

# Smart Start

## Foundation project executive summary

Giving Warwickshire's children the best start in life

Smart Start is a 3 year programme aimed at improving the health and wellbeing of children aged 0-5 years in Warwickshire by giving them the best possible start in life.



Warwickshire is home to **37,974** 0-5 year old children

Together we want to increase the number of children who are measured as being 'ready for school' by the age of 5.

2015 67% achieved a good level of development (GLD)



By 2020 80% will achieve a good level of development GLD



As an initial part of the programme, research was undertaken under the umbrella of the Smart Start Foundation Project. The research was designed to gain a better understanding of the experiences of local families with children aged 0-5 years (including expectant parents);

what help they valued?

where they went for advice and encouragement?

any unmet needs and perceived gaps in support?

## The Smart Start Foundation Project was designed to....

Uncover new insights about families of children aged 0-5 years and communities.

Help challenge assumptions.

Reframe the problems to be solved.

## We did research in three parts from Dec 2015 - June 2016

Two research strands focused on hearing from parents and carers. One of these also mapped community strengths and resources that supported 0-5s families. The third research strand involved listening to frontline workers who supported families with 0-5 year old children (including expectant parents).

### Research with parents and carers

1



We heard the voices of **1,127** parents and carers

**574** online survey responses  
**377** Face to face interviews  
**36** Focus groups

We also mapped the things in communities that help support 0-5s families, to assess which locations had greater or fewer 'assets'.

2



We carried out more detailed ethnographic research to uncover the realities of daily life for **8 families** across Warwickshire.

3

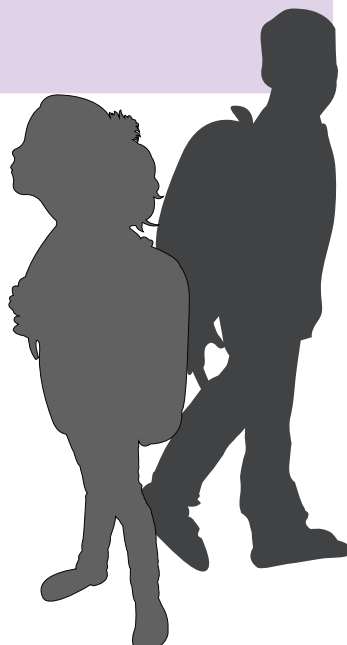


We heard the voices of **274** frontline workers

**71** semi-structured interviews  
**29** focus groups.

### Of the people we heard from:

17% non- white British  
12% lone parents  
13% workless families  
6% disability  
58% do not use children's centres very often.



# How we're using the data

It has informed the **Smart Start Strategy** and its future work programme.

It is supporting the redesign of 0-5 services in Warwickshire.

It is informing the health visiting transformation and re-design process.

It has resulted in additional investment in Family Support Services.

## What the data revealed

### Key themes and challenges

#### Isolation and loneliness

This was a recurrent theme. Many new parents and carers (including grandparents and child-minders) said:

*"I felt isolated and didn't really know who to talk to"... "It can be a very lonely time"... "It was and still is really lonely".*

Isolation was geographical, social, and financial. Poor access to information also resulted in further isolation.

**30% of parents/carers did not cite family and friends as 'most supportive'. These people were more reliant on services.**



#### Stigma, shame and social anxiety

The stigma of being seen as 'needing help' puts some parents off accessing services. Fear of 'mummy shaming' and not being the parent they wanted to be was linked to social anxieties:

*"I felt everyone was judging me for being really young even though I was 25"*

*"If I look after my kids too much, they think something's wrong with you".*

## Targeted vs Universal approaches

Parents did not like to present themselves as being in need (at least not publically). Instead, they wanted to be recognised for their efforts and stance in wanting the best for their children.

Staff worried that funding cuts had resulted in a shift towards support that did not always appeal to families being targeted. They argued for more universal parenting groups - from the antenatal period - that were appealing to all, and provided an opportunity to quickly spot those struggling to cope, so that early help could be offered.

*"Children's centres are now focused on targeting 'vulnerable' families, which stops all families from going... but then (struggling) families won't come because it's seen to be for 'vulnerable' families. They're in the spot light and they don't like it."*

## More groups & peer support

Frontline workers said there were fewer groups for parents and their babies/children than in the past because of funding cuts and fewer parents with time to volunteer.

Parents and carers wanted more group opportunities for building peer support from the antenatal period, but often lacked information on how and where to access these:

*"It took me a long time to find out about [all of] the groups."*

Others felt intimidated or unwelcome:

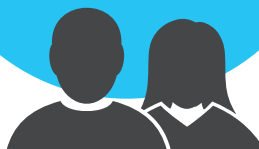
*"(in) the mum and baby groups I attended the mums were very cliquy"... "Some groups feel like a closed shop."*

Several parents struggled to find groups that accepted different aged children:

*"Having more than one child seems to make it really difficult to access groups. A lot are aimed at parents with one child, you can feel excluded"*

Staff worried about the lack of group support opportunities for parents of children with SEN/D.

**20% of parents /carers said groups run by community venues or places of worship offered the 'most useful' support after their baby was born.**



**A No.1 Priority: 26% of frontline staff nominated 'more parenting groups and peer networking opportunities' as one of four top priorities for Smart Start action.**



## Learning to be a parent

Frontline staff talked of the need to 'normalise' parenting education as early as possible both in secondary schools and antenatally.

*"We've got to normalise it, so every parent goes on a parenting programme (from the antenatal period). There needs to be a positive shift, where it's not seen as criticising, but that everyone does it as a matter of course."*

## Holistic antenatal support

The offer of parenting preparation classes and groups was limited and very patchy across the county. Classes were viewed as being limited to instruction about the birthing process and breastfeeding.

Parents wanted more practical, broad and realistic information and guidance about birth and becoming a parent:

*"the main focus was the birth... (there was) very little information about actually coping with a baby".*

Frontline workers echoed this:

*"Antenatal is a really important window for building parental knowledge and confidence, but we are missing it at the moment".*

Parents talked of "brilliant" but "rushed" midwives, and not seeing the same midwife twice. Many second time parents said they felt they'd been "left to get on with it".

**60% of parents had not attended any antenatal classes. This increased to 81% amongst workless parents.**



**30% of parents said they'd wanted more support in preparing for birth and the early days of parenting.**



**30% of parents said they'd needed more support in adjusting to the early days after their baby was born.**



## Support in the early days

The early days after a baby is born can be critical in nurturing attachment between parent and child. However, a lack of antenatal information had left parents poorly prepared. They said this had dented their emotional wellbeing and confidence.

Parents who'd experienced pre-term or complicated births were particularly affected.

## Mother's last

Many mothers felt it was right to put their own needs last, at the expense of their own health and wellbeing. However, this could have a longer term impact on their children.

*"As a mum you're last on the list... You do for everybody else first and there is no time left for yourself."*

### Fathers at their limits and precarious futures

Some fathers reported working long hours, for low pay which left them feeling anxious about their ability to provide for their family now or in the future.

### Some new mums talked about a 'loss of self'

*"There are less things for 'being you' outside of being a parent, it's like society expects 100% of your life to become 'baby baby'. It's a very overwhelming feeling, like you have lost your sense of identity"*

## Warm welcome & 'softer' entry process

Parents talked about the importance of having the support they needed without having to repeat their story. They wanted affordable, local and easily accessible help from welcoming, respectful and non-judgemental staff.

Ethnographic findings suggested it did not matter exactly how the service reached families. What mattered was who the person delivering the service was, and the kind of relationship that was formed with them.

This was also understood by frontline staff:

*"There's a need for places and support that are informal... so that parents might not know who they're talking to (in terms of cadre)...different roles are a turn off... Staff, whoever they are, need to relate to families beyond their own service – to treat them as a whole".*

**A No.1 Priority:  
31% of frontline staff  
nominated 'improved  
integration of 0-5s  
services and systems' as  
the top priority for Smart  
Start action.**



## Joining up services and systems

Frontline workers shared frustration that too much time was spent trying to negotiate and build partnerships, and that what was needed was a 'systems' approach to services integration - driven from the top. They repeatedly argued that this would increase efficiency and reduce duplication of effort and improve the experience of services.

*"We need to all work to shared outcomes so we aren't pulling in different directions"*

*"We need more joint working and joining up of expertise, as no one service is going to make the difference to (0-5) children and their families."*

## Reach and depth of help

Given current funding pressures, and limited physical resource, we need to consider how to balance sufficient reach with and enough depth of services. This includes the need to provide support outside normal working hours for struggling working parents, and how to get help to those families experiencing physical and financial isolation.

*"We have mums on Working Tax Credit who are just about keeping their heads above water. We find they need more work from us, to help narrow the school readiness gap, yet there's no 2Help, deprivation funding or pupil premium attached to these children, and they have little access to children centre support." (pre-school)*

*"Many of our mums can't drive and they won't travel far - these are walking distance parents...and they won't go more than a couple of blocks."(children's centre)*

*"If you live out in (an isolated community) and have no transport you're reliant on what is going on in your area and quite often there is nothing going on for parents." (3rd sector organisation)*

## Mental health and wellbeing

There was a shared recognition by frontline workers of the importance of promoting mental well-being of parents, carers and infants, as well as challenging the stigma and fear of disclosing mental health difficulties for fear of their child/ren being “taken away”.

Parents gave strong messages about the impact of becoming a parent on their mental health and wellbeing. Many reported having suffered from post-natal depression.

Parents said their low mood prevented them from making the leap into a group, because they worried about experiencing criticism or rejection.

Grandparents described the impact of providing childcare to grandchildren on their health and wellbeing, and their feelings of isolation.

**A No.1 Priority: Frontline staff nominated ‘better mental health support’ as one of four top priorities for Smart Start action.**



**23% of workless and 10% of parents in working households didn't know where to go to get support if they were feeling low. And, workless parents reported poorer social support.**



## Adult mental health

There were repeated concerns about insufficient access to adult mental health support, particularly for lower-level problems, with long waiting times.

There was a call for pregnant and perinatal parents to be fast-tracked into early help, because of the potential impact on their infants.

*“I felt I was passed from pillar to post and made to feel even worse with my mental health problems”*

## Child mental health

Repeated concerns raised about the inadequate provision of infant mental health services (under 5yrs): “CAMHS is officially a 0-17 service, but only occasionally will CAMHS take under 5yr olds.”

## Parent-infant' mental health

The need for more specific dyadic (parent-infant) mental health expertise (including supervision) and interventions to reduce the risk of insecure attachment, particularly in babies of mothers with Post-Natal Depression. (PND)

## Family Support Service

Family support workers (FSWs) were highly valued by parents and professionals alike, but the service was seen to be at "breaking-point".

Staff called for strategic clarity on the role of early years FSWs, as there was a shared concern that their 'preventative' role had been eroded by different competing demands.

**A No.1 Priority:  
Frontline staff  
nominated 'greater  
provision and access to  
FSWs' as  
one of four top priorities  
for Smart Start action.**



## Hidden problems, hidden complexities

Several families who shared their experience with our researchers had hidden problems that conceal further layers of complexities. Solving the immediate problem may only be a sticking plaster that does not address the real problems behind it.

Frontline workers echoed this finding:

*"I can't quite let go of families, I try and fix everything. I don't think I'm the only one that has issues exiting families coz you do find that there's a lot more going on than what you originally thought".*

## Community-led play and learning activities for 0-5s families

**76%** of parents and carers talked of the benefits of participating in group activities in order to meet new parents and children and to get support and advice.

**42%** had found children's centres most helpful in achieving this and **20%** cited other community venues or places of worship.

However, asset mapping highlighted some significant differences in access to community-led activities and groups across the county. With a greater reliance on public-funded activities in parts of the county where there are fewer community assets.



## Challenges of co-production, harnessing and building community 0-5s assets

The Smart Start programme recognised the potential and value of “unlocking parent and community assets” to enhance support for local 0-5s families.

However, feedback from parents and frontline workers pointed to a general reduction, over the last few years, in the number of community-led groups for 0-5s families and parent volunteers.

*"There are fewer (parent) volunteers, because mums are getting terrible pressure to go back to work..."*

## Communicating with parents via the internet

Surprisingly some parents did not use social media and said they were unlikely to learn about new services via the internet.

Our research found that antenatal and new parents from working households were more than twice as likely to use the internet to seek information and support than parents from workless households.

## Challenges highlighted by our research findings

- ➔ How do we communicate with people who are genuinely hard to reach?
- ➔ What does a ‘warm welcome’ look like when entering services?
- ➔ How do we solve the problems of both ‘reach’ and ‘depth’ of service provision?
- ➔ Integrated services are one thing, but how do we deliver an ‘integrated experience’?
- ➔ How do we create communications that are meaningful to all, without being patronising?
- ➔ How do we ramp up the quality of ‘experience’ without ramping up the costs?
- ➔ How do we unlock community assets and parental skills?

These are questions we will be considering as we move forward with early help redesign and planning work, as well as the delivery of the Smart Start Strategy's work programmes.

Do you want to read the full Foundation Project reports?

**1. WCAVA  
Engagement and  
asset mapping  
report**

**2. Ethnographic  
research report**

**3. Summary report  
of engagement with  
frontline workers**

**[www.warwickshire.gov.uk/smartstart](http://www.warwickshire.gov.uk/smartstart)**

 Facebook [smartstartwarwickshire](https://www.facebook.com/smartstartwarwickshire)  Twitter [@SmartStartWarks](https://twitter.com/SmartStartWarks)

Warwickshire County Council. October 2016.