



A Better Start Southend Stories of Impact

**A Summary of Learning and Recommendations
from the A Better Start Southend Programme**

Executive Summary

A Better Start was a ten-year programme, funded by £215 million from The National Lottery Community Fund, running from 2015 to 2025. Five areas – Blackpool, Bradford, Lambeth, Nottingham and Southend-on-Sea – were selected to take part in the programme. It was designed to help families give babies and young children the best possible start in life. The approach was based on scientific research and evidence, shaping services that aimed to support healthier and happier lives.

The A Better Start Southend (ABSS) programme delivered a range of projects and services across three main themes: Social and Emotional Development, Communication and Language, and Diet and Nutrition. It also focused on two cross-cutting priorities: Community Resilience and Systems Change. ABSS specifically targeted six of Southend wards which were found to be in greatest deprivation and/or need – Kursaal, Milton, Victoria, Westborough, Shoeburyness and West Shoebury.

Evaluation of the ABSS programme has provided evidence of the impact of ABSS services on individuals, families, communities and professionals, and determined a number of themes and thematic interdependencies. Taken together, these inform four key recommendations from the ABSS programme.

Each of these recommendations is underpinned by the recognition that community members have important insights and understanding. Including parents/carers as equal partners and bringing community voices into decision-making through processes such as co-production creates more effective services for families.

Recommendation 1: **Invest in relationships and peer-led models to build lasting trust, community resilience and system-wide sustainability.** Trusting relationships and community-centred practice are essential elements that form the backbone of partnership working.

Recommendation 2: **Partners, organisations and delivery bodies must be flexible, responsive and ready to adapt to the changes within a complex system and the needs of babies, parents/carers and families.** ABSS found that locally rooted, flexible models were more effective than externally imposed approaches, especially when supported by shared goals and strong relationships.

Recommendation 3: **Services must be designed, developed and delivered with inclusion in mind to ensure equity of access to babies and families with the greatest challenges, with barriers minimised and knocked down at every opportunity.** Truly inclusive services should address the complex barriers families face, including stigma, time pressures, language differences, and cultural disconnects.

Recommendation 4: **Services should be designed, developed and delivered with the end in mind, capturing evidence of impact throughout the journey as a clear method of justifying continuity and securing sustainability.** Robust evidence is critical to developing and sustaining effective early years services. Evidence must be embedded throughout the lifecycle of programmes, from design to delivery to evaluation.

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Introduction

The impact of the ABSS programme was evaluated through ongoing monitoring of individual ABSS projects and services, alongside a meta-thematic analysis of the programme as a whole. ABSS also worked with partners at the University of Essex, who conducted a formative evaluation of ABSS projects, and RSM UK Ltd, who conducted an independent summative evaluation of the ABSS programme.

Stories of Impact

The research, evaluation and impact data were brought together in the ABSS Stories of Impact - a series of themed reports, vlogs and videos, posters and banners, presentations and other materials demonstrating the evidence and learning from the ABSS programme. The material is hosted on the Beyond ABSS website at <https://abetterstartsouthend.co.uk/>. An introduction to these reports and their findings follows.

The Context of A Better Start Southend

A high proportion of Southend's early years children live in areas of greater disadvantage. High levels of deprivation are linked to poorer overall health and life expectancy. ABSS aspired for Southend to be the best place in the country to bring up a child. The ABSS programme took a 'test and learn' approach to innovate, change systems and build community resilience. Services were delivered by commissioning delivery partners across the public and charitable sectors. Evaluation identified where improvements could be made, and success evidenced. ABSS was built on a partnership working approach. By breaking down boundaries between organisations and disciplines, partners worked towards a common purpose that put children and families at the centre of decision-making. By respecting and valuing the views and experiences of people engaged in ABSS services, ABSS designed services that met the needs of children and families and empowered them to support themselves and each other.



Supporting Infant Feeding in Southend

Infant feeding is important to give children the best start in life. Breastfeeding has notable benefits for mother and child, providing key nutrients, protecting against illness, and promoting an emotional bond. ABSS infant feeding services focused on early intervention targeting the most deprived populations. These services improved women's knowledge, confidence and motivation to breastfeed, enabling them to make informed choices about initiating and sustaining breastfeeding, and transitioning baby to solid food.

- The rate of sustaining breastfeeding at 6-8 weeks significantly improved since ABSS services were commissioned in 2018, and currently surpasses national rates. Success was ascribed to the person-centred approach to ABSS services.
- Joined-up services and a comprehensive referral pathway enhanced the uptake of ABSS infant feeding services and facilitated shared learning between professionals.
- Community resilience was strengthened as beneficiaries themselves became advocates for others in their community, creating a network of peer support.



From Birth to School: Supporting Social, Emotional and Communication Development in Southend

The first 1001 days of life are critical for child development, with a child's experiences from the womb to infancy shaping brain development and forming the basis for success at school and the future. Low levels of school readiness are associated with socioeconomic factors such as living in areas of multiple deprivation, and school readiness is a predictor for future learning, employment and health. ABSS services supported the holistic and targeted development of children, allowing for early intervention if a communication challenge was identified, and aiming to improve the school transition period.

- Children residing in the most deprived areas achieved improved Early Years Foundation Stage Profile scores, particularly in key areas supported by ABSS services.
- The ABSS universal preventative speech and language pathway reduced the need for more intensive specialist services. Early intervention played a critical role in supporting sustained developmental progress in the early years.
- Increased communication and collaboration between early years settings, schools and parents/carers supported children's smooth transition into school and provided opportunities for speech and language development. Ongoing specialist training equipped staff with knowledge and skills to more effectively respond to diverse developmental needs.

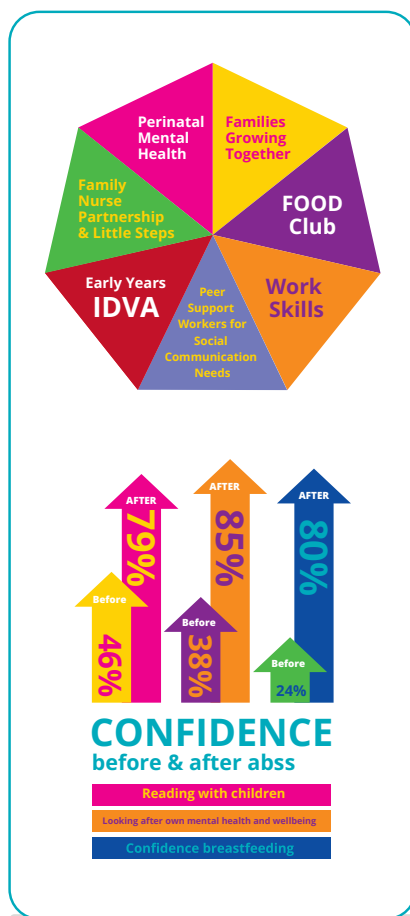


Parental Resilience: Supporting Mental Health, Building Peer Networks and Empowering Parents

When parents/carers have the inner resources to manage stress and adapt to change, they are better equipped to create a secure, nurturing environment for their children. This resilience enables them to model healthy coping strategies, emotional regulation, and problem-solving skills that contribute to children's mental health, social development, and academic achievement.

ABSS commissioned services ranging from direct clinical support through to enhanced community support and training to strengthen parental resilience. Parents/carers built confidence and self-esteem, fostering stronger family bonds and improving child development.

- ABSS improved mental health and community resilience by combining personalised, relationship-based support with peer-led approaches. Building trust and creating space for shared learning helped families to feel understood and supported, strengthened informal peer networks, and built long-term resilience. This reduced dependency on reactive and intensive services.
- Holistic, strengths-based support was most effective for engaging and supporting families. Addressing both emotional and practical needs built confidence, supported action, and sustained progress.
- Fathers' participation in ABSS services increased when support was delivered through more flexible, inclusive, and accessible approaches tailored to their needs.



Family Voices: Shaping Communities From Within

When families and communities are actively involved in design and delivery, services become more responsive, relevant, and sustainable. In areas of deprivation, systemic barriers to access and participation are more prevalent. Engagement services can build connections and trust, promoting equity and ensuring that services meet communities' needs. Co-production can empower parents/carers as collaborators, bringing lived experience, insight, and innovation to the table.

Family voices were central to the design and delivery of ABSS services. ABSS supported grassroots projects through targeted funding, enabling them to grow into sustainable, community-led initiatives. Engagement services worked collaboratively with residents in ABSS wards, to embed community leadership and local voices in service improvement. This approach improved service outcomes and fostered community resilience, inclusion, and lasting impact.

- ABSS offered a model of investment that prioritised community voice and reduced barriers to access, improving outcomes through shared ownership and local innovation. Co-production was shown to be successful. Grassroots projects became sustainable, integrated parts of the local ecosystem, strengthening community-led services.
- Parents/carers drove long-term change within the community and were key stakeholders in the design of services and projects. Community voices were pivotal for the long-term sustainability of projects, creating a sense of connectedness for individuals and building community resilience.
- Increased confidence and skills resulting from participation in the Parent Champion programme led to enhanced knowledge, employability, and personal development for parents.

The Impact of COVID-19 on ABSS Services and Families

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly affected families, children's development, and social care services, with the greatest impact on populations living in areas of higher deprivation. Children in these communities faced additional challenges including limited access to digital learning resources, reduced socialisation opportunities, and increased family stress, which contributed to widening developmental inequalities compared to less deprived peers. The flexible design of ABSS services allowed for rapid adaptation, enabling services to pivot quickly to meet evolving family needs.

- There was a decline in developmental progress of 0-5-year-olds and an increase in overweight school children in ABSS wards during 2020-22, and these rates still remain worse than less deprived peers.
- Strong multi-agency and cross-organisational working underpinned the ABSS response to the pandemic. Trusting relationships, shared goals and reduced bureaucracy enabled coordinated support for families during a time of national uncertainty.
- Families in ABSS wards experienced heightened vulnerability during the COVID-19 pandemic, but consistent, trusted staff remained available for support, unlike areas where key personnel were redeployed. This continued engagement offered some protection from the worst impacts of the pandemic and has proven important as COVID-19's long-term effects on deprived cohorts become clearer.

Change is the Only Constant: The Inside Story of ABSS

ABSS was a complex programme, involving multiple organisations addressing a range of priorities, which relied on strong working relationships between individuals and organisations. Research was conducted to learn from the experiences of the core programme team who managed the ABSS programme, to provide insights for others planning similarly complex programmes for the future.

- Change and disruption were inherent to the complex ABSS programme, but this created space for innovation and rethinking service delivery. Organisational culture and leadership style influenced how change was managed and sustained across the programme's life cycle.
- Working in partnership required trust and understanding that partners faced their own challenges and changed over time; open communication and evolving relationships were essential.
- Locally tailored services underpinned by strong evidence and robust, consistent data collection were more effective than generic models.

Systems and Ecosystems: A Better Start Together

- Creating effective and long-lasting change in systems requires organisations and services to work in partnership, alongside the communities and families they serve. Ownership of systems change needs to be shared, with collaboration, co-production and distribution of leadership taking place at all levels and across organisations and stakeholders.
- The ABSS programme created an ecosystem of support for families, based around a shared ethos of partnership working and putting family voices at the centre of service design and delivery. This ethos shaped the changes that ABSS made, from systems-level integration of services and the adoption of co-production through to services' common focus on relationship building and improving soft skills to support hard outcomes.
- ABSS identified opportunities to change systems by shifting resources towards prevention, upskilling the workforce, integrating service delivery across sectors, and putting the family at the centre of service design, development and delivery.
- Understanding partners' strategic priorities was an important precursor to changing systems. However, even where these did not focus on early intervention, ABSS could still collaborate and integrate at service level. ABSS created opportunities for practitioners to share information and expertise, which increased collaboration and cross-referrals between services and eased processes such as data sharing.
- ABSS mapped needs, assets and services, developing a directory of support that facilitated signposting and cross-referrals, to be regularly updated and maintained.



Recommendations

Learning from the ABSS Stories of Impact was codified and then analysed meta-thematically to establish areas of commonality, leading to the identification of cross-cutting themes. These themes form the basis of our four key recommendations from the ABSS programme.

Each of these recommendations is underpinned by the recognition that community members have important insights and understanding. Including parents/carers as equal partners and bringing community voices into decision-making through processes such as co-production creates more effective services for families. This approach enables services to respond to local contexts and build on community strengths, which in turn builds community resilience and reduces reliance on services.

The ABSS approach developed within the ever-changing contexts of policy and practice in early years' service provision. It links, both temporally and thematically, the successes of place-based approaches such as the Sure Start programme, priorities established by The best start for life: A vision for the 1,001 critical days (HM Government, 2021), and emerging policies set out in the recent UK government strategy Giving every child the best start in life (HM Government, 2025b). The recommendations below set out how insights from ABSS can be taken forward in early years practice.

Recommendation 1: Trusting Relationships and Community-Centred Practice

Relational practice, co-production and peer support consistently emerged as vital for engagement, wellbeing and long-term community empowerment. These elements should be embedded into all aspects of early years systems and resourced appropriately.

Strong, trusting relationships, whether between staff and families, among professionals, or between organisations, are the foundation of impactful early years practice and enable emotional safety and engagement. Trust is built over time through consistent, empathetic, and culturally aware interactions, particularly when practitioners share lived experiences with families they support. When parents/carers feel respected and listened to, they are more confident and more likely to participate. Peer support networks, such as Parent Champions and breastfeeding advocates, help to build parental resilience and provide informal learning, reducing dependence on formal services. Programmes co-produced with families and based on inclusive outreach and lived experience are more trusted, better accessed, and more sustainable.

Recent UK government strategies, namely *Giving every child the best start in life* (HM Government, 2025b), delivering the Best Start in Life pillar, and *Fit for the future, the NHS 10-year plan* (HM Government, 2025a), corroborate many of the findings from ABSS. The former strategy emphasises that Family Hubs focus on building “trusting relationships between families, services, peers and communities,” (HM Government, 2025b) placing families’ experiences at the heart of reforms—echoing our call for relational, co-produced, and peer-led services. *Fit for the future* demonstrates how personalised, relationship-based outreach enables early identification of needs and tailored support. Together, these underline that embedding trust and community connection is essential for effective, sustainable early years practice.

Based on these insights, the following recommendations are proposed to support the development of trusting, community-centred early years systems:

- Prioritise non-judgemental, relationship-based practice that creates safe and welcoming environments for families. Allocate sufficient time and resources to build strong, consistent relationships between practitioners, parents and communities. Support staff with training and supervision that enable relational and emotionally intelligent practice.
- Support the development of soft skills such as parental confidence and self-reliance with the recognition that these skills form the foundation for hard outcomes such as improvements in children’s development.
- Embed co-production and peer support into the design and delivery of services from the outset. Recognise parents as central to long-term change, not only as beneficiaries but also as leaders and collaborators.
- Host services or partner organisations in shared spaces to make services access easier and more welcoming for families, while building stronger inter-organisational relationships.

Recommendation 2: Flexibility, Responsiveness and Adaptation in Complex Systems

Flexibility and adaptability are essential in complex systems, particularly during periods of disruption such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the ongoing cost-of-living crisis. ABSS found that locally rooted, flexible models were more effective than externally imposed approaches, especially when supported by shared goals and strong relationships. Online and hybrid delivery formats presented both opportunities and challenges, highlighting the importance of accommodating varied family needs. Organisational culture and effective leadership were key in determining how well services responded to complexity and change. By working in partnership and identifying opportunities to integrate services, both at strategic levels and at the point of delivery, services can fit local circumstances and be easier for families to navigate to access support.

Fit for the future (HM Government, 2025a) and *Giving every child the best start in life* (HM Government, 2025b) both emphasise the crucial role of responsiveness in effective care and development. The latter highlights that babies need rich, nurturing, and responsive interactions to thrive, while the former recognises that patients increasingly expect care that adapts to their needs. Together, these underscore that services must respond dynamically to individual and community needs for the best outcomes. This aligns with ABSS insights about the need to build flexibility into service design and commissioning, enabling real-time adaptation and collaborative leadership to navigate complexity and disruption effectively.

ABSS showed that early years systems can remain effective in the face of uncertainty when designed with flexibility and responsiveness at their core. This was particularly evident during the COVID-19 response.

The following recommendations are made to embed flexibility and responsiveness into early years systems:

- Build flexibility into service design and commissioning processes, allowing services to adapt quickly to change, viewing disruption as a feature of complex systems, not a failure, and use it as an opportunity for learning and innovation.
- Enable adaptive leadership and collaborative decision-making across organisations and sectors.
- Embrace iterative evaluation that supports real-time adaptation, rather than rigid performance measurement.
- Encourage integrated communication between early years settings, schools, and parents/carers to support smoother transitions and shared understanding of children's developmental needs.
- Use the way families engage with and access services to identify new integration opportunities, allowing service delivery to adapt organically to lived realities.

Recommendation 3: Inclusion, Equity and Reducing Barriers

Services must be designed, developed and delivered with family voices at the centre and inclusion in mind, to ensure equity of access to babies and families with the greatest challenges, with barriers minimised and knocked down at every opportunity. Inequities, whether related to income, geography, ethnicity, or digital exclusion, create significant barriers to positive outcomes in child development and family wellbeing. Social and environmental factors, such as food insecurity and lack of safe outdoor spaces, have marked impacts on family wellbeing, especially in areas of deprivation. ABSS found that engagement with fathers and minoritised ethnic communities was lower than expected, despite targeted efforts. Truly inclusive services must address the complex barriers families face, including stigma, time pressures, language differences, and cultural disconnects.

The UK government's pledge to fund outreach work in Family Hubs (HM Government, 2025b) fits with our recommendation to actively engage families who traditionally face barriers to accessing services. This includes calls to co-design culturally relevant services and formalise community ambassadors or navigators. These strategies help to break down structural inequalities and ensure more inclusive, equitable family support.

The following recommendations are set out to improve inclusion and address systemic barriers within early years services:

- Co-design culturally relevant services with community members to ensure they reflect lived experience and local needs, whilst formalising the role of community ambassadors or navigators to build trust and improve reach into underrepresented areas and communities.
- Recognise that systemic barriers require systemic solutions, including improved access to outdoor spaces and inclusive environments.
- Use data disaggregated by demographic and geographic factors to monitor equity and respond to emerging inequalities in a timely manner.
- Support and expand universal early intervention services—such as preventative speech and language pathways—to reduce reliance on more intensive and specialist provision, especially in disadvantaged communities.
- Continually map and re-map local needs, assets, and services to understand evolving barriers and to support inclusion through responsive service planning. Enable access to a searchable directory of services and support to enable better signposting, especially for marginalised or underserved families.

Recommendation 4: Evidence, Impact and Sustainability

Robust evidence is critical to developing and sustaining effective early years services. Evidence must be embedded throughout the lifecycle of programmes, from design to delivery to evaluation. A combination of qualitative and quantitative data is needed to demonstrate impact, inform practice, and secure ongoing investment to sustain improvements. While the long-term effects of recent crises are not yet fully understood, emerging evidence suggests that families in areas of disadvantage will require extended support. Sustained impact also depends on formalised peer networks and clear legacy planning. As well as identifying impact, evaluation strengthens trust amongst partners and helps to clarify what approaches are most effective.

These findings align closely with the *Giving every child the best start in life* strategy, which focuses on smarter data use to inform timely, accurate service delivery. Our findings and the strategy delineate the need to break down data silos, avoid duplication, and use shared insights to build trust, guide interventions, and ensure no family “falls through the cracks” (HM Government, 2025b, pg 24).

From this evidence, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen data-informed, resilient early years systems:

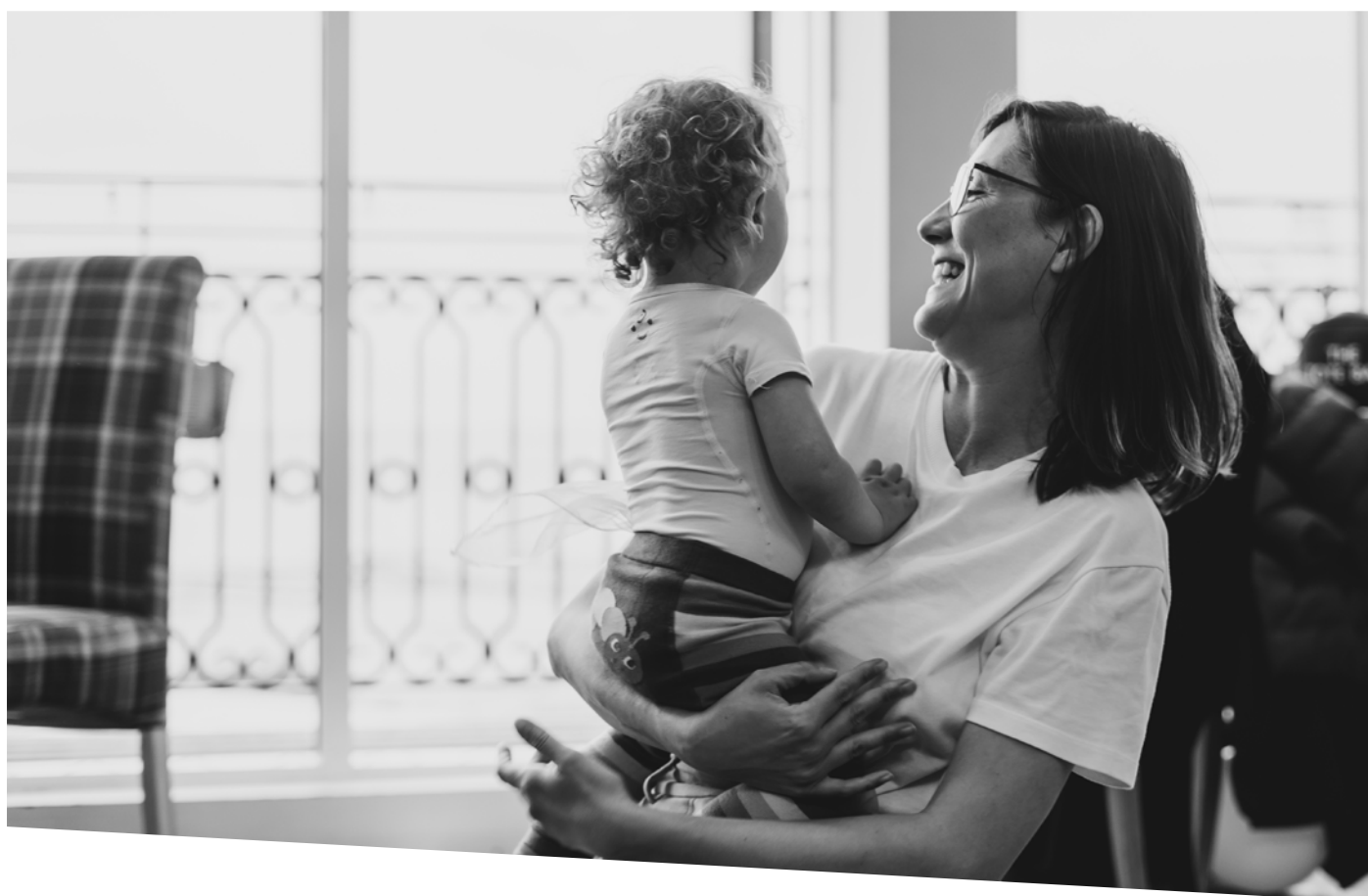
- Develop clear outcome frameworks from the beginning, with robust data collection aligned to long-term goals.
- Use evidence not only for accountability, but to build trust among partners, guide service development and demonstrate real-world impact.
- Support the formal integration of peer-led roles (such as Parent Champions) to ensure long-term community engagement and sustainability and to ensure the voices of lived experience are reflected in evidence.
- Plan for sustainability beyond initial funding periods by investing in legacy structures, such as City Family Community Interest Company, ABSSs legacy vehicle, that can carry forward learning, networks and services.
- Continue targeted support for families most affected by deprivation and the long-term impacts of COVID-19, recognising their ongoing need for early years interventions.
- Monitor and evaluate both direct participation and indirect community-level influence when assessing programme outcomes, recognising the role of informal networks in improving children’s development.
- Upskill the workforce through cross-sector learning and shared professional development to sustain effective, evidence-informed early years practice.

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**Authors: ABSS Research, Evaluation
and Impact Team in Southend**

Clare Littleford

Elizabeth Buzza

Mikki Barrett

Nathaniel Owen