



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

Phase 2 Final Report for the Summative Evaluation

October 2023

THE POWER OF BEING UNDERSTOOD
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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. The purpose of the Summative Evaluation is to measure the impact of the ABSS programme to date. This Report summarises the findings from Phase 2 and draws comparisons with the research findings identified in Phase 1. The findings from Phase 2 are based on the following research activities between March and September 2023:

- Analysis of the financial and monitoring information held by ABSS.
- Interviews with representatives across Southend: ABSS partners (3), programme delivery staff (4), community leaders (2) and one children and families' service provider.
- Interviews with ABSS service managers and staff (15 representatives, 13 interviews).
- A survey of ABSS service delivery staff and volunteers (25 responses).
- A survey of parents and carers who took part in ABSS activities or events (131 responses).
- Short interviews with parents and carers who had taken part in ABSS to explore the impact of COVID-19 on their child (8 interviews).
- A survey of local parents and carers who had **not** taken part in the ABSS programme (65 responses).

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.

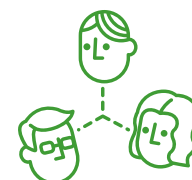
About the ABSS programme

ABSS is a 10-year, £36.7 million programme funded by The National Lottery Community Fund (TNLCF). Since 2015 the ABSS programme has provided free services to over **6,733 unique primary beneficiaries**. ABSS services are primarily aimed at people living in the most deprived wards in Southend-on-Sea - Kursaal, Milton, Shoeburyness, Victoria, Westborough and West Shoebury. The majority (76%) of primary beneficiaries lived in the top 30% of the most deprived areas. The majority of respondents to the parent survey said the programme was **delivering useful support for people in Southend and, children in Southend will have a better quality of life because of the ABSS programme**. Similar results were identified in Phase 1.

Strengthening of planning processes over time

Interviewees were positive about how the programme's planning processes had evolved over time to **address the changing needs of the community**. Interviewees felt that the programme had developed a **flexible approach**, able to adapt service provision and

94% of respondents felt that the programme was delivering **useful support**.



92% agreed that children will have a **better quality of life** because of the programme.

demonstrating a willingness to collect and act upon feedback from parents. This was also highlighted in Phase 1 findings. However some services, particularly those relating to health, diet and nutrition were more prescriptive in their service delivery. Overall, it was suggested that **co-design has become more entrenched** over time.

Some stakeholders also praised the programme's adaptability to changes in the local and national context, such as:

- The COVID-19 pandemic (including moving services online).
- Worsening perinatal mental health.
- Increased reporting of domestic violence.
- The cost-of-living crisis (including programme activities adapting to help families reduce household costs).

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 accessed services. In particular, improvements in the confidence of parents attending ABSS services was noted by some parent and service manager interviewees. This included an increase in confidence in their ability to look after their child (particularly for those attending breastfeeding services), parents' confidence in their ability to re-enter the workforce and parents who had become Parent Champions, had grown in their confidence in being an active and leading member of their community.

Since taking part in the programme, survey respondents said they were **better able to access support** to:

- **be healthy** (91% of respondents, compared to 67% before ABSS and 61% of respondents who had not taken part in the programme).
- **eat well** (87%, compared to 69% and 54%).

Survey respondents also indicated that since taking part in the programme they were better able to help their children:

- **learn to talk** (86%, compared to 62% and 79%).
- **express themselves** (91%, compared to 63% and 74%).
- **understand their feelings and behaviours** (87%, compared to 56%)



In surveys of parents who accessed ABSS services, parents reported they had **increased confidence** in their ability to:



- **breastfeed** (83%).
- take care of their own **mental health and wellbeing** (74%).
- their ability to help through **co-production** (80%).

Parents reported their **knowledge increased** after participation in the programme, including:

- the **benefits of breastfeeding** (87% knew 'a lot' or 'quite a bit' about the benefits, compared to 78% of non-ABSS parents).
- **keeping their families healthy and active** (86% knew 'a lot' or 'quite a bit' about the benefits, representing an increase from 62% prior to taking part in ABSS).



Building relationships in the community

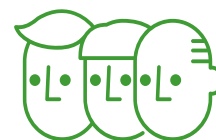
Findings on the impact which the ABSS programme had on community resilience were generally positive. A majority of survey respondents felt that the programme was contributing towards improved community integration. The majority (84%) of survey respondents reported that the ABSS programme had **connected parents to their communities**. The Community Connectors also felt better connected to their communities. Similarly, 88% of ABSS survey respondents felt that the programme was **effective in connecting parents to each other**. Stakeholder interviews reinforced the positive impact of the programme, giving the example of ABSS services that have worked with families newly arrived in the UK and trying to establish connections within Southend. Accessing ABSS services reduced initial feelings of isolation and helped them to build positive relationships in their local area.

Parent Champions provided the programme with an effective model for approaching community engagement, enabled a bottom-up approach to programme design and **gave parents a voice in decision making** on the ABSS programme. The majority (80%) of ABSS parents had at least some confidence in their **ability to help through co-production** since taking part in the programme, compared to a third before taking part. A minority of interviewees suggested that the introduction of the Community Connectors represented an **even more innovative approach that created better linkages** with the wider community.

These findings were supported by the interviews, which gave evidence on how ABSS services were helping people enter or return to the workforce (the Work Skills service for example). Additional benefits of connecting parents were mentioned, including **better sharing of advice** between parents, an increased **sense of being understood** and **practical support** such as ride-sharing and informal childcare.

The majority of interview respondents said that the ABSS programme had been successful in **improving community integration**. Survey respondents said the programme:

- **improved the confidence of the parents to use other local services** (89%) and,
- encouraged **leadership in local support groups** (84%).



Whilst the programme was inclusive by design, it struggled to reach some specific groups

When asked if the ABSS programme **actively encouraged people from different backgrounds to get involved**, 81% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed. Respondents to the parent survey were more likely to agree than respondents to the community survey (87% of respondents to the parent survey agreed/strongly agreed, compared to 53% of respondents to the community survey). Similar to Phase 1, both survey and interview respondents were **positive about the inclusivity of the programme overall**.

The majority of interviewees agreed that the ABSS programme **was inclusive by design**. However, when asked which groups benefited the most from the ABSS programme, interviewees reported it was **predominantly white females aged 20-35**. When discussing groups that were particularly difficult to engage in ABSS services, some interviewees commented on the **difficulty getting fathers involved**. Additionally, some interviewees said that the ABSS programme also **struggled to engage minoritised ethnic groups**, particularly the Chinese and Jewish communities. This was due to difficulties in

understanding their respective cultures, as well as the extent of existing support networks within those communities. **Young mothers** were also mentioned as another group which the programme struggled to engage.

Representation from local communities (including parents) in governance activities

Several interviewees suggested that the diversity of representatives involved in co-production and governance activities was **reflective of the overall demographic composition** within Southend. Specifically, the **composition of the group of Parent Champions was said to be particularly representative** of the diverse communities within Southend. A minority of interviewees suggested that a distinct effort was made to engage representatives from all communities in co-production and governance activities, resulting in **improved representation** from the African and Muslim communities. However, difficulties, also identified in Phase 1, in engaging members of the Bangladeshi, Chinese and Jewish communities persisted.



A minority of stakeholders felt that including parents in co-production and governance activities **increased the relevance and effectiveness of the programme**. However, a minority of the interviewees also suggested that it **would have been preferable for the governance of volunteers and Parent Champions to have been in-house within ABSS**, to allow for more autonomy.

Issues effecting uptake of ABSS services

Several barriers to the uptake of ABSS services were identified, these remained **broadly consistent** with those identified in Phase 1. Whilst the most common barrier to uptake cited by community survey respondents in Phase 2 (79%) was **not living in an ABSS ward** and therefore, not being eligible to participate in the programme or specific services, it should be noted that this was part of the intentional design of the test and learn programme.

PAR participants also identified **issues with engagement and awareness** of ABSS services generally. This was supported by 68% of staff and volunteers responses, where a lack of awareness about the ABSS programme as suggested as the main barrier to participation. It was noted that **ABSS was less effective in reaching particular communities** (e.g. the Chinese Community) through their communications and marketing materials. **Language barriers** were a particular concern as most promotional material was developed in English. Additionally, interviewees noted that relevant information was not always easily accessible on the **ABSS website**. However, staff were more likely to identify accessibility as an issue than parent survey respondents (48% compared to 8%).



*“I think it only covering a small amount of Southend has been a barrier from the start because there are families that live next door to someone who's in ABSS and they're not.”
(Service manager interviewee).*



Another barrier identified as limiting uptake of services was the **perception amongst some communities that ABSS services were not for them**. This was particularly true for fathers, however, some interviewees suggested that this also applied to LGBTQ+ families. Some

interviewees also suggested that the **COVID-19 pandemic** created challenges around digital exclusion which negatively impacted uptake of the programme. Interviewees referenced how the pandemic limited the accessibility of services as face-to-face delivery was temporarily halted and moved online, which some parents were unable to access due to a lack of technology. Interviewees also suggested that some parents were uncomfortable with an online or hybrid delivery model.

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

The majority of interviewees felt that developing **good links with other local services** was a key factor shaping the effectiveness of the programme. The majority of interviewees who discussed the linkages the ABSS programme had with other services, reported that integrated working and collaboration had increased since the programme began in 2015.

The benefits of increased integration and collaboration included:

- **improved continuity of care** for those availing of services.
- better quality of care and/ or support, with **increased understanding of the holistic needs of service users.**



In particular, the programme's linkages with Education, Public Health and Family Centres were referenced as being beneficial. Improved integration and collaborations made it easier for ABSS staff to **make direct referrals into or signpost service users to other services** within (but not limited to) these sectors and, other ABSS services. Additionally, a minority of service managers commented that once referrals were received by the ABSS programme, other services were more consistent in their follow-up process with those referrals.

72% of respondents to the parent and community surveys said there was **more community involvement in developing local groups because of the ABSS programme.**



Some interviewees also commented on the impact that the ABSS programme has had on other services. These impacts included **stronger working relationships, improved referral pathways and adoption of the co-production approach** by other organisations.

A minority of interviewees reported that the emphasis ABSS placed on

sustainability and legacy (as noted in Phase 1) had **spread across the wider children's services landscape**. Interviewees highlighted key elements of the ABSS approach such as **building strong working relationships, more integrated ways of working and the use of co-production** and indicated an intention to use them in **future service and policy design** beyond the lifespan of the ABSS programme.

However, in contrast to Phase 1, interviewees were mostly unable to comment on what impact the ABSS programme (and integrated ways of working) had on the children's workforce or those delivering services in Southend.

Recommendations from Phase 2

- 1. Revise the ABSS Communications and Marketing Strategy.** Revisions should set-out how the local knowledge of Community Connectors can be leveraged to enable the programme to reach communities which it has historically struggled to engage. It should include the use of promotional videos and Vlogs to promote services in languages other than English and increase accessibility for those with low levels of literacy. The strategy should ensure that information available on the ABSS website is up to date and consider promoting ABSS services in areas within Southend where non-ABSS parents frequently access advice and support.
- 2. Encourage whole families to participate in ABSS activities.** The programme to-date has struggled to engage fathers and particular minoritised ethnic groups. Organising more ‘whole family’ events and activities could help to make attending ABSS services and events less intimidating for underrepresented groups.
- 3. Undertake a system mapping exercise of the wider community support network,** given the clear impact of the programme in encouraging increased networking between Southend services. This would cover the extent of the support network across health, education and children’s services and, the referral pathways between service.

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