# An Eco-System of Support for Families:

Learning from the Formative Evaluation of A Better Start Southend



**Formative Evaluation of ABSS** conducted by: Dr Aaron Wyllie, Dr Kathryn Chard, Dr Sanjaya Aryal, Dr Liliane De Silva, Professor Vasilios Ioakimidis, Dr Gregory White, and Dr Lauren O'Connell at the University of Essex, on behalf of A Better Start Southend.

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## **About A Better Start Southend**

A Better Start is a ten-year, £215 million programme commissioned by The National Lottery Community Fund, running from 2015-2025. Five ABS partnerships based in Blackpool, Bradford, Lambeth, Nottingham, and Southend-on-Sea were selected to take part in the programme, which aims to support families to give their babies and very young children the best possible start in life. Scientific evidence and research underpin the programme's approach to designing services for happier and healthier lives. Southend was awarded £36.7 million over those ten years to develop services and ways of working that would make a real difference to the lives of children and families in the city.

The A Better Start Southend (ABSS) programme comprises projects and services across three themed workstreams: Social and Emotional, Communication and Language, and Diet and Nutrition, and two additional cross-cutting areas: Community Resilience, and Systems Change. ABSS targeted the six most deprived wards in Southend: Kursaal, Milton, Victoria, Westborough, Shoebury and West Shoebury. The ABSS programme aimed to make Southend the best place in the country to bring up a child and be a parent.

This report was originally delivered as a Powerpoint presentation by Dr Kathryn Chard to the ABSS Executive Programme Board on 16<sup>th</sup> July 2024, and by Dr Aaron Wyllie to the ABSS Partnership Board on 16<sup>th</sup> August 2024.

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## Scope and purpose of the Formative Evaluation

The Formative Evaluation of A Better Start Southend conducted by researchers at the University of Essex is one part of the overall ABSS evaluation programme. In addition to the Formative Evaluation, formal evaluations of ABSS also comprise of an Independent Summative Evaluation of ABSS conducted jointly by RSM and the University of Essex, and the National Evaluation of the A Better Start programme led by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen). The internal ABSS teams also closely monitor the performance and outputs of services and have conducted research into organisational aspects of running the programme as well as engagement with children and Parent Champion volunteers. All of this evidence is brought together by the ABSS team to provide a mosaic of evidence that can describe how ABSS operates and the impact it achieves.

While the Summative Evaluation has a population-level outcome focus that lends itself to examining the ABSS programme as a whole, the Formative Evaluation is an experience-led evaluation examining the delivery of projects and services. This means that the Formative Evaluation focuses on what it is that has made a difference individually and personally, and how the outcomes translate personally. While it has focused for much of its operation at an individual project level rather than a whole programme level, with conclusions and recommendations feeding in at a project level before then informing ABSS a whole organisation, it has also included thematic analysis that has enabled the team to identify common findings across the programme as a whole.

The Formative Evaluation focuses on five key aspects of ABSS projects and services:

- 1. Achievement: Is the project reaching the intended audience?
- 2. Implementation: What factors are assisting and inhibiting delivery?
- 3. Effectiveness: How is participation impacting beneficiaries' lives?
- 4. Quality and experience: What is it like being part of the programme?
- 5. Long term change: What is the longer-term sustainability of the positive changes brought about by the service?

## The Formative Evaluation in numbers

During the Formative Evaluation's operation, between March 2020 and September 2024, the Formative Evaluation carried out the following:

- 185 one-to-one interviews across 18 projects, producing 4987 pages of verbatim text
- 17 survey instruments developed and deployed
- 2442 survey responses analysed
- 83 periodic highlight reports produced
- 14 summary reports synthesising project findings produced.

# Methodological approach

The Formative Evaluation utilises a multi and mixed method approach, enabling the evaluation to remain pragmatic to the needs of individual projects, while also maintaining an integrated focus that drew insights from comparisons and commonalities across projects to inform a more generalised understanding.

The methods used include a combination of structured surveys, bespoke surveys, and semistructured interviews with both parents and project staff. By using within-case inductive analysis, bringing together the data and evidence collected for an individual project, the evaluation developed insights about each project. Regular reporting of these insights (initially quarterly but then moving to six-monthly) for each project allowed the delivery partners to learn from the evaluation and adjust delivery in the light of its findings. Longitudinal elements were incorporated as the analysis was repeated over time, allowing the evaluation to identify common elements and areas of change within each project.

In summer 2022, the research team conducted a cross-case deductive analysis, bringing together all interview data across all projects collected between October 2020 and December 2021 and re-examining the data as a combined data set. This meta-thematic analysis allowed the team to identify elements of commonality and difference across all projects, providing valuable insights into the nature and effectiveness of the overall ABSS approach, as well as bringing into relief the findings for individual projects.

Both of these analytical approaches were combined in the development of several longitudinal case studies, following individual parents' experiences over time, and a thematic meta-synthesis bringing together insights from across all elements of the evaluation.

This summary report brings together findings from the whole Formative Evaluation, combining within-case and cross-case analysis to draw together learning from individual projects and from the whole ABSS programme.

## Implementation of ABSS services

#### Impact of COVID-19 affected implementation

The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, with associated lockdowns, distancing requirements and health impacts, required projects to adapt the way that their services were delivered. The formative evaluation also had to adapt in order to operate effectively in this changed environment, and to understand the impact that these changes had had on delivery of services and on the experiences of families eligible for those services.

Many ABSS projects were able to adapt their delivery to an online or virtual model. Online delivery was viewed positively for many group-based projects or projects delivered as series or modules (e.g. HENRY, Preparation for Parenthood). However, projects delivered on more of a one-to-one or 'drop in' basis (e.g. Let's Talk, Bump to Breast) found that online delivery was more difficult for many.

Delivering projects in an online or virtual manner had advantages for many participants, offering greater convenience and flexibility and reducing challenges around getting out of the house (particularly for families with multiple children), transport logistics, and scheduling of sessions alongside other responsibilities. However, disadvantages included greater difficulty for parents/carers to build relationships with peers and, for some projects, with staff. A significant issue was that of digital exclusion, with some families struggling to access services due to limited access to technology or the internet, or the need to share access between multiple family members for work, education and access to services.

Overall, COVID demonstrated the adaptability of projects, and shaped beneficiary expectations post-COVID, in terms of flexibility and adaptability.

### **Effectiveness**

The evaluation identified that 'soft' elements of experience, such as social opportunities, time out of the house, giving or receiving care and support, and access to green space, were critical to enabling and supporting 'hard' outcomes. One example was the Families Growing Together project, based at community gardens, which offered an informal 'space' that gave participants access to these elements. These 'soft' elements then contributed to 'hard' outcomes around social and emotional development, increasing knowledge of health, diet and nutrition, and improving mental health and wellbeing.

Project outcome(s) that focused on the development of 'skills' or 'competencies' (whether for parents/carers or within their children) were often secondary from the perspective of parent/carer(s), who identified the nature of the support offered and softer outcomes such as developing confidence and self-belief as important to their own development. For example, interviews highlighted that the success of the Work Skills project in supporting parents towards re-entry into the workforce came not just from its focus on skills and competencies (such as role-specific training, writing a CV, responding to an interview question, using a computer) but also through recognition that re-entry to the workforce is also about factors such as confidence, self-belief, a sense of support, or accepting the possibility of failure. For many parents/carers, support in these areas (often from their peers, or from staff members who listened and made them feel like they belonged) was identified as the most impactful and lasting, enabling their ongoing engagement and participation.

## **Quality and experience**

One of the key insights that came out during the formative evaluation was that creating change takes time, and that by building effective relationships, that time can be given. This has been seen for services themselves, in terms of building relationships between the central ABSS team and the delivery partners delivering services on the ground. Having time to develop these relationships also allowed them to work together to understand, learn from and improve the design and delivery of services, leading to positive change.

The importance of giving time for the development of relationships between delivery partners and the parents/carers or children they work with was also of vital importance. This allowed parents/carers or children to build bonds and develop trust with staff, allowing for greater openness. Parents/carers particularly identified the importance of project staff providing a sense of 'welcome' and 'belonging', and a non-judgemental approach, as anchors of the beneficiary experience.

Peer support elements also contributed significantly to the parent/carer experience, even where these were not an explicit feature of the project. Building connections with other parents/carers going through similar experiences was an important positive feature of engagement with ABSS for many parents/carers, with associated reductions in isolation, improved wellbeing and resilience and improved confidence in parenting ability being frequently cited as benefits. Projects focusing on breastfeeding support were good examples of this, with peer support and the development of supportive networks being cited as influences on a parent/carer's ability to continue breastfeeding for as long as they would like to, and confidence around steps such as moving on to solid food.

## Long term change

The longitudinal case studies conducted with individual parents over a four-year period (October 2020 to May 2024) enabled a deeper understanding of the longer-term impacts

projects had on individuals, and allowed some exploration of the pathways that beneficiaries could take between multiple ABSS services. Alongside insights from interviews conducted for individual project evaluations, this identified that long-term impacts could be seen from engagement with ABSS services.

In particular, there was evidence of enduring networks and relationships that were built through involvement with ABSS projects, contributing to greater levels of connection and increased resilience within the community. This enabled parents/carers to share learning and insights with each other, as well as to build peer support and community networks.

On an individual level, improved self-esteem and confidence after participating in ABSS services could function as a 'springboard', or a first domino, leading to further participation in services, community activities or social networks, and further improvements in confidence, knowledge and efficacy as parents/carers.

## **Key learning and recommendations**

ABSS as an 'eco-system': A consistent theme in both the 'Achievement' and 'Implementation' domain was that 'ABSS' was an identifiable entity as much as being a collection of individual projects. 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, with common focus on elements such as relationship building, improving confidence and continual improvement of services as a result of the 'Test and Learn' approach.

**Soft vs hard outcomes:** While rarely set as project outcomes, 'softer' outcomes were critical to reinforcing and enabling 'harder' outcomes. In particular, developing self-confidence and peer support were identified as key enablers for many parents/carers. Allowing the time for these softer outcomes to take hold also gave the time to achieve change in other areas.

**Recognising complexity in programme management:** Feedback from project delivery staff pointed to some periods when there was a sense of 'top-down' management, which sometimes felt like a lack of operational understanding. Changes in programme management leadership and staffing, and changes over time as the programme matured and moved into different phases of delivery, could result in shifts in focus or strategic priorities which then impacted on project delivery staff.

The complexity of inclusivity: ABSS faced some challenges when talking about engagement with minoritised ethnic groups, as ethnicity information had not been recorded for around 20% of beneficiaries, limiting the ability to draw conclusions. Reasons for such high levels of ethnicity being unrecorded were unclear but were believed to include a combination of reluctance on the part of beneficiaries to provide this information, reluctance on the part of staff to request this information, and the registration process being perceived as onerous. Overall, ABSS tended to interpret data around ethnicity as evidence of 'inclusivity', however there was little consideration of contextual factors, such as whether alternative more culturally specific services might be operating locally. Future programmes might do well to consider local contexts and community make-ups when identifying indicators of inclusivity.

Other aspects of inclusivity that the evaluation reflected on were the means of service delivery. During COVID, the move to virtual delivery opened up access to services to beneficiaries who had found it difficult to attend in-person services. However, this also introduced new limitations for families who faced digital exclusion. Delivering inclusive

services means considering all of the barriers that might be in place and looking for ways to mitigate those.

# Impact and dissemination beyond the evaluation

At the time of writing, research and associated findings from the formative evaluation have been shared in the following ways:

- Three academic publications (two published, one undergoing second review).
- Peer researcher training five parents took part in a five-week research skills programme, with one Parent Champion subsequently supporting data collection and analysis alongside the university researchers.
- Production of an evidence map focused on breastfeeding, which was subsequently presented at an international conference and published.
- As part of a 'Lunch and Learn' series of lunchtime webinars produced by ABSS and SAVS to share learning with delivery partners, other early years and community sector practitioners and other interested parties.
- Within sessions delivered as part of three ABSS Festivals of Conversations, bringing together parents/carers, families, other community members and professionals for a range of informative sessions and activities.
- To support ABSS and delivery partners with continuing evaluation and monitoring through frameworks and surveys beyond the end of the formal evaluation.