



SOUTHEND'S BEST START: WHAT HAS BEEN THE IMPACT OF THE ABSS PROGRAMME?

Phase 1 Summary Report for the Summative Evaluation

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THE POWER OF BEING UNDERSTOOD
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SUMMARY

About this evaluation

Early Years Alliance (EYA) asked RSM UK Consulting LLP (RSM) and University of Essex (UoE), to measure the impact of the A Better Start Southend (ABSS) programme. This Report summarises the findings from Phase 1. It is based on:

- A review of finance and monitoring information held by ABSS
- Interviews with 12 ABSS partners, programme delivery staff, non-ABSS service providers and community leaders in Southend
- Interviews with 18 ABSS service managers and staff
- A survey of 33 ABSS service delivery staff and volunteers
- A survey of 94 parents and carers who took part in ABSS activities or events
- 5 focus groups with 19 parents and carers who took part in ABSS
- A survey of 113 local parents and carers who had not taken part in the ABSS programme.

Survey responses were lower than expected. This means that the survey findings presented in this report are indicative and cannot be generalised to represent the whole population.

About the ABSS programme

ABSS is a 10-year, £36 million programme funded by The National Lottery Community Fund (TNLCF). Since 2015 the ABSS programme has provided free services to over **5,000 pregnant people and families** with babies and children under 4 years old. As part of the original ABSS funding agreement, ABSS services are primarily available to people living in ABSS wards - Kursaal, Milton, Shoeburyness, Victoria, Westborough and West Shoebury. Almost all respondents to the parent survey said they **enjoyed the ABSS activities they took part in and found them useful.**

98% of respondents

enjoyed the ABSS activities they took part in.



97%

found them useful

Strength of a community-based approach

Some interviewees felt that the community-based approach was a strength of the ABSS programme, because it **made use of local knowledge, supported better communication with different communities and made it easier for people to take part in ABSS activities.** A minority of interviewees also felt that the way that the ABSS programme **tailored its approach to its users** was innovative, in how it:

- **worked with participants** using group sessions, peer support, one-to-one support, home visits or a combination of these
- **reached out to new participants**, for example, through public events like the Festival of Conversations, working with community groups and advertising in local businesses.

The majority of interviewees said that the programme had introduced some promising practices, including **sharing lessons learned** with other organisations in Southend, and **community involvement** in service design (co-production) and how it is run (governance). Most respondents to the staff survey said that the importance of collaboration and co-production was understood by everyone involved in the ABSS programme (76%). However, a minority of interviewees felt that, at times, co-production had been relatively superficial.

Representation from local communities

A minority of interviewees said that the parent champions and governance boards were **representative of the local community**, and included fathers, families from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds, a good age range and people with disabilities. However, a separate minority of interviewees disagreed and felt that governance activities were not diverse, commenting that they often saw **the same people attending which often discouraged others from taking part**. Groups that were noted as being **underrepresented in co-production and governance were fathers and people who do not speak English**.

Associated with a more positive parenting experience

There was some evidence that the ABSS programme was associated with a more positive parenting experience for those who have taken part in it. While respondents identified other factors that had influenced these changes, the findings provide some support that the ABSS programme was having an impact on participants.

Since taking part in the programme, survey respondents said they were

better able to access support to:

- **be healthy** (84% of respondents, compared to 54% before ABSS and 64% of respondents who had not taken part in the programme)
- **eat well** (82%, compared to 58% and 63%)

and help their children:

- **interact with others** (82%, compared to 56% and 57%)
- **express themselves** (77%, compared to 53% and 58%)
- **understand their feelings and behaviours** (72%, compared to 47% and 52%).



There was also evidence that since taking part in the programme respondents

knew more about:



- the **benefits of breastfeeding** (89%, compared to 52% and 75%)
- activities they could do to help their **children learn to talk** (78%, compared to 41% and 60%) and
- **express themselves** (74%, compared to 31% and 53%)

Respondents also reported **increased confidence** in their ability to:

- **breastfeed** (78%, compared to 30% and 51%)
- **get involved in designing or delivering services** for people in Southend (50%, compared to 13% and 26%).



Other factors that had influenced these changes:

- gaining more experience as a parent
- advice from professionals
- support from family and friends.



Less of an impact on the wider community

Findings on the impact that the ABSS programme had on people's sense of connection were mixed. Almost a third of respondents said the programme made them feel **more connected to other parents** (32%). However, the majority of respondents reported little or no impact on how connected they felt to the wider community (62%) or their neighbourhood (49%).

Respondents to the parent survey were generally more positive about the impact that the ABSS programme has had on children and families in Southend and their involvement in local services when compared to the community survey. This was supported by the findings from the interviews and staff survey.

The majority of interviewees said that the ABSS programme had been successful in **developing community resilience**. Respondents to the staff survey said it:

- **improved the confidence of the parents involved** in ABSS services (94%)
- helped parents **support their children's growth and development** (94%)
- gave people in ABSS wards **more opportunities to connect** with each other (91%)
- **improved the outcomes of children and babies** involved (90%)
- supported people in ABSS wards to **work together to address local issues** (74%)



It is important to note that fewer respondents were able to answer that last question.

However, a minority of interviewees felt that while there were benefits for those involved in the ABSS programme, its **reach was not broad enough to have impacted the wider community**. These interviewees said that the programme had limited to no lasting impact on community resilience and that other programmes had contributed towards community resilience. Therefore, they could not attribute all of the changes to the programme.

Whilst no group was intentionally excluded, the programme struggled to reach some specific groups

While survey respondents were generally positive about how inclusive the ABSS programme was, respondents to the parent survey were more likely to have said that ABSS actively **encouraged the involvement of people from different backgrounds** (90% of respondents, compared to 75% of respondents to the community survey). The majority of interviewees and some focus group participants also agreed that the ABSS programme was inclusive by design. However, when asked which groups, if any, were benefiting most from the ABSS programme the majority of interviewees said it was predominantly white females.

When asked about what groups, if any, were not actively participating in the ABSS programme, some interviewees said that it was **difficult to get fathers involved** in some, but not all, ABSS services. This was also reflected in responses from the focus group participants. A minority of interviewees said that the ABSS programme had **struggled to engage ethnic minorities**, particularly Chinese and Jewish communities, due to difficulties in accessing and understanding people in those communities as well as existing support networks within those communities. Other groups the programme had struggled to engage were **people with disabilities** and **young mothers**.

Issues effecting take up of ABSS services

Survey findings identified a number of **issues that influenced take up** of ABSS support that were likely to impact some groups more than others, including:

- Lack of awareness or information about the programme and who could access it
- When, where and how ABSS services were being delivered.

Most respondents to the parent survey found out about the ABSS programme through the **children's or family centres** (56%) or were **referred by a professional** (37%). This was supported by a comparison of survey findings on where respondents who participated in the ABSS programme go to for support and advice about their children's development when compared to respondents who had not taken part in the programme. This suggested that **people who were not already using these other services could be missed**.

Some interviewees also identified challenges in reaching specific groups, including communication difficulties for **parents who did not speak English** and **cultural issues**,

particularly the preference amongst some communities for formula milk rather than breastfeeding. The **COVID-19** pandemic created an additional barrier in reaching groups that were already underrepresented across the ABSS programme, particularly the BAME community, because it meant that many local businesses and venues that could have been used to advertise ABSS services were closed. Finally, interviewees said that the **timing of ABSS service delivery** often created a barrier to fathers getting involved in sessions and activities that were held during the week. The same would be true for many working parents and carers.

Working with other children's and families' services in Southend

The majority of interviewees felt that the programme had established **good links with other local services**, particularly in the health sector and speech and language services, that benefited from direct referrals. Some interviewees said that the programme had done a good job of networking with other services in Southend, through networking events, regular meetings, and updates. However, some interviewees felt that creating linkages with other services had been challenging. A minority of interviewees commented that, at least in the beginning, there was limited understanding of what the ABSS programme had to offer and how it could work with non-ABSS services.

80% of respondents to the parent and community surveys said there was **more community involvement in the design of local services** because they were following the ABSS approach.



Some interviewees also commented on the impact that the ABSS programme has had on other services. This included **stronger working relationships, improved referral pathways and adoption of the co-production approach** by other organisations and local government, albeit to a lesser extent than the ABSS programme.

It is notable, however, that a large proportion of respondents were unable to answer these questions, indicating that **the programme's impact on other services was not widely known or understood**.

A minority of interviewees also said that the ABSS programme had **contributed to a greater focus on service sustainability, legacy and future programme design at a systems level**. Sustainability was seen as an important part of the programme. The more **integrated ways of working and the increased connection between services** were seen as something that should be continued. The focus on sustainability and legacy was something that these interviewees had observed being included in the design of other programmes because of the ABSS programme.

Some benefits to the children's workforce were identified in terms of **encouraging a culture of learning and development** as well as a **shift towards early intervention and prevention**. Although it was not clear to what extent the latter was being driven by the ABSS programme rather than the national policy agenda. There was no evidence to suggest there was any change in the makeup of the children's workforce.

A minority of stakeholder interviewees felt that **austerity measures had restricted local service providers' ability to deliver early interventions**, because they did not have enough resources to focus on prevention as well as treatment. Additionally, austerity was seen as causing the voluntary sector to deliver more target focused products, to remain viable in the face of constrained commissioning from local authorities. This was said to have

increased the sense of competition between service providers and limited the use of a more joined up approach.

Findings on the programme's influence on inequalities in access to children's and families' services in Southend were mixed.

A minority of interviewees said that the ABSS programme was **providing accessible services** directly to those from deprived areas who would normally not have access to these services.

They also said that the delivery of ABSS services in

community hubs and family centres had **encouraged ABSS participants to access other non-ABSS services** in these venues. However, a minority of interviewees felt that the ABSS programme had **done very little to reduce inequalities in access to services**. This was supported by a minority of focus group participants, who said that although the ABSS programme had a positive impact on them, they often found it quite **difficult or confusing to go on to access further services** offered by either ABSS or non-ABSS providers.

A minority of interviewees also felt that the ABSS programme had created **some separation between ABSS and non-ABSS wards** and that limited engagement with ethnic minority families had created further division and **increased inequality in access to services**.

Learning lessons

Respondents to the staff survey said that the programme had adapted, and **improvements had been made**. This was supported by some interviewees who said that both the

programme and individual ABSS services had changed in response to lessons learned from the testing of different delivery approaches and the feedback collected. A minority of focus group participants also reported improvements in the range of activities on offer and the role parents were given in helping to shape the programme.

Recommendations from Phase 1

1. **Raise awareness about what the programme offers** by creating accessible guides or maps to services that can be easily understood by families. One way to do that would be for ABSS to carry out a systems mapping exercise.
2. **Address the gaps and inconsistencies in service level monitoring information** to make sure that there are reliable measures to identify where there has been change that could be credited to specific ABSS activities or services and help to track that change over time. ABSS has already committed to actioning this recommendation.
3. **Use a more innovative and multi-pronged approach to community outreach and recruitment**. ABSS should use a mixture of parent champions, community connectors, public events, community and voluntary groups and statutory services to help attract a more diverse group of participants.



38% of respondents to the staff survey said that the ABSS programme had

reduced inequalities in access to services



16% said it **neither reduced or increased inequalities**

16% said it **increased inequalities in access to services.**



It is important to note that a relatively high proportion of survey respondents (31%) answered 'don't know'.

Totals do not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Changes were made in response to:

- insights from on-going **monitoring** of the programme (85% of respondents to the staff survey)
- **lessons learned during implementation** (73%)
- **emerging issues**, such as COVID-19 (89%).

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