



University of Essex



Families Growing Together

Summary Report July 2024

University of Essex, ABSS Programme Evaluation

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1. Project overview

This document is a summary of findings from the formative evaluation undertaken by the research and evaluation team at the University of Essex. The report presents thematised findings from Three rounds of evaluation reports, covering the period 1st July 2022 to 31st March 2024. The purpose of this summary report is to provide a snapshot view of the project's journey through key qualitative and quantitative insights and its impact on beneficiaries' lives. This report integrates analysis of Key Performance Indicators (KPI), interview and survey data across all previous reports and including the current period.

Families Growing Together began delivery in June 2021. It is delivered by Trust Links and provides a prevention focused early intervention using outdoor activities and learning that promote and support positive social and emotional health, and improved diet and nutrition. The aims of the project are to:

- Improve social and emotional development and reduce social isolation
- Increase knowledge of health, diets and nutrition
- Build community resilience and cohesion
- Improve mental health and wellbeing through opportunities to socialise and grow food in an outdoor environmental education facility

1.2 Deliverables

The project outcomes contribute to the overarching ABSS programme and population level outcomes framework. For Families Growing Together, which sits within the Social and Emotional Health and Diet and Nutrition Workstreams, the intended outcomes are:

- Parents/Carers report that their child has improved communication and social skills
- Parents are better equipped to cope with their thoughts and feelings
- Parents feel less stressed and/or anxious
- Parents have improved self-esteem and well-being
- Parents/carers develop new skills around gardening and food growing and preparation
- Parents/carers increase their knowledge of healthy lifestyle choices
- Parents learn parent skills through peer support and role modelling
- Parents believe in their ability to parent effectively
- Parents report they feel more connected to their child
- Parents report they have more fun with their children
- Parents feel less isolated
- Parents feel more connected with others

2 Project impact snapshot

Quantitative and qualitative evaluation data about the performance of Families Growing Together demonstrate a range of positive impacts among the children and parents it supports. Findings from our analysis indicate that participating parents repeatedly report increases in their social and emotional health, stronger connections with their children and peers, and the development of skills

related to gardening, growing, and preparing healthier food, and making healthier lifestyle choices. The approachability of staff and the breadth of information and activities available were identified as key factors driving positive beneficiary experiences.

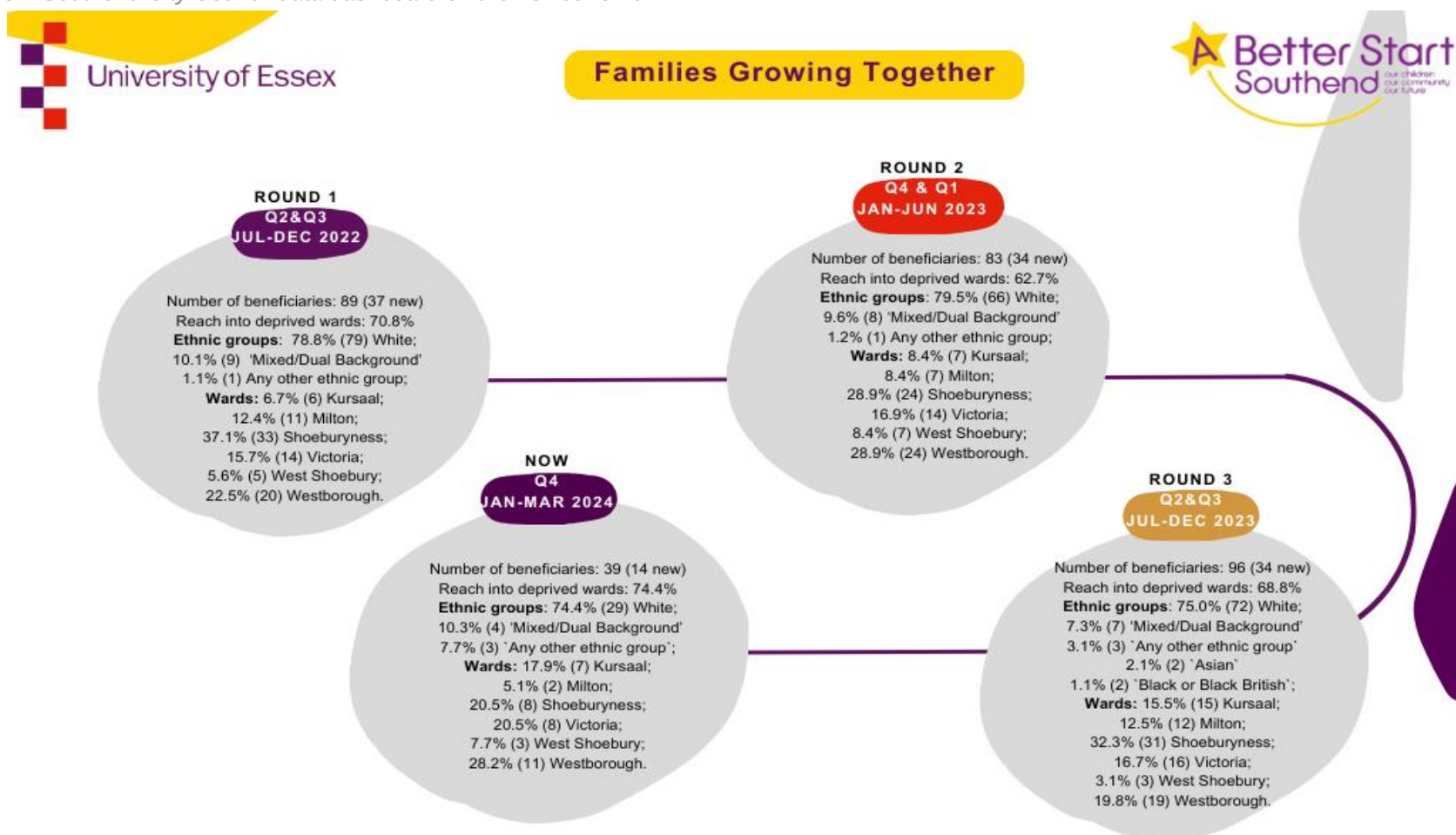
The graphics overleaf provide a high-level visual overview of the journey of Families Growing Together over the period of their inclusion within our evaluation across three key areas:

- **Figure 1: Beneficiary¹ engagement and reach**, comprising total number of beneficiaries, beneficiary ethnicity, and reach of the project into wards of higher deprivation. This figure visualises the change over time by tracing each of these data points across each of the project reporting periods.
- **Figure 2: Performance against target outcomes**, comprising percentage achievement against established targets for the project, within and across each of the reporting periods of the project's inclusion in our evaluation.
- **Figure 3: Qualitative interview data**, comprising representative accounts from qualitative interviews with beneficiaries undertaken over the period of evaluation, linked with the project outcomes areas established for all ABSS Southend projects.

A deeper analysis of each of these elements is included within this report, however, these graphics capture key details which illustrate the journey of the project across the period of their involvement in our evaluation.

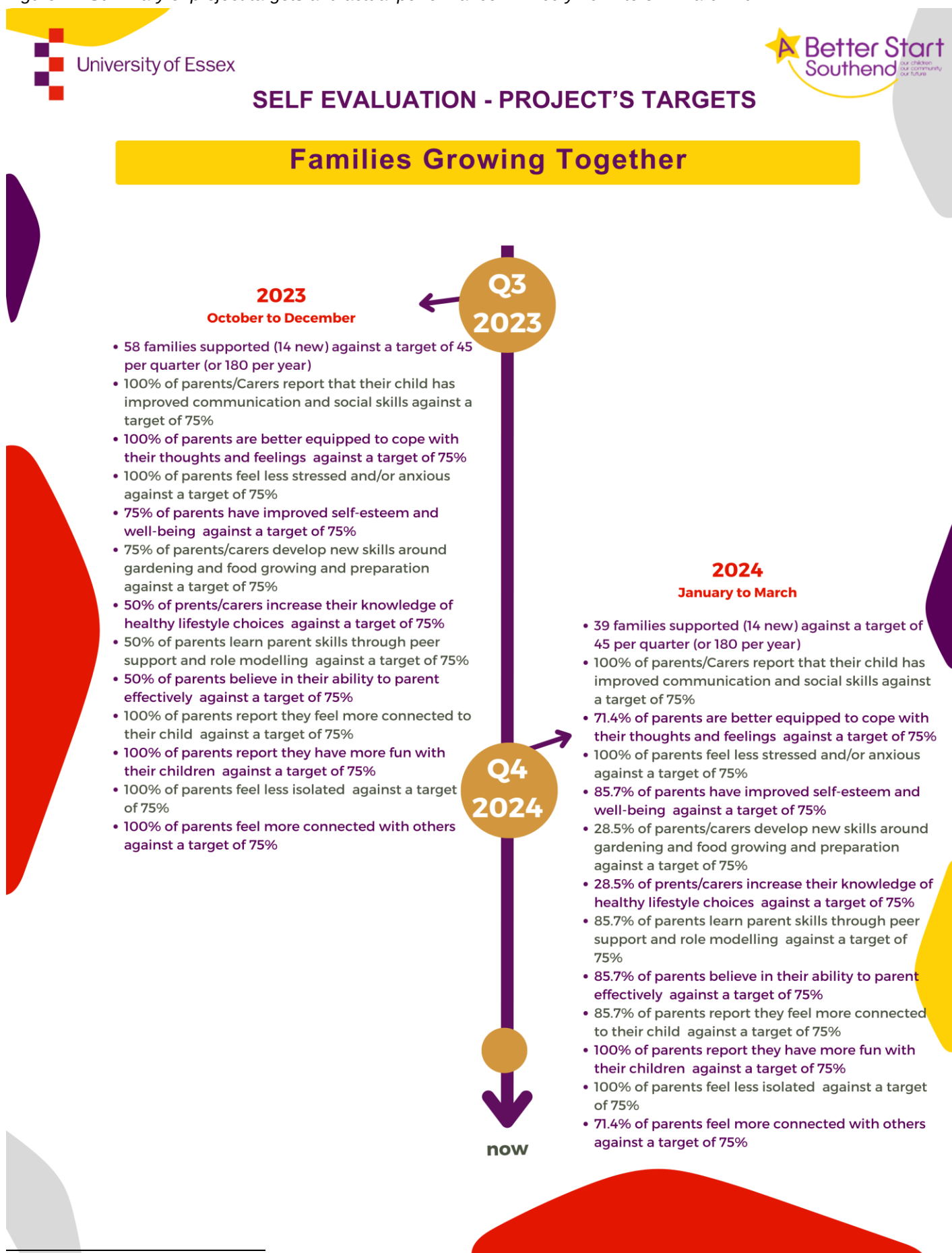
¹ A beneficiary is defined as a child under the age of four.

Figure 1. Summary of number of beneficiaries, project's reach into deprived wards, beneficiaries' ethnic groups² and wards – 1st July 2022 to 31st March 2024 - data downloaded from Southend City Council data dashboard on the 18th June 2024.



² Ethnicity data reported above *excludes* the percentage of participants for whom no ethnicity data is recorded (10.1%) and thus these figures should be interpreted with caution.

Figure 2³. Summary of project targets and actual performance – 1st July 2022 to 31st March 2024.



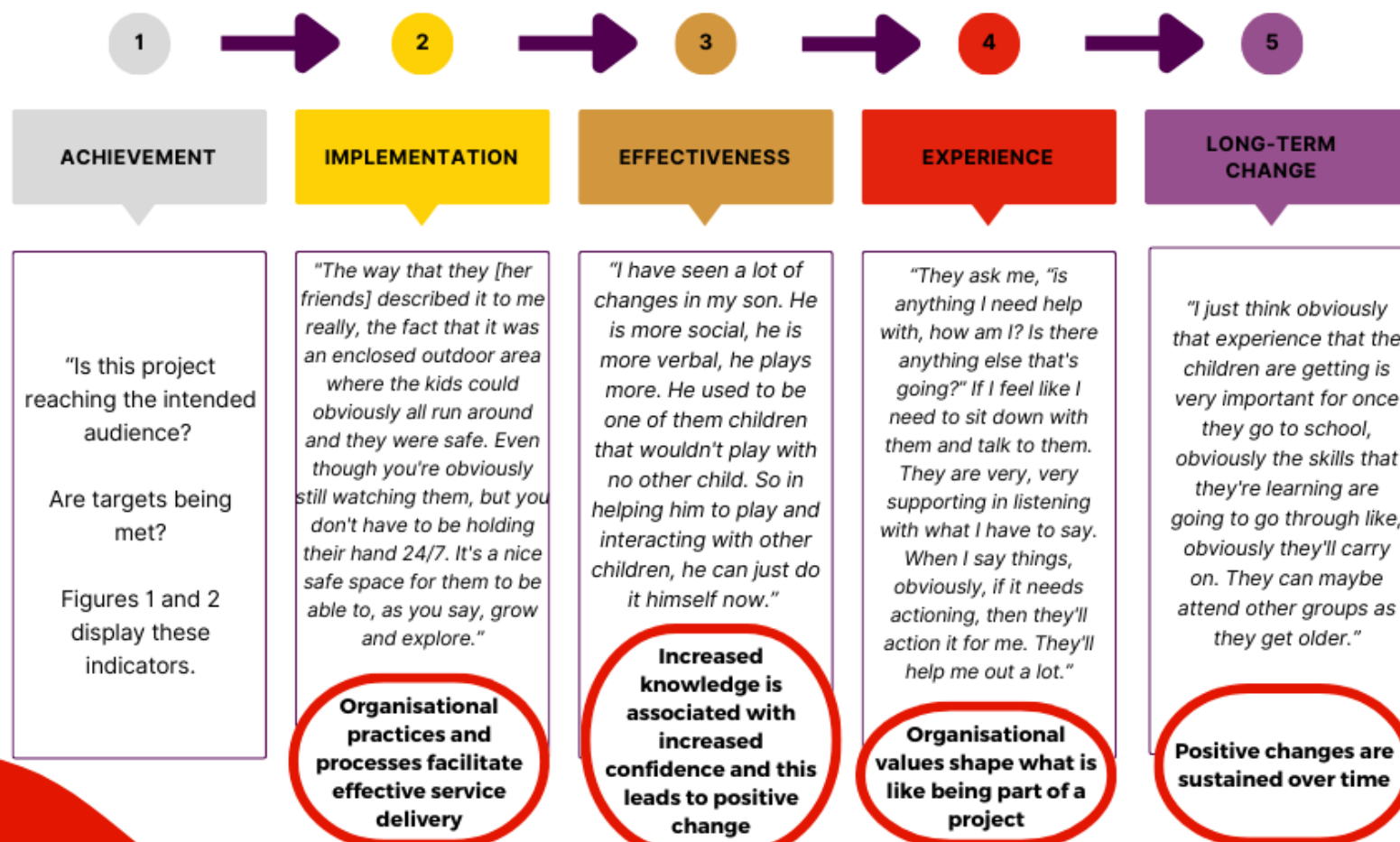
³ A Beneficiary is defined as a child under the age of four or a pregnant woman. Performance against the KPI target is based on 11 survey responses that were collected from November 2023 (4 responses between November-December 2023, and 7 responses between January-March 2024).

Figure 3. Summary of semi-structured interview findings – 1st July 2022 to 31st March 2024.



QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW DATA FINDINGS

Families Growing Together



3 Project impacts (1st of July 2022 to 31st of March 2024)

The remainder of this summary report provides an overview of project impact, drawing from KPI, online survey and interview data. Analysis of findings is reported on in relation to the five aspects of ABSS services (outlined in figure three above).

Section 3.1 of the report draws on service data obtained via Southend City Council's Project Activity Dashboard indicating that the project reached a total of 179 beneficiaries over the course of the reporting period.

The final section of the report (4 onwards) draws on findings from analysis of six one-to-one semi-structured qualitative interviews with parents, and eleven surveys completed during this same period of October 2021 to March 2024.

3.1 Summary of secondary data findings (1st of July 2022 to 31st of March 2024 (data downloaded on 18th June 2024)

3.1.1 Achievement: Is the Project reaching the intended audience? Are targets being met?

Owing to discrepancies within the datasets available for analysis, it is difficult to determine the extent to which the beneficiary engagement target has been met. According to the Southend City Council Dashboard data, Families Growing Together reached 179 primary beneficiaries⁴ over the course of the entire evaluation period, equating to approximately 9 additional beneficiaries on a monthly basis, or 102 per year. This is below the target to reach 336 beneficiaries and 115 fathers attending Dad's sessions within the same time period⁵. However, the project's Self-Monitoring reports show a total of 538 families and 88 fathers attended the service across the same period, well above the established target.⁶ There are at least two potential reasons for this discrepancy worth noting, however, it is not sufficiently clear to the research team the extent to which each account for the discrepancy. Firstly, a beneficiary is classified according to the Southend City Dashboard as a unique primary individual, whereas the self-monitoring reports are likely to include repeat beneficiaries, and multiple members of a family. Secondly, parents/carers may not have completed the registration process to be classified as an ABSS beneficiary on the Southend City Council Dashboard, whereas the self-monitoring data is comprised of more basic session attendance figures where no registration is required.

The reach of the project into the more deprived wards of Southend was broadly consistent across the reporting period at 67.6%, this was lower than the annual target to reach 80.3% of beneficiaries

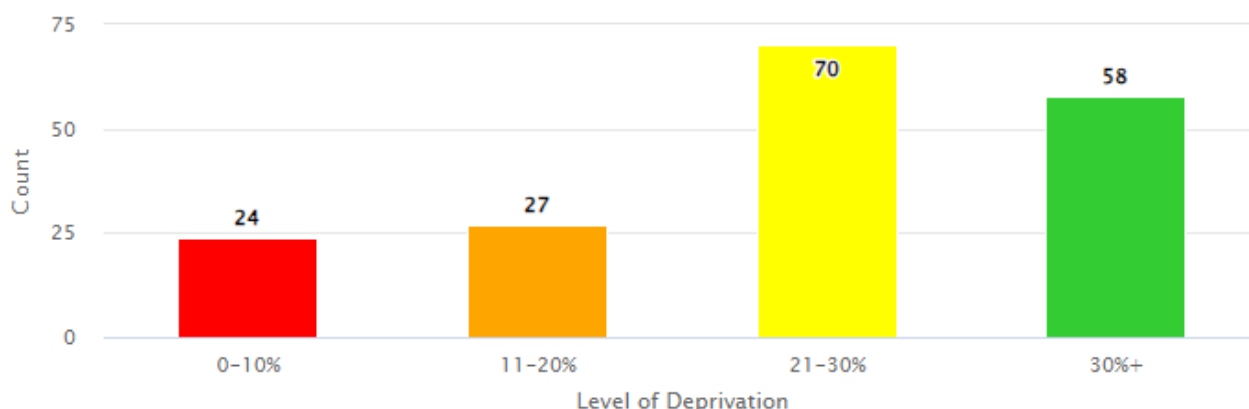
⁴ This figure is based on Southend City Council Dashboard data covering the period of 1st July 2022 to 31st March 2024. Beneficiary reach figures differ depending on date range searched for, likely linked with the removal of double counting.

⁵ This figure is drawn from the total of 114 beneficiaries and 50 dads for nine months of 2022/23 (covering July 2022 to March 2023) and 192 beneficiaries and 66 dads for a whole year of 2023/24.

⁶ This figure is drawn from a total of 215 families attending either Westcliff or Shoeburyness between July 2022 to March 2023 and 323 families attending either Westcliff, Shoeburyness or Kursaal between April 2023 to March 2024. Likewise, Total number of fathers attending Dad's sessions is drawn from a total of 35 fathers attending the dad's sessions between July 2022 to March 2023 and 53 fathers attending the sessions between April 2023 and March 2024.

living in the more deprived wards in Southend. Figure four and table one below show beneficiary reach by indices of multiple deprivation⁷ and as a percentage by wards respectively. Figure four shows that 13.4% of beneficiaries (24 of 179) live in an ABSS ward that falls within the 10% most deprived areas of England at the point of their engagement with FGT.⁸

Figure 4. Primary beneficiaries by deprivation – 1st July 2022 to 31st March 2024



Source: Southend City Council Data Dashboard

Table 1. Primary beneficiaries by Ward – 1st July 2022 to 31st March 2024

Ward	Count of Direct Beneficiaries	Count of beneficiaries as a %
Victoria	25	14.0%
Milton	22	12.3%
Kursaal	23	12.8%
Westborough	49	27.4%
Shoeburyness	49	27.4%
West Shoebury	11	6.1%
Total	179	100%

Source: Southend City Council Data Dashboard

⁷ The Index of Multiple Deprivation (<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019>), commonly known as the IMD, is the official measure of relative deprivation for small areas in England. It is the most widely used of the Indices of Deprivation.

⁸ [https://democracy.southend.gov.uk/Data/Cabinet/200410121400/Agenda/\\$att5431.doc.pdf](https://democracy.southend.gov.uk/Data/Cabinet/200410121400/Agenda/$att5431.doc.pdf)

Over the course of the evaluation period, the project has reached beneficiaries from minoritised ethnic groups. Figure six and table two overleaf show that the majority of primary beneficiaries (76% or 136 out of a total of 179 beneficiaries) identified as 'White', and 8.9% (16) as mixed/dual background, with very small number of beneficiaries identifying as 'Any Other Ethnic Group' (5, 2.8%), 'Asian or Asian British' (2, 1.1%), or 'Black or Black British' (2, 1.1%). Notably, 10.1% (18) of beneficiaries did not provide information about their ethnic identity, therefore a note of interpretive caution is needed in interpreting this data in terms of its implications for understanding the appeal or inclusivity of the service for different ethnic groups.

Table 2. Number of primary beneficiaries by ethnicity - 1st July 2022 to 31st March 2024

Ethnic group	Count of Direct Beneficiaries	Count of beneficiaries as a % of information provided
Asian or Asian British	2	1.1%
Any Other Ethnic Group	5	2.8%
Black or Black British	2	1.1%
Information Not Yet Obtained	18	10.1%
Mixed/Dual Background	16	8.9%
White	136	76.0%
Total number providing information	179	100%

Source: Southend City Council Data Dashboard

3.2 Secondary data findings (Findings from the Project's online survey - data covering 1st November 2023 to 31st of March 2024)

3.2.1 Achievements: Is the project reaching its intended audience? Are targets being met?

The project's online survey data is used to assess the performance of the project against a series of key performance indicators (KPI) established at the commencement of the project. Please note, survey collection commenced only from 1st November 2023, rather than the commencement of the project, and the below figures are based on a total of 11 responses over this period.

Target one: 'Parents/Carers report that their child has improved communication and social skills'.

Performance against this target shows that the project has been highly successful with all respondents either agreeing (36.36%) or strongly agreeing (66.64) with the statement that 'Spending time at Families Growing Together has helped my child to improve communication and/or social skills'.

Target two: 'Parents are better equipped to cope with their thoughts and feelings'

Performance against this target was broadly very positive, with seven parents (63.64%) agreeing, and two (18.18%) strongly agreeing with the statement 'Families growing together has helped me feel better equipped to cope with my thoughts and/or feelings'. A further two parents neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement.

Target three: 'Parents feel less stressed and/or anxious'

The project performed very strongly against this target, with seven parents (63.64%) strongly agreeing, and four parents (36.36%) agreeing with the statement that 'Families Growing Together has helped me feel less stressed and/or anxious'.

Target five: 'Parents have improved self-esteem and well-being'

Over 80% of respondent beneficiaries reported that Families Growing Together had positively shaped their self-esteem and well-being, with two parents (18.18%) agreeing and seven parents (63.64%) strongly agreeing to the statement that 'Families Growing Together has helped me improve my self-esteem and well-being'. A further one parent disagreed, and another neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement.

Target six: 'Parents/carers develop new skills around gardening and food growing and preparation'

Performance against this target was more mixed than most other established targets, with most parents neither agreeing or disagreeing (45.45%) with the statement that 'Families Growing Together has helped me develop new skills around gardening, food growing and/or preparation'. Approximately the same number of parents either agreed (27.27%) or strongly agreed (18.18%), while one parent disagreed. The high number of 'neither agree or disagree' responses may indicate that respondents did not understand the question or had not participated in FGT activities related to this outcome.

Target seven: 'Parents/carers increase their knowledge of healthy lifestyle choices'

As with target six, performance against this target was mixed. One parent (9.09%) disagreed, six parents (54.55%) neither agreed nor disagreed, and two parents each either agreed or strongly agreed (18.18% each) to the statement that 'Families Growing Together has helped me increase my knowledge of how to follow a healthy lifestyle.'

Target eight: 'Parents learn parent skills through peer support and role modelling.'

There was strong performance against this target with most parents either agreeing (27.27%) or strongly agreeing (45.45%) with the statement that 'Families Growing Together has helped me to learn parenting skills through seeing what other parents do', while one parent (9.09%) disagreed and two parents (18.18%) neither agreed nor disagreed.

Target nine: 'Parents believe in their ability to parent effectively.'

As with target eight, performance was generally strong against target nine, with eight parents either agreeing (7, 63.64%) or strongly agreeing (1, 9.09%) with the statement that 'Families Growing Together has helped me to feel more confident to parent my child effectively'. A smaller number of respondents disagreed (1, 9.09%) or neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement (2, 18.18%)

Target ten: 'Parents report they feel more connected to their child'.

One parent (9.09%) neither agreed nor disagreed, two parents (18.18%) agreed, and eight parents strongly agreed (72.73%) to the statement that 'Spending time at Families Growing Together has helped me to feel more connected to my child'. Hence, more than 90% of the parents either agreed or strongly agreed to the statement.

Target eleven: 'Parents report they have more fun with their children'

The available survey data indicates that the project has been successful in enabling parents to have more fun with their children. Three parents (27.27%) agreed, and eight parents (72.73%) strongly agreed with the statement that 'Spending time with Families Growing Together has helped me to have more fun with my child'.

Target twelve: 'Parents feel less isolated'.

Performance against this target was very strong, with all parents either agreeing (4, 36.36%) or strongly agreeing (7, 63.64%) to the statement that 'Families Growing Together helped me to feel less isolated'.

4 Interview and survey insights

The second way in which impact is measured is via the University of Essex formative evaluation. This consists of two elements: the first is an online survey managed by Families Growing Together (partially reported on in Section 3), that seeks to capture beneficiaries' experiences of the service to understand how it meets beneficiary need and their perception of the quality and effectiveness of the service. Secondly, qualitative semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 10 beneficiaries over the evaluation period.

4.1 Implementation: How is the project being implemented?

4.1.1 Access: How and why do parents access the project?

Across the evaluation period, the survey managed by the Families Growing Together and our interview data highlight a range of factors motivating parents to join the Families Growing Together weekly sessions. Survey data shows diverse referral pathways, with the Families Growing Together website or social media most common (28%), followed by the ABSS website or social media (16%) and ABSS or Trust Links staff (16%), as illustrated in Figure 5 overleaf.

Table 3: How did you hear about Trust Links/Families Growing Together? – 1st November 2023 to 31st March 2024

Source	Count of Direct Beneficiaries	Count of beneficiaries as a % of information provided
Friend/Family Member	7	28%
Trust Links/FGT website or social media	4	16%
ABSS website or social media	4	16%
ABSS or Trust Links staff	2	8%
Family Nurse	2	8%
Perinatal Mental Health Team	1	4%
Health Visitors	1	4%
Health Professional (e.g. GP)	1	4%
ABSS or Trust Links volunteer	1	4%
Other	2	7%
Total number providing information	25	100%

Source: Families Growing Together online evaluation

Interviews with beneficiaries provided an opportunity to better understand the paths taken by parents and families engaging in Families Growing Together sessions. Endorsement from other parents and word of mouth emerged as a key avenue for parents interviewed, in addition to engagement with other ABSS funded services:

“I found it through another mum that I met at a playgroup. She used to call this the chicken place. Go and see the chickens. That was about two years ago. About two and a half years ago, so I've been coming here nearly every Friday for two and a half years. I love it.”

“It was through my friends actually. My friends [name] and [name] already came here, so it was nice that I had friends that already came here, which is what gave me the confidence to come originally for the first time. The first time we came, [name of child] was one and he's turning three soon, so it's been a little while.”

“Someone told me about it, but I used to walk during Covid because there was nothing to do. We used to walk around all day when we were allowed. And then I used to walk past, and I saw the signs, so I thought when it opens, I will come. Then someone I know told me it was open, so that's when we decided to come.”

“...I think because I was going to the breastfeeding group. Then they started advertising for this one... We came the very first week that they opened...”

"It was from my support worker from YourFamily. She was talking about it and then she made me go over. And then ever since I've been going there every single week, ever since that day I ever found out about place."

"we'd seen it online and then we went to an event where obviously they were advertising different activities. Then the only other thing I would say is obviously my daughter obviously did attend as well. She attended some of the other groups, and we had attended in the holidays when they run some holiday activities. That's how we know obviously I guess growing together."

A key motivating factor for parents engaging in the Families Growing Together sessions was the safe, quiet and enclosed environment available for children to play, which many noted was something they did not have access to within their own home or elsewhere. The environment of Families Growing Together was also seen to enable some greater degree of independence for children, in that parents were confident in the safety of the environment and could therefore be less intensive with their supervision of play:

"Where I live in a flat, I have no outdoor space whatsoever. I have no balcony, so [it] gets him out. He can run around, he's quiet, he's peaceful. Staff are friendly. It's just lovely."

"The way that they [her friends] described it to me really, the fact that it was an enclosed outdoor area where the kids could obviously all run around, and they were safe. Even though you're obviously still watching them, but you don't have to be holding their hand 24/7. It's a nice safe space for them to be able to, as you say, grow and explore."

"...Giving him that more space to do what he wanted to do. Bless him. It's really nice and helpful with the other kids as well, because the socialisation for them as well."

"Because obviously it's nice, it's a lot of outdoor activities and [name of child] loves being outdoors. He hates being stuck indoors, especially with it being quite cold and that he still wants to get outdoors and it's the perfect environment for that."

"Mainly the expectation is to keep him happy and entertained really. As long as he's entertained, it doesn't take much for a two-year-old to keep entertained really. As long as there's something here for him to do and run around in. It's a place for him to work off some energy really."

"Because we were in need of activities, things to do for the kids every time. It's really close here so we walk here. I live around. It's nice."

"Obviously we could explore an outside environment, which meant obviously we were kind of... Yeah, it was a safe space for us to be attending."

4.2 Quality and Experience: What is it like being part of the programme?

4.2.1 Parents' experiences on the Families Growing Together service:

Across the period of our evaluation, survey and interview data indicate that parents' experiences of the Families Growing Together project have been very positive. The perceived safe open space and wide range of activities for children of all ages, opportunities for children to play in natural environment and to know about plants and animals the supportiveness and helpfulness of staff, in addition to their knowledge and experience, emerged as central to these positive experiences.

Parents highlighted the variety of activities on offer as important for maintaining interest and engagement of their children, and supporting socialisation between children who may find this difficult in more structured environments:

"They've got all different stuff. It's always different every time. They like to change the theme every time, which is really nice. It's not like it's the same every week."

"We were going every week, every other week, on that Monday. Just to get the kids out of the house really, keeping them entertained. [She] likes it because they've got Play-doh, or they do painting, or stone drawing, and she enjoys all of that."

"It means that I can let her loose a little bit, so she is free to kind of do what she wants, she's in a safe environment where I know that she's not going to get out, because there's other adults watching. I get time to sit down and have a cup of tea with another adult, or I'm playing with [name of child] in the shade, and they've got garden chairs and they put mats out for the younger ones to be able to play and interact and watch the older ones of their run around and investigating."

"We've done growing, they've done picking, we just love to explore. We like to go over to the pond, see the beehives. We've attended pottery when it's been fairs and that type of event as well. We've been there when it's been messy play, which really enjoyed everything when it was that type of activity. It's just a lovely space to just spend some time."

"Just a whole range because I've got two little ones and there's three years between. There'll be some activities that will be more suited for my little girl, which would be the messy plays and just those activities. And then with my boy maybe a plant here, activities. Something it's a bit more hands on that involves those larger motor skills. So, they'd growing together gardens where we'd go, and they'd do colouring in and activities. We'd have breakfast and stuff like that and reading and whatnot."

Additionally, for parents, a 'softer' outcome of the environment and activities was the opportunity to socialise and meet other parents without the pressure of a more structured 'group' environment, and without the distraction of needing to keep a very close supervision of their child(ren):

"It's very kind of... It's very easy to feel comfortable and you can just... You can just have a chat and there's somebody there to listen... Obviously for myself, I just think it's nice to have some people that you can kind of... If I'm not having a great day, obviously there's somebody else there to just have a chat with and obviously they'll obviously offer support and advice obviously if they can."

“... what I found going to the Dad's Group is my little boy would recognise some of the other children from my wife taking him to groups. And then I'd then get talking to the dad and that would, we'd discover that you'd just get chatting about your little one and realise that they've met before and the mums and now wives know each other. That sort of thing I think.”

“I think this is fantastic. I've told my mum about it, and she's wished that she had something like this when we were younger. It's absolutely amazing. No one knows about it really. Like I said, it just feels like such a little community feel here. I can't say enough good words about it. It's just nothing but good. Good positivity.”

“... it is nice to come somewhere and talk over a cup of tea. Because it's not so difficult now when [name of child] is older, but when she was little, you can't even sit and have a cup of tea in your own house.”

4.2.2 Parents' experiences and perceptions of project staff:

Our analysis highlights the critical role played by project staff in supporting families' positive experiences with Families Growing Together. Interviewed parents highlighted the staff as welcoming, friendly, and skilled at engaging their children in the Families Growing Together environment:

“They're very welcoming. As soon as you walk through the gate, [they would ask] “Would you like a drink?” Obviously, you just sign the register and they're just very welcoming. They've got open ears, and they always have open ears. They'll never turn their back or anything. They always listen to you and help you and support you in whatever way they can help, which is nice.”

“So, when I got there, I got offered a drink, they asked about my family life and spoke to my children as humans really, they didn't downplay things, they didn't baby them, so they invited [name of child] round to play with them straight away...”

“We've never attended and there's been someone there that we've thought, “Oh, that they're not very approachable.” Everyone always seems very lovely, very friendly, happy as well. The staff and volunteers seem happy!”

“If they see a child is very, very shy in there and don't want to really play, they'll encourage them to play, or they'll sit down and whatever they want to do.”

Parents also reflected on how staff had impacted on their own sense of belonging and comfort in the Families Growing Together environment, with some noting how staff and the project had supported their own mental health and sense of wellbeing:

“I just love it. Because there's a lot there, the headspace and clearing my head, just having time out. It's just so peaceful, and you always get people checking up on you to see that you're alright. They're just very helpful, very supportive. I would never have anything bad to say about

them, to be honest. It's always positive with them. They're like family to me. I look at them as family."

"It's been brilliant. They make you feel welcome from the second you walk through the gate. It's just the warm and it gets a loving family. You just become an extended family but I can't fault and they're all absolutely amazing."

"Coming from someone with anxiety as well and I've never felt uncomfortable here ever. I will always recommend it to mums as well that are in obviously the ABSS areas. I always recommend it to my friends as well, because it's as I said, I can't rave about this place enough really."

Another measure of the positive impacts of the project on parents, and their experience of the Families Growing Together environment was the number of interviewees who spoke of recommending the project to others, for example:

"It's so nice that we're recommending it to other people and then there's more people knowing about it, and they're using that service. It's lovely to see a service being used instead of a service that people don't know it's there and it's there for people that need it."

"[I recommend it to] Everyone. Although my family have not been here, all my family know about it. Friends know about it. It's absolutely fantastic. All the mums down at my son's nursery, I tell all of them. I've told all of them about this place, but you see they've not come. It's their loss."

"Yeah. It will be something that will pass on to our people and obviously he goes to nursery and stuff like that. I don't know if they may already know about it, but it's something that we've passed on to our people to come and check out. Definitely."

4.2.3 Suggestions for improvement

Given our formative focus, our interviews were an opportunity to understand participant experiences of the project as it developed and identify from the perspective of parents how the service might be further developed or adapted to meet beneficiary needs and expectations.

Some parents noted specific activities or pieces of equipment they felt would be useful additions to the Families Growing Together environment, for example:

"A climbing frame or some sort, that kids can climb on that space."

"I think obviously where they have like... they do have themed events. Maybe more obviously like [those] where they had some other people come in and do messy play, that type of activity. Maybe some more of that would be nice as well."

"A few more water plays, so they've got a big space, so water play is actually a big option. Because they're in a garden, everything needs watering. Water play would be a good thing.... During the summer, that's what parents want, they want a safe space for kids to play, get wet,

cool down, without having to the stress about them running through the house, wet, with sand and dirt stuck to their feet.”

“I think that the Dad's Club on a Saturday morning there was a breakfast offered and I think a lot of guys are simple like that. I think if there's some incentive to go, you get a sausage sandwich or something like that or I think it just benefits, I think maybe particularly if there's a sporting element to it or something like that really, I think it might kind of encourage dads in particular a little bit more. If you offer free food kind of personally, I'll be like okay, there's some free food and I'll take them along.”

A second theme regarding suggestions for improvement shared by several participants was an improved marketing or communication strategy to ensure that families across the area were aware of Families Growing Together:

“I think advertisement would help as well with the whole service. Because not a lot of people know what it is, because you go past it, just look like anything. It doesn't look like you can go in there and do whatever. But its also kind of local advertisement. Even if they had it on the radio or advertised it in a supermarket. Just making the sign bigger outside would help, because the sign they've got, you can't see from the road.”

“Probably get the word out a bit more. It's the same people come every week and has been since I've been coming here. I don't know. But finding ways to boost the advertising sides of things. What else would I do? I feel like I've been put on the spot now. I think it's fantastic here. There's nothing much that I would really improve.”

“As I say, get the information out there, because as I say, its so valuable. If it is another mum that struggles with mental health like me, its good for them to know because it helps. It really helps.”

4.3 Effectiveness: How is participation impacting parents?

4.3.1 How does the project impact the lives of parents and the wider community?

Analysis of survey and interview data highlights several positive impacts of the Families Growing Together sessions on both parents the community more broadly. Parents shared how the sessions had promoted their children's inquisitiveness, supported more healthy eating habits, and developed their understanding of nature and the environment:

“...it [FGT] has intrigued her [child], she's fascinated with her magnifying glass, so even when we go to the breastfeeding club, because we're at the garden club she wants the magnifying glass, and she runs around with that and looks for things in the garden. She also gets to try a lot more of the fruit and veg, so its not necessarily, rhubarb isn't something I'd go out of my way to buy, but they've got it growing there, so she's got to try Rhubarb and they let her pick the fruit of the bush, they've got blackberries, there's a lot of strawberries available for them to pick and eat. She enjoys doing that because she's a bit of a snacker.”

"He literally loves crawling through the garden, pulls himself up on everything, grabs hold of the leaves, touches. So, it's quite sensory for him."

"Obviously, they like watching the fruits and plants. They like seeing them growing. They like seeing obviously the stages. Obviously of course, the best bit for them is obviously being able to pick something and then wash it and eat it."

"They also have a little pond there where we've been able to watch the frogs spawn, and you watch how the tadpole grow and turn into frogs. [Name of child] has been watching that for the last year, watching the pond change from being barely anything to a spring of life, yeah."

Beyond the immediate focus of the content delivered in Families Growing Together sessions, our data highlights how the sessions supported bonding between children and their parents, and with parents of other children, for example:

"Just that building that relationship with my children, but I've now got friends in the local area that I still meet up with and the little ones are friends, so they keep in contact with their friends that they've met outside of the nursery and the school and whatnot. That's just nice for that really."

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"I think already it has helped me develop a really good bond with my children and done things with them otherwise I might not have done. So, I think definitely helped me learn a lot more about my children."

"It's really an opportunity once in a week, come here with my baby, she can play around, and I have little chitchat with the ladies. It's for mental wellbeing, some physical, because my baby she got some space to walking around her development."

"No, it's just good to come down. Any advice that you need, people are always here to help and it's just nice. Like I said, it's a little community."

"...we come every week so pretty much with the same kids every week, so we know each other even from outside. We meet outside as well. It's nice if you know many people you need to have that interaction with other kids. That's nice because then you can meet them outside as well."

"One thing it's been good, is because there's lots of different people that come here. You do get to see other people's parenting styles and how they interact with their children that you don't. When you send your child to nursery, you don't see that yourself. But when you're coming somewhere and you get to know people, you're learning about how they parent their children, and you pick up things from that actually."

“...But that day I realised she is also very happy. After going home, she ate well, she sleeps well. It’s good to go with her somewhere. Now she starts building the relation like she saw the other children. She is trying to follow them at home.”

The parents noted several benefits in terms of socialisation and connection, both between parents and children, and these were seen to extend beyond the sessions themselves in the sense that there was a general improvement in feelings of connection and reduced isolation. For example:

“It will be good for their social skills as well. He’s been spending a lot of time with different members of my family which will take him for different activities, he’ll still have social interaction with other babies and toddlers.”

“I guess the children obviously, is building their confidence, definitely that helps them.”

“I’ve always been a lot shy. I’ve always been very shy... But when I’m there, I feel like I can open up to people, I can say hello, I can try and talk to people. I just feel like my social life is free. I can be free. I can then let all my emotions out really.... You’ll see how much the Trust Links and all different services really have a really good impact on me.”

“I have seen a lot of change in my son. He is more social, he is more verbal, he plays more. He used to be one of them children that wouldn’t play with no other child. So, in helping him to play and interacting with other children, he can just do it himself now.”

“As I say, the socialisation element of it, I think is super, super important. Because as you said, again with the how isolating parenthood can be and all of things like that, it’s nice to be able to come...It can be, as you say, isolating to be stuck in the same four walls, 24/7 when you’re parenting your child. It’s really nice to be able to come here and have that outdoor and a bit of freedom really. It’s really, really helpful. Really helpful.”

“It’s very isolating when the kids are young, if you don’t know what to do and even to share, even to vent with other parents, it’s really nice. I would recommend all the groups, just to go and meet people and spend some time and they get to do something different every week.”

5 Summary of key findings and recommendations

Our evaluation has highlighted the positive impact of the Families Growing Together project and identified several key areas of impact for both parents and children. Key to the success of this project, our data suggests, has been the open and flexible nature of services provided, and the capacity of staff to facilitate a welcoming environment which parents perceived as flexible to their needs and goals. As intended, the Families Growing Together functioned as safe open space for children to engage in various activities, engage with the nature and socialise with other children. Equally it functioned as space for parents to bring their child for the weekly sessions and get time to engage in activities or socialise with other parents and get support if needed. The survey data suggests that some activity areas were more impactful on parents and families than others, for example, there was more ambivalence with respect to the development of gardening and food growing knowledge as compared with parenting skills and socialisation. However, our interview data highlights the significance of the impacts for many parents who felt that Families Growing Together

was a place where they could 'belong' and connect with other parents while providing an opportunity for their children to play and interact in an environment which they could not find elsewhere.

In terms of next steps and recommendations, the project may consider introducing more 'peer led' design elements which could involve parents facilitating groups or different sessions, collating and sharing family feedback, or proposing session ideas. Additionally, given the beneficiary data highlighting some limits to engagement with ethnically minoritised communities, the project may consider specific strategies for involving these groups. For example, events or activities could be tailored to specific cultural needs or contexts, or outreach and promotion activities could look to employ more targeted strategies for engaging ethnically minoritised communities.