

Home-Start Southwark

Post-Pandemic Consultation Outcomes

Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought significant changes to the lives of families in Southwark. In response, Home-Start Southwark, and PACT, two local VCS charities, conducted a consultation with families with children under 5 to understand their experiences during the pandemic as well as resulting emerging health and social care needs. PACT conducted group work with families to ask questions and provide services (and will report on findings separately), while Home-Start engaged with families and volunteers through their peer training and support programme. This allowed for in-depth conversations with families to find out what was worrying children and parents, deliver training programmes aimed at addressing these issues, and make recommendations for Southwark Council to commission services that respond to these emerging needs.

We recognised how crucial it is to capture the voices of parents, children, and women who were pregnant during the pandemic to gain a better understanding of how the pandemic has affected their lives. The consultation not only aimed to understand the key legacy issues for children and parents, but also support the case for early intervention, and inform future commissioning. By really listening to the families, we can gain valuable insights that will help us shape the delivery of services that cater to those needs.

The project ran from June 2022 to April 2023, with training courses continuing to be delivered through the current spring and summer. It is hoped that the findings of this consultation will be instrumental in guiding future commissioning and early intervention efforts for families with young children in Southwark.

We dedicated a full day of one of our Family Support Coordinators (Helen Glanville) to lead this piece of work supported by the family support team and volunteers. Our Business Manager also provided technical support with the survey and promotion tools. Our management team helped shape the methodology, support the project lead, and collate the research.

We also delivered some targeted groups where there have been gaps, referred/engaged families with specialist services and increased the length of time we work with families according to need.

Key messages from Parents and carers:

- **They are worried about their child's emotions and behaviour,**
- **They are concerned about their children's speech, language, and communication skills,**
- **They are worried about their child's opportunities to play and socialise,**
- **Money worries are making it difficult for them to focus on their children,**
- **Family stress is affecting their ability to parent as they would want to,**

- **The family's mental wellbeing has been affected by isolation and poor support networks.**

Recommendations arising are that Southwark Council should focus on delivering and commissioning services aimed at:

- **Universal family activities and groups,**
- **Delivering a wider range of tailored parenting support,**
- **Commissioning peer support in the home environment.**

Methodology

To better understand the impact of the pandemic on parents and children, we employed a multi-faceted data collection approach, incorporating an online survey, snapshots, and in-depth interviews.

The **online survey** was administered from September to November 2022 and was shared through Home-Start social media platforms and direct outreach to families in Southwark with at least one child under the age of 5. To ensure the inclusion of families with language and literacy barriers, Home-Start FSCs actively supported and encouraged participation from a diverse range of backgrounds. From the survey, we received over 200 responses, but used 53 which were complete and met all the criteria.

In addition to the online survey, we gathered **snapshot responses** from families, staff, and volunteers (we met the target of 50) about their experiences during and after the pandemic through ongoing conversations and interactions. These insights were complemented by meetings with volunteers and staff to share their experiences of working with families during this time.

To gain a deeper understanding of the impact of the pandemic, we conducted 20 **in-depth interviews** between December 2022 and March 2023. These interviews were led by Home-Start Family Support Coordinators (FSC), who contacted families that had agreed to be interviewed from the original survey or were known to the FSCs. We also held a specific session for volunteers to share their experiences and conduct interviews, ensuring a diversity of perspectives. The interviewees included 20 families that had been supported by Home-Start, and the sample included both married/co-habiting and single parents, as well as a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds.

We had aimed for 50 interviews, but quickly realised there was not the capacity within our organisation to deliver this level as this was significantly more time consuming than expected. While we acknowledge that the sample size for in-depth interviews is limited, we believe that our approach, which incorporated multiple data collection methods, has provided a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of parents and children during the pandemic.

Online Survey:

- Conducted by Home-Start Southwark from September to November 2022,
- Shared through Home-Start social media platforms and direct outreach to families in Southwark with at least one child under the age of 5,

- 53 responses received and screened to ensure reliability and representativeness,
- Home-Start FSCs supported and encouraged participation from families with language and literacy barriers.

Snapshots:

- Collected through ongoing conversations and interactions with families, staff, and volunteers,
- Complemented by meetings with volunteer forums and staff to share experiences.

In-depth Interviews:

- Conducted between December 2022 and March 2023,
- Led by Home-Start FSCs, who contacted families that had agreed to be interviewed from the original survey or were known to the FSCs,
- 20 in-depth interviews conducted, including 14 with families supported by Home-Start,

● supported by Home-Start	14
● NOT supported by Home-Start	6



- Sample included married/co-habiting and single parents from diverse ethnic backgrounds,
- 1 interview with a father, the other 19 with mothers (including one who had adopted a child),

● Mother	19
● Father	1

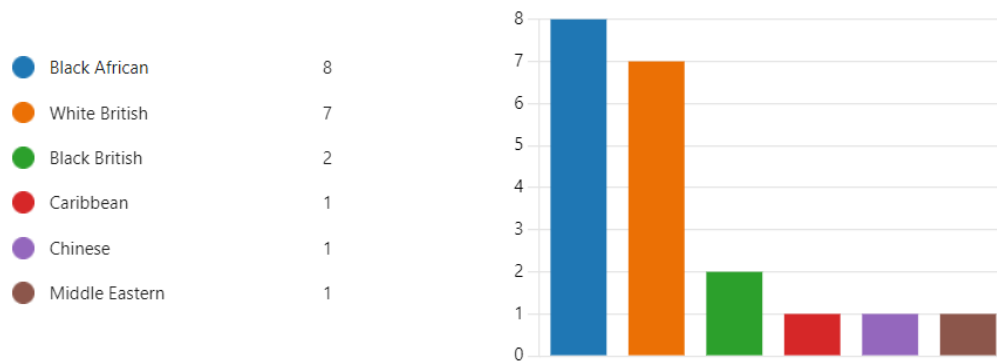


- 9 parents were married or co-habiting, 9 were single (including 2 who lost their partners during the pandemic),

● Married / co-habiting	9
● Single	9
● Lost partner during pandemic	2



- Ethnic breakdown: Black African (8), White British (7), Black British (2), White and Black Caribbean (1), Chinese (1), Middle Eastern (1),



- All families had at least one baby born around or after March 2020, and experienced pregnancy, birth, having a new baby, or a combination of these during the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns.

Family Responses

Online-Survey:

Based on the data collected from the consultation with parents of children under 5 in Southwark, the top 3 headlines results are as follows:

- Behaviour and emotions are the top concern for parents: 24 respondents reported that they were worried about their child's behaviour and emotions as they move out of the pandemic. This suggests a need for resources and support for parents to help them manage their child's emotions and behaviour effectively.
- Money worries are a significant issue: 35 respondents indicated that money worries have made it more challenging for them to parent their child/ren during the pandemic. This highlights a need for financial support and resources for families to help them navigate these challenges.
- Parenting support groups and opportunities to meet other parents are in high demand: 31 respondents ticked both parenting support groups or classes and opportunities to meet other parents and families. This shows a desire for community and social support, as well as resources to help parents develop their parenting skills.

Snapshot Reflections from Home-Start Volunteers and Staff:

The survey and consultations with Home-Start staff and volunteers reveal that the pandemic has had a significant impact on families, particularly in terms of ongoing concerns about children's development, issues with accessing support and services, and the challenge of adapting to the "new normal."

In terms of ongoing concerns about children's development, parents continue to be worried about their children's behaviour, emotions, and speaking and listening skills. Parents also highlighted the need for more opportunities for their children to play and more toddler groups, as well as the need

for more parenting support classes or groups. Home-Start staff and volunteers have also observed that parents are struggling with managing their children's behaviour and that there has been an increase in referrals for children with speech and language delay.

Issues with accessing support and services were also highlighted in the survey and consultations. Some families commented on the lack of family activities available for working parents to access, while others had difficulty accessing services due to transport issues or the suitability of some groups for children with additional needs.

Financial concerns were also cited as a significant barrier to accessing support and services, with three-quarters of parents reporting that money worries had made it more difficult for them to parent their children. Money worries also were prohibitive in terms of travelling to activities, paying for lunches, or attending places where their child may want to buy something.

Finally, the pandemic has created a "new normal" that families and professionals are still adapting to. Some families reported feeling unsupported during the lockdowns, particularly by health visitors. Home-Start staff and volunteers acknowledged that while virtual and online support had been valuable during the pandemic, face-to-face support was far more effective and conveyed a better sense of hope and commitment. They also noted that the pandemic had widened inequalities in society and that digital inequities were still a significant issue. Accessing professional services, such as speech and language therapy, was also challenging due to long waiting lists.



Overall, the findings from the survey and snapshots highlight the ongoing challenges that families are facing because of the pandemic, and the need for continued support and resources to address these challenges.

Themes from the In-depth Interviews:

The purpose of the in-depth interviews was to take a deeper dive into the outcomes from the survey so we could better understand the detail behind the headline responses as well as explore with

parents how they felt they and their children could be helped to overcome the barriers and inequalities that are affecting their life chances.

We conducted 20 one-on-one interviews with families in Southwark who had undergone at least one pregnancy, given birth, or were raising a baby between March 2020 and March 2022. Our consultation aimed to explore the ongoing impact that the pandemic and lockdowns may have had on family life. However, the families we spoke with appreciated the opportunity to share their experiences of having and raising a baby during such a tumultuous time. They used vivid descriptions such as "stressful," "horrible," "a very difficult time," and "a nightmare" to describe their experiences. Only one parent spoke about the increase of her health anxieties directly due to her concerns over the effects of the Covid-19 virus. For many other families, this was a time when they were dealing with personal trauma and difficulties either independently of or exacerbated by the effects of the pandemic.

Three families suffered personal bereavements of close family members. One lost the father of her baby from knife crime, while another lost her husband from cancer just after the birth of her second child. Two families were massively affected by job losses because of lockdown. One family relocated due to domestic violence, and another mother talked about the breakdown of her relationship during this time. Another mother was an asylum seeker who arrived in the UK just before the pandemic and found herself alone, living in a hostel with a one-year-old child and no idea where to find any support.

Many parents talked about the stress on their mental health during this time. One mother knew that she had post-natal depression, and it was getting worse because she was so isolated. Another mother talked about trying to support her husband, who was suffering from depression and anxiety, but not finding any professional support for him. Many families said that they were now starting to receive Talking Therapy and other support. One mother was incredibly positive about the support she now receives from the parental mental health team. She said, "I think that since the pandemic, I have been trying so hard to look after my children, I haven't any time to look after myself, and I need to do that."

A recurring theme for many parents was how hard it had been for them to access midwife and health visitor support at this time. One parent said, "Everyone thought I was fine because I had already had children. I didn't see my health visitor until the babies were eight months, and one of them was already trying to walk!" However, it was at that appointment that she was finally offered parental mental health support. Several parents talked about how different it was for them going through a second pregnancy now that they can access services more efficiently. "I look back now and realize how crazy it was, having to send photos to my midwife if I was worried about anything. I don't know how we all did it," said one parent.

Approximately 9,000 babies were born in Southwark between March 2020 and March 2022, and it is crucial to give voice to the experiences of many parents who had to deal with giving birth on their own in the hospital, being isolated from family and friends at a time when support is so vital and dealing with massively restricted professional services. We should acknowledge the resilience and fortitude of these parents and caregivers.

How Parents felt their children were affected

Socialisation:

Families have reported that the lockdown and lack of opportunities for children to socialize have had a significant impact on their mental and emotional wellbeing. Parents of children of all ages have seen different effects, with isolation being the most common issue mentioned.

For example, one mother shared, "I had two babies born during the pandemic, and I was really anxious to go out even when things opened up. My three-year-old daughter still has no emotional resilience, and everything is a really big deal as she has had so little experience of playing outside."

Similarly, another mother noted, "My three-year-old son is a very nervous child who prefers to play on his own. But I think it's because he didn't get to play or socialize with other children until he started nursery."

While some parents have appreciated the return of playgroups, others feel that it is still challenging to adjust to post-pandemic dynamics. One mother recalled attending a music group during the pandemic, where children had to sit on their own mats and not touch others' instruments. She went back recently with her younger child and found it overwhelming to see all the children putting things in their mouths. She said, "Everything was wiped down, and we were so careful. I went again recently with my younger child, and it was so full-on with everyone's kids putting everything in their mouths. I almost couldn't handle it." Another mother believes her three-year-old son has become clingier because they spent so much time indoors together. She said, "He's more clingy than he should be because of the amount of time we spent indoors just the two of us."

Some parents also mentioned the impact on children who have just started school, such as delayed milestones related to self-care. One parent said, "The children just didn't seem ready, and they had been really behind with milestones such as potty-training and feeding themselves."

Parents of older children talked about the challenges of home-schooling and how it has affected their children's academic progress and screen time habits. One mother said, "It was really tough, and my 10-year-old is still struggling with school." Another admitted, "My children spent a lot of time on screens during the pandemic, and it has been hard to break that habit."

Overall, families have experienced various effects of isolation on their children, and many are still trying to navigate the post-pandemic world while balancing their children's needs.

Speech, Language & Communication:

During the 1:1 consultation with families, we found that many expressed concerns over their children's speech and language development or suspected that their child may have undiagnosed additional needs. Out of 10 families, 6 were on waiting lists for speech and language therapy.

One mother attributed her son's developmental delay to the pandemic, saying, "the pandemic was a big problem - we stayed in the house for one year. This definitely made my son's problems worse." She also noted that other families with boys the same age as her son were experiencing similar issues. Another mother shared her concerns about her older son's lack of sociability, saying, "I don't know if it is his personality or because of lockdown. He doesn't really like talking even though he is now 6 and a half."

For families with children on the autism spectrum, the pandemic posed particular challenges. One mother spoke about the difficulty of managing the behaviour of her two hyperactive and distressed autistic children during the lockdown: "The pandemic has been difficult for my children. Not being

able to go out has affected the children's development...It made their behaviour difficult to manage for me and my husband."

For some parents, the pandemic worsened existing stressors. One mother whose son was not speaking and had no interactions with other children felt lost and hopeless because she could not access any services. She also had difficulty accessing healthy foods, which added to her stress levels. "The levels of stress I was in made it difficult to enjoy my son and give him enough attention because I was constantly worrying," she said.

Overall, these stories highlight the challenges that families have faced during the pandemic, particularly with regards to child development and accessing necessary services.

What parents would like to see more of:

Organised groups and activities:

During the lockdowns, many parents expressed their need for support to deal with the challenges brought on by the pandemic. For some, this meant having access to more organised groups. One parent suggested that parent and toddler groups and parenting classes would be helpful for child development, as children had too much screen time during the pandemic and were not developing well. Another parent highlighted the importance of having access to support services such as advisory, health, wellbeing, and social support, especially as the long-term effects of the pandemic on children were uncertain.

To gain a better understanding of the types of groups that would be useful to families, the FSCs and volunteers conducting the interviews asked about the accessibility of existing community groups. Several parents expressed a desire for more outdoor activities, particularly those without outdoor space at home, to help their children stay active. Others mentioned the need for family activities available in the afternoons and on weekends.

In addition to activities for children, many parents also talked about the importance of having a space where they could socialise and connect with other parents. They valued the opportunity to share parenting tips and advice, and to meet other families with children of similar ages.

Some parents expressed difficulty in accessing information about children's centres, suggesting that health visitors could leave information about these centres in baby red books. Others noted that some groups were not well advertised, and expressed gratitude for stumbling upon nearby playgroups where their children could socialise, and they could connect with other parents.

Overall, parents stressed the importance of having accessible and approachable spaces where they could find support and connection during a challenging time. Many felt that in-person activities and the opportunity to connect face-to-face with others were particularly valuable for child development and their own wellbeing.

Targeted support:

In response to feedback from some parents, there is a need for more targeted support in parenting groups and classes. While many parents value the community aspect of these groups, some would like more specialized offerings to address their specific needs.

For instance, parents with children who have speech and language delays may require more support in helping their children's development. In addition to resources for the children, these parents may also benefit from support groups or classes that address their own feelings of shame and isolation. Providing a safe space for parents to connect with others who understand their experiences can help reduce the stigma and develop a sense of community.

Moreover, some parents may need more targeted support based on their child's age and developmental stage. For example, parents with toddlers may benefit from classes or groups that address common behavioural challenges at this age. On the other hand, parents with teenagers may require more specialized guidance to help them navigate the unique challenges that arise during this developmental stage.

By offering more targeted support, parenting groups and classes can better meet the diverse needs of families. This can include providing more resources and support for children with specific needs, as well as creating safe and supportive spaces for parents to connect and share their experiences.

One to One Support:

Several families have highlighted the significance of Home-Start in their lives, especially in accessing groups and community activities. One mother said that her Home-Start volunteer was a lifesaver for her as she had a child with special educational needs as she found it difficult to attend playgroups on her own. She expressed her gratitude by saying, "they are more than a friend to me."

Another mother who had anxiety issues shared how her Home-Start volunteer helped her access community activities and services, which she would not have done otherwise. She said, "I wouldn't have gone to a children's centre without my volunteer as I was too anxious. Now that I go to the children's centre, I know about other services and activities, which has really helped." Similarly, another mother appreciated her volunteer's efforts in connecting her to relevant services during the lockdown.

For some families, the practical support offered by Home-Start has been crucial, as one mother shared, "I wouldn't have been able to get out of the house at all without Home-Start support. Sometimes my Home-Start volunteer was the only person I would see all week." One mother expressed that she had mental and physical health issues and preferred home-based support, saying, "Home-Start support is much better for me as I need someone to come to the home."

Another mother who had PTSD due to trauma and bereavement found it challenging to go to children's groups and preferred one-to-one support at home. She said, "I have got a lot of mental health problems, and physical issues so I hardly go out at all. I prefer support in the home."

One father found groups overwhelming and preferred one-to-one support at home, stating, "The dynamic in groups is usually more about showing off i.e., who is the best or who has the worst problem. Having support at home was incredibly beneficial. The volunteer was not obsessed with their own child like other parents are."

Overall, families have expressed appreciation for the support provided by Home-Start, whether through access to community activities or one-to-one support at home. As one father aptly put it, "Home-start volunteers should be offered to all parents!"



Analysis:

The pandemic has had a significant impact on families, particularly in terms of children's development, emotional wellbeing, and access to services. Parents and carers are worried about their children's behaviour and emotional state, as well as their language and communication skills. They are also concerned about their children's opportunities to play and socialise and would like more support with parenting and managing their children's behaviour.

Access to services has been a major issue for many families, with some reporting that services have been stopped or reduced since the pandemic. Others have struggled to access services due to financial concerns or difficulties in accessing professional support such as speech and language therapy. The lack of suitable services for children with disabilities has also been highlighted as an issue.

Home-Start staff and volunteers have seen first-hand the impact of the pandemic on families, with many reporting that they have seen more referrals for children with speech and language delay, and more families struggling with parenting and managing their children's behaviour. They have also seen the impact of the pandemic on families with complex needs, and the difficulties they face in accessing the right support.

There is a consensus among staff and volunteers that supporting families face-to-face is more effective and preferable, as it conveys a better sense of hope and commitment. However, they also recognise that the shift to more online tools has had some benefits, such as offering hybrid working patterns and making it easier for people to access some online support and meetings.

Overall, the reflections suggest that the pandemic has widened inequality in society, and that more needs to be done to address these problems. There is a clear need for more support for families, particularly in terms of parenting and managing children's behaviour, as well as more accessible and affordable services for children with disabilities. It is also clear that there is a need for more face-to-face support for families, while recognizing that online tools can be useful in certain situations.

Recommendations:

Universal family activities and groups

Our findings include the importance of access to community activities for the whole family and a desire for more baby and toddler groups, techniques to manage child behaviour, and activities to help parents bond with their children. Overall, the data suggests a need for resources and support for parents to help them manage the challenges of parenting young children during and after the pandemic. This suggests that parents of young children in Southwark feel a need for social connections and a sense of community.

Delivering a wider range of tailored parenting support

Many parents expressed a need for opportunities to connect with other parents in similar situations to share experiences and advice. This approach can help them feel less isolated and more supported in their parenting journey as well as giving opportunities for social learning to take place. However, for parents of children with additional needs and/or behavioural difficulties they found groups difficult to engage with and felt that creche environments did not meet their child's needs. They also expressed how group activities increased their own level of anxiety as they felt worried and even shame about their child's behaviour. This led us to recognise that helping parents to change their approach to their child's additional needs rather than trying to 'fix' their child was key to improving children's outcomes.

Commissioning peer support in the home environment

The data also shows the importance of peer support in the home for parents and young children in Southwark. By supplying resources and opportunities for social connection, parents will be better equipped to navigate the challenges of parenting moving forward post-pandemic.

Home-Start Southwark has found that face-to-face support is an essential part of promoting positive parent-child engagement and outcomes. While remote support was helpful during the pandemic, they have found that in-person support is now essential for many families.

Research has shown that in-person support can be particularly effective for building trust, establishing rapport, and promoting positive interactions between parents and children. Face-to-face support can also provide a sense of connection and belonging, which is crucial for parents who may be feeling isolated or overwhelmed. Therefore, it is crucial for commissioners to consider the benefits of in-person support, home-based when developing programs and initiatives to support parents and young children.

How we have responded to date:

In response to the consultation (in the limited period we have had available; 9 months), we have:

- Adapted our core service support package in line with family,
- Developed a training package for staff and volunteers,
- Delivered family group activities and events.

Core service:

We reviewed our core support and made some changes so that where it was needed, we increased our support period from 6 months to 9-12 months. We continue to do this, but this has put pressure on our capacity, so it is continually reviewed.

We also supplied increased clinical supervision to Family Support Coordinators, including training, so they can implement mentoring approaches when supervising volunteers. We knew volunteers were working with families with increased complex needs and needed to enable them to cope with the issues families were presenting with whilst also protecting their own mental health.

We have also spent time evaluating our vision, mission and values and are currently focusing on analysing our Outcomes Framework to enable improved assessment and review processes that support the Journey of Change.

Training:

We have sourced a range of training opportunities for staff, volunteers and PACT members aimed at addressing issues families faced such as children's communication and behaviour, unidentified additional needs, trauma, mental wellbeing, and financial stress. This was aimed at improving awareness, skills, and strategies to use with families in key areas:

- Speech, Language and Communication (provided by SaLT)
- Being Together (improving parent/child relationship through play)
- Autistic Spectrum (early signs, strategies to support parents)
- Trauma-informed Support (for children and parents behaviour shaped by trauma)
- Domestic Abuse awareness
- HSS Preparation Courses (3 delivered in the period; all adapted to include new learning)
- Source financial wellbeing training for volunteers (TBC)



Groups & Activities:

Home-Start Southwark hosted two four-week Big Hopes, Big Future sessions with a total of 20 families in attendance. The primary goal of these school readiness sessions was to empower both parents and

children by equipping them with the knowledge and understanding of what will be expected of them when starting Nursery or School. Through these sessions, parents were encouraged to establish routines and were provided with practical activities that would enable their children to be more self-reliant and confident, resulting in a smoother transition from home to Nursery or School.

Home-Start Southwark also delivered the Healthy Movers program, which highlights the paramount importance of physical activity for the cognitive development of a child. Additionally, it supports other areas of development, such as social skills and creativity. This program was designed to provide several weeks' worth of physical activity ideas to help the whole child develop. It is recommended that children under five years of age have at least 180 minutes of movement time daily. The Healthy Movers sessions gave an opportunity for families to spend time in their local parks, helping them avoid isolation during the summer holidays. We engaged 29 families in two different sessions with 16 families attending both events.



Finally, for World Book Day this year, HSS distributed books to 10 families and encouraged Storytime techniques for parents and children, allowing them to share a love of reading and bonding over stories. We also planned and distributed resource bags for families that encourage reading, play, mark making and talking and listening exercises.

Next steps for Home-Start Southwark

- Seek commissioning opportunities from the LA and Health to ensure our service is funded to deliver essential and unique peer support for families in the home environment,
- Secure WellComm tool and training for the organisation to better identify communication needs for children,
- Review our Bump to Babe training module for volunteers supporting women and babies in the perinatal period,
- Grow our understanding and response to children with additional needs to better support the child and parents.