



# Neighbourhood Management Excellence Award Blackpool: A Case Study in Excellence

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## Introduction

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Blackpool: a case study in Excellence.

Blackpool Council was awarded 'working towards excellence' status for neighbourhood management in May 2008.

This case study explores the Neighbourhood Management Excellence Award, from the reasons for its inception and subsequent development through to Blackpool's specific experience of piloting the Excellence process.

The case study focuses particularly on Blackpool's reasons for taking part. It also looks at barriers faced and improvement changes that have been made – directly or indirectly – as a result of participating in the assessment. Most importantly, it provides some learning outcomes that are specific to the Blackpool experience.

## About Neighbourhoods NW and Partners

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NNW is an organisation that supports improvement and excellence in neighbourhoods in the North West of England.

Established in 2008 by the North West Improvement and Efficiency Partnership (NWIEP) as a regional gateway, Neighbourhoods NW builds on the regional gateways concept created by the North West Improvement Network (NWIN). Neighbourhoods NW provides learning and development opportunities, networks and a knowledge and research hub accessible to all the North West local authorities and their partners - supporting all who live, work, manage and lead in their neighbourhoods. This is complemented by a number of sub regional initiatives under the umbrella of the NWIEPs which include a strong focus on community empowerment, resident satisfaction and cohesion.

Working with the NWIEP, Neighbourhoods NW strategically influences policy and practice locally, regionally and nationally to ensure a neighbourhood focus is maintained by governance bodies and service delivery agencies. Neighbourhoods NW works in partnership with North West Together We Can (NWTWC), the regional community empowerment partnership, Government Office North West (GONW) and the Department for Communities & Local Government (CLG).

The organisation is funded by central government through CLG and by the North West Improvement and Efficiency Partnership (NWIEP). The North West Improvement and Efficiency Partnership is

“playing a central role in setting the strategic ambition for improvement and efficiency in the region, and providing strong support for local authorities, their partners and ultimately the people who live and work in the North West.”

## The challenge for communities: policy context

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There is currently cross-party consensus that advocates the development of a new citizen/state relationship, where power and influence is increasingly devolved to local people.

The government has recognised that communities need to be revived and supported in order to provide a strong foundation for devolved politics. Its current agenda includes the creation of thriving local democracies that give real control over local decisions and services to a wider pool of active citizens.

There is a belief that if local councils can foster confidence by showing that they work successfully in neighbourhoods, citizens will feel more inclined to get involved in shaping the places they live in – increasing the sense of belonging and local identity.

Of course, communities are complex, non-homogenous places and people do not have a single view about the places that they live in. Every section must be consulted to ensure that everyone is represented.

The agenda sets a range of challenges for Neighbourhoods NW, its partners and clients.

The context for all Neighbourhoods NW's work is within a range of policy documents, including:

- **Transforming Places, Changing Lives (2009):** a policy framework to shape the way that future regeneration is carried out in England, aiming to improve delivery with a particular emphasis on deprived neighbourhoods.
- **Communities in Control (2008):** CLG white paper looking at who has power, on whose behalf is it exercised, how is it held to account, and how can it be accessed by everyone in local communities.
- **National Improvement and Efficiency Strategy (2008):** sets out how central and local government will provide the support that local partnerships will need to deliver excellent Local Area Agreements.
- **Sub-national Review of Economic Regeneration arrangements (2006):** considers the measures which Government had put in place since 1997 to improve sub-national economic development and tackle pockets of deprivation.
- **Local Government White Paper (2006) and the published Action Plan:** aims to give local people and local communities more influence and power to improve their lives by creating strong, prosperous communities and delivering better public services through a rebalancing of the relationship between central government, local government and local people.
- **NW Regional Improvement and Efficiency Strategy (2008-2011):** a three year strategy to deliver continued efficiency and improvement in the North West based on the priorities of the National Improvement and Efficiency Strategy.

## Vision

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Neighbourhoods NW's vision is to see improved neighbourhood working and increased community empowerment in order to achieve more resilient and sustainable neighbourhoods in the North West.

## Key Values

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As a value-driven organisation, Neighbourhoods NW wishes to:

- achieve efficiency and improvement in order to maximise resources at a neighbourhood level
- develop ongoing sustainable learning through action research and learning experiences
- work in collaboration with North West Together We Can and other partnerships - adding value as a result
- have at the core of its work equality, diversity, cohesion and sustainability
- promote encourage quality outcomes and excellence at a local neighbourhood level
- share best practice and collaboratively identify solutions and scale this up from the neighbourhood to the sub-regional and regional level
- drive transformation within neighbourhoods and promote innovative solutions to meet local challenges
- respond effectively and efficiently to changing priorities and challenges within communities and neighbourhoods.

## Rationale for developing the Excellence Framework

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The existing Neighbourhood Warden Quality Standard provides a framework that is based on the national Investors in Excellence Award and enables warden schemes to reach a nationally recognised standard of performance.

RENEW Northwest was the North West's Regional Centre of Excellence for Sustainable Communities. As part of its remit to support regeneration practitioners and leaders develop skills to deliver sustainable communities in the region, it asked Neighbourhoods NW to develop a bespoke framework that would achieve a nationally recognised standard for Neighbourhood Management similar to the Warden Quality Standard.

Although successful, interviews with scheme managers in the North West revealed some criticisms of Warden Standard:

- As a self-assessment exercise, it contains repetitive questions that take time to complete; it's an uninspiring, laborious process.
- The scoring system was perceived to be ambiguous; the marking process as subjective.

NNW decided to develop a framework that combined the best elements of the existing Warden Quality Standard with a model that was nationally recognised. The framework would allow Neighbourhood Management (NM) organisations to be assessed against a range of criteria to both drive improvement and enable national recognition of their achievements.

The North of England Excellence (NEE) is a non-profit organisation with a remit to inspire organisations from all sectors to change. As a licensed operating and authorising body for the UK Investors in Excellence Standard, NEE were brought to partner NNW – to help develop a bespoke Excellence Framework based on the Investors in Excellence Standard.

The Neighbourhood Management Excellence Framework has four broad aims:

- to inspire change and improvement in NM
- to provide a benchmark for organisations/partnerships to compare against
- to enable development of an improvement plan
- to provide recognition for good practice and drive to a national excellence standard.

# Methodology for developing the NM Excellence Standard

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Eight neighbourhood managers were consulted throughout the development of the Excellence Standard to ensure that it genuinely reflected the needs of potential participants. Focus groups were held regularly to develop themes that would form the basis of the excellence framework. It took Neighbourhoods NW, NEE and the focus group four months to develop the framework.

The basic agreed criteria of who can apply for the Award adheres to that which is set out in the Policy Action Team (PAT) 4 Report on Neighbourhood Management. The principles are:

- someone with overall responsibility at the neighbourhood level
- community involvement and leadership
- the tools to get things done
- a systematic, planned approach to tackling local problems, and
- effective delivery mechanisms.

## The Excellence Framework focuses on six key areas:

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- 1. Leadership**
- 2. Planning**
- 3. People**
- 4. Partnerships and resources**
- 5. Processes**
- 6. Results**

Neighbourhood management (NM) teams are invited to complete an initial diagnostic workshop that assesses strengths and weaknesses to ensure that they are ready to go through the Excellence process. A workbook is then completed, providing supporting evidence in the six key framework areas.

This is initially desktop assessed, then followed-up with validation visits to confirm that the evidence and information provided meets the Excellence requirements. Recommendations are then submitted to an independent juror for a final decision.

In recognition of the commitment involved (as organisations try to balance the benefits of working towards the award with everyday business operation), there is a stepped approach to achieving Excellence.

This allows organisations to work towards the excellence standard in stages without taking on the whole of the process from the start.

# Blackpool & the Neighbourhood Management Excellence Scheme

## About Blackpool

Blackpool is a seaside town in Lancashire, England. Lying along the coast of the Irish Sea, it has a population of 142,900, making it the fourth-largest settlement in North West England behind Manchester, Liverpool and Warrington. It is a unitary authority – although it remains part of Lancashire for ceremonial purposes.

Blackpool rose to prominence as a major centre of tourism during the 19th century, particularly for the inhabitants of northern mill towns. Although tourism numbers have declined steadily from the 1960s onward, it's still the focal point of Blackpool's economy.

The continued falls in tourism visits and spend in the local economy has created a growing number of complex and interrelated economic, social and environmental problems:

- The lowest average wages in the UK.
- One third of Blackpool is amongst the 10% most deprived areas within the country.
- Extremely high levels of worklessness (23% of the working age population claiming a work related benefit).
- Over 13% of all adults of working age claiming incapacity benefit - many are often extremely detached from the labour market and face formidable obstacles in moving toward employment.
- High proportion of children aged 0-15 live in income deprived households.
- Lack of private sector investment as a consequence of declining visitor numbers and falling confidence.
- The 2001 Census identified Blackpool as having the second highest incidence of transience in the country, after inner London.

## Neighbourhood Management in Blackpool

It is within this context that the 'Reassurance Plus' neighbourhood management partnerships operate in Blackpool. Started in 2006, Reassurance Plus aims to improve the quality of life for those in most disadvantaged areas through effective community engagement and involvement. It focuses on three of the most deprived areas:

- South
- Central
- Grange Park

These areas fall into the 3% most deprived neighbourhoods nationally on the 2004 Index of Multiple Deprivation.

Reassurance Plus provides three specialist multi-agency teams with officers from different services across the Council, including: street cleaning; environmental; planning enforcement; housing enforcement, CDRP, youth services and police. Each team is led by a council officer called the Head of Neighbourhood Services.

The Local Area Agreement (LAA) 'Safer Stronger Communities' board provides the strategic direction for neighbourhood management in the area. On the board are: Blackpool Council; Lancashire Fire and Rescue; Lancashire Constabulary; Council for Voluntary Services; Primary Care Trust. Blackpool uses the LAA as an opportunity to broaden and deepen its neighbourhood improvement initiatives and strengthen partnership working through Reassurance Plus.

## Organisational chart



## Why did Blackpool decide to take part in the Neighbourhood Management Excellence Award?

Blackpool piloted the Excellence Award in April 2008. Interviews with the participants reveal some of the motivations for taking part:

1. To use the Excellence Framework as a point of reference to check performance and share best practice.

*"We thought it would benchmark our tactics and approach. It would also give us the basis for comparison with the other partnerships participating in Excellence Award. We want to know exactly where we're innovating and where we're missing a trick."*

Shirley Young (Assistant Director, Neighbourhood and Communities Division)

This view was shared by Sarah Elliott (Reassurance South Neighbourhood Head of Service), who expressed that she saw the process as a chance to influence by sharing best practice. She acknowledged the benefits of working in a unitary authority in that it was easier to get direct access to neighbourhood delivery resources, but stated that: "Blackpool still has significant social problems and partnerships can learn from our experience of neighbourhood delivery". This approach to knowledge sharing was revealed as one of Blackpool's particular strengths; the Excellence assessors commenting that 'Blackpool is to be commended for its commitment to share examples and best practice in neighbourhood management across the wider region and the UK in order to encourage other regions to focus and deliver strong neighbourhood management.'

2. To add a framework to a particular way of working that would be easily understood beyond the context of neighbourhood management.

Neighbourhood management partnerships need to be fluid to reflect the different needs of each neighbourhood. As such, there is not one model of neighbourhood management and delivery. This can be confusing for the members of staff who come to work in neighbourhoods from a different context:

*"I was from a Crime Disorder Reduction Partnership background. Nationally it is a well regulated operation: everyone knows their role and reporting responsibility: good support mechanisms are in place; case studies are available for guidance. I attended neighbourhood management conferences and got the feeling that there wasn't the same structure that I was used to."*

Sarah Elliott (Reassurance South Neighbourhood Head of Service)

Sarah got involved in developing the Excellence Framework, taking part in the focus groups with other neighbourhood managers. She saw it as an opportunity to build a generic framework that directly related to the experience of neighbourhood delivery. As such, would offer a comprehensible structure to neighbourhood management.

3. To increase publicity with staff members and the wider community.

Anecdotal feedback from partners, staff and members of the community suggested that Reassurance Plus was working successfully. However, these successes weren't publicised effectively:

*"Although we were doing well, we just didn't shout about it."*

Sarah Elliott (Reassurance South Neighbourhood Head of Service)

In addition, it was hoped that the Excellence Award would recognise the input of the multi-agency delivery partners:

*"We wanted to recognise the achievement of our partners and the value of what they do. We wanted to participate in something that demonstrated that they are leaders in their field. So they could share success with peers throughout the country and feel proud of what they've done."*

Shirley Young (Assistant Director, Neighbourhood and Communities Division)

## Outcomes of going through the Excellence Framework

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1. The audit process encourages partnerships to revisit the long-term problems that are often neglected due to the day-to-day issues of neighbourhood delivery.

After completing the Excellence assessment, partnerships are issued with an analysis document that highlights the strengths and weaknesses of their approach to neighbourhood working. In the case of Blackpool, staff indicated the improvement suggestions were generally long-standing issues that they were already aware of:

*"A lot of the weaknesses highlighted by the report we knew about. We had been planning to do an audit for a long time and the process helped us."*

Shirley Young (Assistant Director, Neighbourhood and Communities Division)

One of the major weaknesses noted by the assessors in Blackpool concerned communications:

'Whilst some evidence exists of communicating progress and priorities of the action plans with residents the organisation may wish to review the mechanisms in place in order to further improve this. This may include a review of the methods in place for celebrating and marketing the successes being achieved.' Blackpool chose to address this issue as part of the wider restructure of the neighbourhood engagement facility:

*"We had been thinking of the restructure for some time. The results from the assessment told us that it was the right thing to do. The Excellence framework propels you to bring the services into line and deliver a process of improvement. It opened the gates for us to do this. It wasn't the catalyst for the restructure, but it was the momentum."*

Shirley Young (Assistant Director, Neighbourhood and Communities Division)

Of this restructure, three positions have been put in place to directly increase communications activity:

- Two Communications Assistants with a remit to publicise neighbourhood activities through standard online and offline communications tactics such as: newsletters, press releases, posters, websites and email.
- One Communications Development Officer who will liaise with all partners to ensure that all communications are consistent to strengthen the Reassurance Plus brand.

*"I was aware that we got credibility from our peers at conferences and events, but not necessarily within our neighbourhoods. We've directly addressed this issue with these new posts. We want to get through to the people who don't shout the loudest and encourage them to come forward and get involved with the neighbourhood."*

Sarah Elliott (Reassurance South Neighbourhood Head of Service)

The focus on communications has had a positive internal effect with the multi-agency partners:

*"We're a lot more confident now about trying to promote ourselves and pushing our wins into the public eye."* Nicola Bingham (Police Officer Community Beat Manager)

2. The process of review has been used to boost the confidence and morale of staff.

Effective neighbourhood delivery is reliant on the enthusiasm of all those involved, from residents to council members. The Excellence Assessors noted that ‘the passion and enthusiasm of the multi-agency teams for improving the neighbourhoods was clearly evident, as was the passion and determination of the responsible directors and assistant directors of Blackpool Council.’

Staff acknowledged that the “feel-good factor” of the team has been enhanced by going through the Excellence process.

*“The award has been a big pat on the back for all of us.”*

Kevin Egan (Reassurance Support Officer, Reassurance South)

To celebrate the achievements of those involved, officers and members of the multi-agency teams were presented with the ‘Stage 1 Working Towards Excellence’ certificate at an awards ceremony.

*“Winning the award has been a great for motivation.”*

Nicola Bingham (Police Officer Community Beat Manager)

Staff agreed that the process of being assessed provided the opportunity to stop, reflect and review achievements. This is especially important in the context of neighbourhood delivery, where there are always new tasks for the multi-agency teams to tackle:

*“Things will always need improving in my neighbourhood. We’ve created gated alleyways to stop fly-tipping and now there’s a problem in the alleyways with dog fouling. It’s an ongoing improvement issue.”*

Julie Bascome (Resident, Reassurance South)

*“There are lots and lots of different projects going at any one time. To deliver constant improvement we always need to be looking at the next tasks.”*

Paul Preston (Streets and Area Manager, NEAT)

*“Things move so fast you forget what you’ve done. Plus you’re always moving on to the next project...there doesn’t feel like there’s time to celebrate. Getting the award made us stop and look at our successes.”*

Margaret Hall (Reassurance officer, Reassurance South)

3. Another outcome of the Excellence assessment has been a major review of the types of data gathered.

The problems of gathering quantitative data at neighbourhood level are well documented. For a start, defining a neighbourhood is problematic: it could be the boundaries of an estate, ward or something else entirely. Secondly, other service providers tend to ignore neighbourhoods and collect data at a ward-level to suit their own targets.

Reassurance Plus collects neighbourhood data from a variety of sources, including Police, Fire and Council intelligence, Primary Care Trust, statistical data from the CDRP, officer intelligence and community concern.

Although a solid foundation, Reassurance Plus were urged by the assessors to take the data collection one step further: ‘whilst it is clear that neighbourhood action plans are based upon sound information, the organisation may wish to consider how it can further improve in collecting and using information at the neighbourhood level.’

*“We agreed with what the assessors said. It’s about having better data collection around the neighbourhoods we’ve designed, not the wards. That means changing recording systems with the police, Primary Care Trust etc. It’s something we’re working together to rectify.”*

Sarah Elliott (Reassurance South Neighbourhood Head of Service)

5. The process of assessment provides a focus to neighbourhood management activities.

The success of Reassurance Plus is such that the model is now expanding: the development of a fourth Reassurance Plus zone covering the town centre has been put into the latest 'Sustainable Community' strategy. What's more, this success has led to further expansion as other service providers seek to use the existing structure to deliver within the neighbourhoods. This is a result of Blackpool Council's desire to become more geographically-based; the existing Reassurance Plus areas are a perfect starting point to develop a single neighbourhood approach.

In this context of growth, the Excellence Process has been useful as it has provided a focus for Neighbourhood Management to ensure that it avoids mission drift and sticks to original objectives:

*"The process has allowed us to re-focus what we're about. There are so many areas involved in Reassurance Plus that it's been helpful to go back to basics and look at what we're trying to achieve – so we can ensure that it doesn't turn it into something it isn't."*

Shirley Young (Assistant Director, Neighbourhood and Communities Division).

6. Going through the Excellence process highlights the benefits of top-level support.

Participating in the Excellence Award presented some challenges, most notably collating information and evidence in a very short timescale:

*"There were a lot of people to involve: management team, assistant director, officers on the ground. I had to ensure that the other partners took the time to review their roles and input them effectively into the framework; ensuring that everyone's contribution was of real value."*

Sarah Elliott (Reassurance South Neighbourhood Head of Service)

The quick and efficient way in which information was gathered highlights the top-down support enjoyed by Reassurance Plus:

*"We were lucky in this respect as we've always enjoyed support from the Chief Executive downwards. Completing the first stage of the Excellence Framework was made a priority - and as such everyone contributed in a timely manner."*

Sarah Elliott (Reassurance South Neighbourhood Head of Service)

*"We've got very, very good relationships with the councillors. I think they recognise that we're doing a good job"*

Kevin Egan (Reassurance Support Officer South)

The Excellence Award has been important in maintaining this relationship as it is an efficient way to demonstrate achievement in top-level meetings:

*"In the context of senior management meetings with the Chief Executive where there is the pressure of time and agenda items, getting the award has been good way of shouting our successes quickly."*

Shirley Young (Assistant Director, Neighbourhood and Communities Division)

Support is mirrored at partner level. The assessors cited the authority of the neighbourhood Heads of Service to task the neighbourhood police and fire and rescue teams, as 'a strong demonstration of the partnership relationships that have been developed.' Indeed, rapid completion of the assessment was partly due to the support of the LAA board and the Heads of Police and Fire and Rescue, who agreed that their officers should both contribute to (and be given new tasks as a result of) the Excellence assessment.

## Lessons learned from the Blackpool experience

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### *Stop and reflect*

*the day-to-day pressures of neighbourhood delivery mean that it's often difficult to pause and reflect on previous successes in service delivery. Going through a process of review allows partnerships the time to acknowledge and celebrate achievements. The knock-on effect of this is the increased confidence and morale of staff.*

### *Centralize evidence*

*gathering data from the multi-agency teams into one framework is important in that it provides evidence of a way of working. This is therefore useful as a handover document; a foundation for succession building.*

### *Review and re-prioritise*

*the process of review gives the opportunity revisit long-term problems that often get neglected due to the pressures of day-to-day delivery. It also provides a focus to ensure original objectives are being kept.*

### *Be consistent*

*make data collection consistent across all neighbourhood management areas to ensure that comparable performance baselines can be set.*

### *Top-down support*

*the impact of support from the Chief Executive downwards can not be overstated – especially when working with multi-agency partners.*

# Annex

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## Research Interviewees

We would like to thank the following people who were interviewed in the preparation of this report:

Shirley Young (Assistant Director, Neighbourhood and Communities Division)  
Sarah Elliott (Reassurance South Head of Neighbourhood Services)  
Nicola Bingham (Police Officer Community Beat Manager)  
Tony Ball (Sergeant, Lancashire Police)  
Julie Bascombe (Resident, Reassurance South)  
Linda Brown (Resident, Reassurance Central)  
Donna Giles (Resident, Reassurance Central)  
Paul Preston (Streets and Area Manager, NEAT)  
Margaret Hall (Reassurance Officer, Reassurance South)  
Hazel Pearson (Reassurance Support Officer, Reassurance Grange Park)  
Kevin Egan (Reassurance Support, Reassurance South)  
Dave Crocombe (Lancashire Fire and Rescue Service)  
Philip Coope (Chief Inspector, Lancashire Police)  
Richard Lloyd-Mullen (North of England Excellence)  
Susan Hall (Neighbourhoods NW)  
Iain Girvin (Reassurance Officer, Reassurance South)

In addition to numerous local documents collated in each neighbourhood, a number of documents and websites have been consulted for background research.

Key documents are contained within: Transforming Neighbourhoods

A Collection of Short Stories About Empowerment (The Young Foundation, 2007)  
Blackpool Local Area Agreement (June 2008) and on the websites

<http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/laa/home>

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/corporate/>

<http://www.neighbourhoods-nw.co.uk>

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