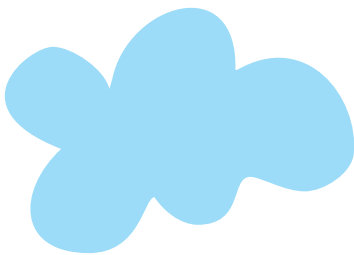




Small Steps Big Changes (SSBC) **Commons Education Select Committee: The Impact of Covid-19 on Education and Children's Services**

May 2020





Commons Education Select Committee: The Impact of Covid-19 on Education and Children's Services

Written evidence submitted on behalf of the SSBC Partnership by Karla Capstick, Emma Lomas-Clarke, Amy McDonald, SSBC and our local partners: Steve Parkinson, The Toy Library; Jane Gostlow and Marie Sheffield, HomeStart Nottingham; Stacey Lochhead, Sue Wood and Claire Windebank, Framework Housing Association; Kathryn Bouchlaghem and Catherine Smith, Nottingham City Council, SSBC parent volunteers, parent recipients of the Small Steps at Home programme and National Literacy Trust, Literacy Champions.

We are happy to provide oral evidence if required.

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Executive summary

Small Steps Big Changes (SSBC) is one of The National Lottery Community Fund - A Better Start Programme funded sites, utilising a test and learn approach to support the improvement of social emotional development, communication and language and nutrition outcomes amongst 0-4 years olds in four ethnically diverse wards in Nottingham. SSBC utilises a partnership approach including health, early years, Early Help, community and voluntary sector providers and parents to improve early child development outcomes.

Our partnerships experience of supporting families with young children to improve outcomes forms the basis of the submission.

- ➔ Due to a national need for social distancing, remote working and altered capacity across the partnership, there is concern that more babies and children are experiencing difficulties and may be classed as vulnerable. Despite vast efforts across the partnership, the identification of newly vulnerable babies and children is likely to have been more challenging.
- ➔ The closure of early years settings and a pause on group based activity and face to face contacts in response to the pandemic, including health, Early Help and SSBC groups alongside childcare facilities, is likely to have significant impacts upon efforts to close the attainment gap during the early years.
- ➔ The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is likely to disproportionately impact on families with young children who are most disadvantaged creating a widening of the attainment gap at school entry.
- ➔ External factors, which increase stresses, including levels of poverty, have the potential to impact upon a family's ability to provide a positive home learning environment. Post Covid- 19, it will be important to ensure effective early intervention is available alongside wider policies that support parental mental health and support an adequate family income.
- ➔ Significant concern exists for parents around the socio-emotional impact of Covid-19 on their children.

Submission

Small Steps Big Changes (SSBC) is one of The National Lottery Community Fund - A Better Start Programme funded sites, utilising a test and learn approach to support the improvement of children's social emotional development, communication and language and nutrition outcomes amongst 0-4 years olds in four ethnically diverse wards in Nottingham. SSBC utilises a partnership approach including health, early years, early help, community and voluntary sector providers and parents to improve early child development outcomes. Our partnership's experience of supporting families with young children to improve outcomes forms the basis of the submission.

This written evidence principally addresses three areas, the first two directly and the third indirectly.

- 1 The capacity of children's services to support vulnerable children and young people.
- 2 The effect of provider closure on the early year's sector including reference to children's development.
- 3 The effect on disadvantaged groups, which has been interpreted as those children and families for whom effective early intervention has the opportunity to be of greatest benefit.

The capacity of Children's Services to support vulnerable children and young people

- 1 Services have responded quickly and innovatively, adopting where appropriate, at pace and enthusiastically, to virtual methods of delivery. However concern exists that due to remote working and altered capacity across the partnership, that the identification of newly vulnerable children is likely to have been more challenging.
- 2 Alongside supporting healthy child development, the 0-19 Community Public Health Nursing Service has a significant role to play in terms of supporting vulnerable children.
- 3 Local services responded to the national pandemic guidance from the NHS Prioritisation within Community Health Services directive¹. The service continued to prioritise the home-based Birth Visit. A follow-up visit took place if concerns existed about mum or baby's health and wellbeing. 6-8 week checks and the 3-4 month checks took place only for those families deemed to be high risk. Access to qualified health visitors by phone was available as needed. As from 24.03.2020 all clinics ceased, including the appointment only model. The 1 Year Review, 2 Year Review, 3½ Year Review and Active Programmes of Care were paused, as they were not deemed a critical function. Some members of the team were redeployed to adults' services to support their critical functions.
- 4 Whilst it is acknowledged that the unprecedented workforce challenges associated with dealing with a global pandemic, concern exists that as a direct consequence of the government advice to stay at home, that there will be increased vulnerability at home for some children. Evidence suggests that child and family safeguarding concerns will increase². Although workforce provision was made for existing safeguarding caseloads, opportunities to identify new and emerging concerns and support families with new vulnerabilities are likely to be greatly diminished, due to the lack of regular reviews with families.
- 5 Early Help Services play a significant role in supporting families, from universal services to undertaking targeted work with those families with increasing levels of need, including work supporting vulnerable children.
- 6 The Early Help Services were not deemed an essential service for the purpose of the Covid-19 response. Although three children's centres in Nottingham City physically remained open, to enable midwifery and health visiting colleagues to use the centres for clinic appointments, Early Help staff predominantly adopted a work from home model, providing virtual support to families. The initial focus of work from Early Help involved, trying to encourage vulnerable children to take up school places and supporting families to stay at home through engagement and providing structure. Colleagues who normally supported families via children's centres, developed resource packs for families in need, online videos and updated information enabling online signposting of family resources. Staff from the children and social care directorate, were redeployed to residential homes and social care. Emerging themes reported by staff, relating to families as a consequence of Covid-19 in this sector included: increased domestic violence, increased mental health concerns and increased child behavioural concerns.

- 7 Family Mentor Services are a new paid peer workforce commissioned by SSBC. The services are unique to Nottingham, offered in four wards across the city and funded via The National Lottery Community Fund – A Better Start Programme. The Family Mentor services offer an intensive home visiting programme; Small Steps at Home, designed to support children's development and run groups within the community to support improving childhood development outcomes. The commissioned providers of the Family Mentor Service are well established community and voluntary sector organisations.

- 8 In response to the pandemic, the Family Mentor Services adopted a virtual mode of delivery for the Small Steps at Home Programme enabling continued support to potentially vulnerable families. During April 2020, 622 children continued to receive Small Steps at Home via either telephone or video call. This amounts to 1503 visits being delivered, 1130 over the phone and 373 via video calling. In addition, during April 2020 there were 812 telephone support or wellbeing calls made to SSBC families who had a Family Mentor.

- 9 Key themes which arose from these support or wellbeing calls were related to finances, including debt advice, access to benefits due to furloughing, food bank referrals, concerns over losing essential gas and electric services, as well as help resolving tenancy and housing issues and how to access other services.

- 10 Seventeen percent of those families accessing Small Steps at Home were classed as vulnerable, based on the Health Visiting case load allocation; 14% on Universal Plus and 3% on the specialist and protection caseload. It is likely given the themes that were raised as part of the wellbeing calls that additional vulnerable children will emerge from the pandemic.

- 11 Although the Family Mentor Service has provided welcome additional capacity to support the identification of potentially newly vulnerable babies and children and to support existing vulnerable babies and children across four wards in Nottingham, the service is not currently universally taken up and not currently offered across all wards in Nottingham. Gaps in provision across the city are therefore likely to exist.

The effect of provider closure on the early year's sector including reference to children's development

- 1 Covid-19 is having a significant impact on the childcare and early education sector.
- 2 Early years are crucial. Evidence supports good quality childcare and a positive home learning environment as being beneficial in improving outcomes for children^{3,4}. Concern exists that the closure of early years settings, a pause on group based activity in response to the pandemic, including health, Early Help and SSBC groups alongside childcare facilities, is likely to have significant impacts upon efforts to close the attainment gap during the early years.
- 3 Income related childhood development gaps are known to exist^{5,6}.
- 4 Prior to Covid-19, language gaps related to income have been shown to exist by 18 months and by the age of three these have become entrenched⁶. These gaps increase as children grow older⁵. As children's language capabilities are strongly associated with cognitive abilities alongside children's social, emotional and behavioural development, gaps in language development are highly important.
- 5 In 2018, 32% of 5-year olds in Nottingham started school without the communication, language and literacy skills they need to learn and progress. At least 10% of children have significant speech, language and communication needs in the early years. Children from socio economically disadvantaged families are more than twice as likely to have a language delay.
- 6 Nottingham is ranked 11th most deprived district in England in the 2019 Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), an increase from 8th in the 2015 IMD⁷. 34.2% of children are affected by income deprivation⁸. The impact of provider closure is therefore likely to have a significant impact locally.

15 hour free childcare offer

- 7 The 15-hour childcare offer available to the most disadvantaged families represents a good opportunity to close income-related learning gaps³.
- 8 76% of eligible families with 2 years olds in Nottingham in 2019/20 took up the offer, with 90% of eligible 3 and 4 years olds taking up the offer.
- 9 As of 23 April 2020, within Nottingham City 19/76 childcare venues remained open, with the focus on providing childcare places for critical and key workers. Due to the large Medical Centre in Nottingham, demand was high and the challenge of providing places was complex. Care was not always provided in the same environment and by same staff and children experienced increased transitions.
- 10 The City Council continues to provide support primarily to those settings that are open and working with partners to support with a recovery plan in line with the DfE guidance and local need.

- 11 For many families the immediate opportunities in relation to closing the income related learning gap through the 15 hours free childcare offer will not have been able to be realised during this crisis.

Home Learning Environment

- 12 With the closure of many childcare facilities and the pause on group based activity during Covid-19, differences in the quality of the home learning environment, defined as *"the physical home and the interactions in and around the home which implicitly and explicitly support a child's learning"*⁹ are likely to impact upon early childhood development outcomes.
- 13 Support for the home learning environment comes from a variety of sources and the current Covid-19 crisis is likely to limit the options of some of these supports.
- 14 With adaptations, the Family Mentor Small Steps at Home Programme has been enabled to continue during the Covid-19 crisis across four wards in Nottingham.
- 15 The Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) rapid review of evidence in response to Covid-19 found that there is evidence that virtual or digital delivery in some instances may be as effective as face to face¹⁰. However we are not able to provide evidence for this at this time.
- 16 An important element of the home learning environment is the availability of books in the home and shared reading but disparities exist across homes in relation to availability of books.
- 17 SSBC support the Dolly Parton Imagination Library (DPIL), an enhanced supported book gifting scheme. External evaluation showed families who register with DPIL are more in need of the support it provides¹¹. Although the scheme has been able to continue amongst the current Covid-19 crisis, an external evaluation suggested that parents whose children are enrolled with the DPIL may need additional support to ensure that their children are actively engaged in shared book reading¹².
- 18 Partners across the early years sector provide several groups within the community to provide opportunities to model and practice elements of a good home learning environment. In response to Covid-19, all face to face groups have been paused.
- 19 Concern exists in the short and medium term that the potential benefits from attendance at these groups or others, will be impacted upon by any ongoing needs for social distancing combined with parental anxiety about increased social mixing.

Digital adaptations

- 20 The Covid-19 crisis saw a rapid response across the partnership and digital adaptations may present an opportunity when considering contingency planning.
- 21 SSBC engaged SoJo Animation to produce weekly interactive shows to continue our engagement with families and to provide them with no-cost activities to try at home and make learning fun. In total the four episodes of SoJo on YouTube had some engagement from 2217 families with 1404 families watching the full video.
- 22 A video based on a local community group Cook & Play received 5127 total views. A closed Facebook group, set up by one of the Family Mentor teams, to offer online support for home learning attracted 107 total members, with views around specific activities ranging from 61 to 85 participants. Many more examples exist to support high levels of engagement with online video posts.
- 23 These services have yet to be evaluated and we are not able to provide evidence of impact in relation to child development outcomes however the utility of this medium to support engagement with parents of young children should be considered in contingency planning going forward.
- 24 There are important potential limitations around digital delivery which may adversely affect some families who are already disadvantaged.
- 25 Opportunities to engage with online support are contingent upon having the bandwidth and devices to get online and the ability to pay for access to the internet, however a digital divide exists whereby some families do not have the same access creating digital exclusion¹³. Some families have reported needing to share existing devices between several family members, impacting the amount of school work that can be done.
- 26 Much of the online material provided is provided in English, which may not be the main language for some families. Local data suggests that 7.8% of families have no one in a household who speaks English as a main language⁷.
- 27 The current Covid-19 crisis has revealed extensive disparities in relation to the physical material resources that exist in some family homes. Due to extreme poverty, some families simply do not have access to the same physical resources to support home learning. The partnership recognised this issue and several of the community and voluntary sector providers have provided craft and resource packs to families that were in need. Other partners across Nottingham have identified this and have worked similarly to address this significant challenge for families. SSBC are currently reviewing options for a resource pack specifically for 0-18 month olds.

Socio-emotional

Parental mental health

- 28 The foundation for good socio-emotional development in children is good parental mental health.
- 29 As a partnership we are particularly concerned about the number of families that have been severely impacted by the Covid-19 crisis. Parents are reporting feelings of low mood and increased anxiety with increased numbers signposted to their GP to discuss their mental health.
- 30 We are concerned about the potential impact in the short and long term of increasing poverty following Covid-19 amongst our families.
- 31 In longitudinal studies, the family stress model highlights the impact of economic pressures upon parent's mental health, impacting upon relationships and causing difficulties with parenting¹⁴.
- 32 Many families in contact with our partners are reporting psychological distress. Families are reporting additional costs associated with children no longer receiving free school meals and high shopping bills. There has been a marked increase in the need to access food banks. Community and voluntary sector organisations have needed to provide nappies, baby foods and baby milk. Families are reporting concerns in relation to affording basic amenities such as gas and electric and concerns in relation to being able to access benefits, unstable employment and threats of redundancy.
- 33 Responsive parenting is a key protective factor in relation to a child's non cognitive development⁶, but concerns exists that family stress associated with Covid- 19 may lead to a reduction in sensitive parenting. As discussed previously (see section 27), economic constraints and low family income can have a direct impact upon a parent's ability to provide a rich home learning environment.
- 34 There have been some reports of increased domestic abuse within our communities.
- 35 Domestic abuse impacts on children in a number of ways: They are at risk of physical injury during an incident, they can experience serious anxiety and distress which can express itself in later anti-social or criminal behaviour – and domestic abuse can also impact on parenting capacity and attachment.

Identification of socio-emotional problems

- 36 The early identification of social and emotional problems in babies, toddlers and young children and the availability of effective early intervention is essential to assist them in building their emotional and social competence.
- 37 The Children's Public Health Nursing Service screens for socio-emotional concerns, using the ages and stages questionnaire ASQ 3 SE at ages 4 months, 12 months and 2 years. Due to reprioritisation of NHS activity¹ these screenings will have been paused. Those wards where the Family Mentor Service operate have been able to complete ASQ screening via the telephone, which has been welcomed by families as they are concerned about their child's development during lockdown.

- 38 As we move out of the Covid-19 crisis the completion of the ASQ:SE may identify an increased number of children who would benefit from additional support and may result in an increase in referrals.

Parenting support

- 39 The Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) demonstrates correlations between income group and parenting with the likelihood of achieving good development on Foundation Stage Profile by age five. Seventy three percent of children who were not exposed to poverty and had positive parenting achieved good development, 58% of children who were in persistent poverty with positive parenting achieved good development, whereas only 19% of children who were in persistent poverty with associated poor parenting achieved a good level of development.
- 40 This suggests that considering both addressing poverty, alongside providing parenting support post Covid-19 is likely to have a bigger impact on early childhood development outcomes.

Parent voice

- 41 SSBC is committed to co-production; allowing the voice of lived experience to be considered as a form of expert knowledge. SSBC gained both written feedback and interview feedback to five broad open-ended questions relating to the impact of Covid-19 on their immediate family, their friends, neighbours and their local community, alongside their concerns going forward. Respondents were informed that comments would feed into an Education Committee response, however were asked to share the things of most relevance to them. All responses were received before the announcement of the Government's planned phased reopening of schools.
- 42 Parents engaged with the Small Steps at Home programme, alongside literacy volunteers and local parent champions were approached. Those that responded therefore may not be representative of our ward populations as a whole.
- 43 Parents who responded to the questions had children that ranged from 3 months to 17 years. Twenty two written responses to the survey were received of which two were Dads, alongside six responses from parents via group interview.
- 44 Lack of socialisation with other children was identified as a significant concern for a number of parents across a variety of child age groups. For those that had young babies, there was a sense that they were missing out on this contact, for those that had toddlers or those normally in nursery and school there was a sense that children were missing their friends. For many, these concerns existed past the initial phase of the lockdown, as many expected social distancing to exist beyond the current stage.

Mum, child 9 months

"I worry that there may be an impact on the development of young babies and children due to them not being able to get close and play with other children the same age. I think this may be a concern for a lot of parents as you need to be confident that it's safe"

- 45 Parents reported concern around their mental health. Some parents reported pre-existing anxiety and depression worsening. Others reported new anxiety, specifically related to the coronavirus, in relation to leaving the house, whilst others reported challenges with being isolated from friends and family. Mental wellbeing was also impacted upon by lack of "own time".

Parent, child 2 years

"very challenging to manage work and home life and still feel like there is time for me, 2 months really hard to be cooped up indoors with children when they can't see their friends"

- 46 Parents described a sense of normality being a long way off, with continued anxiety about social distancing and the impact this will have on the ability to socialise normally.
- 47 Amongst parents particularly with school age children, the majority reporting finding home schooling "challenging". Parents reported mixed expectations on themselves in relation to home schooling and also mixed expectations from schools, suggesting that a consistent message had not been heard or interpreted from schools.

Mum, children <1, 3, 6

"you just feel like you need to be ahead of everything and everyone and because the kids aren't going to school, you feel like they are missing out"

Mum, children 3,4,7

"obviously we are struggling with school work, but we have spoken to school about it and they said don't worry about it, just do a little bit and just get on with it, if they want to do it, and if they don't want to do it don't worry about it"

- 48 Where parents had children at an age of transition from either nursery to school or into secondary school, parents reported concerns around transitions and how these would be managed.
- 49 One parent identified that her own grasp of the English language was insufficient to support her child's home learning.

Recommendations

- 1 The early years are a time of crucial importance for later childhood development.
- 2 To mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on those already disadvantaged further investment in the early years should be prioritised.
- 3 The impacts of Covid-19 in both the short, medium and longer term run the risk of more families with young children being left behind. When considering education we urge the committee to consider education within the context of the impact of poverty and take a coordinated approach with other government departments to support improved outcomes for children.
- 4 We feel the greatest benefit in relation to supporting child development outcomes will need wider policies which promote and support good parental mental health, including policies which promote an adequate family income.
- 5 Dependent upon ongoing needs for social distancing, virtual delivery may present an opportunity for continued early intervention and should be guided by the principles of likely effective virtual video and remote delivery as outlined by EIF rapid review¹⁰.

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