

# An eco-system of support for families:

## Learning from the Formative Evaluation of A Better Start Southend

### What is the Formative Evaluation?

Researchers from the University of Essex looked at what difference ABSS services made to the families who took part in them.

They focused on people's individual, personal experiences of taking part in projects, to understand what made projects work and how they could be made even more effective.

By comparing experiences across different ABSS projects, they identified learning from the whole ABSS programme. These insights can be taken forward to ensure future projects supporting families are delivered in ways that will have real and lasting impact.

### Five areas examined

- Is the project reaching its intended audience?
- Factors that help or hinder the delivery of the project.
- Effectiveness and impact for families.
- Quality and experience of taking part.
- Long term change.



### Evaluation in numbers



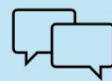
18 projects evaluated



83 periodic reports  
14 summary reports  
2 synthesis reports



17 surveys  
2,442 survey responses



185 interviews  
4,987 pages of text

### Implementation

- Projects had to adapt how they delivered during the COVID pandemic, and this shaped how flexible and adaptable families expected future services to be.
- Virtual delivery improved access for some, but digital exclusion was a challenge for others.

### Effectiveness

- 'Soft' elements (e.g. social opportunities, green space, building confidence) supported 'hard' outcomes (e.g. improved children's speech and language).
- For many parents/carers, support with 'soft' elements from other parents/carers or from staff was the most impactful and lasting aspect of a project.

### Quality and experience

- Change takes time. By building effective relationships, ABSS projects created the time for change to happen.
- Peer support was an important part of positive experiences for parents/carers, even where this wasn't explicitly part of the project's design.
- Parents'/carers' experiences were anchored by relationships with staff who gave a sense of 'welcome' and 'belonging'.

### Long term change

- Parents/carers involved with ABSS built enduring networks of relationships, allowing learning to be shared and increasing community connections.
- Improved self-esteem and confidence encouraged parents/carers to take part in more services, community activities or social networks.



**ABSS as an eco-system:** "There was a high degree of **fertilisation of networks and referrals** across and between ABSS projects. The sense of an **ABSS identity** reflected a **shared ethos** across the whole programme."

### Learning and recommendations

- **ABSS as an 'eco-system':** ABSS was more than just a collection of projects, it had an identity based around close connections between services and a shared ethos that included building relationships, improving confidence and continual improvement of services.
- **Soft versus hard outcomes:** Softer outcomes, such as developing self-confidence and peer support, were rarely formal project outcomes, but were key enablers leading to change for many parents/carers.
- **Complexity of programme management:** As a complex programme, there were sometimes disconnects between staff on the ground and 'top down' management responding to changing priorities.
- **Complexity of inclusivity:** ABSS worked hard to be inclusive, but more consideration of local contexts and culturally specific services operating locally might have helped to identify how inclusive ABSS was.



University of Essex

