



University of
Bedfordshire

Buckinghamshire
Health & Social
Care Academy



Deep End Network Evaluation report

1. Introduction

The Deep End Network (DEN) initiative in Buckinghamshire is a collaborative effort between the Buckinghamshire Health and Social Care Academy (BHSCA) and local health partners. This initiative aims to address health inequalities by focusing on primary care services in areas experiencing significant socioeconomic deprivation. By supporting general practices serving these communities, the DEN seeks to enhance healthcare delivery and outcomes for populations most in need.

The DEN's approach includes providing targeted support to general practitioners (GPs) working in challenging environments, fostering collaboration among healthcare professionals, and developing strategies to improve patient care in deprived areas.

2. Evaluation

This report outlines an evaluation commissioned by Buckinghamshire Health and Social Care Academy (BHSCA) and undertaken by the University of Bedfordshire (UoB). The purpose of this evaluation is to assess the effectiveness of Deep End Network (DEN). This evaluation report integrates findings from practice case studies, an evaluation meeting report, survey results, and a focus group session. It highlights the key achievements, ongoing challenges, and some strategic recommendations to sustain and expand the network. The findings are presented together as they strongly align with themes of improved collaboration, increased awareness of resources, and enhanced strategies to tackle health inequalities.

3. Deep End Network (DEN)

DEN was launched to address the needs of GP practices located in the most deprived wards within Buckinghamshire (based on levelling-up scores >43%). Of 13 eligible practices, 12 initially joined, with 10 actively contributing case studies and evaluation feedback. The network's core aim is to support GPs in addressing health inequalities through shared learning, resource development, and targeted community engagement.

4. Key Themes and Findings

4.1 Collaborative Learning and Peer Support

The Deep End Network (DEN) has been instrumental in fostering collaboration and shared learning among GP practices facing similar systemic and population health challenges. Data from both survey responses and a facilitated focus group reveal that DEN meetings have created a vital space for peer exchange and support. In the survey, 85% of respondents indicated that peer-to-peer learning was one of the most valued elements of their participation, reinforcing the network's role in building collegiality and promoting shared problem-solving across practices.

4.2 Modes of Engagement: Face-to-Face Versus Virtual

A consistent theme that emerged from both the focus group interview and survey was the comparative value of different engagement formats. While virtual meetings conducted via Teams were noted for their logistical efficiency, participants strongly favoured in-person meetings for enabling more dynamic discussions and stronger participant engagement. The improved quality of conversation and networking in face-to-face settings was repeatedly cited as a strength, suggesting that hybrid models may need to lean more heavily on physical convenings to maximise impact.

4.3 Communication Improvements and Information Flow

The introduction of informal communication tools such as a DEN WhatsApp group, alongside the integration of key updates into meeting minutes, significantly improved information flow and reduced the sense of overload previously experienced via lengthy email communications. These developments addressed a previously cited barrier, information fatigue, and improved overall engagement within the network.

4.4 Innovation in Practice: Digital Tools and Service Efficiency

From an innovation and service development perspective, DEN participation has directly contributed to the uptake of new digital tools. Notably, 68% of survey respondents acknowledged being introduced to resources like the JOY app through the network, leading to more effective patient signposting and workload management. These tools were seen to enhance triage processes and alleviate pressure on clinical appointments, particularly by reception and administrative teams. Focus group insights

affirmed that these digital innovations were not only functional but also embedded into practice routines, helping to streamline patient interactions.

4.5 Tackling Health Inequalities Through Collaboration

Addressing health inequalities was a core ambition of DEN and findings show demonstrable progress in this area. Several practices implemented opt-out models, particularly in smoking cessation services, as a result of network learning. These proactive approaches were highlighted in both survey responses and case studies as being effective in engaging populations typically underserved by traditional healthcare pathways. Moreover, inspiration drawn from the Make Every Adult Matter (MEAM) initiative catalysed the development of multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) within several practices. This approach allowed for more holistic care, particularly for patients experiencing multiple disadvantages. Reflecting this, 79% of survey respondents reported increased confidence in working with external partners and agencies, an indicator of growing interdisciplinary collaboration facilitated through the network.

4.6 Patient and Community Engagement

Patient and community engagement efforts, particularly through Patient Participation Groups (PPGs), showed mixed outcomes. Where successful, PPGs contributed meaningfully to operational efficiency, supporting activities such as flu clinics and digital literacy sessions, thereby improving both patient experience and administrative flow. Nonetheless, challenges in maintaining consistent PPG engagement were apparent, with 43% of survey respondents citing difficulties in recruitment and sustainability. Focus group discussions further emphasised the importance of tailored outreach strategies and local visibility to strengthen ties with the community and build trust in primary care services.

4.7 Recognition and Strategic Influence

Importantly, the visibility and systemic recognition of DEN have increased markedly over the past year. The inclusion of DEN practices in a recent Buckinghamshire Council commissioning tender illustrates its growing influence within local health policy and planning. This recognition extends to wider stakeholder engagement; external agencies

are now actively seeking to collaborate with the network, reflecting its perceived value as a model for integrated, locality-based care coordination.

5. Challenges and Areas for Improvement

- **Variable PPG Engagement:** Engagement levels are uneven, often reliant on individual motivation. Further support and shared models may help standardize effectiveness.
- **Information Access:** Practices noted the need for a central repository for local service directories to streamline signposting.
- **Sustained Engagement:** Survey and focus group data indicated that ongoing funding and tangible service support are key to ensuring continued involvement.
- **Time Constraints:** Some practices still view DEN meetings as an add-on; making the link between attendance and operational benefit more explicit may help.

6. Future Recommendations

To build on current success and extend DEN's impact, the following areas should be prioritised:

1. **Secure Ongoing Funding and Institutional Support**
 - Sustained investment will ensure continuity and engagement across practices.
2. **Develop a Central Community Services Directory**
 - A digital, regularly updated resource hub would enhance signposting and reduce duplication.
3. **Strengthen Patient Participation Strategies**
 - Share effective approaches and consider region-wide support for active PPG development.
4. **Link DEN Involvement with Operational Incentives**
 - Offer practices access to pilot projects or resource funding tied to participation.
5. **Explore Scalable Expansion While Retaining In-Person Elements**
 - Consider extending DEN's model to other counties while preserving the value of face-to-face networking.

Overall conclusion

The first year of the Deep End Network (DEN) initiative has yielded significant progress in terms of increasing awareness of health inequalities and strengthening collaboration between practices and external organizations. While challenges such as patient engagement and funding sustainability remain, the overall feedback indicates that DEN is a valuable initiative for addressing health inequalities within deprived populations. Moving forward, the focus should continue on expanding the network, increasing practical solutions, and ensuring that health professionals are equipped with the tools and resources necessary to tackle these challenges effectively.