgrounds to encourage greater use by pregnant women and children aged under 4. The project involved engaging the community in the design of changes to the local environment and implementing capital changes. Examples of capital investments include natural play areas for 0–3-year-olds, toddler trails, sculptures, embankment slides, trampolines, story trails and much more. These changes were intended to be completed by October 2023. However, due to complications posed by COVID-19 some of this work is still on going. To promote park usage Better Place have also been conducting and or working with other organisations to run family activities within the newly improved spaces.

Aims of the evaluation

At the start of the project, it was intended that Better Place would receive implementation, 'before and after' and effectiveness evaluations.

The planned effectiveness evaluation involved taking a staged approach to the implementation of the capital changes creating an 'intervention' area to the west of Wakefield Road and a 'control' area to the east. This would have allowed BSBIH to assess the quality and use of local outdoor spaces in both the intervention and control areas before and after the capital work had taken place, to examine whether the changes lead to improvements. The impact of the capital changes on self reported family wellbeing, satisfaction with and use of local green space was also going to be assessed by asking local families to complete a series of questionnaires at key intervals over the life of the project (the Wellbeing Survey).

However, despite baseline data for the Wellbeing Survey being collected between September and November 2019, delays and challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic made it difficult to maintain a control site since improvements were implemented simultaneously both sides of Wakefield Road. This meant it was not possible to proceed with the effectiveness evaluation. Baseline findings were reported in September 2020 and can be found here (<https://borninbradford.nhs.uk/what-we-do/improving-health/bsb-innovation-hub/>).

Plans for the evaluation were then adapted to include a detailed qualitative evaluation alongside the 'before and after' study. The aims of this evaluation were to:

- Describe changes in quality of Urban Green Space (UGS) and neighbourhoods following refurbishment using the Natural Environment Scoring Tool (NEST) which is a standardised quality audit tool.

Executive Summary

Aims of the evaluation

- Describe how patterns of use of UGS and neighbourhoods change pre and post refurbishment using the System for Observing Play and Recreation in Communities tool (SOPARC).
- Establish the extent to which communities in the BSB area engaged with green space co-design activities and whether they were satisfied with the process.
- Establish the community's satisfaction, engagement with and perceived ownership of local green spaces and how these change over time.

Establish how green spaces are currently maintained, and key issues faced by communities in maintaining the quality of local green spaces.

Methods

Baseline data for the 'before and after' evaluation was collected in 2018 which included NEST audits, and SOPARC observations. Further NEST and SOPARC measures were completed in 2019, 2021 and 2022 and in 2023, only NEST data was collected due to staff capacity constraints. Findings from previous NEST and SOPARC have already been reported to BSB. This report includes analysis of NEST data for 2023 in which 30 sites were audited. The full analysis across the evaluation period is intended for a report in January 2025.

The enhanced qualitative evaluation involved a multi-method longitudinal exploration with the community in four case study parks across the BSB area over three years (2021-2023). The methods used were transect walks, photovoice and focus groups. During the transect walk the participant's walked with the researcher in one of the four identified greenspaces and shared their perceptions and perspectives on different aspects of the park. Photovoice data was captured during the transect walk, here participants were asked to take photographs of aspects of the park they found to be significant and wanted to draw attention to or discuss.

Participants included parents or caregivers of a child aged 0-4 and pregnant women residing in the BSB area, and members of community organisations that live within the BSB area and operate close to one of the four identified greenspaces.

During Phase 1 (2021), a first round of transect walks, photovoice and focus groups were conducted to produce initial findings. During Phase 2 (2022) and Phase 3 (2023) further transect walks and interviews were completed. Findings from Phase 1 and 2 have previously been reported. This report focuses on findings from Phase 3, while overall longitudinal findings will be included in the final report in January 2025.



Executive Summary

Key findings of the evaluation



Enhanced qualitative evaluation

- The community felt that parks played an integral role in supporting their health and wellbeing
 - Although participants did report a sense of ownership over parks and were making efforts to maintain them it was felt that more needed to be done in relation to this
 - Involving communities in decision making around parks was thought to be one way of improving maintenance, sense of ownership and park usage
- The changes made by Better Place were valued and well used by the community with many participants expressing a desire for the infrastructure to be expanded further.
 - Activities in the park were thought to support the use of the infrastructure, built confidence in children and encouraged play between parents and children.



Quality of parks

- Findings from 2023 indicate that urban greenspaces scored higher than formal recreational and functional/amenity spaces.
- Sites that received investment from Better Place scored higher in quality than those that did not.
- Investment parks scored higher for recreational facilities (e.g., quality playground equipment, amount of open green space), aesthetic natural features (e.g., flower beds), safety, and usability.



Satisfaction

Satisfaction questionnaires were distributed to families as Better Place activities held in parks and green spaces. A total of 50 were completed across these activities, which included play streets, nature walks, planting etc. Responses indicate a high level of satisfaction. 94% of the respondents had a median score of 4 or more which suggests they felt the activities were beneficial and the support they received was useful.

Recommendations

- The Better Place project is highly valued by the community, and they report benefiting from both the changes to infrastructure and the activities. We therefore recommend that this kind of approach to the development of urban green spaces in Bradford should continue to support family wellbeing.
- Engaging the community in decision making around their parks and local spaces promotes a sense of ownership and responsibility for those spaces and encourages more use of them. Involving the community in the coproduction and governance of local urban green spaces will help build better relationships between the community and their local environment.

Qualitative Evaluation findings

What did the community say?



The enhanced qualitative evaluation aimed to assess the impact of the project on the community's use of and satisfaction with local parks and greenspaces in the BSB. The study also explored the influence of the project on the community's sense of ownership of those spaces and how existing community networks relate to those spaces with a specific focus on maintenance. The interviews were conducted in four local greenspaces in the BSB area which were selected because of the investment they had received and because co-design activities had taken place in these spaces. In 2023, 19 interviews were conducted with parents or caregivers of 0-3-year-olds and members of community organisations including friends of groups. The findings below present the analysis of these interviews.

Parks play an integral role in the lives of users

Parks in the BSB area serve multiple roles beyond playgrounds, they are being used as community hubs that help to strengthen bonds between communities, connect adults and children to nature and promote wellbeing.

We do our Park Run, we get young people involved and then we have breakfast at the cabin [...] they learn about their community, they learn about something really positive that's happening in the park[...] you know, and it feels like everybody could tag onto different things that are happening, if they wanted to.

"...We come with one state of mind to the park but go back with another. So, the other state of mind, that park has an overwhelming [...] peaceful atmosphere. It calms and soothes the mind and gives us a new, you know, state of mind, and we go back relaxed, accomplished in terms of, you know, mental wellbeing. So, yes, it helps a lot".

There continues to be inequality in access to good quality urban green spaces

Participants preferred parks that are well maintained, contained a variety of facilities, were safe and had events and activities taking place. However, many of those interviewed often had to travel long distances in order to access these types of parks as those close to their homes were either deemed unsafe or lacked amenities that would sufficiently engage children. These findings highlight inequalities in access to good quality parks for families living in the BSB area.

And this is like the park I can bring my kids to because the one that I told, [park name] near my house it's not been maintained, it's just all the old equipment and climbing frames there, so I don't take them there. I'd rather bring them here.

Qualitative Evaluation findings

Antisocial behaviour creates safety concerns

Generally participants felt safe in the parks, however, where safety concerns were reported, this was largely in relation to antisocial behaviour. Moreover, participants reported feeling safer in parks that had high levels of foot traffic and visibility such as well distributed trees that allowed for clear views of people leaving and entering the park.

The community have a responsibility to maintain their spaces

Responses regarding maintenance of parks were mixed with some parks being thought to be well maintained whilst others had maintenance issues such as litter and flytipping. These problems were thought to be as a result of a mixture of lack of user knowledge and problems with how parks are governed. For example, on the one hand participants felt that parks users are not doing enough to maintain their parks whilst on the other hand it was felt that not enough facilities such as bins were provided in parks to promote maintenance.

The swings get very busy in the summer and there is a lot of litter but there are also overflowing bins so you can't blame... Well no, you can, people could take their rubbish home but they're trying to put things in a bin but if the bins are not there or the bin's too full then that's not their problem, it becomes a bigger issue doesn't it.

[...]if the bin is full busting [...] just take it back home, put it in your bin. I mean a lot of people are local, you know, they come by cars. How hard is it? [...] So maybe a bit more awareness and advertising, some signs in regards to that, something, you know, promoting because on a nice sunny day, you know, there be rubbish flying everywhere and everybody just leaving it about.

Participants believed that park users should take ownership of keeping the park clean, picking their litter, and proactively maintaining cleanliness. However, to what extent that communities did this varied as some participants felt that upkeep was not being done by park users as instances of issues with maintenance and cleanliness were highlighted in many of the parks.

Involving the community in events and decision making promotes a sense of ownership

There was evidence that involving communities with the park through events and activities could increase a sense of ownership resulting in park users taking more responsibility in taking care of their park. Participants also felt that involving the local community in decisions related to the development of UGS is important as it helps to sustain the community's engagement with the park and facilitate a sense of ownership.

Oh yeah, they do maintain it and look after it, they're dead proud [...] when we did all the design of the park and the clean-ups, the kids got involved so they could see what hard work went in there, they could see their parents taking up the algae and then putting it in bins [...] at first there was like oh, shouldn't somebody else be doing this but they soon realised if they don't do it it's not going to get done, so their mind concept changed.

I mean generally it's obviously everybody's park isn't it? So the more people that get involved or want to say, you know, what they want to see for their kids, for their future on their doorstep.

Qualitative Evaluation findings

Better Place infrastructure is highly valued

The addition of the Better Place infrastructure was considered to be a valuable enhancement to the parks it was both well-received and frequently used by families. Some participants reported increased park usage due to the introduction of the infrastructure. Some participants also highlighted that the infrastructure was unique to what was already available in the parks. Traditional play equipment in the park was thought to engage children in passive play whereas the new facilities ensured children were actively engaged. However, some participants highlighted perceived issues with some of the new equipment. The most frequently cited problem was with the slide at Bradford Moor Park and Attock Park which was thought to be too high thereby posing a risk that children might hurt themselves. There was also a suggestion that parks would benefit from more equipment aimed at very young children such as babies such as a sensory area being developed for them.

[...] it makes me more inclined to come to this park because I know it's not just a playground, there's other things to do as well, if that makes sense, it's not just... Because there's playgrounds everywhere but this one's got the added extra of more things to do so it will keep her occupied for a bit longer.

I have seen it like very busy. That's like without it being like a playgroup or something going on, so I've been on like warm days and it does like get busy, so I think all the kids are just around this sand area.

Yeah, well, this one especially because, at first, without this, it was just a basic, kind of, activities. Whereas my daughter really likes to do those and I feel like it's good for her balance and hand-eye co-ordination and stuff like that. It's a bit of a challenge for her, so she does enjoy playing on that[...]

Organised activities in UGS encourage usage

At times, it was difficult to identify whether participants were referring to Better Place activities or activities carried out by other organisations in UGS. However, regardless of who was hosting the activities it was evident that organised activities in UGS were perceived to be highly valuable. For instance, they were frequently highlighted by parents as a significant incentive for park usage with many using the parks more often because of these activities. The activities were thought to positively impact children's wellbeing such as some children were reported to experience increased confidence. They also had a positive impact on the relationship between parents and children whereby parents learnt how to play with their children.

So I feel like just putting up play equipment, and leaving it to the community, I don't think then it's valued or respected, but I think the way Better Place have put in the new equipment, and then ensured that they set up groups in that, in those spaces, and there are two or three groups a week that are taking place [...] I think in those spaces the equipment is valued and respected by the community.

Definitely, it had a huge impact on her, from being a fussy and a clingy child and not accepting anyone else except her father and me, but now she is more than socialising, she is more than, you know, roaming about, she is more than making new friends, she is more than happy to, you know, learning new things from friends.



Quality and use of spaces 2023

Measuring quality and use of outdoor spaces

To assess the impact of the changes across the Better Start Bradford area two measures were planned to be implemented. The Natural Environment Scoring Tool (NEST) assesses the quality of green or outdoor space and the System for Observing Play and Recreation in Communities (SOPARC) assesses the use of outdoor spaces. However due to staffing constraints at Better Start Bradford and the Better Start Bradford Innovation Hub in 2023 only the NEST observations were conducted.

NEST scores spaces on the presence, amount and condition of features and facilities including: access, recreational facilities, amenities, natural features like flowerbeds, non-natural features like art or buildings, incivilities, safety, significant natural features like views, and usability. It produces scores for all of these factors as well as an overall quality score.

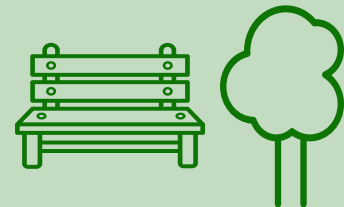
Higher scores on NEST indicate greater quality of an outdoor space.

The areas assessed with NEST include:

- Formal recreation spaces - managed for sports
- Function/amenity spaces - such as roadside greenspace, roundabouts, street trees
- Urban parks - including those with play equipment, signed gates, bins, benches, usually managed by the council

30

outside spaces
were assessed with NEST in August 2023



Overall quality of local outdoor spaces in 2023

It is worth noting that at the start of the evaluation in 2018 parks in investment sites were rated slightly higher than those in non-investment sites (84 vs 77). In 2023 scores for investment sites remain considerably higher than none investment sites.

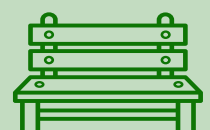
81

Investment
site

63

No investment
site

Average total NEST scores for spaces assessed in investment and
no investment sites 2023



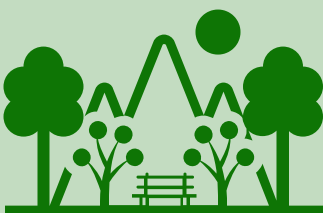
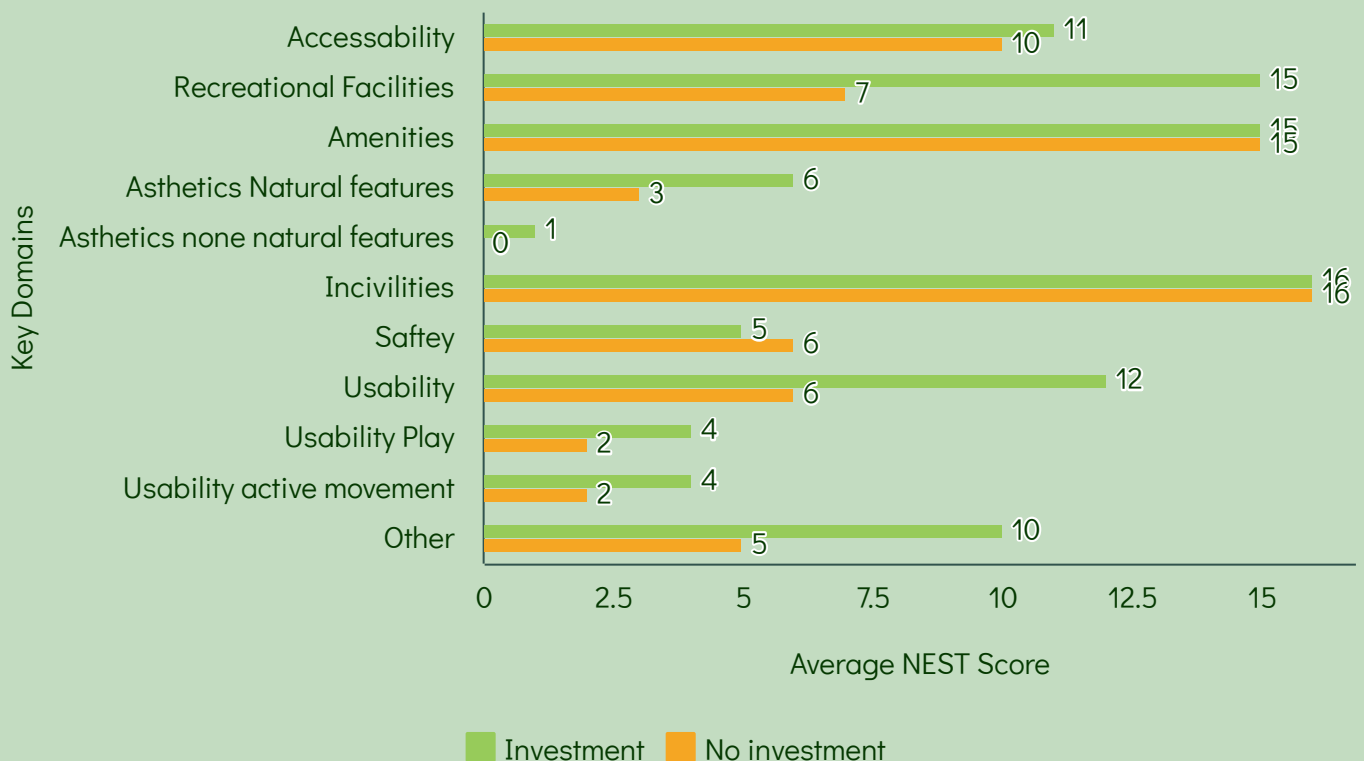
Quality and use of local outdoor spaces

Quality of outdoor spaces

In 2023, urban spaces, which include those with play equipment, signed gates, bins, benches and are usually managed by the council, received the highest average total NEST score (95). Formal recreation spaces, which are managed for sports, received the second highest average score (79) whilst functional/amenity areas, which include roadside greenspaces, roundabouts, street trees scored the lowest (59).

Key differences were also found in the domains relating to recreational facilities (e.g., quality playground equipment, amount of open green space), aesthetic natural features (e.g., flower beds), safety, usability (e.g., suitability for children's play, cycling and walking), usability – Play (e.g., suitability for swings, hiding, safe water), Usability – Active Movement (e.g., suitability for running, balancing, climbing) and other (e.g., parking, information boards, gates) with these domains receiving higher scores in investment sites than sites that did not receive investment from Better Place.

Average NEST score Investment and None Investment Sites 2023



Satisfaction

What did families think about Better Place?



A total of 50 participants completed the satisfaction questionnaires at the Better Place activities. Survey responses indicate that participants were extremely satisfied with the activities they attended and the support they received.

94% of respondents had a median score of 4 or more

94% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the activity was helpful for them and their child

90% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they are satisfied with the level of support they and their child received

94% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed the activity was useful to them and their child

94% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed it was easy for them to join the activity

90% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they would recommend the project to family or friends

94% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were happy with the activity

"I absolutely loved this activity. It was really special as I have never been to that area before so it was really interesting to do this and go there with my kids. Thank you so much for running this activity. I loved the tour guide who kept giving us a lot of information about the area. We really enjoyed going to the cave and walking on the trail."

"My daughters love this group, X engages the children and makes outdoor learning so fun and exciting! We always look forward to this group each week, its also good for us mums to get out in the fresh air and to be around nature."

"This is the first session I have attended; my daughter loved all the different activities and cannot wait to go to another session. Thank you to all of the staff for making it more special."

"Absolutely brilliant to have these activities outside in the park for our children."

"It's fun. Possibility resident may do independently."

Summary of findings

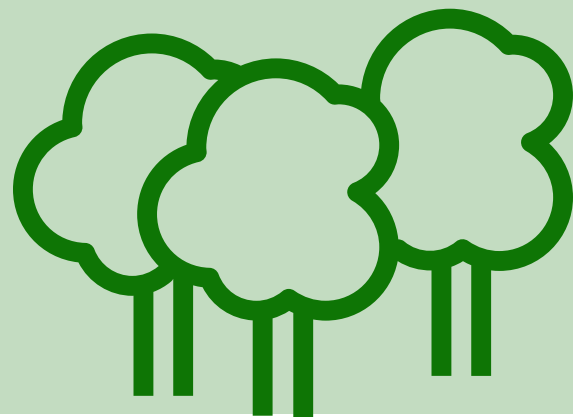
Parks are very important to the communities in the Better Start Bradford area. They are utilised by parents not just to entertain their children but also to socialise with others and manage their own mental and physical wellbeing. Likewise, community organisations operating at the parks are using these spaces to bring communities together and tackle issues that they may be facing.

It seems that although those who were interviewed felt that they had a sense of ownership of the park and made efforts to maintain them, it is evident that more needs to be done to improve the communities' sense of ownership and the maintenance of parks.

The Better Place infrastructure has been well received by the communities and is seen to have filled a gap in facilities available for children at parks. Some participants have reported an increase in park usage due to these facilities. The interviews also highlight that organised activities in UGS whether conducted by Better Place or other organisations are highly valued by the community and significantly incentivise park usage. Parents and members of community organisations observed that outdoor activities enhanced children's confidence as they provided opportunity for socialisation as well as risk taking. Moreover, these activities help parents learn how to engage their children in outdoor environments.

Assessments of the quality of local parks and greenspaces in the BSB area show that in 2023, sites that received investment from Better Place scored higher in quality than spaces that did not receive investment.

In conclusion, qualitative findings indicate that the Better Place infrastructure and the organised activities have had a positive impact on park usage and community engagement. Further efforts are needed to strengthen the community's sense of ownership and improvements in park maintenance to ensure that these positive impacts are sustained.



Recommendations for Practice

Parks in the BSB area are vital for supporting local communities, particularly women and children. They serve various purposes from enhancing the mental and physical wellbeing of adults and children to fostering connections among diverse community members.

A key recommendation is to enhance the connection between communities and parks through investing in events and activities as this can help improve a sense of ownership and park maintenance. Additionally, outdoor activities are highly valued by parents and children with participants reporting numerous benefits to children's wellbeing as a result of attending these activities. Given the positive feedback, it is crucial to continue commissioning and organising these activities and events.

Although it is not possible to comment on the effectiveness of the Better Place project, it was evident that the work carried out by Better Place was valued by the community. Participants enjoyed the activities and felt that they had a positive impact on their children and increased their park usage. Additionally, the infrastructure built by Better Place has been well received by the local communities with many participants requesting its expansion to cover more of the park areas. However, there are concerns about how appropriate of some of the infrastructure elements may be for very young children. Therefore, consideration should be given to adding more infrastructure that targets babies and toddlers.

Maintenance is a very important factor in the likelihood of parks being used and people taking ownership. To promote better maintenance, several mechanisms should be implemented, including the deployment of park rangers, increasing the number of bins and initiatives to improve people's knowledge on how to maintain parks such as through notice boards and placards in the park.

Finally, community organisations play an active role in the four parks studied, they have been lobbying for funding to improve park maintenance, organising events and activities to support their local communities. Providing more funding to these local organisations can facilitate their efforts in maintaining the parks and ensuring they continue to serve as valuable community resources.