



Celebrating 10 Years of A Better Start

Report from the Annual Shared Learning Event

February 2025



Delivered by



About A Better Start

[A Better Start](#) is a ten-year, £215 million programme supporting communities to give their babies and toddlers the best start in life. A Better Start is funded by [The National Lottery Community Fund](#), the largest community funder in the UK.

Between 2015 and 2025 A Better Start has supported five partnerships based in Blackpool, Bradford, Lambeth, Nottingham, and Southend to develop and test ways to improve their children's diet and nutrition, social and emotional development, and speech, language, and communication. Working with local parents and communities, A Better Start partnerships have changed local systems, including the way services are commissioned and delivered, taking a preventative, place-based approach and using evidence and learning to refine and adapt to local needs and contexts. Evidence from A Better Start is used to inform local and national policy and practice initiatives addressing early childhood development.

The [National Children's Bureau](#) is 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 using funds raised by National Lottery players.

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, policymaking or place-based systems change can benefit.



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Introduction



David Knott, CEO, The National Lottery Community Fund

This year's event celebrates ten years of the A Better Start (ABS) programme and the incredible impact it has had, with 140,000 individuals benefiting, and its influence on wider early years practice and on local and national policy.

The ABS programme, set up in 2015 to support families to give their babies and very young children the best start in life, wasn't just about funding, it was also about wider systems change. Through their preventative, place-based approach, using evidence and learning, refining and adapting to local needs in context, the ABS partnerships have changed the way local services are commissioned and delivered.

Thank you to everyone involved and all those who continue to make the ABS programme the success it is, and tribute to the hard work and dedication of the five ABS partnerships in Blackpool, Bradford, Lambeth, Nottingham and Southend. These areas were chosen because there was a high level of need in the local wards, and because there was a dedicated, strong commitment to partnership working and a really clear vision for change.

The distinctive approach across the five partnerships has focussed on:

- prevention and parent/carer voice in co-design
- adaptive design, testing and learning - small scale before building up
- a very strong, equitable approach, being inclusive of all families and removing barriers to participation

ABS partnerships have contended with a huge amount of change and challenge impacting families and services over the last decade, including four general elections, Covid, and the rising cost of living. Yet despite these, partnerships have always found a way to make sure support is tailored and delivered with families, for families. Through incredible hard work and perseverance, so far ABS partnerships have:

- Supported 75,000 pregnant women, babies and toddlers
- Delivered over 175 services to families
- Provided workplace training to almost 25,000 practitioners
- Involved more than 2,000 volunteers
- Worked with over 200 partner organisations

Thank you to the National Children's Bureau, who are delivering a suite of shared learning for the ABS programme, ensuring wider influence beyond the five ABS areas funded. This ten-year anniversary comes at a critical time for sharing that best practice, with the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, a new National Youth strategy and NHS ten-year plan all in development. It's important to be using this moment to make sure ABS learning is heard powerfully, informing government and

wider sector thinking through policy briefings, roundtables, trips to sites, policy makers and politicians being involved, submitting ABS evidence to consultations and inquiries. ABS is viewed by key departments, particularly the Department for Education and the Department for Health and Social Care, as an example of very best practice and evidence.

A key recommendation arising from the ABS programme was the use of a single unique child identifier to improve data sharing across services, now committed to by government and included as a recommendation in the Children's Wellbeing Bill; this is a significant step forward in providing holistic support to children and families.

The National Lottery Community Fund (TNLCF) have commissioned a [national evaluation](#) of ABS, led by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) and partners, looking at how ABS has contributed to improving children's life chances and a range of outcomes. Emerging findings have given a real insight into the experiences of families; the final report is due in early 2026. Evidence from the national evaluation will help inform policy and practice right across the early childhood space.

Looking ahead, ABS partnerships have been developing sustainability plans for lasting legacy. Some ABS partnerships are continuing, completing plans that might have been put on hold during Covid, ensuring smooth transition to mainstream provision for some services. Funding for a further three years has been agreed to support the Born in Bradford Better Start cohort study to provide further evidence on the impact, both on A Better Start in Bradford and the impact of Covid on the district's youngest residents.

TNLCF is committed to continuing investment and support in early years and it is one of [four community-led missions](#) in the new strategy. ABS practice has informed all TNLCF's funding that supports families and children in England, and across the UK. This preventative work promotes resilience, provides a supportive environment, empowers families, children and young people to make informed choices. This focus is reflected in the revised criteria for wider National Lottery funding, launching on 1st April. Recognising the power in working with others, TNLCF will be investing £150 million pounds in a National Early Years Partnership across England, with the aim to go further, offer more funding, make connections and build deeper partnerships.

TNLCF is a convener, and founding members of the Early Years Funders Group, made up of grant makers, trusts, philanthropic donors, all with a common interest of early years. This group will continue to raise the profile and recognition of the importance of early years and will be working alongside the ABS partnerships, NCB and NatCen in developing early years best practice. By laying those building blocks, we want to ensure a lasting impact on children's futures, changing our society for the better. Working together we can build a brighter future for generations to come.

A Better Start: Parents' experiences

Click [here](#) to watch ABS parents share their experiences of ABS services and the

impact the programme has had on their families' lives.

Blackpool Better Start: Building systems for early child development



Victoria Morgan, Senior Development Manager

Annette Algie, Strategic Service Manager

Over the past ten years, Blackpool Better Start has accumulated a wealth of learning on working within systems to achieve change for families, from pregnancy through to school. Systems around early childhood are complex, cutting across health, social care, education and community services. The early years are a critical time to provide intervention and support to families and children before starting school, which dramatically impact outcomes of children across their life course. Despite this compelling argument, often systems do not provide the right support to young families at the right time

Blackpool Better Start has developed a Better Start [framework](#) to systems building. This has been developed with a reflection on a decade of learning from service innovation, implementation of evidence-based practice, co-production and leading collective change. The framework is a practical tool which can be used by other areas to understand the key building blocks within their systems and those that have helped in Blackpool to transform the system.

The framework recognises collective and committed approaches which address weaknesses in existing systems and processes and build a cohesive and sustainable system focussing on supporting families. The presentation focussed on two elements of the framework: **committed workforce and committed families and communities.**



[Better Start Building Systems for Early Childhood Development](#)

Committed Workforce

The workforce across early years is wide. It includes professionals traditionally associated with pregnancy and early years, such as midwives, health visitors, early help and family hubs, GPs and specialist health professionals, early education workers and social care. It also includes volunteers, community workers, housing officers, police force, citizens' advice and often those whose work is less focussed on this life stage but nevertheless can make a big difference to the lives of families and young children.

Engaging all these individuals in the collective vision for early years requires a strategic approach to consistently sharing the knowledge of the first 1001 days, child development and the impact of early childhood adversity on children and families. Ensuring this foundational knowledge is widely shared and the workforce is engaged with the shared vision will motivate practitioners with collective purpose to support families. This collective purpose also supports professionals to hold each other across professional boundaries and reduce silo working.

Involvement of the workforce in either the design or implementation of services for families adds another layer to this commitment. Where possible, this should also be done alongside those with lived experience.

Blackpool has an ambitious workforce development programme, working with those in both paid and unpaid roles and the current and future workforce. The programme is based on a stepped approach, with a core offer of awareness raising and essential skills and knowledge, and additional learning around targeted or specialist support for those that need it. One example is the introduction of the WellComm assessment and screening tool.

Early Identification of Speech and Language Needs

Introduction of the WellComm assessment and screening tool

Early identification of speech and language needs in Blackpool has been a collective priority, led by historically poor outcomes seen for Blackpool's children on the Early Years Foundation Stage profile, and across a child's educational journey. The partnership highlighted that the ASQ assessment, undertaken by health visitors, may not accurately be identifying some children's needs, often leading to late

identification. Data from the 2024 two and a half year health visitor check shows those children who were identified as amber on the WellComm and therefore would be referred for additional support through the multi-agency triage panel, scored an average of 44 on the ASQ. This score would not have previously flagged an immediate referral for additional support, therefore these children could potentially have been missed.

The introduction of the WellComm assessment tool has been a commitment from across the partnership to support earlier and more accurate identification of children needing additional support. The WellComm assessment has been used by health visitors since 2018 - at 12 months, 2.5 year and 3.5-year checks - and is now undertaken at 83% of those checks.

Additionally, early years practitioners have also been trained in the use of the assessment tool, which uses a red, amber, green system, so they are able to assess children in their care at any point, rather than waiting for the routine checks with the health visitor. Children that require specialist support are still referred to specialist NHS services, but 'amber' children are referred to the new multi-agency triage panel with early support offered through groups, home visiting, coaching support or via the child's early education setting.

The commitment of the workforce to implement this new assessment tool has led to more children being referred to services early and has contributed to positive changes for children. Looking at the most recent Early Years Foundation Stage profile data; although Blackpool's children are still under the national average for meeting the expected level of development across all early learning goals, there has been a positive change since 2021, when the tool was relaunched. Nationally there has been an 11.5% improvement, whereas Blackpool has seen a 12.5% improvement in children meeting the expected level of development.

When looking at Blackpool in relation to the five most deprived authorities, this 12.5% change reflects the greatest improvement. In the specific early learning goals of communication, and language and literacy, there has been a smaller improvement of 0.5% and 2.6% improvement respectively.

The WellComm screening tool is only one element of the transformational work across the partnership in relation to speech and language. There has been commitment to use a balanced system to review speech and language services in early years and beyond. This looks at five areas of family support:



- environment
- workforce
- identification
- intervention
- home based learning

This [video](#) describes the impact of this work by some of the parents who have received support from the speech and language services.

Committed Families and Community

Family involvement underpins system building at three main levels:

- Empowering parents and fostering social support networks creates strength and resilience - therefore at the heart of the preventative approach. Blackpool Better Start philosophy is about getting behind families and stripping away barriers that get in their way, and equipping parents with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to provide nurturing care for babies and young children.
- Parental engagement is essential for service improvement and reducing inequalities. Co-design of services with meaningful involvement of families increases acceptability, take up and likelihood of effectiveness. Parents are sometimes mistrustful of public services and often those with the greatest need are the ones that are more reluctant to access support. A crucial part of systems building is overcoming barriers to **meaningful involvement and building trust**.
- Active inclusion of **local families and community members in shaping the vision and strategy increases the legitimacy, appropriateness, acceptability and potentially also sustainability of the new system.**

Use of Participatory Budgeting in Community Decision Making

The use of participatory or community led budgeting is nothing new. Blackpool Better Start listened to communities who said that while they appreciated being consulted on activities delivered in council-led children centres, now Family Hubs, they found the bureaucracy and red tape that came with public sector-led procurement frustrating. Ultimately, the same families who always attended the children's centre continued to attend. Blackpool wanted to continue to support regular centre users but also encourage new families to engage with the Better Start offer and receive consistent support and messaging around early years and child development.

Out of this grew two new concepts: **Street to Scale** and **Parents Ideas Factory** - both putting parents in the driving seat whilst offering different levels of support to those members who initiated ideas.

Street to Scale offers community members £1000 on a prepay debit card to start up or add to a local activity or concept that improves outcomes for young children and their families. This required no involvement of procurement through approved providers or cumbersome systems, families could simply go to local shops and purchase resources that they needed.

Since 2019, 35 projects have been supported, engaging a wide range of parents and groups e.g. parents' first aid training or trips to the zoo.

However, some community members felt safer with the support of professionals when choosing or booking activities such as bike-ability or baby massage, but they still wanted to remove the red tape that often came with procurement.

From this feedback, Blackpool Better Start worked closely with Family Hubs to launch the **Parent Ideas Factory**. Parents panels work with Family Hub staff to consult with families on activities through social media, advertising and word of mouth to gain insight into what families wanted. These activities or events were then advertised on Family Hub timetables and encouraged new and existing families to attend.

Since the launch of The Parents Ideas Factory there has been an increase of 6.5% of new families accessing the sessions, and in turn linking with their local Family Hubs or other Better Start services. This is a **sustained model**. Blackpool Better Start has continued to work closely with the Family Hub Parent and Carer panels, with the ambition to utilise social value funds from contracts elsewhere in the council.

Impact: reach of activities and events

Most families reached live within the most deprived areas in England, not just in Blackpool. The team is confident that the families most in need of support are those accessing the sessions. Since launching, there have been 1706 funded activities, impacting 9,280 adults and 11,390 children aged 0-4.

Blackpool's philosophy of community-driven activity is now fully embedded within Family Hub partners and the wider partnership. Here you can watch a video showing one of Blackpool's biggest Street to Scale successes: '[Football Therapy](#)'.

Watch the recording of Blackpool's presentation [here](#)

Better Start Bradford: Parent-led innovation supporting system change



Gill Thornton, Director

Shummel Uddin, Community Engagement Manager

Innovation in Better Start Bradford

Innovation has featured throughout the programme, from the bid onwards. Better Start Bradford's parents have often brought innovative thinking and ideas to the table, and the A Better Start (ABS) programme has given them the opportunity to try new things and learn from them. Examples include:

- **Better Place project** - an environment project which has created change across the local area and changed the minds of people. The parks department and landscape department are picking up Better Place ideas, seeing how they are bringing people into the parks - making parks better places, and play areas healthier for children.
- **Talking Together** - a language intervention developed by a local organisation and building a strong evidence base for its effectiveness.
- **Little Minds Matter** - an infant mental health project developed locally, that brought together parents involved in the development and understanding of the project. It is now embedded into local systems.
- **Perinatal Project Administrators** - working alongside health service colleagues within the hospital to refer parents onto the services, now a standard offer through Start for Life in Bradford.
- **Neighbourhoods Project** - engagement support put into the neighbourhoods where parents live to make services more accessible and local. Funding for innovation was included in the bid to allow further opportunities for the parent and community voice to create change.

The Innovation Fund

Ten years is a long time, things will change and not everything will work. Innovation support would allow us to:

- start small and grow things
- respond to emerging needs
- find new ways to do things

- Identify gaps and develop work to address gaps identified

The Innovation Fund was set up as a way of enhancing and extending the core programme offer, and addressing gaps and priority areas identified through a coproduction workshop. This also reflected local need, community assets and learning from the wider programme so far. Innovation Funding was built into the programme from the bid stage and was split into activities (Happy Early Years [HEY!] Fund) and project funding.

Projects funding

This was developed into a bidding programme designed with parents and community partners. It allows parents and community partners to bid for up to £100,000 to pilot new, innovative approaches, addressing gaps or unmet need, robustly over a period of a year, with potential to become a fully-fledged Better Start Bradford project. The bidding process is overseen by Commissioning Advisory Group (CAG) with Better Start Bradford Partnership Board making the final decision.

Five projects were successful in the bidding process:

Older Yet Wiser - ChildsSide

This project gave local grandparents with childcaring responsibilities an opportunity to attend six group sessions so that they could contribute to the early years of their grandchildren's development, helping to foster secure healthy family relationships.

Growing Together - Horton Community Farm

The Growing Together project ran seasonal sessions with a focus on food-growing and play, using local green spaces and sharing knowledge with families and practitioners about when and how best to grow specific fruits and vegetables that could be used for cooking and eating. Families and practitioners could then use this learning at home and within the community to 'grow their own'.

Resilient Dads - Sharing Voices

This project worked with dads and male carers to develop their ability to support the social, emotional and cognitive development of their children, whilst preventing the risk of Adverse Childhood Experiences. Participants were encouraged to develop secure attachments with their children through group-based trauma awareness sessions, mentoring and a dedicated programme of social activities where they could spend quality time with their children, play and meet other dads and male carers.

Play Gym and Hubert Street Kitchen - Womenzone

This project developed a brand-new play gym for young children within a local community organisation, with dedicated play workers on hand to encourage and support parents to talk and play with their children, demonstrating how much can be achieved with simple interactions which are easily intertwined with the family routine. Along-side this, the on-site kitchen offered subsidised healthy meals to families who accessed the free sessions and linked them to wider support.

Enhancing the HABIT (Health Visitors delivering Advice in Britain on Infant Toothbrushing) - The University of Leeds

This oral health project allowed the HABIT intervention to be developed further and tested within early years settings, with parents and practitioners and with non-English speaking South Asian and Eastern European parents. The intervention was also trialled and tested with a large group of Health Visitors as part of the MECOSH project (Maternal Early Childhood Sustained Home Visiting).

Impact of Covid

Most projects were some months into delivery when Covid hit and further innovation was required to enable the projects to adapt and continue. Some projects were able to adapt quickly and move online e.g., Resilient Dads, whereas others adapted and developed new ways of doing things e.g. Growing Things offered seeds to families in the community; HABIT stopped face-to-face activities but distributed resources to health visitors to encourage supervised toothbrushing in the home.

Learning from Innovation in Better Start Bradford

Due to delays from the impact of the Covid pandemic, none of the projects could grow into full scale projects for evaluation, but all benefitted from the funding. Through these projects, parents developed links, capacity and skills, and the ABS vision was shared **in creative ways that had not been tested before.**

Feedback from parents and grandparents was positive and satisfaction surveys and case studies demonstrated that participating families really gained from the experiences and would recommend them to others.

“I will continue to refer to the tools. I enjoyed socialising after almost two years of lockdown. Yes - I have gained new information - better ways to use words to encourage my grandchildren and other children and relating with other grandparents.” Grandparent who attended the Older Yet Wiser Course.

The future of Innovation Fund projects

- The WomenZone project has established itself as a place of play and is a successful offer for families.
- The Resilient Dads project successfully engaged with and supported 73 vulnerable dads and Sharing Voices continued to invest in it.
- Horton Community Farm has secured funding and continues to work with the Better Place project and is delivering growing activities with our families.
- The HABIT intervention is a [module for the district’s MECOSH service](#) and will continue to be delivered.

- A final Innovation Fund project - a Maternity Health Independent Domestic Violence Advocate (HIDVA) - was funded in 2022 and is now part of the Domestic Abuse service in the district.

How has the parent-led innovation changed things in Bradford?

- HEY! Fund is a model for genuine coproduction and is used as a strong approach for participatory grant-making.
- The co-production/engagement model was adapted for Start for Life family navigators and parent voice, while Little Minds Matter was the model for the Start for Life infant mental health element.
- Better Place is a leading-edge co-production model for environmental improvements and outdoor activities led by parents.

Happy Early Years (HEY!) Fund

As part of the Innovation fund, the Activities fund was initiated by parents on the partnership board, originally launched in 2017 as Parents in the Lead (PITL), now established as Happy Early Years (HEY!) Fund.



Parents in the Lead (PITL) gave parents the opportunity to run activities for families with 0-3s in the Better Start Bradford area, aiming to work together to build community capacity, and act as a platform for parents to lead and enhance their personal development.

Families, parents, and community voices are central to Better Start Bradford, so a key aim was to ensure they participated in the programme as equal partners. A parent-led panel allows parents to make decisions on the applications. We wanted parents to run activities where there was a gap or an unmet need, with sessions acting as a vehicle for parents to develop parenting skills, embrace and mirror parenting techniques and access other projects and services.

In 2022, following a review of PITL, the Happy Early Years (HEY!) Fund was launched, with its own brand and identity.

- The HEY Fund has a dedicated full-time activities co-ordinator to manage all projects.
- 'Before you start your project' session implemented to help parents promote their project and provide information on the early years training offer.
- Money is held on a Soldo Card rather than with an organisation. This enables the funds to be transferred to the card which parents can use as a debit card to manage their own funding without a supporting organisation.
- HEY! webpages and resources developed.
- Post-project sustainability support is provided.

The aim of the HEY! Fund

Parents and carers could apply for up to £2,500 to run their own projects for expectant parents and families with 0-3s in the Better Start Bradford area:

- To meet Better Start Bradford key themes and messaging:
 - 🍎 Eat well and be healthy
 - 💬 Talk and communicate well
 - 😊 Be confident, friendly and understand your child's emotions
- To share key messaging and provide another platform for Better Start Bradford projects to engage with expectant parents and families with 0-3s.

What parents gained from the HEY! fund:

- Parents were empowered by giving them the platform, support, tools, transferable skills and opportunity to deliver.
- Parents' skills were developed such as project management, budgeting, community engagement, communication and learning about child development through interaction and play.
- The Fund helps to build community capacity and inclusiveness
- Parents have the confidence to grow and continue volunteering or working in the early years sector in Bradford beyond the life of ABS.



Since 2017, the fund has provided more than £260,000 to over 170 parents and carer-led groups.

Legacy of PITL / HEY! Fund

- Parents have gone on to work and find employment through their experiences.
- Ongoing work with organisations such as schools, community centres and faith institutions to sustain the groups and embed as part of their services.
- Community Action Bradford and District (CABAD) is supporting groups to become constituted, helping with governance to become independent and apply for their own funding e.g. Wonder Tots has successfully applied for £2500 from VCS Alliance's ABCD Small Grants which has allowed them to continue for another 10-12 months.
- Basic training has been provided such as 'The beginners guide to fundraising', safeguarding and confidentiality.

Watch a video about the HEY! Fund [here](#)

Watch the recording of Bradford's presentation [here](#)

Lambeth Early Action Partnership: From SureStart to Start for Life via A Better Start - how a collective approach supports outcomes for babies, children and families



Sophie Woodhead, Assistant Director

In Lambeth, building on SureStart principles, the LEAP programme has generated further evidence and been able to provide insights into the Start for Life framework, and informed system wide change. This is demonstrated through three examples of LEAP's work:

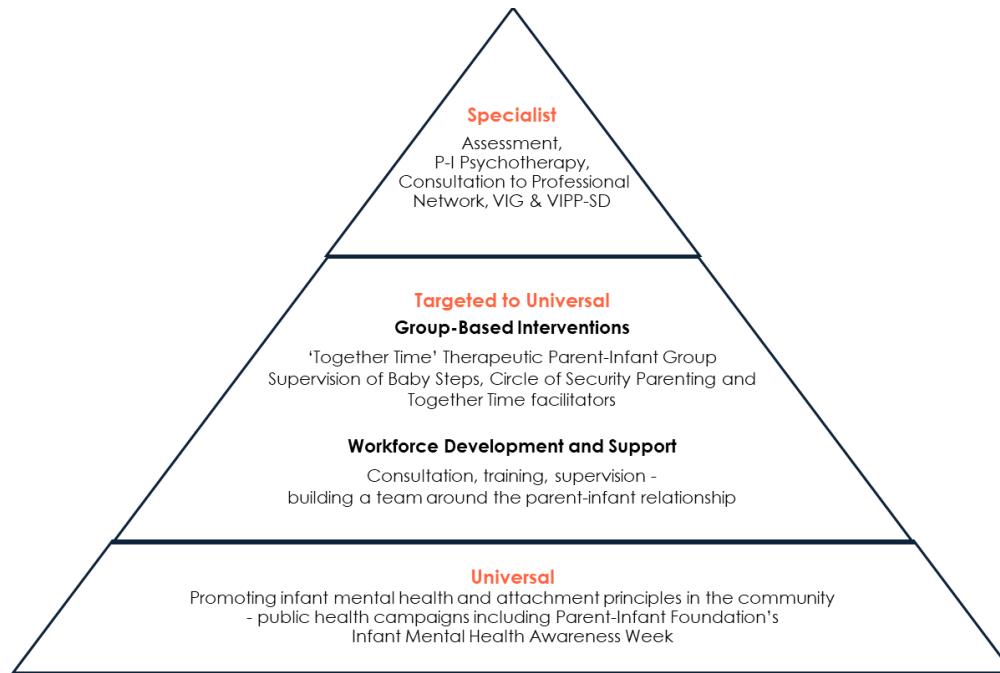
- Infant mental health and wellbeing - a systems-led approach
- Parent voice and community engagement - building trusting relationships
- Earlier intervention in domestic abuse: Enhanced casework service - local innovation

Infant mental health and wellbeing: Parent-Infant Relationship Service

LEAP's approach to supporting infant mental health and wellbeing took a systems-led approach, developing the [Parent-Infant Relationship Service \(PAIRS\)](#) which has been embedded into the local system. This has informed investment into this space through Start for Life and the recognition of the importance of this work.

The PAIRS team was one of the first teams developed as part of the LEAP portfolio of services, building on a local needs analysis which identified a gap for parent-infant psychotherapeutic support. Building on Sure Start work, it was recognised that it was important to bring in a multidisciplinary parent-infant relationship team, which was embedded with the Lambeth Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAHMS) and funded by LEAP since 2015.

The service offers different levels of support through a pyramid approach:



The PAIRS service has gone from strength to strength and the number of families seen has increased during the time the service has been running. This is down to a growing and strengthening referral pathway between the PAIRS team and other teams within the LEAP portfolio. This also demonstrates the time it takes to build and embed a service such as PAIRS.

PAIRS was one of the more novel areas of practice being implemented through LEAP, and so developing the evidence-base for this programme was essential. The Centre for Maternal and Child Health Research (University of London) was engaged as an evaluation partner, with the aim to understand how and to what extent the PAIRS work improved parent-infant relationships, contributed to addressing inequalities, and to understand what impact it had on the Lambeth early years ecosystem.

Key Achievements

- PAIRS has **improved the capacity of Lambeth's early years ecosystem** to support parent-infant relationships, driving the establishment of new services and helping a range of professionals to understand and support parent-infant relationships within their own caseload.
- PAIRS has a **unique focus on antenatal work**. 74% of accepted referrals for parent-infant psychotherapy were made antenatally, and most came from LEAP's continuity of care midwifery team.
- The quality and consistency of clinical outcome data varied, however there was **evidence of improvement**.
- Qualitative data suggests that **families have a positive experience of PAIRS**, with parents reporting improvements in their bond with their baby and

confidence in their parenting.

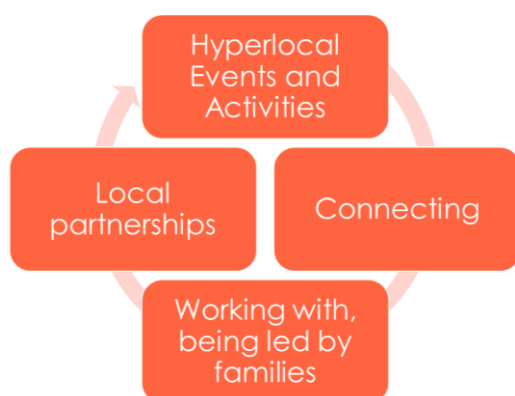
- PAIRS contributes to **reducing inequality** through working with families experiencing multiple disadvantages.
- Interviewees reported that by improving parents and infants' mental health and relationships, **PAIRS could potentially improve children's long-term outcomes and avoid further intervention later.**

This [evaluation](#) has shown that PAIRS is greater than the sum of its parts, so the success of the services depends on the interconnectedness of its parent-infant psychotherapy, group work and workforce development offer.

Parent Voice and Community Engagement

SureStart showed the importance of working with families, and developing participative models involving parents as part of local delivery was key. LEAP wanted to take that forward to find the most genuine form of engagement possible.

Many parents have been involved in the LEAP programme in different ways:



- governance structure through parent representative role
- service design
- parent champions
- parent volunteers
- community researchers as part of LEAP's evaluation.

This led to a framework with four mutually reinforcing elements of community engagement, which enabled planning in line with LEAP's theory of change but also allowed for flexibility and responsiveness.

Creating a structured and appealing engagement offer

LEAP's hyperlocal approach was underpinned by the delivery of quality child focussed activities whilst connecting families to each other and to LEAP and other early years

services. Under this, a festival model was developed which gave coherence to the engagement approach and was promoted by bespoke community engagement campaigns.

Three festivals were held each year which started with large scale 'gateway' events, followed by smaller weekly sessions to enable keeping in touch with families regularly.

Through this model there has been:

- 10 festivals
- 1824 events, activities, sessions
- 36,000 attendances



Through this work, consideration was given to:

- The complex challenge of translating the attendance of families at community engagement activities into them taking up more targeted service offers.
- The fact that it's the system that needs to change in terms of how to engage with families, rather than expecting families to change to engage with the system.

Developing connections and building trust.

The development of a Community Connector role within LEAP has:

- Ensured a consistent visible presence in the community, taking part in activities and events and becoming the familiar face/name for LEAP parents.
- Built relationships with the service leads, ensuring up to date and detailed knowledge of each service.
- Actively listened to what parents were saying and identified tailored appropriate referral and signposting opportunities.
- Helped reduce barriers to services by providing parents and carers with clarification, assurance and encouragement.

To support the community connector role, a digital connector tool was developed to be used interactively with parents. The connector tool included pictures of sessions and short videos about services which helped to further inform and allay fear of the unknown. This visual element also worked to support communications with parents and carers with English as an additional language.

The impact of LEAP's Community Connector role over a 6-month period:

- 100% of people wanted to find out more about the broader offers and support available at LEAP and in their local area
- 95% took a next step in accessing what was on offer

- 67% went on to have a one-to-one follow-up

Working with, and being led by, families

Local parents and carers took up roles of Parent Champions and were trained and supported to guide local parents to local services. There was a range of different approaches within the Parent Champion model, including more tailored approaches such as befrienders and digital champions. These services were developed through listening to parents, understanding their needs and providing tailored support. This model has been sustained by the local authority as part of the Start for Life offer.

People in the Lead was another approach LEAP took, creating a space where the voices, opinions and ideas of parents and carers are heard and encouraged.

Valuing community organisations

LEAP has partnered with 180+ community organisations, groups and services over the course of the programme. LEAP's local funding CoCreate invested in a diverse range of community-based organisations, providing funding to 17 local charities and community groups. These organisations were small-scale charities and Community Interest Companies and reached communities often isolated from, or not reached by, statutory early years services.

New partnerships and collaborations grew organically from these connections, and it has established one of LEAP's key sustainability vehicles, the [First 5 Lambeth Consortium](#). This is the first ever consortium in Lambeth to work specifically to link up community organisations around early years provision.

First Five Lambeth continues to grow and develop and is currently working with the council's Family Information Service to reflect on the accessibility of online information for parents.

Earlier Intervention in Domestic abuse: Enhanced Casework Service

The Enhanced Casework Service, providing earlier intervention in domestic abuse, **highlights the innovation and test and learn approach taken by LEAP.**

- Domestic abuse can have long term negative impacts on mothers and children.
- For many women, domestic abuse begins in pregnancy whereas for others in pregnancy, it may escalate in frequency and severity.
- 20-30% of pregnant women report incidents of physical abuse; in the LEAP area, rates were staggeringly high, which drove LEAP to establish the Enhanced Caseworker service.
- Pregnant women/with young children have greater barriers to seeking support

Enhanced Casework Service

The LEAP Enhanced Casework team provided tailored and holistic support to pregnant women or parents with young children under 4 who were living in the LEAP area and were experiencing, or could have been experiencing, domestic abuse.

Due to a lack of funding and resources in the domestic abuse sector, services often focus on immediate safety needs. LEAP Lambeth's Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) team and Refuge recognised that survivors of domestic abuse who are usually assessed as low or medium risk are still in need of support.

The service aimed to reach and support survivors at stages that tend to be overlooked by traditional domestic abuse services.

Key learning from the Enhanced Casework Service

Active outreach and early intervention

- Proactively reaching out to potential clients and the early years workforce.
- Equipping the wider workforce with skills and knowledge to identify domestic abuse.

Client-led, flexible, holistic and non-time limited support

LEAP Enhanced Casework clients were often parenting amidst significant adversity which depleted their time, energy or resources to engage with services. The service addressed these barriers by:

- **Building trust and confidence over time.** Reduced caseloads enabled flexibility, needs-led and creative approaches to working with survivors at their own pace.
- **Working with the whole person.** The service supported survivors with a wide range of needs and support was holistic and consciously parent-friendly.
- **Advocating.** Caseworkers ensured clients were not left to navigate complex systems alone.
- **Creating opportunities for empowerment, joy, and connection.**

Watch the recording of Lambeth's presentation [here](#)

Small Steps Big Changes, Nottingham: Reducing inequalities by improving access to diverse communities



Donna Sherratt, Head of Programme

Dr Nadine Otting, Research and Learning Officer

Having a place-based approach to improving access to diverse communities is central to improving equity, diversity and inclusion across the SSBC programme and the partnership. This system change theme responds to the important role of equitable access to early childhood in tackling unfair and unavoidable differences across the populations.

Three key spotlight areas from SSBC learning are shared below:

- Coproduction
- Community-based commissioning
- Father inclusive practice

Coproduction

Coproduction, meaning parents and carers from across communities involved in all aspects of the programme and across the partnership as equal partners in creating the best opportunities for children, has been key and central throughout SSBC.

Coproduction:

- Improves acceptance of/ engagement with a service.
- Reduces iteration and therefore misplaced spending on services that don't matter to families or don't necessarily have the impact that is required.
- Meets the needs of the community.
- Prioritises local context.
- Connects communities with services.
- Acknowledges that 'off the shelf' opportunities need to think about the nuances of implementing across communities.

Coproduction at SSBC has not been about the numbers; it is about diversity and culture, perspectives, family make-up, experiences and interest. Working in this way has impacted on the breadth and depth of change for services, campaigns and community connections.

SSBC team didn't start as experts, and recognise that whilst there has been significant growth, this approach will never cease to evolve, as communities also

continue to evolve.

Where has the impact of coproduction been a success from a diversity perspective?

- Translations of resources, followed up with engagement processes that are accessible to parents, representative of the community, and building community connection.
- Really knowing the community - getting to know and understand the local communities and services, including outside of SSBC wards, and by engaging those who really know the community.
- Building community capacity.
- Parent Champion model (covered later).

SSBC's whole approach in trying to ensure diverse and reflective workforces has enabled 'curiosity conversations' to happen and to help families and workforces to come together and to celebrate and acknowledge differences.

Examples of coproduced projects:

- Multilingual Dads' Pack - This resource talks about fathers' roles within children's lives and was translated into seven different languages.
- Feed Your Way - centred on empowering individuals and wider communities to feed their way. This was crafted in consultation with a wide range of the community.
- Multilingual Ramadan breastfeeding booklet - This provides information about breastfeeding during Ramadan so that parents felt they were empowered to ask for services to happen after sunset.



The most significant and cross-cutting approach over the ten years of the SSBC programme has been the Parent Champion model, which has been central to coproduction in the SSBC programme and to the wide impact and power of coproduction across the partnership.

Parent Champions

Parent Champions reflect and advocate for the diverse local communities, ensuring their perspectives directly shape the services, policies and practices.

Parent Champions have:

- Given local families a voice
- Raised aspirations for the 16,000 local babies and children that SSBC have worked with over the 10 years

- Influenced Family Hubs, Integrated Care Boards (ICBs), Public Health projects, Community and Voluntary Sector services, and NHS and Health services

Watch [this video](#) to hear more from SSBC Parent Champions (from 1.52 minutes in)

Community-Based Commissioning

SSBC adopted a community-based approach to commissioning, ensuring that planning, funding and service delivery are collaborative and inclusive. Actively involving local families and diverse communities guarantees this approach has built on local strengths and assets to create equitable opportunities for all children.

SSBC offers a tapestry of support services for families in Nottingham, working with:

- Public sector organisations including statutory health services such as maternity services
- Academics
- Community and voluntary sector organisations
- Private sector organisations such as marketing agencies.

Family Mentor Service

When consulted, local parents requested ongoing emotional support and reassurance and expertise around parenting. Parents' preferred format for this service was a home-visiting model, delivered by peers in a non-judgmental manner.

To address these needs identified by local families, SSBC developed the Family Mentor Service. This was:

- A programme designed to improve children's outcomes through a community-led approach.
- Rooted in evidence and strength-based practice and in the strengths of local neighbourhoods, the service is delivered by three local CVS organisations.
- By being co-produced, family-centred and delivered by these local organisations, it ensures that support is culturally responsive and meets the needs of the diverse communities in Nottingham.

Family Mentors have parenting experience and were recruited based on their aptitude for the role rather than formal qualifications or work experience, making the service peer-led and non-judgmental as requested by parents. A key element to the success of the service has been the comprehensive on-the-job training provided to Family Mentors, equipping them with the skills to offer expert parenting support through home visits.

SSBC's Family Mentor Service has been recognised for its commitment to workforce development and the impact that building a skilled community-based workforce has

on supporting equality and child outcomes.

Family Mentors build trusted relationships with families and deliver Small Steps at Home, an evidence-based manualised programme of preventative health advice and child development support.

Independent [evaluations](#) by Nottingham Trent University have shown positive impacts of the Family Mentoring Service for children and families.

The Family Mentor Service will continue beyond the SSBC programme, having successfully secured funding from the local Integrated Care Board (ICB) Health Inequalities and Innovation Investment Fund. It is now operating as a targeted selective intervention and the service supports families across Nottingham city, with a focus on those earliest stages of a baby's life from birth to 12 months.

Watch this video to hear more: [SSBC Family Mentor Service](#) (from 0.50 seconds in)

Ideas Fund

SSBC has also adopted community-based commissioning through funding for grassroots initiatives. Since 2016, the [SSBC Ideas Fund](#) (search Ideas Fund [here](#)) has supported local organisations by awarding a total of over one million pounds directly to community projects. This funding has empowered organisations to respond to local needs informed by co-production and helping them to grow and develop. The SSBC test and learn approach enabled these organisations to expand their focus into the early years and as a result these organisations have diversified their remit, strengthened local community assets and are driving forward early intervention and prevention efforts. Their tailored projects address what matters most to families in their local communities. An example of this is Shifting Your Mindset which supports fathers and families, especially those facing challenges like parental conflict, domestic abuse or having a need for more positive parenting skills.

Father Inclusive Practice

The role of fathers in families is often unspoken or only spoken about when something is going wrong. Yet research shows that children have better outcomes when they have a positive male role model in their lives.

The father inclusive practice agenda is remarkably complex:

- There are challenges in the way we think about fathers and their interactions with services.
- Fathers often feel excluded but want to be included.
- They are often seen as not wanting to be involved in services and hard to reach; yet is it the services that aren't reaching them.
- Women are a key focus for services, which is right, but does that mean that men should therefore be siloed and be seen as men rather than in that

fathers' role?

- There are lots of gender stereotypes that imply men aren't interested.
- A postcode lottery exists in terms of what's available for fathers up and down the country.

SSBC took a strategic approach to father inclusive practice and had significant system change ambitions:

- Giving fathers a voice
- Identifying and sharing the groundbreaking evidence
- A holistic approach: system wide, organisational and individual impact
- Sharing good practice, raising awareness, creating resources such as an information pack for new fathers, Think Dads campaign, and investment in recliner chairs based in Nottingham University hospitals.



SSBC's father inclusive resources are featured on the recently launched national [Father Inclusion Hub](#), which aims to:

- Build a body of evidence for professionals in different organisations
- Enable fathers' and male carers' voices to be heard
- Continue to develop guidance and tools around inclusion
- Raise the profile and continue the conversation around father inclusive practice.

What is the legacy of this work?

SSBC has:

- Reached over 16,000 children through 46 commissioned projects
- Developed a body of evidence to influence and support commissioning
- Created 246 new jobs, including 75 Family mentors and 18 Pregnancy Mentors.
 - SSBC has been deliberate and specific about ensuring job opportunities have been made as attractive as they can be to the wide range of communities SSBC works with, making sure they reflect the diversity of those communities.
- Ensured its learning has influenced and shaped the work around family hubs, coproduction in the ICB and the Best Start strategies for Nottingham and Nottinghamshire.

Watch this [video](#) to see a short animation about SSBC produced by Parent Champions and their children

Watch the recording of Nottingham's presentation [here](#)

A Better Start Southend (ABSS) – greater than the sum of its parts



Dr Clare Littleford, Head of Research, Evaluation and Impact

Dr Beth Buzza, Research Evaluation and Impact Lead

A Mosaic of evidence

Over the ten years of the programme, A Better Start Southend have collected a mosaic of data and evidence from different sources, through both in-house evaluations and partnering with external evaluation partners. This has enabled ABSS to show and tell complex stories.

In-house: Process evaluations, collecting data from delivery partners, surveys, and analysis of staff experiences within ABSS, looking at the running of the programme itself - the 'Inside Story'.

External: University of Essex partnered with ABSS to provide the formative evaluation of individual projects. Independent summative evaluation of the ABSS programme as a whole was provided by RSM. ABSS also fed into the ABS national evaluation.



“The value that’s added is more than the sum of the parts, because we’re able to work together.” (Service Manager Focus Group participant, ABSS Summative Evaluation)

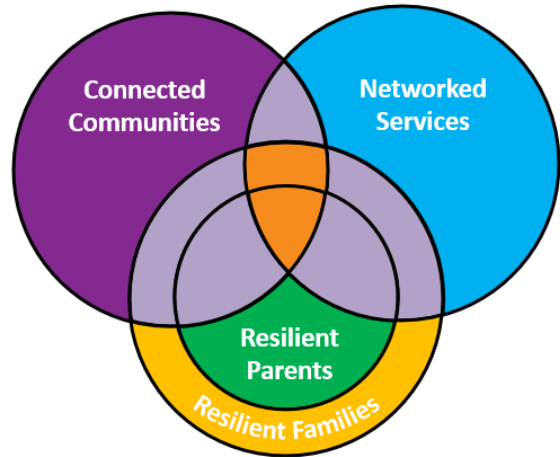
“ABSS as an ‘ecosystem’: There was a high degree of fertilisation of networks and referrals across and between ABSS projects. The sense of an ABSS identity reflected a shared ethos across the whole programme.”

(From Summary Overview of ABSS Formative Evaluation)

ABSS as an ecosystem

ABSS forms an interconnected network of services, linking up with a range of partners and projects.

ABSS is an ecosystem, but this is more than just service delivery. ABSS brings together connected communities, networked services, resilient parents and resilient families to action change.



Findings from research and evaluations identified four themed areas which map across the elements of the ecosystem:

Family Toolkit	Parental Resilience
Knowledge Skills Understanding Communication skills Support networks Social & emotional development Physical development	Confidence Motivation Empowered Mental wellbeing Self esteem Resilience Family wellbeing Socialisation
Community Resilience	Professional Support
Community support Wider community Peer support Social connections Legacy networks	Staff support Trusting relationships Networks

Family Toolkit - attributes which are used to support the child.

Parental Resilience - attributes which support parents and then enable them to support their children.

Community Resilience - building and promoting support within the community for families and children.

Professional Support - support to and from the workforce, including strengthening relationships.

Disseminating the data

ABSS are disseminating the data through the **Stories of Impact Roadshow**.

- Launch event was held in December 2024 for practitioners, professionals, local counsellors, MPs, and other community members.
- Produced a series of banners and posters of the findings, and some child-friendly interactive elements including games and vlogs.
- Roadshow between January-March 2025, taking the data out into the community to show the findings to members of the public.
- City Day on 1st March - ABSS will be joining a day-long celebration of Southend city to celebrate the work of ABSS and signpost to ABSS' legacy vehicle City Family; DadsConnect; Southend Association of Voluntary Services; Livewell; and Southend Supports Breastfeeding.



The data is being presented in themes:

Infant feeding

- 2,137 beneficiaries received support through one-to-one breastfeeding
- 1,949 group breastfeeding sessions held
- 65% reported feeling more confident about breastfeeding
- Breastfeeding at 6-8 weeks in ABSS wards rose from 41% in 2015/16 to 55% in 2023/24

“If I didn’t have A Better Start, I honestly don’t think I’d have breastfed for as long as I did...”

Child development and school readiness

- 3,061 children took part in Talking Transitions 2022-2024
- Number of five-year-olds achieving a Good Level of Development increased by 5% over this time
- 83% of children have improved emotional responses to music

“It helps you as a parent to rethink how you approach speaking with your child and what could work better.”

Communication and language accessibility

- Let’s Talk, a universal intervention, has been shown to reduce demand for more intensive specialist support from 2019-2023
- 3,091 children supported by Let’s Talk to September 2024

- Storysacks, a library-based project, has been translated into ten languages

“I definitely feel so much better now, it seems silly but it’s being daily less frustrated because once his speech improved, I did notice that he was less frustrated and would have less tantrums and things like that. So I think that’s a benefit to myself and my child, just being able to communicate with each other better. So an overall better relationship with each other really.”

ABSS is also communicating findings through a series of impact vlogs, giving examples of peer support and community resilience. An example of this is for the group breastfeeding service [Bump to Breast](#).

Parental Resilience

- 655 beneficiaries, including 72 fathers, attended the Work Skills service
- Increased confidence across a range of areas
- Peer-to-peer support - both in terms of support parents receive themselves but also support they are then able to offer to other parents through their parenting journeys.

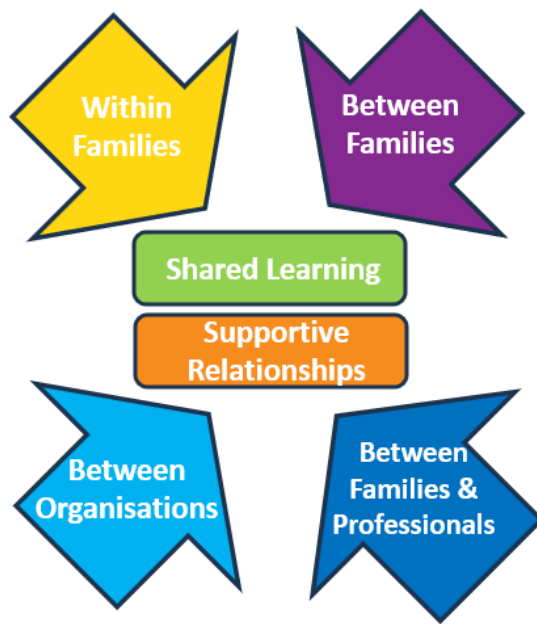
“It has helped me in so many ways to realise I’m not doing anything wrong, and that I’m a lot stronger than I believe I am, and it just helps me as a mum in general.”

Ways of collecting evidence

As well as the formal evaluation work, ABSS have undertaken research and collected evidence in different ways. Two experimental ways of working through ABSS Family Voices work have been:

- Parent Champions as community researchers - Parent Champions created storybooks where they talked through everything they had experienced on their journeys as Parent Champions, both what they’ve gathered from being a Parent Champion and also the impact they have had as a Parent Champion.
- Innovative methods to gather feedback directly from children, such as, observations of children’s interactions with the activities, craft activities, mark-making and talking tins, where they can press a button on the tin and talk about their reactions to activities they are taking part in.

Successes of ABSS



Through all the work undertaken to gather evidence about the impact ABSS has had, key areas of success have been identified:

- Improved **outcomes** for children
- Improved **parental resilience** through improved **knowledge, skills** and **confidence**
- Better **access to support** for Southend families
- **Greater interaction** between services created a **more holistic offer** for families
- Partnering with local organisations to deliver services created **faster** and **greater impact** for families
- Shared learning and improved relationships
- New opportunities for **peer support**
- **Coproduction** and **Parent Champion** input into the design and delivery of services
- Recognition of the **value of coproduction** across the system in Southend

This all underpins the idea of ABSS as an **ecosystem** supporting all the work with families.

Learning for the future

From the emerging conclusions from all the evidence gathered, ABSS have drawn out learning for the future in four key areas:

- **Programme delivery** - how to achieve outcomes to support families.
- **Parental resilience** - how parents can strengthen themselves to support their families and their children.
- **Partnership working** - the way organisations can work together to provide the best for local families.
- **Organisational factors** - lessons from running a complex programme like ABSS.

Programme delivery

- Supporting 'soft' outcomes enables 'hard' outcomes
- Importance of learning from implementation and responding flexibly
- The complexity of ensuring inclusivity
- Importance of evidence and measuring long-term outcomes and impact

Partnership working

- ABSS works as an ecosystem
- Partnership working requires relationships and trust, built over time
- Working across organisations is more successful with a common goal
- Importance of maintaining networks and partnerships established by ABSS beyond ABSS

Parental resilience

- Feeling valued by non-judgemental staff builds confidence
- Encouraging connections with other parents promotes emotional wellbeing
- Learning from experienced parents is a powerful way to gain knowledge
- Communities that share knowledge are stronger and less reliant on professional services

Organisational factors

- Importance of recognising complexity in programme management
- Difficult external periods create challenge and change for organisations
- An organisation's culture is shaped by the visions and styles of its leaders
- The challenge of delivering national policy in a local context

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Watch the recording of Southend's presentation [here](#)

Reflecting on 10 years of A Better Start

Facilitated conversation with:

- Elizabeth Myers, Head of Funding Development, Children & Young People, The National Lottery Community Fund
- Clare Law, Director, Blackpool Better Start
- Sophie Woodhead, Assistant Director, LEAP
- Karla Capstick, Director, SSBC Nottingham
- Gill Thornton, Director, Better Start Bradford
- Nia Thomas, Director, A Better Start Southend
- Gayle Munro, Director, Centre for Children and Families, NatCen

The five A Better Start Directors, representatives from The National Lottery Community Fund and NatCen closed the celebrations with reflections on the collective impact ABS has had, and the legacy that will see the programme's impact sustained beyond the funded period.

The following is a summary of the key points:

What are the key elements or unique attributes that have made ABS different and contributed to its success?

- **Co-production:** Co-production with families has been a feature right from the bid stage and at all stages of the ABS programme. This has embedded parent's voices in a meaningful way, supported decision making and finding out what works, reduced inequalities, and meant that services are sensitive to cultural differences and improving access. ABS teams have worked hard to get statutory services to recognise how important co-production is.
- **Test and Learn:** ABS has been committed to evidence based learning and gathering evidence of what works well and what doesn't. ABS teams have made many service improvements through trying something new to better support local families. A test and learn approach acknowledges that meaningful change requires sustained investment over time and has contributed to the significant difference in child development outcomes, systems change, and the longer-term legacy of the ABS programme.
- **Place-based approaches:** ABS has established partnerships that will outlive the programme, meaning the legacy of joined up working can be continued. Locality working has allowed ABS to build meaningful relationships based on trust and sustainability which has made recruitment into the programme's services more successful. ABS has been quite radical in promoting this way of working locally; parents and carers feel closer to services and that services better understand them, value their input and are more accountable. The

portfolio of 'local offers' has been valuable and the ongoing tracking of families will generate more learning from the programme in the future. Taking an asset-based approach has put funding directly into the heart of communities, built on local strengths, and ensured that local needs have been responded to accordingly through the development of local infrastructure. This approach has also provided pathways into employment, volunteering opportunities and local collaboration.

- **Sustained funding:** ABS partnership sites have developed expertise over the past 10 years in areas such as infant mental health, adverse childhood experiences, trauma informed approaches, working with fathers, improving access to diverse communities, on top of the three core areas of speech language and communication, diet and nutrition and social and emotional development. New workforce models have been implemented and trying, failing, and adapting has become second nature.

These successes were made possible by the 10-year funding from The National Lottery Community Fund which has enabled the longer-term evidence gathering and embedding of services and working practices that underpin the success of ABS.

What is the collective impact of ABS through changing systems, and what lessons can we learn for continued systems improvement?

- **ABS approach to systems change:** ABS has been an investment in systems transformation to improve the lives of babies and children through reforming the way systems are working together. The approach to this has been grounded in the same values and ways of working with communities and families, building relationships and partnerships, capacity building and building on local strengths. Systems change is complex so it should be difficult; taking a collective, integrated approach that builds a system through sustained commitment, with 'buy in' from the early years sector and beyond, builds a common vision and strategy.
- **Evidenced based approach:** Backed by evidence, the ABS programme is a cohesive whole, tailored around the needs of families to build a culture of continuous learning and improvements, motivated by a shared commitment to give all children the best start in life. Barriers have been removed and unlocked by senior leaders, ABS has changed the way that decisions are made and the way services work together. Infant voice has been heard and acted upon and ABS works alongside those with lived experience.
- **Creating an ecosystem:** The cohesive nature of ABS services has been instrumental in achieving positive impact for children and families. ABS has connected services and the pathways of support for families, backed up by research and evaluation which forms an evidence base of what works and why.

Cohesion makes a big difference in how parents access services. Embedding programmes of support into a variety of local services has supported system wide change. It is important that we understand how services fit together rather than providing standalone services which may be less effective.

- **Partnership approach (families and stakeholders):** Initiatives such as the peer-to-peer support models that are a key feature of ABS bring real awareness of the realities of living in the ABS localities and bringing up children in these areas. Parents have helped ABS think about things in a more holistic way and challenged ABS to be more inclusive while delivering commissioned services. Bringing stakeholder organisations together and ensuring joint decision-making has generated a real sense of ownership. Greater systems change relies on building relationships with people and organisations and this can empower them to take ownership and hold themselves accountable for achieving success.

What are the key lessons from ABS for emerging policy?

- **The importance of policies relating to babies and young children, and early intervention:** Early intervention directly influences the adults that children will become. Early years lays the foundation for social and emotional, physical and cognitive development and resilience which should make a focus on early years and intervention attractive to policy makers.
- **Focussing policy on community involvement** and building partnerships that encourage families to play an active part in service design and delivery has a positive effect on engagement with services and interventions.
- **Cross-sector collaboration:** when services collaborate e.g. health, education, and social care, this creates a comprehensive support system for families. Emerging policy should prioritise breaking down those barriers between sectors and facilitating collaboration between different agencies and organisations so that the complex needs of families and children can be addressed in a more coordinated manner. An integrated workforce needs to be scaffolded, and working in collaboration incentivised.
- **Data and evidence:** ABS's robust and rigorous evidence gathering has been key to its success and emerging policies should emphasise the need for data collection and evaluation, identifying in real time what works and what doesn't, learning fast, and failing fast and safely.
- **Holistic approach to child development:** Policymakers should focus on child development strategies that consider all the aspects of development together e.g. integrated services that take a 'whole-child/family' approach.
- **Breaking down barriers to opportunity:** Areas of emerging policy tie in with ABS's working knowledge and experience of bringing about workforce reforms and development, and alternative and enhanced delivery models e.g. how to

provide better support during pregnancy, supporting home learning environments through speech and language or wider family support. Investing in parents as the child's 'first teacher' and building community capacity is vital and in terms of both workforce and families, relationships are the key. We need to stop seeing communities and groups of people as 'hard to reach' and actively go to them; this is a very important lesson for policymakers.

- **Peer support programmes** have been embedded as part of workforce reforms in ABS areas and the evidence shows that these roles enhance social value. These ABS initiatives also relate to policies such as flexible working arrangements, parental employment, upskilling and training and further builds community capacity as well as support for the wider workforce.
- **Father inclusive practice** remains an area of policy making that is relatively undervalued. ABS has demonstrated the immense value that comes from acknowledging fathers and other primary caregivers in the lives of young children and this should be included in further workforce reforms.

Looking ahead, tell us about the legacy that A Better Start will be leaving?

- **An enduring commitment to babies, young children and families**, the awareness raising of the importance of early child development and investing in that crucial first 1001 days will be felt in ABS areas long after the funded period ends.
- **Data and evidence** of effective approaches to support family development and well-being will serve as a valuable resource for family practitioners and policy makers who are seeking to adapt successful support strategies.
- **Models of integrated service delivery** can be used to guide future programmes and encourage new collaborations across sectors.
- **Empowering parents to play an active role in defining and shaping services:** Stronger networks of support for parents and volunteers have been developed and partner organisations will carry this forward so that it will continue to benefit families.
- **Training and capacity building:** The skills and knowledge developed within ABS areas will persist and continue to benefit communities.
- **ABS as a best practice example:** This has been established in national policies, guidance and initiatives and will continue to grow with the wealth of data and evidence that has been, and will continue to be, generated by the programme.
- **Through The National Lottery's commitment to carry on partnerships** within the early years space and taking the learning from ABS into the Reaching Communities work and preventative approach to funding programmes.

- **Systems reform:** learning from implementing evidence-based programmes successfully into public services and routine practices and translating academic research into ‘real-world’ practice and programmes.
- **Evidence informed universal services:** Ensuring high quality support is available to all families but ensuring that those that need specialist and more tailored services receive high quality support that is grounded in science and research.
- **Governance:** Being accountable, making shared decisions, and challenging each other.
- **ABS has demonstrated that sometimes the smaller things make a huge difference** e.g. making small pots of money available that enhance the lives of children and their families.
- **Legacy vehicles** that will continue to ‘beat the drum’ locally e.g. to advocate for peer support programmes, co-production, and early intervention and prevention. Also, taking learning outside of the ABS areas to benefit neighbouring communities.
- **Staff and workforce:** Colleagues will be taking the lived experience of ABS with them into future work, acting as early years champions and spreading the best practice examples from ABS beyond the local communities.

Finally, a call to action - what still needs to change, who is responsible, and where should priorities lie?

- **Early years and prevention** should continue to be prioritised to make sure that this remains on political agendas.
- **Improvements in early years childcare:** Investment is needed to provide high quality, accessible and affordable childcare, and providers need to be enabled and supported to deliver this vital resource.
- **Investment in the wider early years workforce** is needed to enable services to better meet the needs of the population.
- **Addressing inequalities** through tailored and holistic support strategies that value parents and carers as the experts in their lives, communities and families.
- **Developing community partnership systems** and recognition of the value of the work that is done by community partners; community commissioning needs to involve community partners at all stages.
- **The role of trusted relationships as a mechanism of change:** incorporating processes that ensure families engaging in services feel they are building trusted relationships, and that relationships between services are cohesive. Reductive medical models of care are unhelpful; there needs to be a

commitment to move towards more relational models of care across early years services.

Watch the recording of the facilitated conversation [here](#)

Further resources

A Better Start Programme Insights share learning and case studies from across the programme, they can be found here: [Insights from A Better Start](#)

Annual Learning Event reports summarise the annual learning events that have been delivered as part of the ABS shared learning contract, find them here: [A Better Start Annual Learning Events Reports and Recordings](#)

The above documents can also be found on [The National Lottery Community Fund's website](#) amongst other useful insights from TNLCF's funding activities.

Partnership websites

[Blackpool Better Start](#)

[Better Start Bradford](#)

[Lambeth Early Action Partnership](#)

[Small Steps, Big Changes Nottingham](#)

[A Better Start Southend](#)

Links shared from the chat:

<https://www.wavetrust.org/a-uk-wide-movement>

<https://eric.org.uk/potty-training/>

<https://fatherinclusion.org/>

<https://parentinfantfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/building-great-britons-report-conception-to-age-2-feb-2015.pdf>

Appendix 1: Agenda

1:00pm	Welcome and purpose of the day Introduction from The National Lottery Community Fund	Claire Dorris , Senior Research Manager, NCB David Knott , CEO, The National Lottery Community Fund
1:15pm	Parent experiences (video) ABS parents talk about the difference ABS services have made for them	ABS service users from across the five partnerships
<p>Learning from <u>A Better Start</u></p> <p>ABS Partnerships will reflect on 10 years of ABS and share their expertise and learning from their work locally.</p>		
1:20pm	Building systems for early child development	Blackpool Better Start Victoria Morgan, Senior Development Manager Annette Algie, Strategic Service Manager
1:45pm	Parent-led innovation supporting system change	Better Start Bradford Gill Thornton, Director Shummel Uddin, Community Engagement Manager
2:10pm	Break (10 mins)	
2:20pm	From Sure Start to Start for Life via A Better Start	LEAP (Lambeth Early Action Partnership) Sophie Woodhead, Assistant Director
2:40pm	Reducing inequalities by improving access to diverse communities	SSBC (Small steps Big Changes, Nottingham) Donna Sherratt, Head of Programme Dr Nadine Otting, Research and Learning Officer
3:05pm	ABSS - greater than the sum of its parts	ABSS (A Better Start Southend) Dr Clare Littleford, Head of Research, Evaluation and Impact Dr Beth Buzza, Research Evaluation and Impact Lead

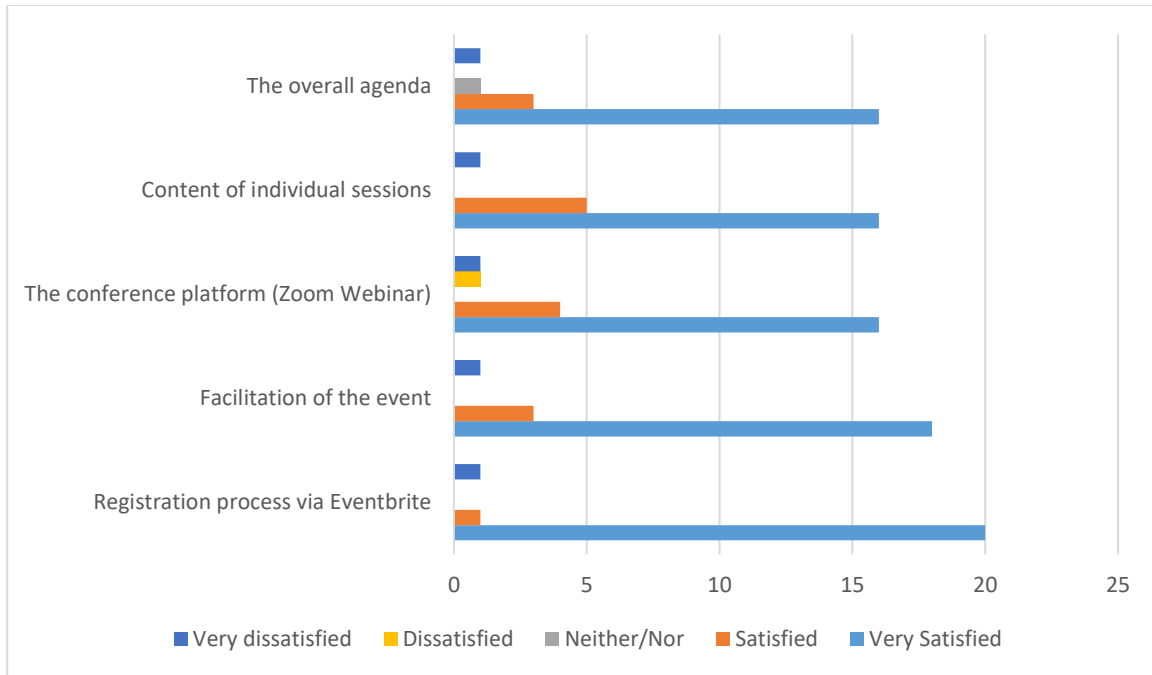
3:30pm	Break (10 mins)	
3:40pm	Reflecting on 10 years of A Better Start	<p>Discussion facilitated by Claire Dorris, NCB</p> <p>Five ABS Directors: Clare Law, Blackpool Gill Thornton, Bradford Sophie Woodhead, Lambeth Karla Capsticks, Nottingham Nia Thomas, Southend</p> <p>Elizabeth Myers, Head of Funding Development, The National Lottery Community Fund</p> <p>Gayle Munro, Director, Centre for Children and Families, NatCen</p>
4:30pm	Closing remarks	Claire Dorris, NCB

You can find all the recordings of the event [here](#).

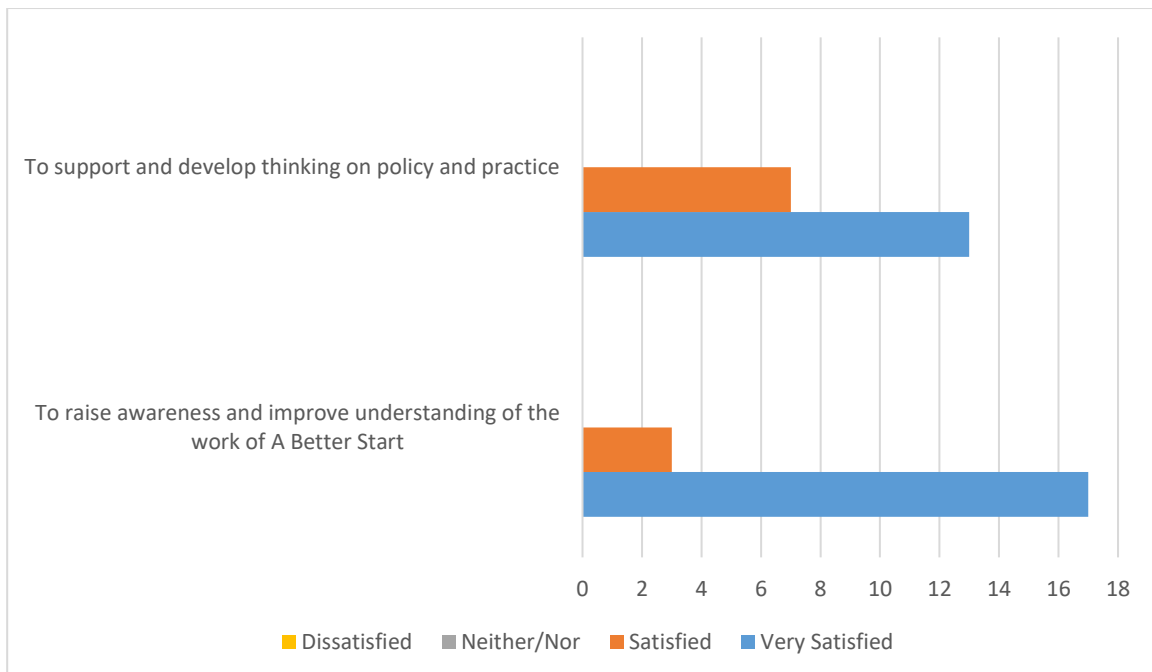
Appendix 2: Summary of evaluation findings

Below is a summary of evaluation survey results (22 responses)

Q. Please rate how satisfied you were with the following aspects of the event



How satisfied were you that the aims below were met?



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

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