

ActEarly:

*Shaping the future through
collaboration in research*

**Our inaugural annual report:
summary of activities 2019/2020**



Our partners:



Our other partners include:

Arup, Bromley by Bow Centre, Centre for Cities, Department of Education, East London Genes Health, Health Education England, JRF, Local Government Association, National Housing Federation, NIHR CRN, NSPCC, NUPHA, Public Health England, RSA, TfL, West Yorkshire Police.

A bold vision for young people

ActEarly's vision is **ambitious and far-reaching**. At its heart lies a **deep collaboration** between communities, local leaders, academics, scientists and professional practitioners designed to understand, test and hone **upstream prevention solutions** to child poverty, social and health inequality.

Using a **wide range of data platforms and methodologies** covering areas including economics, urban design, transport, education, housing, arts and culture, social justice and welfare, researchers will describe and develop interventions to **reduce early life inequality**.

Using test-bed sites in Bradford and the London borough of Tower Hamlets, they will then **work with communities** to **develop, test and evaluate interventions** to provide policy makers with a framework for **new approaches and strategies**.

Although ActEarly was **conceived in a pre-COVID-19 world**, its development has been shaped by the impact of both the pandemic and the measures taken to control it. The programme's goal of **research-ready communities** and **strong data infrastructure** is now needed more than ever to promote **healthier, fairer futures for children** living in deprived areas.

A year of progress and pragmatism

In the last 12 months ActEarly has **secured over £4 million of external funding**, carried out a **dozen knowledge transfer activities** and hosted **two national consortium workshops**.



It has also **flexed and re-focused** in light of the coronavirus pandemic, rapidly setting up a **bespoke COVID-19 Scientific Advisory Group (CSAG)** in Bradford to support local partners and **developing research streams** specifically designed to provide **insight and intelligence** to the regional response.

Highlights for the year include:

- **The ActEarly Collaboratory** – Developing a new way of working and generating ideas with our two local authorities, consortium members and partners, underpinned by robust governance arrangements deliverables and milestones
- **ActEarly interventions and evaluations** – Covering the three themes of Healthy Places, Healthy Learning and Healthy Livelihoods, supported by the **ActEarly Evaluation Group** and the **ActEarly Co-production and Citizen Science Group** and cross-cutting work around child obesity and food.



- **Data infrastructure** – Building on Bradford's existing data infrastructure to start to develop an **ActEarly data platform** which includes system-wide pseudonymised data linkage across health, education, social care, housing and environment and maternal/child cohorts, with research data and consented data linkage to primary and secondary health records and detailed phenotyping.
- **Co-production** – Supporting citizen science research fellows to **draw in partner expertise from across the system** and work closely with our themes to **support co-production** at an early stage of intervention, evaluation, scoping and development.
- **Cementing partnerships** – Further strengthening the partnership with Bradford Metropolitan District Council (BMDC) through the appointment of Dr John Wright as Director of Research, the **BMDC chief executive as chair of the ActEarly Board** and the BMDC director of strategy, policy and performance as a member of the ActEarly Executive. Similar engagement is now developing with Tower Hamlets Council.
- **Responding to COVID-19** – Helping to **define and identify vulnerable groups** through research insights, connected data and intelligence; supporting service resilience planning with **COVID-19 Situation Reports and analysis of emerging trends**; assessing the population health impacts of the COVID-19 response on wider determinants of health and **utilising Born in Bradford (BiB) families** to assess the impact of the COVID-19 response on communities. **This work continues** through the ongoing pandemic.
- **Working collaboratively** – Bringing together a **range of disciplines** that have not previously collaborated in this way and **showcasing different skills** and ways of working to the consortium.

- **Knowledge transfer** – Contributing to **six scientific/professional publications**, presenting at the **NIHR Senior Investigators annual conference 2020** at the request of the Chief Medical Officer, developing a user-friendly website and hosting **two national workshops**.

Challenge and opportunity

Despite the significant progress of ActEarly in 2020, a number of factors have hindered a full roll out of activity in all areas.

Unlike the NHS, most **local authorities have poor research and development infrastructure** which **limits research activity**.

To some degree **Bradford bucks this trend** because of its long association with collaborative research projects such as Born in Bradford. However, this **lack of an embedded research culture** has proved to be a temporary barrier to some of the planned work in Tower Hamlets and the ActEarly team is in **active discussions with the NIHR CRN** to secure a post similar to the one in Bradford to support data and research infrastructure development.

Added to this, **COVID-19** has had an unavoidable temporary **impact on the research capacity** available to ActEarly due to the number of co-investigators and partners who work in the public health.

As a result, **some ActEarly interventions** – for example a natural experiment evaluation of 20 mph speed restrictions in four areas of Bradford – **have been placed on hold** due to redeployment of local authority resource and capacity, school closures and social distancing requirements.

However, any freed up resource has been used to **support the District's COVID-19 response** and scheduled activities are expected to resume once local and national restrictions are eased.

Looking to the future

Despite **some unexpected interruptions** due to the coronavirus pandemic, ActEarly's first year has been one of **significant progress** and some **notable successes**.

The next 12 months will see the programme become further embedded within the communities of Bradford and Tower Hamlets as it seeks to:

- Identify and prioritise the most effective areas of intervention through the **development of an ActEarly data platform** that will provide important local intelligence for the two local authorities.
- Focus on **embedding research and developing research activity within** Bradford and Tower Hamlets.
- Further **develop specific, targeted interventions** and methodologies such as the child obesity research which already spans both local authority sites.
- Continue **tracking the formation/nature of ActEarly networks**, influence and activity through a wide range of co-investigators from varied disciplines
- Develop a **common language and approach** to evaluation and modelling across all our themes and groups.
- Shape proposals to **expand the programme across the wider West Yorkshire region**.
- Embed the concept of **ActEarly North** – an **ambitious global centre for innovation in prevention research** that will support prevention research for the West Yorkshire Combined Authority region, act as a catalyst for much needed additional research and prevention **investment** in the North, **enhance the digital literacy** of young people and **attract much-needed jobs and investment**.

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