



A Better Start Implementation Evaluation Workstream Report 6 Summary: Profiling Services and Systems

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Background

A Better Start (ABS) is the ten-year (2015-2025), £215 million programme, set up by The National Lottery Community Fund (referred to hereafter as 'the Fund'). Five ABS partnerships based in Blackpool, Bradford, Lambeth, Nottingham and Southend-On-Sea are supporting families to give their babies and very young children the best possible start in life. Working with local parents, the ABS partnerships are developing and testing ways to improve children's diet and nutrition; social and emotional development; and speech, language and communication. The work of the programme is grounded in scientific evidence and research.

The research reported here builds on earlier work that was undertaken. The overarching study questions to which this research exercise contributes are:

- What does the ABS programme provide in terms of service delivery, pathways, experiences of communities and families? Specifically, to what extent, and how, does the ABS programme differ from early development programmes in non-ABS sites?
- Is the programme sustainable in relation to changes achieved in communities and families, and in relation to the system change?

Aims

The aim of this research exercise was to update the map of services and work programmes initially provided by the ABS partnerships, and explore how systems and services for families have been transformed since 2017, as a result of ABS.

Methods

Data was collected from the five ABS partnerships during June to September of 2019. Each ABS partnership was asked to update the service mapping spreadsheet they first completed in 2017. A total of 16 interviews and 10 focus groups were carried out with local ABS teams and their partners from health, children's services, education and corporate services.

Results

1. A profile of the services and interventions being provided in summer 2019

In their initial bids, the ABS partnerships had planned for their core services to be in place by 2019, which is the mid-way point in the programme. In practice, progress has been variable and affected by a range of factors, with the result that they were at different points in their development, with some having interventions and services that were still in the early stages of being set up.

The profiling activity recorded 81 individual services and activities being funded and delivered as part of ABS in June to September 2019. Of these 81 individual services and activities, 43 were new, two thirds were being provided universally, and the remainder on a targeted basis. This represents **a significant increase of just under 50% in provision since 2017, with the range of new provision across the five sites ranging from 38% to 79% of total service provision.**

In addition, sites had **significantly enhanced workforce training** targeted not only at volunteers but the wider workforce in the early years' ecosystem including health visitors and the police.

This development of services represents a better coverage in terms of:

- a) the type of services being provided around diet/nutrition; language and learning; and socio-emotional development; and
- b) the focus of the support, ranging from universal level advice to pregnant women and their partners about having a baby and parenting, to more targeted interventions for children with more complex needs.

Factors perceived to have contributed to the commissioning of new services, and the discontinuation of others, included the changing political and financial context in which ABS teams were operating, and the consequent change to local services and structures. Changes in the external environment resulted, for example, in the closure of children's centres; recruitment challenges for providers; a lack of staffing capacity to deliver a programme or challenges recruiting for a specific role; and considerations about the future sustainability of a service/ intervention. Sites were also developing new services in response to the 'test and learn' implementation principle underpinning ABS, such as making changes based on their success in terms of the reach of interventions and engagement of families.

2. Transforming services and systems

The interview data showed that local ABS teams and their partners perceived the programme to have continued to transform services and systems locally, as described below.

- **Improving the provision of services** – In 2017 sites were still in the early stages of transitioning into service delivery. At this midway point, the sites were continuing to change the way in which services were being provided, and staff perceived their ability to do this to be a result of their unique position receiving ABS funding and having flexibility to test and refine services. This was described, for example, as allowing them to pilot new approaches, focus explicitly on early intervention, and to adapt delivery based on local need. The latter included developing a trauma-informed approach, new care pathways, and exploring ways of better involving fathers.
- **Enhancing partnerships** – Professionals in ABS sites reported in interviews that they were continuing to build on the strong culture of partnership working that has been described in earlier evaluation reports. While the foundations for some of these partnerships were already in existence, particularly at the strategic level, ABS was felt to have strengthened the partnerships at an operational level. However, following changes at senior leadership level (including the ABS Director in some sites), staff felt there was a need to reinvigorate some of the connectivity and commitment and to build relationships with partners who did not know each other.
- **Community development** – All ABS partnerships reiterated their ongoing commitment to engage parents and community members in the design and delivery of ABS services. A

range of approaches continued to be used to engage parents and community representatives at different levels, including: decision-making at the board level; being involved in commissioning of services; design and co-production of services; volunteering and supporting a service, including becoming a parent champion or parent ambassador; or being part of a paid peer workforce delivering a service. The need to harness and draw on the community was viewed as critical to the long-term legacy of the programme.

- **Development of pathways and an integrated 0-5 offer** – All ABS partnerships described a continuation of their work in terms of developing and improving their pathway of support for an integrated offer for parents and children aged 0-5 years. This included working with the local authority to map the points when parents and children can access services, from pregnancy until reception, and streamlining referral processes for targeted services so that there was one central point of access. Perhaps most importantly, this mapping and streamlining work was perceived to have involved developing better connections with the wider early years ecosystem.
- **Supporting evidence-informed approaches** – The ‘test and learn’ component of the programme was perceived to be starting to increase the use of evidence-informed approaches. The ‘test and learn’ approach was felt to have helped transform the use of evidence to justify actions and decisions; help understand why partnerships were developing or delivering a particular activity; and what difference interventions make.
- **Developing skills and equipping the workforce** – The partnerships had further developed their training programmes to both train ABS staff and upskill the wider early years workforce including health visitors, voluntary sector staff, and the police. This was perceived to be making a significant contribution to the development of a learning-rich environment and helping to build knowledge about early child development.

Conclusion

All sites, at the time of this profiling exercise, had significantly increased their provision since 2017, and were offering better coverage in terms of the type of services being provided to target the three main outcomes of the programme. They were offering a much extended programme of workforce training and were also employing a range of different approaches to expand their community workforce. At this midway point, we can conclude that there has been considerable progress by ABS sites in the development and delivery of services, the priority and focus for each site was clearly moving toward the creation of a sustainable infrastructure.