



SPOTLIGHT ON ABSS SERVICES: Responding to the Cost-of-Living Crisis

A Report for UNICEF

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Introduction

A Better Start (ABS) is a ten-year (2015-2025), £215 million programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK. Five ABS partnerships based in Blackpool, Bradford, Lambeth, Nottingham and Southend 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 their 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. It aims to improve the way that organisations work together and with families to shift attitudes and spending towards preventing problems that can start in early life. Learning and evidence from ABS enables The National Lottery Community Fund to present evidence to inform local and national policy and practice initiatives addressing early childhood development.

In selecting the areas in which ABS partnerships would be based, several criteria were identified which demonstrated a level of need for programme insight. This included data on deprivation, child and maternal health outcomes, child development and a range of other local indicators. Against the measures used, families in the chosen ABS partnership areas had a starting point which was generally lower than the national average. However, each of the five areas also showed that they had a strong shared local vision and existing resources to contribute innovative and forward-thinking approaches to improving outcomes for children. At a national level, statistics show that outcomes across the three key child development outcome areas (diet & nutrition, social & emotional development, and speech, language & communication) leave room for improvement, and there is strong evidence that overall, outcomes are worse for those in areas of deprivation.

A Better Start Southend (ABSS)

Southend-on-Sea is a seaside city with a majority White British population (87%) and a median age of 41.7 years. The average salary is £31,609, below the national average salary of £40,746. Net international migration into Southend is below the national average (0.18% versus 0.4%) and Southend's population tends to stay relatively stable (-1.2% growth rate mid 2020- mid 2021). The percentage of working age population who have a degree or higher is 37.9%, below the national rate of 42.8%. Southend has a higher rate of crime than nationally (11.750 incidents per 100,000 population versus 8.245) (Office for National Statistics, 2021).

35.7% of Southend's population live within the bottom 30% decile of most deprived areas in England (Index of Multiple Deprivation, IMD3). Almost 75% of these individuals reside within just six of Southend's wards (2021 Census). These wards were identified for targeted intervention by the ABS programme in Southend – A Better Start Southend (ABSS).

The ABSS programme works in partnership with local parents, carers, and professionals to create and improve services focusing on families with children under four years old, including pregnant women, living in the six most deprived wards of Southend. The aim is for Southend to be known as the best place in the country to bring up a child and be a parent, to create a community that welcomes every baby and ensures that they have the best start possible.

ABSS services are delivered in partnership with statutory authorities, the public sector, public health services and local voluntary services. Services are referred within the partnership network to improve the efficiency and efficacy of delivery. At the time of programme inception, preliminary gaps in Southend's existing early years service provision were identified and targeted. These included offering breastfeeding support, infant feeding and healthy nutrition, maternal wellbeing, perinatal mental health support, support for vulnerable young mothers, and creche services.

ABSS works in collaboration with a number of external evaluation providers who conduct evidence-based analysis of the programme and individual project impacts. These providers include the University of Essex (UoE - formative ABSS evaluation), RSM (summative ABSS evaluation) and the National Centre for Social Research (national ABS programme evaluation). These evaluation tools enable ABSS projects to undergo robust test and learn analyses to ensure that they are meeting objectives and having the desired impact. They allow ABSS project design to be agile and adaptive to families' needs. The services and activities offered by ABSS have therefore evolved over the tenure of the programme.

ABSS Programme Activities

Diet and Nutrition

Healthy diet and nutrition in the early years not only supports physical development but contributes to much wider health and wellbeing outcomes for children across the life course. Healthy nutrition should be a priority, not only in the early years, but from pregnancy and even before conception. It has been shown that poor diet and nutrition in the early years has a long-lasting impact. Childhood obesity has been linked to long term conditions such as asthma and type 2 diabetes, as well as later life conditions, for example, cardiovascular disease (Victora et al., 2016). Emerging research also demonstrates a complex relationship between obesity and social and emotional wellbeing in the early years (Beynon, 2023).

The World Health Organisation (WHO) reports that children who were never breastfed are 22% more likely to be obese (Rito, et al., 2019); this is particularly important given that we know breastfeeding rates are lower in areas of high deprivation. In addition, the evidence strongly shows that children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to be obese, with the gap emerging in the early years and widening over time (Perkins, and DeSousa, 2018). This

is in part related to the factors and behaviours identified above, and a key consideration in the wider discussion on the need to improve outcomes for those in more deprived areas.

In 2016, the A Better Start Southend: Childhood Obesity Prevention report highlighted that five of the top six Southend wards ranked in order of childhood obesity rates were ABSS wards, with National Child Measurement data showing around 10% of reception-age children (4–5-year-olds) were obese as of 2014. These numbers are higher than the average for the East of England (8.4%) and England as a whole (9.4%). The ABSS wards were also found to feature higher levels of deprivation, more lone parents and higher levels of child poverty. The food environment, known to contribute to childhood obesity, was not found to be conducive to healthy eating strategies, with the number of fast-food outlets per capita among the highest in the country (22nd among English local authorities and 2nd in East of England).

As part of its strategy to support early years diet and nutrition, ABSS provides several breastfeeding services which are fundamental to the impact on breastfeeding rates in Southend. The Bump to Breast community project is principally aimed at supporting all mothers who would like to initiate and sustain breastfeeding. Mothers are encouraged to attend sessions with partners or other members from their support network. Support is also given to mothers who are expressing and bottle feeding.

A 1:1 breastfeeding service is offered to address the multiple influences that can affect a mother's confidence and ability to optimally breastfeed and is delivered by commissioned partners at the Mid and South Essex NHS Foundation Trust. It is specifically designed to be a short intervention, both antenatally and postnatally, to increase the numbers of mothers initiating breastfeeding at 48 hours, 10 days and successfully reaching the 6–8-week target and continuing to 6 months and beyond.

Evidence relating to the impact of these services was obtained through a number of surveys and interviews with delivery partners, parents and carers, collected by our research partners, RSM and UoE. Following engagement with ABSS services parents reported having better access to support of diet and nutrition, being healthy, and eating well, and an increase in knowledge about diet and nutrition. The vast majority of parents also reported increased confidence about breastfeeding following attendance at the ABSS activities.

Social and Emotional Development

Healthy social and emotional development in the early years provides a child with the necessary building blocks to engage with the world around them and contributes to a wide range of positive longer-term outcomes. Evidence from the clinical and social science fields shows that the areas of the brain controlling social and emotional development are most active during the first three years of a child's life (and particularly active in the early months). Attachment theory emphasises how the relationship between parent/carer and baby provides the foundation for how an individual builds and experiences social relationships throughout their life. A secure attachment has been found to increase positive outcomes across a number of measures of healthy functioning (Malik and Marwaha, 2022).

Careful nurturing of a child's social and emotional health at this early stage is vital to provide them with the skills necessary to form relationships throughout their lives. Research has found that positive social and emotional development in the early years can be promoted through social and emotional learning. Improved outcomes include boosting attainment, lifelong wellbeing and reduction of the attainment gap (Tickell, 2011).

ABSS offers a number of services to aid social and emotional development to deprived early years families in Southend. The ABSS Perinatal Mental Health service aims to address the mental health needs of women and their families in the perinatal period, with particular focus on early intervention, prevention of mental health difficulties, and the promotion of positive relationships between parents and their infants. The ABSS Early Years Independent Domestic Violence (EY IDVA) project provides early support to (non-abusive) parents experiencing and disclosing domestic abuse through conducting risk assessments, making referrals, providing immediate support and risk reducing actions. The EY IDVA project works across Southend with parents who have children under 5, to ensure that geography does not inhibit timely access to specialist intervention. The project also delivers workforce training and awareness to ensure that 'domestic abuse is everyone's business'.

The Early Years Alliance and ABSS offer a service of focused support to families with children with social and communication needs in Southend. The project helps to support parents and their children under the age of 4 who have concerns about their child's development in two of the areas (communication, interaction and/or play).

The Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) is a tool used to provide a summative assessment of children's development made at the end of the child's Reception year at school. It measures progress in seven areas, including social and emotional development, and language and communication. The methodology used for the assessments changed following the pandemic, meaning that data collected since 2021/22 is not comparable to previous years.

Between 2015 and 2019 (pre-pandemic), the gap between levels of social and emotional development for children in ABSS wards and non-ABSS wards closed, from being statistically significant to non-significant. This shows that more children in the ABSS wards were benefitting from being more confident and self-aware, reaching their expected development milestones in personal, social and emotional development. being equipped to manage their feelings, leading to improved behaviour, and having well developed skills to form positive relationships with adults and other children.

Following the pause in data collection during the pandemic, however, the gaps between EYFS attainment in ABSS wards and in the rest of Southend appear to have re-opened. This reflects a national trend for worsening outcomes since the pandemic, particularly affecting children in the most deprived areas.

Speech, Language and Communication

The importance of early language development and the home learning environment has been well documented. It is viewed by theorists as a "critical period" for development, as neural

pathways are formed within the brain which pave the way for successful speech, language and communication development throughout childhood (Kuhl, 2010). We know that babies can hear the rhythm and sound of their mother's voice while in the womb, and they are primed and ready for communication from birth (Movalled et al., 2023). In the early days and weeks, babies communicate through cries, babbles and facial expressions and by turning their heads towards sounds that attract them. As communication skills develop, infants learn to respond to simple instructions, to communicate their needs, and eventually to take part in simple conversations.

The ABSS Let's Talk project aims to reduce the demand for statutory speech and language services by providing a universal preventative speech and language pathway/offer for children aged between 0-4-years old. Let's Talk delivers a model of best practice whereby all agencies work together to help resolve the underlying issues causing language delay, early opportunities for development through play, quality language - promoting environments and quality support.

Umbilical Chords is a fun, weekly music session for children and their parents, encouraging music making and music discovery for infants. The sessions support and encourage language development and establishing positive relationships between parents and children.

The ABSS Storysacks project, delivered by Southend Association of Voluntary Services (SAVS) and Southend Libraries, produces bags containing stories and props for families living within ABSS wards. These can be borrowed for 2-3 weeks at a time and are suitable for babies and children from 6 months to 4 years of age. The Storysacks aim to support and promote parental interaction and communication with their children through the reading of books together.

Measures of communication development for children aged 2 to 2½ (ASQ-3 assessment) show ABSS wards matching the rest of Southend, but also show there was statistically significantly better performance than the national average across Southend in 2020/21.

Looking at families' experiences of participating in ABSS, the formative and summative evaluations and feedback to service providers from parents/carers identified positive impacts on children:

- Language, storytelling and music activities improving children's attention, understanding of instructions and ability to communicate.
- Language and reading activities improving children's speech, language and vocabulary.
- Group activities for children increasing their confidence to interact with others and to develop positive relationships.
- Advice and support around nutrition and food leading to families introducing new and healthier foods to children.

Community-led Change

The COVID-19 pandemic has left a lasting impact on families and on communities, and the ongoing cost of living crisis has required partnerships to adapt their approach to and priorities for working with families. For many services supporting families, the priority has been to prevent situations worsening, rather than to proactively support improvements.

The ABSS Community Ideas and Development (CID) Fund fits in with the idea of community-led change. The CID fund helps support community groups, organisations and individuals who have a great idea about how to improve lives for Southend's young children and their families, assisting them to put their creativity into action. This fund has been important to ABSS in supporting local organisations to be very responsive to tackling the cost-of-living crisis.

The following are examples of recent projects to support family needs in direct response to the cost-of-living crisis:

Sunshine Baby Bank

Sunshine Baby Bank is using the funding to establish a family hub for two days per week. This hub is a drop-in service, free at the point of delivery, for families in one of the ABSS wards for whom there is no family centre within easy walking distance and access. The sessions offer community support packaged within a professionally led playgroup for early years children planned for by an Educational Psychologist with a specialist in the Early Years. The family hub operates during term and includes a playgroup including educational sessions/materials, with a focus on areas known to be impacted by social deprivation, such as language and reading acquisition.

FOOD Club

The Family Action project, Food On Our Doorstep (FOOD) Club, provides families with good quality food at a low cost, while also reducing food waste. For £1 a year, a family can become a member of FOOD Club. Once they've joined, they can purchase a bag of tasty food items every week worth approximately £15 for just £3.50. This hopes to remove the stigma of food banks that some families may have. Club members can also utilise other offers being presented within the sessions.

FOOD Club support families with recipes and food preparation ideas, based on what's being given out in the bags. Videos of how to prepare meals are available plus 'Life Skill' sessions to support families with some of the challenges they may be facing, linking in with ABSS partners in Southend. FOOD Club also offers a programme of skills-based activities that supports families, including CV writing, wellbeing, signposting, food confidence and healthy eating information.

Findings to date have shown participants benefit from saving money and trying new foods, contributing to reduced food waste.

YourFamily

YourFamily is a specialist service that provides a tailored delivery to meet family needs, adapting to keep current with relevant challenges. This enables the service to be agile and flexible to evolving situations, such as the cost-of-living crisis.

The ambition and vision for YourFamily is that it will provide the golden thread that links all the ABSS, wider community and statutory services together as well as delivering specific programmes and offering support where there are identified gaps in services.

YourFamily makes contact with families, assess the needs and provide support to every family living the ABSS wards; commencing in early pregnancy and maintaining regular contact with the family until their youngest child reaches four years old. From the initial holistic assessment, YourFamily in partnership with each individual family will create a 'YourFamily Plan' which will ensure families understand, are signposted and have access to all available 0-19 services. These will include those commissioned and provided by ABSS, community organisations and statutory services ranging from universal to a targeted level of provision.

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