



# A Better Start Through Better Systems: Parent, Family and Community Engagement

Insights from The National Lottery Community Fund's A Better Start Programme

Delivered by



## About A Better Start

A Better Start 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 A Better Start 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 A Better Start 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.

A Better Start is place-based and enabling systems change. 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. A Better Start is one of five major programmes set up by The National Lottery Community Fund to test and learn from new approaches to designing services which aim to make people's lives healthier and happier.

The National Children's Bureau (NCB) is designing and delivering an ambitious programme of shared learning and development support for A Better Start, working within, across and beyond the five partnership areas. The programme is funded by The National Lottery Community Fund.

Our aim is to amplify the impact of these programmes by:

- Embedding a culture of learning within and between the partnerships.
- Harnessing the best available evidence about what works in improving outcomes for children.
- Sharing the partnerships' experiences in creating innovative services far and wide, so that others working in early childhood development or place-based systems change can benefit.

[www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/funding/strategic-investments/a-better-start](http://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/funding/strategic-investments/a-better-start)



Blackpool  
Better Start



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# Introduction

These Programme Insights aim to collate and share emerging learning from across A Better Start (ABS) programme outcome areas, to inform others working to improve outcomes for young children.

Within ABS, there is a strong focus on leaving a lasting legacy beyond the lifetime of the programme, and therefore a desire to influence and impact wider systems and structures which have a role to play in supporting young children and their families. There are five overarching domains which inform systems change within ABS partnerships:

**A shift of resources towards prevention:** this necessitates a change in culture and spending towards preventative services and models of working, with a commitment to evidence and need-informed service development.

**Upskilling the workforce and sharing learning:** a supported and knowledgeable workforce provides a better service for families, and the skills and knowledge learned will be applicable far beyond the scope of the ABS project.

**Integration across sectors:** true partnership working, sharing of information and data, and joining up of services to provide a 'pathway of support' for children and families.

**Parent & community-led services:** a focus on empowering parents and communities so that, beyond the ABS project, they have the skills, confidence and experience to continue.

**Putting the family at the centre of services:** including a commitment to co-production, ensuring the voices of parents, families and young children contribute to service design and delivery, and that services actually meet the needs of children and families.

[Programme Insight 1: A Better Start through Better Systems](#) considered how points one to three above support systems change across the five partnerships. This Insight focuses on points four and five: systems change through parent and community-led services, and putting the family at the centre of services.

There are many words used in describing this field of practice, such as participation, engagement, involvement. We have used 'user engagement' throughout this report as a catchall term to reflect the variety of people and opportunities involved.

The remainder of this report is structured as follows:

- An overview of the theory and approaches to user engagement.
- Why co-produce? The evidence of impact on people and services.
- Changing systems through co-production, including examples of good practice.
- Systems change through parent and community engagement: case studies from across the ABS partnerships.
- Key learning from across the A Better Start programme.



# Theories and approaches to user engagement

## Why seek the views of service users?

*“Participation is an essential principle of governance. As a former head of government, I recognize that it may be challenging to embrace multiple, and critical, voices. But participation ensures better policies and outcomes.”*

- Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

The requirement for direct engagement with service users is written into many government policies and strategies, locally, nationally and internationally, and is driven by the recognition by the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights that [engagement in political and public affairs](#) is a universal human right. While this includes the right to take part directly in political activity, it also refers to the right to contribute to decision-making at all levels, from local to international. This engagement can take many forms and scales, for example voting in an election, sitting on a committee, responding to a consultation, or writing a letter to a local representative.

Aligned to this human right for participation, the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), article 12, explicitly details children and young people’s right to have a say in issues affecting them, and to have their views listened to and acted upon in accordance with their weight and maturity. There is a responsibility placed upon those working with young children to find ways to facilitate their meaningful engagement, or to engage their parents or carers as the best proxy.

Many of the strategies governing services for children and families, such as [‘Healthy Children: A Forward View for Child Health Information’](#) (NHS, 2016) explicitly reference the need to support their engagement in decision making to ensure personalized and relevant care. Inextricably linked to this, they also stress the need to provide appropriate information for children and families to make informed contributions.

Appropriate user engagement in service design, development and delivery can and should be assumed to be a prerequisite across all service areas that affect the lives of children, families and communities. However, how and to what extent does this happen in practice? The next section will consider some of the theoretical approaches which have informed models of practice in user engagement.

## Theories of user engagement

The extent to which engagement is offered, actively encouraged and enabled, varies. Attempts have been made to define levels of engagement in the research, policy and practice development process, and thinking has evolved over time. Arnstein’s (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation was the first model to distinguish between different levels of engagement, ranging from manipulation by those in power (the bottom rung), to full citizen control (the top rung). Shier’s (2001) ‘Pathways to Participation’ model adds a reflection on the fluidity of the engagement process and the need to look for opportunities to take participation to the next level. The top of the ladder is the most desirable, although not always practical, and aims towards total empowerment of children, parents or community members.

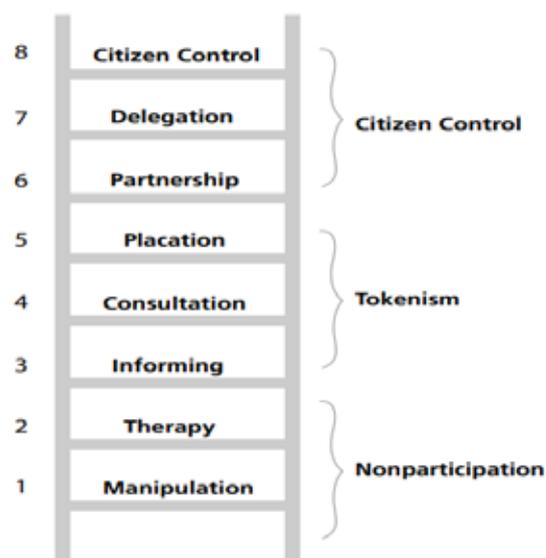


Fig. 1: Arnstein’s Ladder (1969) Degrees of Citizen Participation

[Lundy's \(2007\)](#) model has been particularly influential internationally in supporting policy makers to realize a child's right to participate; both Ireland and Iceland have adopted Lundy's model in their national children's participation strategy. The model identifies four key elements, including **space** and **voice** to express views, an **audience** to listen to those views, and **influence** resulting from their expression. While this model is directed at children's participation, the principles are relevant for all engagement. Giving parents and community members the opportunity to speak out is only one step in the engagement process. They must be facilitated, through practical support, skills development and provision of accessible information, to come to an informed view, and to articulate this view. Beyond that, their view must be actively listened to by those in a position to act upon it, and feedback provided to demonstrate how it was used in any decisions made.

### Moving beyond user engagement: co-production

More recently, the terms 'co-production' and 'co-design' have become commonplace.

These models provide a framework for the active engagement of people and communities in design and delivery of policies and services, in a way that aspires towards the upper rungs of Arnstein's Ladder.

The model from New Economics Foundation below builds on Arnstein's ladder to describe the participatory process in practice.

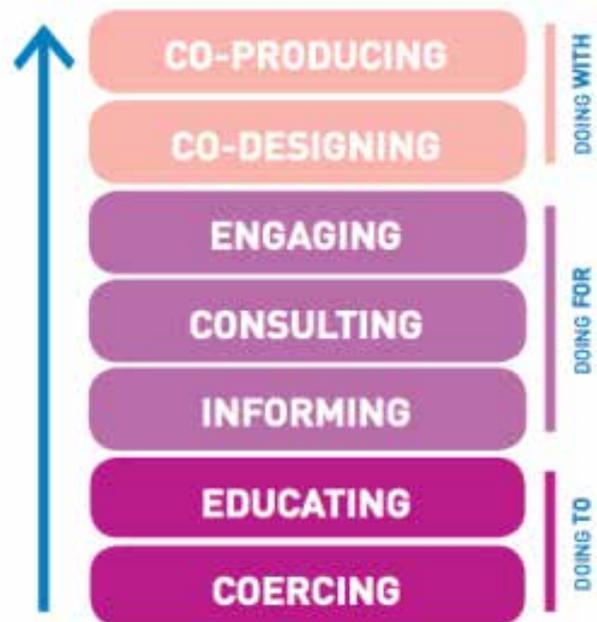


Figure 2: The participatory process - New Economics Foundation.



*“Co-production means delivering public services in an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using services, their families and their neighbours. Where activities are co-produced in this way, both services and neighbourhoods become far more effective agents of change.”*

- NESTA (2009)

At the heart of co-production is the desire for professionals and service users to work in partnership, playing an equal part in the process and activities involved and therefore having an equal say in outcomes. This is driven by a recognition that people are experts in their own lives, and a belief that services designed in partnership with service users will better meet the needs of those users and therefore improve outcomes for them, their families and communities. The earlier in the process that this co-production begins, the more relevant the programme or service should be to real life needs and challenges facing children, families and communities.

*“Co-production enables citizens and professionals to share power and work together in equal partnership, to create opportunities for people to access support when they need it and to contribute to social change.”*

- All in This Together Wales

## Guiding principles of co-production

There are a number of common elements involved in co-production, which are central to success of the approach. [NESTA & NEF \(2013\)](#) identified the following guiding principles:

**Recognising people as assets:** Service users bring personal experience and valuable knowledge to the discussion; they are not passive service recipients, but equal partners in the process. The Co-production model recognises and harnesses this expertise.

**Building on people’s existing capabilities:** Co-production takes a strengths-based approach. Having recognised that service users are assets, the approach supports

service users and community members to recognise their own skills, develop these and use them to improve their own circumstances.

**Mutuality and reciprocity:** Co-production should benefit the service, the practitioner and the service user. Incentives are offered which reflect the value of people’s time, and allows professional and community member to share responsibilities as well as benefits- these are discussed in more detail in the next section.

**Peer support networks:** Bringing together service users to support service development and delivery gives people the opportunity to meet and work alongside peers, and to build relationships with others in similar circumstances to themselves. These peer networks are also recognised as an important method of disseminating knowledge and leading change.

**Blurring distinctions:** moving from a ‘them and us’ mentality to one where there is no distinction between professional and service user in the co-production process. This is a key difference between fully engaging, and consulting. True co-production takes place in partnership, with all inputs equally valued and considered.

**Facilitating rather than delivering:** The co-production approach aims to empower people and communities to identify, work towards and bring about change themselves, rather than have change imposed upon them. They become agents of change in their own environment.

The **Social Care Institute for Excellence** provides a similar set of guiding principles, including equality, accessibility and reciprocity, however also incorporates **diversity**. Co-production hugely benefits from the input of diverse voices; however effort is required to enable contribution from those whose voices are seldom heard.

## Why co-produce? Evidence of impact

In 2017, the What Works Centre for Wellbeing carried out a [scoping review](#) of the wellbeing benefits of co-production in local decision making. While the review highlighted a shortage of robust evidence in this regard, there is increasing interest from researchers to demonstrate the impact of co-production on community members, on services themselves, and on the wider community. Key evidence on each of these areas is summarised below.

### Impact on service users:

Evidence suggests there are strong **health and wellbeing** benefits for people who are engaged in co-production of services that they use. Reasons for this include a sense of empowerment, feeling in control over one's own circumstances, feeling valued for their input, and engagement in the community. The sense of purpose that user engagement brings leads to a stronger sense of wellbeing

([What Works Briefing, 2021](#)). The evidence also suggests that those from lower socio economic groups, the unemployed or those with lower levels of wellbeing are more likely to benefit from such opportunities ([What Works briefing, 2020](#)). Within mental health services, there is evidence that engagement in service user networks actually reduces the need for formal therapy. Services are also more likely to be fit for purpose if co-produced with the current or future service users, therefore will better address needs ([IRISS, 2019](#)).

As a strengths-based model of practice, co-production helps service users to identify their own skills and supports them to make full use of these. They gain additional skills and experiences which will be transferable to other areas of their lives. Experience of co-production has led to people gaining paid employment ([NCVO, 2014](#)) (this is also evidenced in the ABS case studies to follow).

And of course, service users will also have access to services which better address their needs (see below).



## Impact on services:

Many professionals involved in service design have never had personal experience as a service user. Although professional experience in the field makes a vital contribution, service users are in the unique position to advise on what they want from a service and what that might look like in practice. A systematic review by [Vanleene et al, 2015](#), found that services co-produced with users were more effective, of higher quality, more considerate to users' needs, and had stronger relationships between service and user. The ABS examples included below show just some examples of the ways in which parent and community engagement from the beginning has shaped and often changed direction of services.

Co-production has also been shown to increase reach and uptake of services. Services may be more authentic, relevant and accessible ([Slay & Stephens, 2013](#)), and many services use peer support networks, and the

engagement of service users in outreach and dissemination activities, to reduce potential stigma associated with accessing the service (e.g. [Scottish Recovery Network, 2017](#)).

Benefits for practitioners include increased job satisfaction and fulfilment, the opportunity to be more creative and flexible in approaches, a greater understanding of the people they work with and the issues affecting them, and feelings of empowerment when they see the direct impact they are having on people. This influences the way they work more broadly, as well as in delivering the specific project. ([Co-production Wales, 2013](#))

## Impact on the wider system:

Direct health and wellbeing improvements for individuals contribute to positive outcomes for the wider population, and this brings a wealth of benefits for the system.

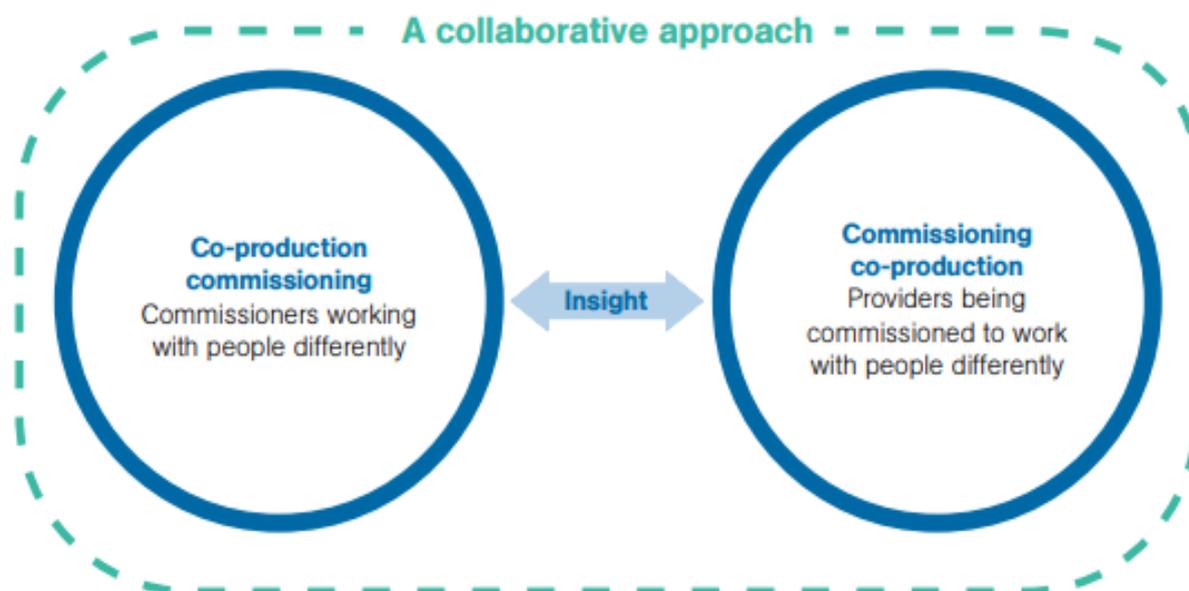


Figure 3: A collaborative approach. New Economics Foundation and Nesta (2012) (unpublished)

Various studies have shown the social return on investment (SROI) that volunteer contribution can bring to services (e.g. [Galea et al, 2013](#)).

A 2018 SROI evaluation of the [Tri-Borough \(City of Westminster, Kensington & Chelsea, & Hammersmith & Fulham\), Community Champions programme](#) (a volunteer programme of local people who promote health and wellbeing knowledge and services for local residents), found a social return of approximately £5-6 for every £1 invested.

A 2019 [evaluation](#) of the British Red Cross Community Connectors Programme found an economic return of £1.48 per £1 invested (Ariss et al, 2019).

Co-production can therefore save money for services and systems, both through the use of local skills and experience rather than paid workforce, and through a reduction in need for services (as discussed above). While this should never be the primary motivation for co-production, it does mean that limited resources can be better targeted to areas of need.

Co-production also supports more effective commissioning decisions, enabling money to be directed towards services which have been co-produced by those who will be using them, and which will as a result be more accessible, relevant and therefore effective ([NEF, 2014](#)). [NEF & NESTA \(2012\)](#) developed the model above to reflect the two key ways commissioning processes can embed co-production; through engaging people during the commissioning process; or requiring commissioned providers to embed co-production.

## Co-production in practice

In applying co-production in practice, different sectors tend to publish their own guidance. Some examples include:

NHS England and Coalition for Collaborative Care's Co-production model: ['Five values and seven steps to make happen in reality'](#).

The Social Care Institute for Excellence [jigsaw](#)

[approach](#), with key components including culture, structure, practice, review.

The Department of Health's (Northern Ireland) '[Co-production guide](#)': eight key implementation steps to effective co-production.

There are common stages in the practical application of co-production emphasized across all guidance documents, summarised below.

### 1. Supporting culture change through education and strategy development:

For organisations beginning their first steps towards co-production, time will first be required to build a culture, with all partners on board, that is genuinely committed to involving service users as equal partners. This culture change involves practical initial steps, including clearly articulating the approach, rationale and benefits, identifying the areas of work where co-production can be embedded, and taking time to support understanding and bring everyone on board. At this stage, it will be important to address the language used and to adapt this to become more inclusive, for example moving away from jargon and acronyms in preparation for engagement with service users.

### 2. Recruiting service users:

Organisations use various methods of recruiting service users to participate in co-production. This may include formal or informal recruitment processes, and advertising can take place in a range of ways (e.g. via social media, word of mouth, flyers in shops or at relevant groups).

It is important to target those groups who have an interest in the topic or area, and take positive and active steps to recruit under-represented groups. There is wide evidence that members of Black and Minority Ethnic Groups are less likely to engage with services, and are less likely to engage in volunteering opportunities, or to have a positive experience when doing so (e.g. [NCVO, 2020](#)). Additional considerations may therefore be

required to ensure engagement of those who may be furthest from the programme or service. This may include reviewing the diversity of the workforce, ensuring accessibility of information and resources, providing additional support to overcome literacy or language barriers, and adopting culturally sensitive practices.

Building strong, trusting and reciprocal relationships between staff and volunteers should be a priority. Rewards or incentives may also be used to secure engagement, and should be used fairly, ensuring that everyone is rewarded for their time equally.

### 3. Training and capacity building:

For many service users, this may be the first time they have engaged in a co-production process. Time must be invested in capacity building, enabling them to develop their own skills and knowledge so they can participate on an equal footing. This might involve, for example, formal or informal training, role shadowing or mentoring, or sitting in on engagement sessions to see what the process is.

Training will also be required for any organisational staff member who will be facilitating the process; they may require support to develop the skills to work with volunteers, or to lead the various activity sessions planned. Aligned to the value of reciprocity, capacity building activities should aim to benefit the service user as well as the co-production process.



### 4. Implementation:

The co-production process should be embedded across all stages of project design, delivery, commissioning, and evaluation, including:

- Generation of preliminary ideas
- Information and evidence gathering
- Project design, planning and delivery (or commissioning of delivery)
- Project evaluation and ongoing impact measurement/reporting.
- Information dissemination and awareness raising
- Governance

Activities will depend on the group and issue at hand, however will likely include a combination of formal or informal meetings, consultation events or activities, information or awareness raising events, focus groups or one to one conversations.

### 5. Review and reflect:

As is good practice in all work, it is important to review and reflect on the co-production process, asking those who have been involved in the process how the experience was for them, and what could be done differently. This should be formative rather than summative, to allow changes to be made throughout the process to better support engagement.

Action for Children and NEF (2009) developed a [framework for co-producing children's services](#), which is a useful tool to assess organisational behaviours and guide on next steps in practical implementation.

There are numerous examples of good practice in co-production, across the ongoing projects funded by the National Lottery Community Fund and beyond. Some examples are highlighted in Appendix 1 for further reading.

## Summary

- Parent and community engagement can take place at any stage of service commissioning, design, delivery and governance, however the extent to which this happens, and the weight given to service user engagement varies widely.
- Co-production is at the top of the ladder of engagement, with service users as equal partners throughout the process, and represents a shift from 'done to' to 'done with'.
- Co-production practice is guided by common values, including equality and diversity, accessibility, a strengths-based approach, mutuality and reciprocity with rewards for all.
- To fully implement co-production, a change in culture is required with buy-in at all levels. Practitioners become facilitators, with their primary aim to support service users to engage in the process.
- Co-production can fundamentally change people, services, communities and systems, and has benefits for all, including improved health and wellbeing for service users, increased uptake of service because they better meet the needs of their users, financial savings across the system, and ultimately improved population outcomes.



## Co-production within A Better Start: Case studies

*When people are in the lead, communities thrive.*

*People understand what what's needed in their communities better than anyone.*

*We listen, collaborate and fund so that good things happen.*

- From The National Lottery Community Fund Strategic Framework

2021 marks six years of A Better Start funding. Most programmes and services across the partnerships are well into implementation and delivery, and the focus has shifted to scaling up and promoting sustainability of services, as well as using the learning to influence the wider system.

Within A Better Start, the aspiration is very much to 'do with rather than to', involving parents as equal partners at every stage of the process, from initial bid stage (2012-2014) through to delivery and governance. Co-production therefore best reflects the work going on across all partnerships, as reflected in the New Economics Foundation above.

*“Co-production means creating, delivering, and evaluating services jointly with people who will use them. It is more than just consulting or informing people about decisions. It's the meaningful involvement of people with lived experience, who bring knowledge and expertise from first-hand experience of a situation. What's important is that this lived experience is recognized in a positive light, as a strength rather than as a need or a deficit.”*

- The National Lottery Community Fund

The case studies below provide examples of co-production across the partnerships, demonstrating:

- How parents and communities are embedded in the work of ABS;
- How this approach is contributing to positive outcomes for children and families;
- How this work is influencing systems change in the way wider services engage with parents and communities.



# Blackpool Better Start: Community Connectors Programme

**Community Connectors** (CCxs) are local people who have been active in their communities, now recruited into paid roles. CCxs are provided with a grounding in early child development and an awareness of services available for parents in the local area; this enables them to support families and help them access the support and advice that they need. The concept and vision of this now vital role came from the community themselves, with them working alongside the Centre for Early Child Development (CECD) to co-design a service that would work for them.

Local families often report feeling poorly connected with services in their communities, whilst professionals also express concern that services aren't always reaching the right people. Local consultations with communities, alongside national research, has shown that informing and educating parents and communities is crucial to help build resilience, break the cycle of poor outcomes and support less reliance on services.

Key aims of the CCx service include:

- Building community resilience
- Embedding key early child development messages
- Growing community leaders
- Supporting pathways into and out of services
- Ensure non-judgemental support
- Maximise the impact of evidence-based programmes

Initially, seven CCxs were employed. Due to their impact and success, a further seven CCxs were recruited to focus specifically on health-related services and support and in 2020, Dads' CCxs were also introduced.

*“We have always recognised how crucial community engagement is, and this strengthens our ethos of employing people who know and live in the community to deliver support where it is needed”*

*- Merle Davies, Director.*

## What difference is it making for children and families, now and in the future?

**Increased uptake of Blackpool Better Start services, leading to improved health and well-being:** CCxs are instrumental in increasing the participation levels of A Better Start programmes including infant feeding, sling libraries, healthy eating/ physical activity courses and also encourage the take-up of places at early years settings. This contributes to many outcomes including reducing isolation and supporting physical, social and emotional learning. For example, the attendance of CCxs at midwifery booking clinics, engaging directly with pregnant women and their partners in the first trimester, has increased the uptake of the NSPCC Baby Steps antenatal course by 10%. It is through this grass-roots support and engagement that we are seeing an increase in the amount of families in Blackpool that are accessing health-related services

**Providing employment opportunities for local people:** CCxs are part of the Blackpool Better Start's (BBS) Workforce Strategy which aims to provide local people with the skills and opportunities to engage in volunteering and training to gain first level entry jobs. Many of the CCxs are parents who have volunteered with BBS. The skills they have established in their volunteer capacity have developed to enable them to take up a paid role; this can then act as a stepping stone to further employment if desired. This model also means that CCxs are familiar with the programme and services available, and can really bring their experiences and expertise to the role.

*“The Community Connector role is a fantastic opportunity for people from Blackpool to improve their own lives, while also improving the lives of 0-4-year olds living in our own neighbourhoods. I started volunteering for Blackpool Better Start as I had been out of work for two years, and I’m really excited to learn new skills, meet new people and open doors to a new future career.”*

**- Gary Cumber, Community Connector for Revoo Ward**

Over the period that the CCxs have been in post they have engaged 6,781 times with families and during this time linked families with targeted support on a wide range of issues facing families.

## How is the programme influencing systems change?

**Increased community capacity and voice:** CCxs aim to build community capacity and capability, championing local issues and driving forward change within the early years. In partnership with community members, in particular Community Voice and local organisations, they support families to influence the outcome of decisions and enable them to shape how services are designed and engaged with. Together, they identify and tackle issues in their local communities and co-produce Better Start community action projects and initiatives. These emerging community leaders will play a key role in ensuring sustainability beyond the lifetime of A Better Start funding, both across BBS wards and beyond.





**Increasing engagement with statutory health services:** CCxs encourage parents to engage with local statutory and voluntary services. For example, due to poor rates of oral health in children in Blackpool, there is a dedicated Oral Health CCx. They work within the Blackpool community to signpost families to oral health services and encourage families to register with local practices. They also influence the way dentists work with young children and their families. This has led to families accessing dentists for the first time, and receiving treatment and oral health advice.

*“It’s been wonderful to have (connector) in my life, I wouldn’t have got an appointment with the dentist without her. I’m really happy that the kids have also got appointments; it’s made a real difference to our family. I now have more confidence to go to the dentist on my own and with the children. I wouldn’t have done any of this without her.”*

**- Local parent**

**Improving pathways with local services to support engagement:** CCxs also support the multi-agency Speech and Language Triage Panel, a mechanism through which children gain access to the right services and pathways. CCxs support the panel by engaging with the family to inform them of the upcoming triage ensuring that they are

informed of, and signposted to, any existing relevant support services and networks. Following triage, the CCx will communicate with the family in regard to the outcomes of the multi-agency discussion and support them to access identified support.

### **Key learning for systems change:**

A critical step in influencing wider systems change is building a robust evidence base to demonstrate the impact that CCxs are having on children and families. The programme was accepted as a Frontiers of Innovation project by the Centre on the Developing Child at Harvard University, and this has enabled the approach to be evaluated. Findings are due to be launched shortly, and will have valuable implications for communities across the UK.

By employing members of the local community, who have an in-depth understanding of the challenges and benefits of being a parent in Blackpool, our community is delivering non-judgemental support when and where it is most needed. In addition, through this innovative role, CCxs’ are growing their own skills and confidence. This supports their own development, as well as having long-lasting benefits for their fellow community members.

For more information on this project contact [Vicki.cecd@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:Vicki.cecd@nspcc.org.uk)

## Better Start Bradford (BSB): Better Place Project

Better Start Bradford has threaded co-production throughout the programme right from the bid stage. This strong parent and community voice ensured the inclusion of our Better Place Project in the Programme aimed at improving:

- Access to high quality green spaces and outdoor play facilities
- Opportunities for children to play and enjoy nature
- Access to safe, high-quality routes and spaces for families to walk and exercise
- Air quality in the local area, especially in places where children live and play

Our parents were clear - their children would thrive in a better environment.

Our Better Place project began in 2017 and is being delivered in collaboration with Bradford Council, Groundwork UK, Public Health, voluntary and community sector groups, local people and other Better Start Bradford projects. There are two key elements:

- A capital programme of improvements to green spaces
- A major engagement workstream to facilitate a co-production approach

Local parents and community groups worked with the Better Place team and researchers to map the environmental issues in the local areas, identify hot spots and “grotspots”, and outline the changes they would like to see for their pre-schoolers. These discussions have informed the project at every stage.

### What difference is it making for children and families, now and in the future?

A formal evaluation is ongoing via Born in Bradford’s Better Start, to demonstrate the impact of improvements on child health.

While COVID-19 has delayed data collection plans, the difference is already becoming clear.

**Increased engagement:** This project is unique in our programme in being about how children are affected by the place they live and how they can be partners in making changes. Parents are therefore not being asked to attend groups or courses, or address parenting issues. By being out and about in local spaces, and through running a range of exciting activities, we have been able to reach people who might not have otherwise engaged. To date, 2593 children aged 0-3 and 2431 parents have been engaged in 191 activities to promote the use of outdoor spaces, including coffee mornings, ‘plant and play’ sessions, sand play, and ‘meet the birds’. We have had a really positive response from toddlers (via their parents) when seeing and interacting with some of the redeveloped spaces, as well as lots of feedback from parents and grandparents about their children’s excitement at the animal sculptures in the woods or the Story trail.

**A healthy environment for children to grow:** The work was driven by evidence of the impact that exposure to harmful emissions can have on child development during pregnancy and the early years, including lower birth weight, breathing problems and respiratory illnesses, as well as the evidence on the positive benefits of green space, exercise and fresh air on wider health and wellbeing. To date, over 40,000 m<sup>2</sup> of outdoor space has been redeveloped with the aim of reducing exposure to emissions, far exceeding initial targets. The programme expects to see a wider positive impact on children and parents across all ABS outcomes due to the increase in time spent outdoors in these redeveloped spaces.

**New skills and knowledge for parents and community members:** As parents and community members have been involved throughout the process, they have had the opportunity to develop a wide range of skills, such as design and planning, research skills, and leading projects and activities. The parents have helped draw up plans based on maps and knowing the area, have done baseline surveys (Our Voice) and have been very involved (with their children) in design ideas and activities. Also, many parents have become Forest Schools leaders and have led the development of community gardens. We worked closely with each community to build their confidence and capability to play, garden and maintain and take pride in local outdoor spaces. As soon as each project's building works finished, we ran sessions with families to give the community fun and inexpensive ideas for how to use their new spaces. These new skills will benefit parents and communities far beyond their role with Better Place.

### How is the programme influencing systems change?

**Working in partnership to co-finance improvements:** Better Place is delivered by Groundwork (VCS organisation) alongside the local authority landscapes and conservation department who oversee the capital works through the Better Place Project Manager. Our Better Place theme group also brings together a wider range of stakeholders to share progress and learning. Through this partnership approach, the Better Place project has allowed resources and funding to be levered in to add to the National Lottery Community Fund grant to enhance the improvements.

**An increased sense of community safety:** Better Place has targeted several neglected and unused outdoor spaces where communities have reported feeling unsafe, and partnered with local community organisations (including community policing teams) to improve the feelings of safety and community ownership surrounding that space. It is also hoped this will reduce instances of

anti-social behaviour and vandalism across these neighbourhoods, leaving safe and friendly greenspaces for all to enjoy.

*“When the community gets together it is a fun and positive environment to be in. There is a sense of belonging and reassurance that you feel safe with your neighbourhood”*

*- Marshfield Place resident*

**Leaving a legacy of pride and collective ownership in local areas:** Better Place developed five steering groups to engage relevant community organisations in co-designing their local greenspaces. These groups facilitated networking and collaboration, and created added value projects to the Better Place Funding. Ultimately, they aim to support community organisations to take ownership of the capital project once Better Place has finished. By building capacity to share responsibility for husbanding the local environment we expect communities to lead in protecting their precious green spaces.

### Key learning for systems change:

There have been challenges along the way. Projects such as this require commitment from partners and landowners which has occasionally created barriers. Local authority departments already under pressure may be reluctant to agree changes requiring ongoing maintenance. Schools and early years settings may not want to allow wider access to their improved facilities. Community members will have conflicting wishes for their greenspaces, which may not include a recognition of the importance of providing for the youngest members of the community. However, our strong engagement work has helped to address community fears and to secure commitment to the project, particularly where additional resources have been made available through the Better Place investment. We continue to work with local authority partners to show how maintenance can be minimised by natural play facilities and by using sustainable materials and approaches.

Our evaluation findings will be key to influencing wider systems change, demonstrating how a healthy local environment improves children's health and wellbeing, which is particularly important in deprived inner-city areas, and our strategic influence will help to build that into local decision making. We will continue to work to ensure our model of good practice is shared across the area and beyond.

For more information on this project, please contact Gill Thornton [gill.thornton@betterstartbradford.org.uk](mailto:gill.thornton@betterstartbradford.org.uk)



## Lambeth Early Action Partnership (LEAP): How LEAP is working with parents to develop a more inclusive offer

The London borough of Lambeth is an ethnically diverse borough, with 3 in 5 describing their ethnicity as other than white British. LEAP is proud of the diversity of the Parent Champions volunteers who are representative of the community in which they live. In 2019, the ethnic breakdown of 24 Parent Champion volunteers was as follows: Black African: 5; Somali: 3; Black British: 2; White British: 2; Mixed Caribbean: 1; Black Caribbean: 3; Latin American: 4; Polish: 2; Arabic: 1; Pakistani: 1.

During the start of the pandemic, the significance of Covid-19 for the Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority (BAME) community, coupled with the death of George Floyd and the rising #BlackLivesMatter movement, resulted in a community feeling uneasy and frustrated. Lambeth Early Action Partnership (LEAP), working closely with the community, observed and felt these frustrations, and recognised a need for, and possible benefits that could come with providing a trusted space for our parents to share their thoughts and feelings in relation to racial inequalities. As a partnership, we are committed to inclusive working, and identified an opportunity to support families by providing a space for them to talk about these issues.

There was no agenda for creating a listening space; this was a sensitive area of work, leading directly from concerns expressed by the parents we worked with, and one which LEAP felt was at a critical point of need. However, after several discussions with parents in relation to racial inequalities and the specific concerns they had for children and their future, the opportunity to work closely with parents to not only identify, but also address factors linked to racial inequalities, became clear.

### What difference is it making for children and families, now and in the future?

**Identifying and delivering opportunities for inclusive practice:** Together with parents, LEAP has embarked on a mapping exercise and has co-produced a blueprint which identifies practical opportunities to be had at the local level, within early years and the community, for inclusive and diverse working. LEAP has made a long-term commitment to working with parents to continue addressing factors identified within this blueprint. We have since delivered several initiatives because of our work with parents, including a month-long Black History Month campaign, developing diverse and cultured literacy sessions for young children, hosting a webinar for professionals and stakeholders and designing representative marketing materials.

**Ensuring diverse community voices are heard:** Whilst this area of work has naturally evolved to become more action focused, it was born from an opportunity for parents to share their thoughts and experiences. The importance of listening to parents and for their voices to be heard has been incredibly powerful, with all parents feeding back how good it has been to talk.

**Building relationships:** LEAP has also observed that throughout this process, parents have been active supporters of each other, leading to a strengthening of connections and richer relationships. When one parent from the discussion group shared her guilt at not addressing something shared to her by her child, another parent was quick to reassure her, whilst reminding her of the importance of believing in children, what they say and have observed.

**Early educational opportunities for young children to learn about cultural diversity:** In addition to the empowerment from talking openly and being listened to, the blueprint co-developed with parents has not only

provided clarity in relation to those areas where parents feel more can be done in early years and community settings, but it has also served well to identify the way in which certain areas are systematically interconnected. For example, parents identified the importance of a society whereby black and ethnic minority people are reflected in both a rounded and more positive way. We know that the early years plays a key role in the formation of perceptions, if we consider that children are introduced from a young age to ideas and norms through books. As part of a month-long black history month which saw various initiatives delivered in collaboration with parents, LEAP also scheduled a series of story-telling sessions which positively embraced and celebrated race and culture. 92 children participated in these sessions, with many new families in attendance and feedback from parents who were surveyed after attending sessions was extremely positive.

*‘One parent remarked ‘Lovely session about black history, very interactive, inclusive and educational. Loved every part of the session, everyone was extremely warm and welcoming.’*

- Parent at event

## How is the programme influencing systems change?

### *Sharing the learning to influence practice:*

While this specific strand of work is in its early stages, the LEAP team has vast experience in working with diverse communities, and is actively seeking opportunities to share our knowledge and learning with other practitioners. Feedback from our recent Race and Inequalities webinar showed that attendees were keen to commit to changes in their own practice, including ongoing personal and professional learning, actively seeking opportunities for diversity in recruitment, and reviewing resources to ensure they are accessible for all. The team is also exploring opportunities to work with others in developing community programmes work further.

*“I feel more inspired and energised--more than I’ve felt in a while--to ensure cultural competency within my work.”*

- Attendee, webinar

**Creating opportunities for parents to engage:** We aim to create wider opportunities for parents to work in partnership to improve their own circumstances, by responding to parents’ expressed needs with strategies involving parents and practitioners as partners in delivering tangible outcomes. We will also continue to look at refining service design work with parents around communications, which we believe will in turn increase the reach and engagement with more families who subsequently benefit from the LEAP portfolio of support.

## Key learning for systems change

This work has reinforced the need for active listening by LEAP and by all those who support Black Asian and Minority Ethnic children and families, ensuring their needs and concerns are heard, and that services are responsive to those needs. LEAP has also made a commitment to continued learning to ensure that as a team and a service, we are inclusive of those we work with and for.

*“We all have an important role to play in addressing the inequalities in our communities - especially paying attention to how racism impacts the lives of babies and young children. Creating a space for open dialogue with parents and practitioners is the first step to opening up a pathway towards an inclusive society”.*

- Laura McFarlane, Director LEAP

For more information on this project, contact Tanya Spence [tspence@ncb.org.uk](mailto:tspence@ncb.org.uk)



## Small Steps Big Changes (SSBC) Nottingham: From the Community for the Community - Developing a paid peer support service

The Family Mentor Service is a commissioned peer workforce, delivered across four ABS wards in Nottingham by community and voluntary organisations, which are embedded in the communities they serve. The Family Mentor workforce comprises 57 full time equivalent roles, equating to 76 paid employment opportunities for local people. Our delivery partners also offer volunteering opportunities for over 50 volunteers.

The service was developed following initial conversations where it became clear that communities felt that they were often 'done to' rather than treated as equal partners. The knowledge of local communities brought by Family Mentors has allowed them to be adaptable and innovative in their approach; supporting their communities in a flexible, strengths-based, and appropriate way, with innovations such as 'Small steps to your future', a four-week employability and confidence building programme developed in partnership with local community organisations, and resulting in four recipients gaining employment as Family Mentors.

### What difference is it making for children and families, now and in the future?

**Building capacity of community members:** Of key importance has been attracting the right staff, ensuring they share programme values and can build strong relationships, communicate, motivate and engage with local families. Recruitment to the Family Mentor Service is based on lived experience, an understanding of the local community and a desire to support families and make a difference, rather than on formal qualifications. Opportunities like this are rare, however, raising aspirations within communities impacts not only the individual but the community as a whole; we like to think of it as 'growing our own'. This impact

is currently being researched in more detail by Nottingham Trent University.

**Reducing isolation and building relationships:** Family Mentors play a key role in identifying parents who are disengaged with services, and supporting them to get involved. Cristina, a Family Mentor working in St Ann's, became involved with SSBC as a new arrival to the UK. Her midwife suggested a Family Mentor might be helpful:

*'She helped me a lot. It was changing my life, really ... I was at home with the baby, I didn't know much about what was going on in the community. I didn't have friends or relatives in the country'*

An SSBC Engagement Officer encouraged Cristina to become a Parent Ambassador, helping to organise community events. After six months Cristina took the next step in to becoming a Parent Champion- attending board meetings.

*'Realising as a parent, realising that we were really one of the most important things within SSBC...parents leading the way was actually the way that it worked... it was quite a journey and I have learned a lot'.*

Cristina's work as a Family Mentor has been driven by the experience she had.

*'I want to help people the way she helped me, I want to give something back to the community'.*

**Supporting individual family needs to facilitate positive child outcomes:** Working from a manualised toolkit - Small Steps at Home (SSAH) - Family Mentors can be flexible and responsive to the needs of the family, combining age-appropriate evidence-based guidance with local and national learning to provide the best in early childhood development. Since launching in Bulwell and Aspley in 2015, 2497 children have received

SSAH and currently there are 1048 children on the caseload. This flexibility and knowledge of the communities they work in means that Family Mentors can be allocated to families who might reflect their own ethnicity, cultures and core values, giving them an understanding of the challenges faced by parents and children.

An independent evaluation by Nottingham Trent University has shown that SSAH is an acceptable model for parents living in SSBC wards, with the relationship between Family Mentors and parents being strong and important. (Lushey et al 2019). The quantitative evaluation of SSAH based on the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ's), a child development screening tool used to identify developmental progress or potential delays, found that those who received SSAH for more than 18 months had the highest mean 24-Month ASQ (excluding problem-solving domain) and 'overall' scores compared with those who did not receive the programme.

### How is the programme influencing systems change?

The ambition for Small Steps Big Changes was always to turn the system on its head by putting families, parents and communities in control of shaping and delivering services to improve outcomes for the youngest children. This innovative approach involved over 1000 conversations and while for some it was a requirement of their job, for others it was an opportunity to support a radical rethink of the system which would work for professionals, practitioners and parents alike.

**Reframing parent and practitioner relationships:** The engagement of parents from the outset was key and not without its challenges. Working first alongside professionals and practitioners and then in turn, senior leaders, it gave an opportunity to reframe problems and to understand them from the perspective of parents, communities and service users. The transformed relationships between parents and professionals led to a more equal exchange where parents were recognised as experts in their own lives.

This approach remains as the central tenet of Small Steps Big Changes, with our core principle of 'Children at the heart, parents leading the way, supported and guided by experts' which in turn is underpinned with values which recognise everyone's expertise and accountability in bringing change about. This model of engagement is now evidenced across wider services in the area.

**Informing strategic direction, within services and beyond:** The Family Mentor Service works with families alongside professional partners such as midwifery and the Children's Public Health 0-19 Service. Beyond the operational level, they have worked collaboratively in the development of strategies and co-production of services. It is clear that their grassroots knowledge of the families they work with has helped shape these services to support every child to have the best start in life.

### Key learning for systems change:

Gaining system-wide buy-in is critical. Whilst for professionals and senior leaders, listening to the view that parents felt 'done to rather than with' was at times difficult, a communal view of wanting to change things for the better helped people come together, overcome any initial reservations in relation to a paid peer workforce and create a more socially embedded approach, which gives greater priority to the importance of social and emotional support and connection within families and communities.

The Family Mentor Service is proof that change can be affected within an existing system; it just requires the will to make it happen! The absolute joint partnership between parents and professionals has been one of the biggest reasons that this is different and will hopefully be even more successful as work continues, and we will ensure this learning is incorporated in further planning and service delivery.

For more information on this work, please contact Amanda Boyle, Family Mentor Hub Coordinator [amanda.boyle@nhs.net](mailto:amanda.boyle@nhs.net)



## A Better Start Southend (ABSS): The role of parent champions

At ABSS, we want Southend to be known as the best place in this country to bring up a child and be a parent. Our aim is to create a community that welcomes every baby and ensures they have the best start in life. We are using new ways of thinking and working, co-production included, to solve some of the problems that have affected local children and families for years. Our Parent Champions are key to this co-production.

Southend Association of Voluntary Services (SAVS) train and manage the network of ABSS Parent Champions. Currently, we have 43 taking part in the programme (67 have been trained since the beginning). The Parent Champions are passionate about the programme and dedicated to its outcomes.

There are many ways that Parent Champions can be part of the programme; SAVS ensures they are introduced to as many opportunities as possible, and supported through their journey. Examples of their involvement include taking part in governance meetings, representing the programme at local and national conferences/workshops, supporting in recruiting new staff to the programme, or leading on ad-hoc projects like the ABSS Conference.

### What difference is it making for children and families, now and in the future?

The Parent Champion programme has become an asset to the Southend-on-Sea community, especially within the six wards it operates within. Many benefits are clear, for the parents who take part, and for the wider families we work with.

**Increased engagement with services:** ABSS has seen a positive increase in the number of parents engaging with and talking about it, and Parent Champions have been key to this as they reach out to families around them. Many Parent Champions started their

own journey with ABSS by attending a group or activity and were helped greatly by this, and wanted to share this experience with others. Parent Champions, and children, also co-designed Pip, our cuddly mascot, and he is a huge success in engaging young children in community engagement events. Pip has underlined the importance of working directly with parents; parent involvement from the outset helps to address important aspects that may be overlooked without their input.

**New skills for Parent Champions:** Working directly with volunteers is inspiring; each Parent Champion has their own unique story and personal achievements, and it's a privilege to watch their journey. There is a priority to ensure personal development, both through experiences and training; training focuses on building confidence, increasing knowledge of the ABSS programme and providing opportunities for parents to share their skills, lived experience and passions. Traditionally delivered physically, the training has been adapted to an online, three-week e-learning course accompanied by virtual support sessions. These new skills and experiences will be transferable to any new opportunities taken up by Parent Champions outside of A Better Start.

We have had strong positive feedback from Parent Champions. One said:

*“...being a Parent Champion gave me the confidence to speak out when needed and to strive to achieve what is best for me and my community.”*

Another said:

*“...the Parent Champion role encouraged and supported my confidence building skills and I firmly believe that a confident parent equals confident children.”*

**Fostering community ownership of services:** Parent Champions lead an engagement fund to run community engagement events and activities, bringing new parents into the

programme and ensuring all parents are represented. As one Parent Champion said:

*“Without engagement with the people you are trying to reach, you will never truly understand what connections can be made and the benefits of it.”*

Many of our services begin life as ideas at Parent Forums, where parents share their thoughts on the services available in their communities, and how ABSS could bridge the gap between parents and projects. These include Umbilical Chords, a music project hosted by Southend YMCA for children and families, and Microgreens, which will provide starter kits for new parents who want to grow and harvest vegetables at home.

**Driving the strategic direction for A Better Start Southend:** The success of parent co-production in developing and delivering new and existing services, designed by and for them, builds on the tremendously positive experience we have had with parents’ involvement in governance. ABSS has always included parent champions as equal members on its key committees, and most recently, as members of our Finance and Risk group. Indeed, no governance meeting is considered quorate unless at least two parents are present. Using the power, creativity and lived experience of parents and communities in our work, we have gone deeper than co-production and advocacy to seeing parents as partners in setting the strategic direction and governance of all aspects of our organisation and work.

## How is the programme influencing systems change?

**Influencing others to co-produce services with parents and communities:** We are setting an example for others around us. At the February Southend Health and Wellbeing Board, our partners heard presentations from Parent Champions about their role in developing new services through co-production. Many of those present were inspired to consider the co-production model as one that should be adopted for the development of all public-facing services.

Parent Champions also opened conversations about the long-term Legacy and Sustainability Strategy the partnership is developing.

A Board member remarked, ‘We need to provide more welcoming situations to harness the power and testimony of the community. We’ve got a way to go, but we’re moving in the right direction.’

ABSS co-funds a co-production champion with Southend Borough Council, who provides support at a strategic level to organisations across Southend to embed co-production. We are also leading work to explore how workforce development across all the early years providers and other partners can reflect a commitment to systems change and co-production values.

Helping people to use their power to create their own future in this way may turn out to be one of our programme’s most lasting legacies.

## Key learning for systems change

Partnering parents’ lived experience with the learned experience of practitioners makes for better services. But honest co-production takes time, and this can be challenging when seeking to deliver a new service at speed.

*‘By having the parent voice at the forefront of our decision-making committees, we are kept accountable for delivering on our promise that all services are developed following the principles of co-production. They also provide a forum in which politicians and senior health, education and social care officers can hear first-hand about the challenges that people and communities are facing.’*

**- Jeff Banks, Director of A Better Start Southend**

Parent champions are working with us on the co-production of a new model called YourFamily, which aims to create the conditions where relationships can thrive between families, the community, and organisations in Southend. It aims to strengthen families’ and community

members' abilities and opportunities to support and learn from each other, and for families to access the help and information they need throughout their parent journey. We look forward to this approach becoming an exemplar for our work to come.

For more information on the A Better Start Southend programme, please contact [deborah.auty@eyalliance.org.uk](mailto:deborah.auty@eyalliance.org.uk)



## Lessons from A Better Start

Looking at the work ongoing across A Better Start, there is a wealth of good practice and learning to share on effective approaches to co-production, where families and communities have an equal place at the table, and where the system is being influenced for the better. Common learning for effective practice includes:

### **1. Involving parents and communities as equal partners must be underpinned by a strong organisational culture that promotes this.**

Co-production is most effective when it is embedded in the earliest stages, when there is opportunity to build in the structures and processes required to fully involve service users throughout. Co-production has been a central feature of ABS partnerships from the very beginning. Widespread staff training to facilitate the process has been a priority across all partnerships. Parents and communities have been actively involved in the bidding stage of ABS funding, and had the opportunity to shape how the services should and would look

### **2. Genuine co-production means that parents and communities have opportunities to contribute across all levels and stages.**

The examples above evidence this in practice across ABS, highlighting the breadth of activity including redeveloping physical spaces, designing programmes, directly delivering peer support to local families, deciding how funding will be spent, and parent involvement in governance structures.

### **3. Co-production truly improves services, but more importantly, improves outcomes for all involved.**

The services delivered across ABS continue to be shaped by parents and community members, therefore ensuring they are appropriate, accessible and contributing to positive outcomes for those who need them. Parental engagement has taken projects in directions not previously considered, and helped practitioners to think more creatively about ways to reach and support families. Beyond this however, parents and community members engaged in the co-production process across ABS sites have been able to develop new skills, experience new opportunities, and contribute in ways they would not have been able to before. Increased confidence, motivation, communications skills are among the common impacts evidenced above. For some, volunteering opportunities have also led to paid employment opportunities. This capacity building for parents and communities is key to the sustainability of many ABS services beyond the lifetime of the Programme.



#### 4. Building effective relationships and partnerships are critical.

Embedding co-production across ABS partnerships has meant redefining the traditional practitioner and service user relationship. Parents are recognised as equal partners, with expertise in their own lives, and practitioners are facilitators, enabling parents to use their expertise in meaningful ways. This practice across ABS is influencing that of others in the local area and beyond, including service providers, commissioning bodies, and local authority structures.

The partnership structure of ABS has meant that key organisations in the local areas have been able to learn from and adopt the practice of co-production, and in many cases have joined forces to increase the opportunities for parents and communities to get involved in their work. Partners have agreed that the involvement of parents and community volunteers has been vital in helping to shape their local priorities and decisions, leading to much greater insight into what works and what does not.

As one commissioner noted:

*“What has really changed though is the approach to designing and delivering reviews and new commissions. What A Better Start has helped embed, is a refreshed approach to engaging people in understanding what they want and need from the services in their community, and then bringing them along on the journey right through the commissioning cycle - not just consultation, but genuine co-production.”*

- Kate Aldridge, Head of Commissioning, Corporate Performance & Delivery, Blackpool Council

This way of working is at the heart of what A Better Start does.



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<https://whatworkswellbeing.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/purpose-whatworkswellbeing-March2021.pdf>

What Works Centre for Wellbeing (2017) Scoping review of review-level evidence on co-production in local decision-making and its relationship to community wellbeing

<https://whatworkswellbeing.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Co-production-scoping-review-July-2017.pdf>

## Organisations with useful expertise in co-production

**Co-production Wales: Co-production Network for Wales**

<https://copronet.wales/>

**Co-production Scotland - Scottish Co-production Network**

<http://www.coproductionscotland.org.uk/>

**Co-Production Northern Ireland - Community Development Health Network**

<https://www.cdhn.org>

**Coproduction Knowledge Base**

<https://info.copronet.wales/>

**Kings Fund**

<https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/>

**Nesta**

<https://www.nesta.org.uk/>

**New Economics Foundation**

<http://neweconomics.org/>

**SCIE**

<https://www.scie.org.uk/co-production/>

## Appendix 1: Practice examples from across the UK

### The National Lottery Community Fund: Talent Match

Across all strategic investments, including A Better Start, within the Fund's portfolio, co-production is a key theme, led by the central commitment to 'people in the lead'.

Talent Match is a youth unemployment programme, delivered between 2014 and 2018, which aimed to '*bring a youth centred, asset-based approach to the challenge of youth unemployment*'. The programme was open to young people aged 18-24 who were, on the whole furthest away from the labour market, with many facing multiple and complex barriers to achieve their employment goals,

A key aspect of delivery was to provide personalised training and support to help them towards a goal of sustainable employment, while at the same time building their overall capacity and supporting their wellbeing. Like many initiatives within TNLCF strategic investments, the Talent Match initiative was led by voluntary organisations across England, but co-designed and co-delivered by young people. They were involved at all stages in the process, from both formal and informal input for planning and information gathering, to formal engagement in governance structures, and throughout delivery and peer support activities.

Evaluation of Talent Match shows substantial individual benefits for those involved in the co-production process, for example in increased confidence and communication skills, and in opportunities for volunteering and work placement. However, there were also important benefits for the programme, in particular, the development of a service that is informed by the lived experiences of the young people who it is aimed at, and therefore better addresses their needs. Indeed, the person-centred and strengths-

based ethos was developed in direct response to feedback from young people that a 'one size fits all' approach could not address the range of barriers to employment that each individual young person faces. Participants have also had the opportunity to present on the co-production model to audiences across England and more widely, therefore sharing good practice on how to involve young people directly at the heart of service design and delivery. They have also been commissioned by local councils and large employers, to review their internal processes, including recruitment and training practices, and service design and delivery models. In this regard, Talent Match has influenced service delivery beyond its own direct remit in terms of sharing the learning on how to fully embed co-production in such a service. For more information, click [here](#).

### The National Lottery Community Fund: HeadStart

HeadStart aims to explore ways to better support the mental health and wellbeing of young people (aged 10 to 16), in order to prevent serious mental ill-health developing. Again, co-production is key to this programme, with young people involved in each partnership and contributing to all aspects of service design and delivery. Across each partnership, engagement of young people has spanned commissioning and service delivery activities, governance through young People's Panels, and evidence gathering through 'school-wide 'big conversations' to identify the issues facing children and young people. As with other examples, young people's engagement in HeadStart has provided personal benefits, including new skills, increased confidence and new friendships, while also working towards mental health services that address real needs.

In February 2020, HeadStart held a Learning

Conference, which was co-produced by the young people involved in the project. Young people were involved in all aspects, including planning discussions to identify themes, keynote speakers and format/ agenda; undertaking key roles at the event, including co-chairing, facilitating round-table discussion, and joining panel discussions. This was a one-off event as part of a wider co-production process, however gave young people an opportunity to shape an important event and to share their views and experiences directly with key stakeholders. The conference also allowed stakeholders to see co-production in practice and the benefits this brings for service users and services alike.

For more information, click [here](#).

### **Disabled People's Commission, Hammersmith and Fulham Council**

In 2016, Hammersmith and Fulham Council set up a Commission to consider the barriers facing people with a disability in the area which were preventing them from participating fully in society. The Commission was made up of ten local residents, all of whom self-identified as having a disability, and a model of co-production with the council was embedded from the beginning. The group undertook a range of activities, including research and information gathering, and community engagement to gather the views and experiences of local people, and produced a report with recommendations for the council on how to build a culture that is fully inclusive of people with a disability, and supports their full engagement in all aspects of life. The report, 'Nothing about disabled people without disabled people', identified many of the barriers to full participation experienced by local residents with a disability. These included practical issues and much broader exclusions impacting life, such as inaccessible shops, services and public places; communication barriers; barriers to equal education and employment opportunities; experience of hate crime, abuse and discrimination; and higher

incidence of poverty and social isolation. The report also outlined the required steps for the Council to fully embed a co-production model in their work going forward, to ensure that the voice of local people with a disability was central to strategy development, service delivery, and decision making.

A significant action following the report and recommendations has been the submission and approval of planning application for the redevelopment of the Town Hall, a new town square and several other buildings including housing and a cinema. The design and planning application were fully co-produced by the Disabled Residents' Commission, with their views and experiences incorporated. Members of the residents' team were paid for their time, treated as equal partners, and received training and support in relevant skills, such as in the planning process and interpreting architectural drawings. The resulting design and approved plans are for buildings and areas which will be fully accessible for all residents, regardless of their ability. The co-production process has also set the blueprint for wider council engagement and processes.

For more information, click [here](#).

## A Better Start

A Better Start is a ten-year programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund. Five A Better Start 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.

For more information visit:

[tnlcommunityfund.org.uk](https://tnlcommunityfund.org.uk)

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