

A Better Start Southend: Staff Spotlight

As the ABSS programme approaches the conclusion of its transformative ten-year funding journey, this series of articles explores key themes that have underpinned its success. Drawing on insights from interviews with ABSS staff, both past and present, and members of the Governance Board, these articles reflect on the programme's achievements and offer valuable perspectives on how collaborative approaches and strategic innovation have driven impactful outcomes, laying the groundwork for future progress.



Contents

Effective research.....	4
Co-Production.....	8
The Reach of ABSS.....	12
Strategy.....	16





A Better Start Southend Staff Spotlight:

Research



When we think about research, many of us picture academics in laboratories or complex data sets filling spreadsheets. But in the heart of Southend, research isn't just about numbers... it's about people. It's about families, children, and the profound impact of understanding what they need to thrive. Through the work of A Better Start Southend (ABSS), research has shaped the way services were designed and delivered, creating tangible benefits for the local community.



The Early Days: Research Meets Real-Life Needs

A Better Start Southend, a programme funded by the National Lottery, was launched with a bold ambition: to improve the lives of children and families in Southend by addressing the challenges they face from birth to age four. But how do you ensure that the services you're providing are actually making a difference? This is where research comes in.

From the very beginning, ABSS was driven by a commitment to gather insights and understand the local context. As Alex Khaldi, the Chair of the Partnership Board, explained, the programme's success hinged on more than just offering services, it embedded research into every step: *"I think one of the things that we've*

learned is the development of locally sensitive services is absolutely key. There are a range of national organisations that offer services in the form of products almost that in the earlier years of A Better Start, we were picking up and utilising. What we found I think was that they didn't always speak to the detailed local context of the wards that we were operating in."

Following this, the Head of Research, Evaluation and Impact, Clare Littleford, explained that whilst research originally sat

behind the design of new programmes, showcasing the evidence of impact and bringing together the findings over the past decade had been at the forefront for the last year

as the ABSS programme drew to a close.

"I think one of the things that we've learned is the development of locally sensitive services is absolutely key."

Making Connections: Research and Community Engagement

At the core of ABSS's approach was its commitment to co-production and involving parents in the design and delivery of services. Through research, ABSS's decision making not only enhanced services, but also led to better outcomes for children.

Former Programme Manager Julie Lannon emphasised that as parents in the local community were upskilled through the various projects offered by ABSS, the outcomes across the entire programme improved. A critical element of this success was involving parents in service design, which led to a more engaged community and higher attendance across all projects. As Julie noted *"If parents have more of a say and more of an opportunity to express what they would like and*

what they feel is needed, they do attend services more.” She further explained that understanding parents’ voices was essential to interpreting the data behind each project.

Following this, the former Business Support Manager Dawn Harvey, highlighted the impressive reach of the ABSS programme and the empowerment it had brought to parents, fostering greater resilience within the community, whilst reflecting on the initiative’s impact: *“I think what ABSS has done was to empower... it was all about empowering parents and providing them with appropriate resources and support... to help the children grow... and have better developmental outcomes.”*

This co-production model empowered families to take ownership of the services that affected them, creating a community where everyone has a stake in the programme’s success.

Further to this, a former researcher at ABSS, echoed the importance of community involvement and collaboration with local stakeholder and offered advice to future charities stating, *“There is always a need for stronger collaborations with local schools and healthcare providers to create a more robust network and reliance events to raise awareness about the programme benefits.”* They emphasised that despite potential challenges of low parent participation early on, building stronger local partnerships could significantly

improve outcomes, having a more positive effect on children within the local area. In addition, they noted the importance of collecting baseline data from the very start in order to successfully track multiple outcomes. By listening to the



voices of those directly impacted, ABSS ensured its services were not just delivered, but welcomed and embraced by the people who needed them most, ultimately making the programme’s work meaningful and impactful.

The Long-Term Impact: Research-Driven Legacy

As ABSS moved forward, its research didn’t stop at measuring short-term outcomes. The goal was always to

“It was all about empowering parents and providing them with appropriate resources and support...”

create a lasting legacy that would continue to support families long after the programme

ended. Alex’s vision was that ABSS would leave behind a framework that Southend could continue to build upon, whether through City Family CIC or other community-driven initiatives: *“We weren’t just looking at the impact right then,”* Alex explained. *“We were thinking*

about how the insights we gathered would shape Southend’s services for years to come. The legacy we hoped to leave was one where families felt supported at every stage of their journey.”

“It wasn’t just about delivering services to families... it was about working alongside them...”

Tara Poore, the director of City Family, further accentuated how ABSS’s efforts were not just about short-term change.

Reflecting on her time as the ABSS Programme and Partnership Director, Tara highlighted the strategic shift she navigated during a period of significant change in the NHS and across the system. Her role had involved guiding ABSS through these transitions, ensuring that its legacy of support and sustainability was carried forward, even as she worked to establish City Family as the next step in the



journey. Looking ahead, Tara advised that future programmes should prioritise clear definitions of co-production, ensuring that the perspectives of both parents and practitioners are valued equally: *“Co-production needed to be a two-way conversation,”* Tara stressed. *“It wasn’t just*

about delivering services to families, it was about working alongside them, respecting their insights, and building services that reflected their needs.”

Tara concluded by highlighting the lasting impact ABSS had in shifting how early years

services were viewed. By raising the profile of early childhood development within local government and health services, ABSS helped to ensure that these issues now received the attention they deserved, with some key decision-makers continuing to advocate for the early years long after her departure.

The work that ABSS did fundamentally changed the conversation about early years services in the local area for children and families. Its legacy is visible in the way the system now prioritised the needs of young children and families.

The Bigger Picture: What Can Other Areas Learn?

ABSS's approach isn't just a model for Southend, more so a blueprint for other cities looking to make a difference. Alex's advice for other places embarking on similar journeys is clear; research must be embedded from the start, and services must be adaptable: *"The more locally sensitive your services are, the better they'll work,"* Alex said. *"National models can be a starting point, but they need to be adjusted to fit the local community, and the research needs to reflect that."*

The Research, Evaluation, and Impact Manager, echoes this philosophy, emphasising the importance of a rigorous and consistent

approach to research from the outset. Since joining ABSS in October 2020, Clare has been pivotal in shaping the programme's research framework, ensuring that data collection and analysis were thorough and systematic. Her efforts transformed how ABSS measured and evaluated its impact, providing a robust evidence base to inform service design and improvement. Further to this, Clare highlighted the necessity of embedding research

early in the programme's lifecycle to allow for continuous learning and adaptation, whilst ensuring that services remain responsive to the community's evolving needs.

Ultimately, both Clare and Alex underline that the success of programmes like ABSS hinges on a foundation of rigorous research, adaptability, and strong partnerships. By continuously learning from data and community feedback, ABSS has created a model that not only delivers immediate benefits but has also built a resilient, informed, and empowered community for the future.

For ABSS, research hasn't been just a tool for

measuring success... it's been a way of continuously improving and evolving. By engaging the community, learning from experience, and adapting based on evidence, ABSS has created a programme that's not just impactful in the short term, but sustainable in the long term.



Research as a Bridge to Better Futures

ABSS's success shows how research can be a bridge between good intentions and meaningful outcomes. It's not just about gathering data, it's about using that data to understand communities, adapt services, and make sure that the needs of families are always at the centre.

As ABSS continued to grow and evolve, its commitment to research-driven practice ensured that the children and families of Southend were supported in ways that truly made a difference. In a world where every decision counts, ABSS provided a space that when you listen, learn, and act on what you discover, you can create a better start for everyone.





A Better Start Southend Staff Spotlight: Co-Production



Co-production is an approach that has proven to be transformative in the work of A Better Start (ABSS), particularly in the way services are developed and shaped. Through their work, ABSS staff past and present alongside Governance board members all offer valuable insights into how co-production has affected their roles, their communities, and their impact on services.



What Is Co-Production?

Co-production is more than just consultation—it's about truly engaging the people who will be affected by decisions in the process of making those decisions. For Zoe Hill, a Project Manager at ABSS, it's been about ensuring that families, particularly parents, are at the heart of designing services and initiatives that directly impact them. *"It's given parents and families a voice in how the system looks and how it's changed,"* Zoe shares. *"It's brought system leaders together... and enabled parents to meet them regularly and form relationships with them, where they feel confident to speak up."* This process of deep engagement ensures that the voices of parents and families are not only heard but actively shape the services they receive.

"It's brought systems leaders together... and enabled parents to meet them regularly"

Elizabeth Buzza, the Research Evaluation and Impact Lead at ABSS, also recognises the importance of embedding co-production into the research side of things. *"Co-production has been a real selling point for ABSS because it's easy to muscle in and say this is what you need to do but if you don't bring your community with you, why should they listen?"* It's about speaking to the people who are living that experience to understand what the community really needs. Co-production ensures that research is grounded in real-world experiences, strengthening the credibility and relevance of the work.

Alex Khaldi, Chair of the Partnership Board at ABSS, adds to this by promoting the value of

"Our commitment to being parent-led and co-producing services, where possible, has been revelatory."

community collaboration. He explains, *"Our commitment to being parent-led and co-producing services, where possible, has been revelatory. Services for families and children are better when they are directed and designed by the families that they affect."* Alex's reflections reinforce the idea that co-production not only empowers families but also leads to more effective services.

Building Stronger Relationships

The benefits of co-production are evident in the relationships between parents and service providers. Zoe Hill highlights how co-production has led to more authentic relationships, where parents feel empowered to directly engage with decision-makers. Zoe recalls a powerful example: *"What opportunity*

would a parent in Southend have had outside of A Better Start to speak to Krishna (Director of Public Health) and actually feel comfortable doing that? And to talk to him about challenges and even debate with him?" She believes this direct line of communication empowers parents and fosters an environment of trust and openness, allowing for more effective service delivery.

Alex Khaldi also reflects on how ABSS has fostered these relationships: "I've seen time and again that A Better Start's approach has built confidence in parents who lacked it going into their parenting journey." He adds that to him, it's less about particular services, but about "whole system support. It's not about a particular service or a particular thing, it's trying to put our arms around and across to the parents of young children and say(ing) you're not alone."

Embedding Legacy and Sustainability

Both Zoe and Elizabeth emphasise the need for sustainability and long-term impact when it comes to the co-production model. Zoe notes the importance of embedding legacy objectives from the beginning. "We've been talking about legacy for a while, but we've only recently started the real

work around it," she shares. Given another five years, we could build very robust cases for project continuation. She sees legacy as a critical factor in ensuring that the changes brought about through co-production have a lasting impact.



Elizabeth agrees, adding that consolidation is key for sustainability. If the programme were extended, "I would want the projects and services where we've seen the most tangible difference to be really consolidated" and further

embedded in the Southend system so "there's an opportunity for service providers to join up and learn from each other".

By strengthening the networks within the community and wider system, Elizabeth believes ABSS can create even more long-lasting change. Alex Khaldi, too, reflects

"...A Better Start's approach has built confidence in parents who lacked it going into their parent journey."

on the need for sustainability: If the funding for A Better Start were extended, "I would absolutely want the freedom to operate right over the city in all circumstances" and for the "loosening up of the age ranges that the grant conditions require into, say, the nought to eleven

age range". Alex's insights highlight the importance of flexibility and broadening the scope of support for children and families, ensuring long-term, sustainable change.

"I would absolutely want the freedom to operate right over the city in all circumstances..."

Lessons Learned from Co-production

For Zoe, the most significant lesson from co-production has been how much the understanding and practice of co-production has grown within ABSS. "A few years ago, we didn't hear much about co-production but actually you hear it so often now". It's become part of how ABSS operates, and this shift has led to more meaningful engagement with parents and communities, ensuring their voices are integrated into every aspect of service development.



Alex Khaldi also reflects on lessons learned, particularly in starting out methodically and "trying to do less, better", instead of overreaching and developing a "range of services and arrangements very quickly". There is a need for patience, particularly with something like co-production, which is unfamiliar to many. He concludes that "the partnership as it is now is really fulfilling the ambition set out in the bid"

however it's taken a long time *"to develop something of high impact, high performance. And therein is, I think, a lesson for public policy makers, funders and others."*

Ensuring Authentic Co-Production

A key challenge that arises in the practice of co-production is ensuring that the process remains authentic. For Zoe Hill, this means ensuring that parents truly understand their role and feel their contributions are valued. Some parents have said that the gesture of them and their voice was tokenistic, and actually it should be more authentic, Zoe explains. If we're asking people to co-produce, we need *"to ensure clarity about what their role is."* She emphasises that co-production should not be seen as a token gesture but as a meaningful and ongoing collaboration. It cannot be simply consultation, or engagement, or information sharing.

Empowering Communities for Lasting Change

In conclusion, co-production has proven to be a catalyst for profound change within A Better Start (ABSS), not just in the services provided but in the relationships between service providers and communities. As we've seen through the reflections of those involved in the programme at different levels, the essence of co- production lies in genuine collaboration,

where families and parents are given the tools to influence and shape the services that affect their lives. This shift toward inclusivity and community driven design not only enhances the effectiveness of services but also fosters a deeper sense of empowerment and trust. However, as the journey continues, the challenge remains to maintain authenticity and ensure long-term sustainability. By embedding co-production into the heart of its work, ABSS is paving the way for a future where communities are at the centre of decisions, leading to meaningful, lasting change for generations to come.

"...it's trying to put our arms around and across to the parents of young children and say(ing) you're not alone"



Compassion-led Practice: Re-thinking ACEs and Trauma-Informed Practice

Join ABSS for a workshop re-thinking Adverse Childhood Experiences and how a compassion-led approach can build connections with children and families.

Free session open to anyone working or volunteering with children aged 0-4 or their families in Southend

Led by Sally Poskett (Knowledge Change Action Ltd) with over 15 years experience working on transformational programmes promoting secure attachment, recovery from trauma, and building individual and community resilience

With Mikki Barrett (ABSS Research Officer), who has experience of using trauma-informed practice with children, adolescents and adults in local education, mental health and addiction recovery programmes

At Twenty One, Unit 21, Pier Approach, Western Esplanade, Southend-on-Sea SS1 2EH

**WEDNESDAY
15 MAY 2024
1PM TO 3PM**



ABSS Delivery Partner Networking 2 Event 18TH SEPT. 2024

QUESTIONS FROM DELIVERY PARTNERS



Now, Next & Beyond



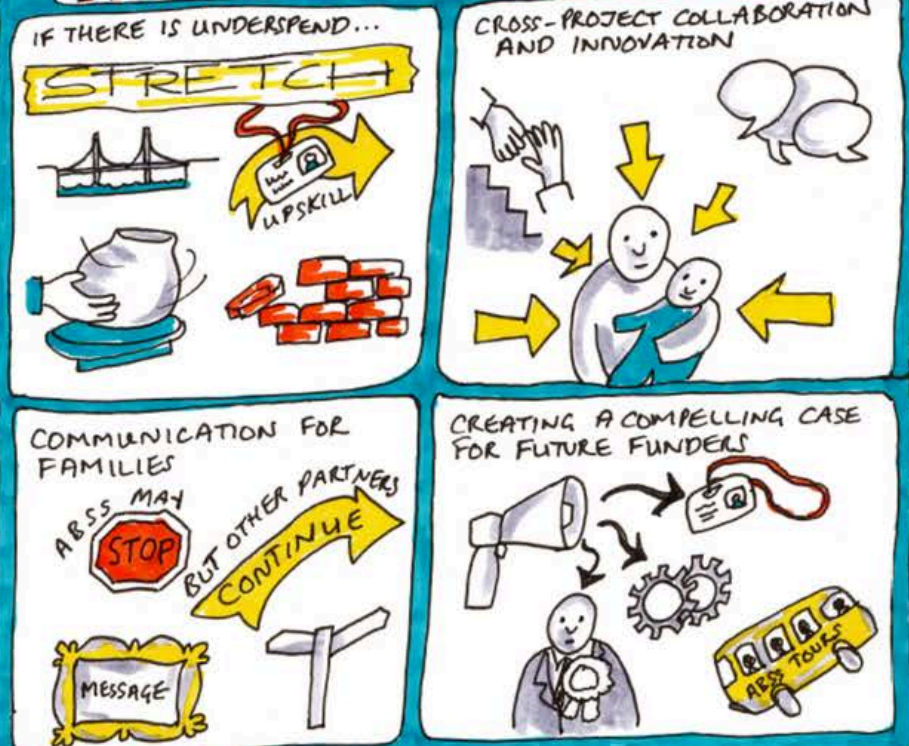
Legacy & Sustainability

- LEGACY RESOURCE PACKS
- EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENTS
- BEYOND ABSS WEBSITE
- QUALTRICS TRANSITION
- SERVICE MAPPING

COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY



TABLE DISCUSSIONS



Service Mapping



A Better Start Southend Staff Spotlight:

The Reach of ABSS



Effective community outreach is essential for ensuring that services meet the diverse needs of local populations. The A Better Start Southend (ABSS) programme sought to enhance the accessibility and impact of services across Southend by engaging directly with the community and adapting strategies to better serve its residents, along with offering recommendations for future organisations embarking on a similar journey.



Outreach Strategies and Challenges

Throughout the ABSS programme, significant efforts were made to enhance outreach and ensure services reached all parts of the Southend community, despite the programme's geographical focus on six wards.

Melanie Larke, who led the Marketing and Communications team, was instrumental in tailoring ABSS's messaging to meet the community's diverse needs. The Communications team prioritised co-production and collaboration, responding to requests from delivery partners, parents, and external stakeholders to create impactful communications. From July 2023, three additional staff members were appointed, allowing the team to operate at full capacity

by February 2024.

The Marketing and Communications Officer Joanne Armstrong played a crucial role in planning and promoting outreach activities, and was responsible for scheduling weekly social media content and aligning communications with national



campaigns and local events. This work helped ensure ABSS maintained its visibility and engagement within the community. Despite these efforts, some community groups remained underrepresented in ABSS's outreach. Joanne acknowledged this gap, reflecting that an extended programme would have allowed for regular

assessments to identify and address these

"There's been many more dads' events, and the Engagement Team have created like a Dad's Club..."

outreach shortfalls more effectively: *"There's been many more dads' events, and the Engagement Team have created like a Dad's Club and they put on regular events for dads. And I have heard that we are reaching many more dads than*

we were before. So I would say do regular reviews of the people we're not quite reaching and just really get stuck into them." Melanie also recognised that efforts were made to increase presence at key events such as Pride and the TrustLinks fair, with plans to build on this visibility had the program been extended. Additionally, Ella Greaves-King, the Contracts and Compliance Lead Officer, accentuated the importance of inclusivity in outreach efforts.

Drawing from her experience as chair of an anti-racism group, she highlighted the need for organisations to better understand how to reach more people and ensure services were inclusive. Her perspective underscored the value of continuous evaluation and adaptation in outreach strategies to meet the needs of all community members effectively.

Location and Reach of ABSS Services

A key strength of ABSS was its commitment to ensuring that services reached the heart of Southend's communities. ABSS focused on engaging families across the programme's designated wards, striving to include all families regardless of their needs or vulnerabilities.

Ros Allen who worked as the YourFamily Volunteer Co-ordinator, highlighted this achievement, detailing how ABSS developed numerous initiatives to encourage families within the wards to participate. She noted that the programme prioritised families themselves over their needs or vulnerabilities, creating a welcoming and inclusive environment: *"ABSS has reached out to the communities and developed many offers to encourage families... The needs and*

vulnerabilities aren't the first thing—it's you as the family. You're the first thing. Then we'll look at what else is necessary to support you on your journey."

Ros further reflected on the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly impacted access to services. Before the pandemic, families had various support options, but lockdown measures limited access to essential services and community groups. ABSS

responded by ensuring families could still access support and feel part of the community during uncertain times. The programme introduced projects that encouraged parents to rebuild

confidence, develop skills, and strengthen community ties, thereby supporting children's development and helping families navigate the pandemic's

challenges. According to Ros, ABSS played a crucial role in helping families feel connected and supported during a difficult period, ultimately contributing to children thriving in their early years.



"ABSS has reached out to the communities and developed many offers to encourage families..."

"...the needs and vulnerabilities aren't the first thing - it's you as a family... You're the first thing."

Further to this, the Strategy and Finance Lead Hannah Fitchew, expressed the importance of expanding outreach efforts to include more wards or adjusting the current geographical focus, recognising that community demographics and needs have shifted since the programme's inception: *"I would also like to see, perhaps including more wards or a re-evaluation of the wards because they have changed since 2015, and so a reassessment of that as well."* Moreover, this could allow for parents from across the whole city have an equal opportunity in gaining support from services.

The reflections of both Ros and Hannah illustrate ABSS's dedication to embedding services deeply within Southend's communities. The programme's efforts to adapt during COVID-19 and its ongoing commitment to evaluating and expanding its reach highlight the importance of accessibility and inclusivity in early support. These insights underscore the value of continuous assessment and responsiveness in outreach strategies, ensuring that all families can access the support they need to give their children the best start in life.



Lessons Learned for Future Programmes

Reflecting on the programme’s experiences, Ella advised other cities receiving similar funding to learn from existing A Better Start programmes, by stressing the importance of early planning and structure to avoid issues later, particularly prioritising data protection from the start to prevent complications. Melanie echoed this advice, highlighting the importance of involving the target community from the beginning: *"Their input is integral to shaping your activities effectively,"* she noted, reinforcing the need to manage expectations and clearly communicate what services can deliver. Melanie also reflected on improvements she would make if starting the programme again, suggesting a focus on organisational foundations like creating a comprehensive website and establishing consent processes for media use: *"Establishing these frameworks early frees up the team to focus on impactful communications later."*

A key lesson from ABSS was the need for continuous evaluation and adaptability in outreach efforts. Reaching underrepresented groups required regular assessment and a

strong commitment to community involvement which ABSS worked hard towards, specifically within the Marketing and Communications team.



Ella also reflected on the importance of organisational collaboration, particularly with local authorities. She noted that improving the relationship with local councils could enhance any programme's effectiveness, despite the potential challenges of collaboration.

Summarising the programme’s legacy, Melanie stated, *"The core of ABSS’s success is the engagement*

with families and stakeholders. By understanding their needs and adjusting our strategies, we’ve laid the groundwork for future outreach efforts."

Joanne shared a similar sentiment, reflecting on the personal impact of the programme: *"Hearing those stories from families about how ABSS has improved their lives... it's so good to know our work made a difference."*

"Their input is integral to shaping your activities effectively."

Building a lasting legacy: The Impact and Future of ABSS

Overall, the ABSS programme made significant progress in improving service accessibility across Southend through targeted outreach strategies and strong community involvement. While challenges in reaching certain groups persisted, the programme’s emphasis on co-production with parents and continuous improvement created a robust foundation for future initiatives.

The legacy of ABSS will continue to influence service design and delivery in Southend and beyond, demonstrating the importance of adaptability, community engagement, and inclusive outreach strategies.

"Hearing those stories from families about how ABSS has improved their lives... it's good to know our work made a difference."



FREE



Costumes and Storytelling

Get Ready and Inspired for
World Book Day!



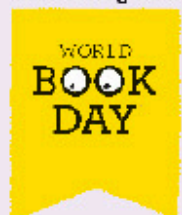
Wed 6th March 2024

9.30am – midday

Shoebury Youth Centre

Delaware Road, Shoeburyness,
Southend-On-Sea,
Essex, SS3 9NS

Celebrating with



SAVS



in Harmony FESTIVAL

In Partnership With
Better Start Southend
LOCAL PEOPLE
MILTON
COMMUNITY
PARTNERSHIP
WORKING TOGETHER

**Hamlet Court Road
Westcliff-on-Sea**

**SUNDAY
26
MAY
2024**

- Arts
- Crafts
- Dance
- Music
- Food
- Stalls
- Kids Corner
- Community Info

FREE ENTRY

Southend City Day

Saturday
1st March
am - 4 pm

Little City Role Play
Arts and Crafts

Stories of Impact
Roadshow



City Family CIC
SAVS
Livewell Southend
Southend Supports
Breastfeeding

The
Royals
Shopping
Centre
Southend

Better Start
Southend

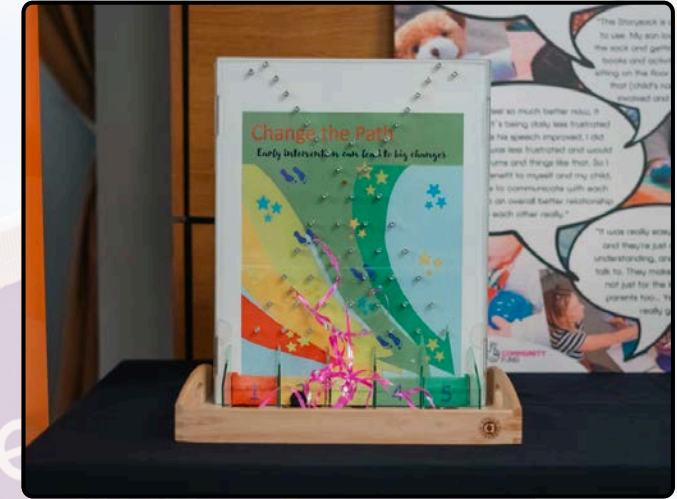
For more
information
about ABSS:



A Better Start Southend Staff Spotlight: Strategy



This article focuses on the strategic approach behind A Better Start Southend (ABSS), highlighting the importance of clear vision, team empowerment, and collaborative partnerships. It explores how strategic planning, fostering innovation, and maintaining core values have been essential in overcoming challenges and driving the programme's success.



Empowering Teams for Success

Though Nia Thomas holds the title of Director at ABSS, she views her role not in isolation, but as one that supports and empowers a team of 29 individuals. "I think of what I do is a team of 29," she asserts. Nia wants to "give everybody an opportunity... to work at the very top of their job description." Stressing the importance of fostering innovation within the team and creating an environment where colleagues can step into leadership roles, ensuring the success of the programme. Effective strategy is fundamentally about empowering the team, and it starts with a clear vision and a commitment to values. As Michael Freeston of the Early Years Alliance explained, "Having a strong value when there's been criticism...it's held on to its view that this is about being bold in test and

"If things don't work, then fine. As long as we learn lessons from them and do things differently"

learn. If things don't work, then fine. As long as we learn lessons from them and do things differently in the future."

Empowering teams means giving them the freedom to test, learn, and improve, even when things don't go as planned. Michael

emphasizes the importance of sticking with core principles, stating that "when there's all the turbulence around you, you know what you hold on to, the important facts of engagement of the families and the children."

The Importance of Strategy

For Nia, strategy was a guiding principle in her leadership role "I talk a lot about strategy and business planning because nobody thinks they do anything with a strategy and a business plan," Nia reflects.

"The one time you notice how important they are (business plans and strategy) is when you don't have them."

"The one time you notice how important they are is when you don't have them."

ABSS's business plan and six key objectives are integral to ensuring that the team stays on track, allowing for clearer priorities and an efficient

roadmap. ABSS faced several challenges during its early years, including tension between vital stakeholders. Krishna Ramkhelawon, Director of Public Health, notes, "There was a level of disengagement between the wider council and ABSS" and even perhaps a "a culture of distrust or mistrust between the two organisations," which affected early efforts. However, leadership changes, such as the appointment of Alex (Chair of ABSS) and Jeff (former Director of ABSS), brought a strategic shift. Krishna recalls that when both joined, the dynamics morphed.

"They (Alex and Jeff) both took a very collaborative approach to changing the mindset", what followed was ABSS becoming "more visible in its approach" having a more "transparent composition", working to interact more with communities and, crucially, having "more visibility of that engagement". ABSS went from tense relationships with strategic partners to bringing them on board with a vision of what ABSS could be. Krishna echoes this sentiment, and further shows the growth of the programme, by mentioning that at an annual review "the indication was actually we're probably one of the best performing of the five programmes nationally."

Strategic vision is crucial in navigating challenges and responding to an ever-changing environment. According to Michael Freeston, *"It's the world that's changed around ABSS, really... it's been the circumstances in which it's had to operate that's been the biggest change."* However, a steadfast commitment to its core values allowed the programme to adapt and continue its mission. Interestingly, Michael sees the work that ABSS has done over ten years as a strategic bridge to a new phase of service development in Southend. When asked what he would want to see happen if the National Lottery funding were extended for

"They both took a very collaborative approach to changing the mindset"



another five years, he replied *"I would probably not support another five years", as "you start to move away from what it (ABSS) was there for and what we've been able to prove and demonstrate"* concluding that for any future funders *"Do something in Southend, but don't do A Better Start Southend"*. Michael highlights how long term strategy - wanting to improve the lives of families in Southend shared by ABSS and partners - should be iterative. If A Better Start Southend was a testing ground for ideas and services, the next phase of services or funding should build upon what worked for ABSS while trying to innovate in new and uncharted territory.

Looking to the Future: Integrated Services and Collaboration

When asked about the potential extension of National Lottery funding, Nia shared her vision for a more integrated system. *"I would want us to have integrated services," she declares. "I think the fact that we are still very separate teams, I'm not sure how that benefits families and children."*

"It's been the circumstances in which it's (ABSS) had to operate that's been the biggest change"



Her vision includes combining the efforts of public and charitable sectors to create a unified early years strategy that benefits families and children without the confusion of separate systems. *"If you're a parent, you shouldn't have to care who delivers (early years services) it,"* Nia states, underlining her belief in a seamless service for the community.

Building Relationships and Strategic Alliances

Looking ahead, Nia emphasizes the importance of building strong leadership relationships from the outset in any similar initiative. *"If you've got money put into different sectors, work on the relationships between your senior leaders,"* she advises. *"You've got to have respect, even if you don't agree on everything, you have to work out a common direction."*

Krishna believes one of ABSS's greatest achievements is empowering local communities, particularly through the parent champions who contribute to partnership board meetings.

Such was the success of the parent champions that Krishna hopes that their voice can be translated over to local government and the council going forward. *"(on parent champions) it's a legacy that I think the council needs to buy into",* this could be in the form of

"evolving the parent champions into the council." or in another way. What is clear is that A Better Start Southend's strategic aim to give parents a voice has been deemed meaningful enough that it may potentially change the composition and structure of Southend's local government going forward, all stemming from the building up of trust and the formation of relationships between ABSS and partners with Southend parents.

Strategic success often hinges on building strong, collaborative relationships. Michael's role working with ABSS has consistently emphasized the importance of working closely with various stakeholders, saying, *"I've always represented the Alliance on the strategic partner board...but also chaired the various iterations of groups involved in collecting the data about impact."* The programme's ability to bring together *"different statutory, voluntary organisations and parents to collectively work to improve the services"* has been a defining factor.

Learning from Wales: The Power of Collaboration

Nia also reflected on the lessons that can be drawn from Wales's extensive early years programmes, particularly the Flying Start initiative, which was funded at a much higher level than similar programmes



"(on parent champions) it's a legacy that I think the council needs to buy into."

in England. *"If England had those four things, it would make such a difference,"* she says, listing early language support, intensive health visiting, parenting family support, and free childcare as vital components for successful early years services.

Despite the disparities in funding, Nia sees immense value in collaborating across sectors and countries. *"There's a huge amount to be learned from Wales,"* she affirms.

Conclusion

Krishna's greatest achievement, in his view, has been acting as a *"critical friend"* to the programme—helping navigate challenges while maintaining a clear, evidence-based direction. Being a critical friend isn't always easy, and Krishna has had to challenge decisions and strategy but only in the pursuit of wanting ABSS to flourish and grow.

At the heart of ABSS's success lies the empowerment of families and communities. Michael reflects on the personal impact of the programme, sharing, *"I'm genuinely moved by the stories from parents...those are the bits that these sorts of interviews should celebrate*

because they are genuinely life changing for many people."

"If you're a parent, you shouldn't have to care who delivers (early years services) it"

The true measure of success, as Michael articulates, is not in statistics or KPIs but in the stories of individuals whose lives have been transformed. Nia underscores the importance strong leadership, strategic clarity, and empowering teams for lasting impact. She believes that collaboration, both within the team and with external partners, is essential for creating effective, integrated services that truly benefit families. Nia advocates for a unified approach to early years services, drawing inspiration from successful models like Wales's Flying Start initiative. Her focus on relationship-building, especially with local communities and leadership, demonstrates her commitment to creating a legacy of trust and positive change for Southend's families.



A Better Start Southend Staff in Action

