



What makes the best start in life for children in Tower Hamlets?

Final Report & Bromley by Bow Families Action Plan

December 2021

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1 Foreword

The Bromley by Bow Centre is a pioneering charity that combines an extensive neighbourhood hub with a medical practice and a community research project. Our [community research and evaluation programme](#) has grown in the last 18 months and is at the heart of what we do, informing the delivery of our services. Never before has harnessing opportunity and responding to the needs of local families been more important and this crucial research and Families Action Plan, co-produced with local families and conducted during the pandemic (funded by the [ActEarly Research and Innovation Fund](#)) paves the way.

ActEarly is a large research consortium uniting broad transdisciplinary expertise to identify, co-produce and implement system-wide early life prevention solutions, aiming to improve the health and opportunities for children living in two contrasting areas with high levels of child poverty: Bradford, Yorkshire and Tower Hamlets. Act Early is funded by the UK Prevention Research

Partnership and supported by several key partners in education, planning, healthcare and local government (<https://actearly.org.uk/>).

The findings from this research present the reality for families living in Tower Hamlets, an area with high inequality and poor health outcomes with challenges, exacerbated by the pandemic, including:

- Material security and emotional wellbeing
- The quality and quantity of usable space for families
- Support for parents
- Activities for children to learn and grow

Providing the best start in life includes many inter-related elements, including meeting basic needs, play, education, skills and connection to people and place. This is all set out clearly in our Community Outcomes Framework and the [2010 Marmot Review](#) as social determinants outcomes are crucial for improving health and wellbeing outcomes. This research starts to set out what this could look like and the Families Action Plan contained within sets the Bromley by Bow Centre's commitment to respond. We do what we can with what we have and with additional resourcing would be well placed to do much more to improve outcomes for local families.

The findings present a massive opportunity for all stakeholders, to plan a response together and deliver on that plan. The Bromley by Bow Centre, as one stakeholder, is fully committed to playing its part to forge the next steps and deliver for improved home lives, inside and outside, and health and wellbeing. The Bromley by Bow Centre and ActEarly are sharing these findings far and wide so others can too.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Rob Trimble', with a horizontal line underneath.

Rob Trimble, Chief Executive

December, 2021

This work was supported by the UK Prevention Research Partnership (MR/S037527/1), which is funded by the British Heart Foundation, Cancer Research UK, Chief Scientist Office of the Scottish Government Health and Social Care Directorates, Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, Economic and Social Research Council, Health and Social Care Research and Development Division (Welsh Government), Medical Research Council, National Institute for Health Research, Natural Environment Research Council, Public Health Agency (Northern Ireland), The Health Foundation and Wellcome.

2 Executive Summary

Since June 2020, and the early stages of the pandemic, Bromley by Bow's [ActEarly](#) Community Research team has consulted more than 500 local families to identify **"What makes the best start in life for children in Tower Hamlets?"**. This has resulted in four priority themes, ten recommendations co-produced with families and stakeholder organisations, and one Bromley by Bow Families Action Plan comprising fourteen actions.

The results of this study are intended to inform residents, local stakeholder organisations, and academics alike: to advise the ActEarly consortium's research, catalyse co-production and inspire new understandings of families' lives. These findings were developed during a pandemic, and ultimately reflect both the unusual context of this research and the timeless role parents play in raising happy and healthy children.

2.1 Drawing together the "Best Start in Life"

- Four themes cut through the research: how families inhabit the Environment and Space around them; the role of Play and Activities for children; the Stability and Security needed for a firm family foundation; and the Connection and Support within families' wider network.
- Recommendations are presented alongside families' perception and experience of each theme

2.2 Environment and Space

- **Co-produce with families more safe, child/family-friendly and accessible play spaces locally, for all ages.** Capitalise on families' renewed interest in the outdoor to make more of the number of green spaces locally. Develop fit for purpose, sustainable designs with families, local stakeholders and expert designers. Ensure there are more indoor spaces for young people.
- **Focus on making well-used public spaces more child-friendly.** Develop cycling provision. Spend time "re-imagining" public spaces and streets to be child-friendly.

Martina's dream street:
"A street in a cosy village and our house in the middle of the street. It is a safe street and friendly street, with lots of green from the grass and trees, where animals are welcome. M has a dog and a cat and she loves looking after squirrels and foxes."

- Families struggled consistently with "staying indoors" over lockdown and managing restrictions within limited home space. Normal "intermediate" settings such as libraries, children's centres, cafes and community centres were particularly missed.
- The outdoors is strongly present in families' experience of lockdown and dreams for

the future, providing discovery, exercise, a new perspective, and animals to care for.

- Families want better quality, safe, accessible and green spaces for their children, including playgrounds and basic amenities. They want more spaces to interact with other families, both indoors and outdoors.

2.3 Play and Activities

- **Establish activities for families to support proactive mental and physical health.** Put on activities which allow children to get active and explore the outdoors. Share activities which allow expression and collaboration - for parents and children to do together. Ensure that opportunities to socialise with other children are prioritised during reopening, both virtually and in "real life".

- Parents/carers worked hard to "keep" their children entertained, happy and active throughout lockdown. This theme is strongly associated with time pressure, for adults juggling responsibilities and priorities, as well as the use of technology and an unease and re-negotiation of the role technology played in the home.
- Developing quality time together and building on a child's individual interests were the main ways that play flourished in homes during lockdown.
- Play at its best is social, creative, active and supported. Families speak about a wide variety of activities that they are involved in or want to see in their area. Play supports family time, provides enrichment and opportunity, and to connect with others and the community.
- The biggest demand for change in Tower Hamlets was "more activities for children", prompted by the lack of opportunities outside of the home.

"In the lockdown the biggest challenge is we look after the children and make them happy- we try our best in this difficult time."

2.4 Connection and Support

- **Increase opportunities to connect local people and neighbourhoods to each other and better information flows.** Provide creative forms of 'casual' neighbourly connection as we exit lockdown. Invest in access to information, focusing on places parents naturally engage and consume information e.g. existing networks.
- **Connect and strengthen parents' existing local support system.** Increase the impact of "intermediate" spaces of supporting parents. Build more opportunities for collaboration and stronger connection between providers of family support, particularly place-based partnerships.
- **Explore new ways to establish peer support between parents/carers.** There are opportunities both for peer support between adults at similar life stages and with older adults to share their experience. Design new activities to promote 1-1 support between parents / carers and other community members. Support learning and exchange between communities in Tower Hamlets and beyond.

- During lockdown, parents/carers juggled multiple roles and responsibilities, whilst lacking their normal support and infrastructure society provides to raise children. New parents and parents/carers of children with disabilities particularly experienced a lack of support.
- Families remained connected to their closest friends and family throughout lockdown, through a variety of largely digital methods, whilst facing significant constraints. This led to reflections on the longer-term impacts of disconnection on society and ideas for support connected more smoothly around a child.
- Families articulated the need for more “spontaneous” connections and to rebuild wider networks. “Intermediate” settings were particularly impactful in making new connections.

“Online doesn’t feed the soul.”

2.5 Stability and Security

- **Develop skills-based programmes for families** - ensuring access both for parents and children. Support and empower parents to look after their children's mental and physical health. Involve whole families in expanding healthy lifestyle promotion; life skills and finance management workshops.
- **Protect families’ access to basic needs.** Parents / carers made recommendations to support and advocate for structural change to ensure that everyone’s basic needs are open to them. This includes reducing inequalities and tackling racism. Shaping the food environment, access to technology and adequate support with finances were the most common responses. Continue championing digital inclusion as a right for families - to ensure access to learning, connection and opportunities online. Support families through holistic family assessments, keeping the focus on most vulnerable families. Build more opportunities for all families to better access to cheap, healthy food - including a supporting environment to make healthy food purchases.
- **Build on the experience of the pandemic to further develop a supportive learning environment for children.** The pandemic has shown the importance of nurturing children's wellbeing and resilience. This should also impact educational priorities. Parents / carers identified a desire for more individualised and focused support for their children's learning. Build on conversations around mental wellbeing to embed this focus into the curriculum. Champion funding for schools and other community organisations to provide more tailored support for learning.
- **Ensure flexible employment provisions continue, alongside support for the local and circular economy.** Advocate and promote for employers to remain flexible with work arrangement options for their employees, including WFH for new parents / carers to be continued. Promote schemes that buy and re-use locally.

- The idea of security occurred in many ways throughout our discussions. This theme draws together several types of work parents are doing to provide a stable space for their children. Materially, this means providing a home and financial security. Emotionally, often as a response to fear and uncertainty, they manage mindset and mood, build routine for their household and interpret the world around them for their children.
- The lockdown challenges were fluctuating danger and restrictions, uncertain income and jobs. Access to healthy and cheap food and the internet were particular concerns, as well as an awareness of families struggling financially.
- Families built routines to support mental wellbeing and work flexibly. They wanted to develop support for children's mental health and further develop their learning environment

2.6 Families Action Plan

The Bromley by Bow Centre's Families Action Plan is Bromley by Bow's response to the research and its commitment to supporting local families. The action plan's fourteen component parts are set out in full at the end of this executive summary and in section 7.

2.7 Conclusion and next steps

Against the backdrop of restricted movement, increased instability and withdrawn family support – and in response, great resilience and adaptation from families themselves - families shared with the research team their dreams, challenges and suggestions to achieve their vision of a best start in life for their children. This means a safe, green, clean outdoors; access to play and opportunities to enrich life and socialise with others; a partnership of support around each child to balance safety and build independence; and work towards a more inclusive society where families' basic needs are met.

This research presents four data driven themes and ten recommendations to inform a response by relevant stakeholders, illustrated by the Bromley by Bow Families Action Plan. It is the research team's hope that through this effort, this research and the continued participation of parents/carers and children will contribute to "the best start in life" for children in Tower Hamlets.

Table 1 Bromley by Bow Families Action Plan (1 of 2)

Action	Recommendation by theme									
	Environment and space		Connection and support			Play activities	Stability and security			
	1. More and better play spaces	2. Public spaces more child-friendly	3. Opportunities to connect and share information in neighbourhoods	4. Strengthen collaboration between organisations	5. Peer support	6. Activities for children and families	7. Skills-based family programmes	8. Protect families' access to basic needs	9. Supportive learning environment	10. Support flexible employment and local economy
1. Invest the legacy of Active Together (a family physical activity programme) into a programme of resident-led events and CDC activities developed. Identify two new neighbourhoods in which to work (hyper-local approach in N-W6)	X		X		X	X		X	X	
2. Work with SCUK to engage stakeholders and resident families, facilitating the involvement of children , as a priority, in the co-production and trial delivery of a play activity that suits their needs.	X		X	X	X	X		X		
3. Work with ActEarly to engage stakeholders and resident families, facilitating the involvement of parents , as a priority in the co-production and trial delivery of a play activity that suits their needs.	X		X	X	X	X		X		
4. Develop an approach and seek funding to audit and produce a map of play facilities available, and develop with children a quality marker and new activity.	X	X	X	X	X	X		X		
5. Capture families' experience of how the home inside and outside work together/don't work together to								X		
6. Share BBB ActEarly recommendations/research with local residents e.g. Thoughts on the Street (recommendations temporarily painted onto the pavement in different sites to form a family treasure trail, inviting local people to share photos of the changes they would like to see), and a community aural/oral art expressing views on the findings.			X							
7. Share BBB ActEarly recommendations/research with other organisations incl. Network 6.			X	X						

Table 2 Bromley by Bow Families Action Plan (2 of 2)

	Environment and space		Connection and support			Play activities	Stability and security			
Action	1. More and better play spaces	2. Public spaces more child-friendly	3. Opportunities to connect and share information in neighbourhoods	4. Strengthen collaboration between organisations	5. Peer support	6. Activities for children and families	7. Skills-based family programmes	8. Protect families' access to basic needs	9. Supportive learning environment	10. Support flexible employment and local economy
8. Proactive contact with members of the community to signpost to BBB services/activities available, and encourage them to continue to come and participate.			X	X						
9. Work with BbBHP, PCN, Residents and Patients to develop a strategy to support children, young people and families in N-W6 , including the expansion of social prescribing.			X	X		X	X	X	X	
10. Training in outreach and engagement with 'what we do' resources. Training and Development Plan from HR			X							
11. Invite parents routinely engaged to provide peer support and connect up interested parents .					X					
12. Active Together Summer event -including a series of physical activities informed by ActEarly findings e.g. Troll Hunt, CDC outdoor activities. Engage stakeholder organisations .			X			X				
13. Community Research to identify what parents need to respond to their children's activity needs in the way that works for them now and sustains into the future.						X				
14. Consult with community research/board to identify if these are the best actions to take and any others	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	

3 Introduction

This report sets out ‘**What makes the best start in life for children in Tower Hamlets?**’ from the perspective of local families. The study, led by the Bromley by Bow Centre, is part of the ActEarly consortium, a research collaboration across Tower Hamlets and Bradford, to identify how residents, local organisations and communities together can help families live healthier and more active lives. The Bromley by Bow community research began in March 2020 and fieldwork was conducted between June – December 2020. This means the data have been captured during a global pandemic. However, as the report shows, the issues and opportunities covered in this report existed before the pandemic and are now felt more acutely and by more families. Therefore, an ongoing legacy to this work is expected. This has resulted in four priority themes, ten recommendations and one Bromley by Bow Families Action Plan. This report presents the findings in the following sections:

- The **Context** of the research;
- The **Method** taken;
- The **Results** of the community research, including core recommendations;
- The Bromley by Bow Families Action Plan –**Building our response** to the research findings;
- The **Conclusion**.



4 Context

The London Borough of Tower Hamlets contains a young, growing and densely housed population¹. Tower Hamlets' self-identified assets include the diversity within the population, its transport connectivity, its parks and green spaces (over 120 at the last count²) and its school performance³. It is also known for its strong history of voluntary organisation and community building. These assets are evident through the research as it traces the ways Tower Hamlets' resilient families have used the strengths of the borough to support their parenting and to provide opportunities for their children.

However, there are also real challenges to ensuring the “best start in life” in the borough. Before the onset of Covid-19 almost a third (32.5%) of children in Tower Hamlets lived in poverty, the highest proportion in London, and England⁴. Since then⁵:

‘...the pandemic (has) “exposed and heightened the impact of the stark disparities between disadvantaged children and their more affluent peers.” Those who were already financially challenged and persistently disadvantaged have become more so, while many new families have been tipped into poverty for the first time due to job losses or reduced income.’

Tower Hamlets Council reports that the local area may have been hardest hit by the economic downturn compared to others⁶:

‘... with evidence that the rise in unemployment is being felt more sharply in LBTH than elsewhere... and a high increase (in) food bank use and emergency food requests, welfare & debt advice...’

‘The economic situation has likely dampened work opportunities that may support people out of poverty.’

Whilst the pandemic was not anticipated when this research was first designed, it now provides a record of Tower Hamlets' families' understanding of their children's real needs informed both by their pre-pandemic experience and their experience during subsequent lockdowns. These findings can inform a much needed post-pandemic response for all Tower Hamlets children. A direct response to the findings is the new Bromley by Bow Families Action Plan which we will deliver from July 2021.

¹ https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Borough_statistics/Population/MYE_2017_Factsheet.pdf

² https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/lgn/leisure_and_culture/parks_and_open_spaces/visit_our_parks.aspx

³ https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/lgn/community_and_living/borough_statistics/Borough_profile.aspx

⁴ <https://democracy.towerhamlets.gov.uk/mgConvert2PDF.aspx?ID=170313>

⁵ https://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/ADCS_Building_a_country_that_works_for_all_children_post_Covid-19.pdf

⁶ <https://democracy.towerhamlets.gov.uk/mgConvert2PDF.aspx?ID=170313>

5 Method

The results of “What Makes the Best Start in Life?” are drawn from participatory approaches, creative methods and the principles of asset-based community development. The accompanying process report “Documenting our Process” (2021) contains a fuller discussion of the activities, reflections, deliberations and decisions undertaken throughout this project.

The research team comprised community and social researchers based at the Bromley by Bow Centre, joined later by UCL researchers. The community researchers were recruited from the local community and trained in qualitative participatory research methods. The team worked together throughout the research process, co-developing ideas and next steps.

Covid-19 was a major disruptor to the study which had been designed in advance, and necessitated the review and re-design of almost all elements of the research, including:

- **Research questions** – How does the research team ask the research question in a way that is meaningful and engages a full response from participants, given restrictions in ways to connect and communicate with participants?
- **Sample design and fieldwork** – How does the team ensure a wide enough and representative enough group of participants, bearing in mind digital exclusion?
- **Analysis** – How does the team interrogate and contextualise what participants have shared, given the unique challenges of the research time period?
- **Sharing** – How does the team encourage change from the research findings in a changing environment?
- **Research principles** – Given the heightened challenges for families of lockdown, how does the research team ensure a supportive community presence and undertake community engagement with integrity?

These areas will be discussed in turn.

5.1 Research questions

Whilst there was no way of escaping the pandemic context, looking to the future provided study participants with the opportunity to look beyond it. To explore “what makes the best start in life?”, three “lenses” to examine this question with study participants were chosen: challenges, dreams and changes. Each had their own strengths and anticipated constraints, and the team took steps to mitigate each, as set out in **Table 1**.

Table 3: Exploring the research lenses of challenges, dreams and opportunities

	Question	Strengths	Potentially constrained by...	How constraints were mitigated
Challenges	<p>What has been the main challenge you have faced during lockdown?</p> <p>What do you think will be the biggest challenges for families to stay happy and healthy over the next few years?</p>	<p>Connection to need</p> <p>Present: snapshot of current life</p> <p>Future: “best guess” distanced perception, involving wider community</p>	<p>...what participants feel safe to disclose and what was “top of mind”</p>	<p>Environment in which questions are asked – ensuring privacy and freedom of response.</p> <p>Introducing hypothetical questioning.</p>
Dreams	<p>What are you doing to keep happy and healthy?</p> <p>We are creating a village that represents the “best start in life” for our children. What would you put in the village?</p>	<p>Connection to assets</p> <p>Immediate experience</p> <p>Hopes and boundary-free thinking</p>	<p>...what is seen as good in wider society</p>	<p>Using art and creativity to explore children’s own dreams through self-expression.</p> <p>Using own experience (e.g. asking for top tips for other families) to keep connected to real life.</p>
Changes	<p>What needs to change in Tower Hamlets to help children be happier and healthier?</p>	<p>Connection to practical ideas and solutions</p>	<p>...what is possible and has been seen before</p>	<p>Asked at end to draw ideas from whole discussion.</p>

5.2 Sample design and fieldwork

The research was based on a purposive sampling design, targeting:

- A range of family configurations, including single parent families, multigenerational households and blended families;
- Both parents and children, particularly children between 3-11 years;

- Different geographical locations across Tower Hamlets, segmented by Network area (see **Figure 1**).

The original research design comprised 30 “pop up” events (participatory activities run with community groups and in local public spaces across the borough) followed by priority setting workshops to collaboratively analyse findings with local residents. This face-to-face methodology required significant revision due to the pandemic.

As **Table 2** shows further, the final research design included:

- Online engagement with families to both connect and offer support;
- Three waves of data collection – an online survey, participatory appraisal activities, in-depth 1:1 interviews;
- Collaborative workshops to consider the findings and develop recommendations.

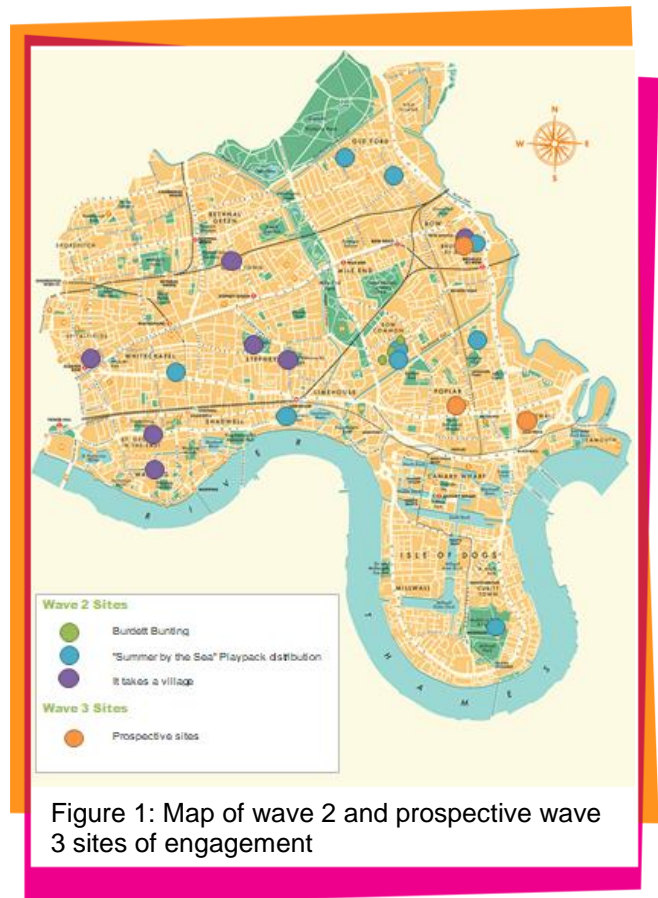


Figure 1: Map of wave 2 and prospective wave 3 sites of engagement

Table 4: Stages of research design

Method	Data collection
Online Family Playrooms engagement	Over 250 families engaged in the study via the bespoke online Family Playrooms platform (involving Facebook and a micro-website) designed to both support families and create a connection with potential study participants. Developed in response to restrictions to in-person activities, the platform created a family support community, coming together to access content and resources to support family health and happiness, and in turn invited to speak about 'What makes the best start in life?'. Resources were provided by the multi-disciplinary team at Bromley by Bow, parents and other professionals in Tower Hamlets,
Online survey (Phase 1 of data collection)	<p>A questionnaire was designed and distributed to over 3,000 target study participants via three major channels: Facebook (including over 15 Facebook groups), WhatsApp and text messages. A total of 158 parents responded between May-July 2020.</p> <p>The achieved survey sample predominantly included British Asian mothers, aged between 31-40 years. 79% of survey respondents were women. The number of people in the household was most commonly 4, but ranged from 1 to 9. This is not dissimilar from the general population of children and primary carers in the borough⁷, but notably lacked fathers and Black parents. Geographically, most families lived in Bow and Poplar, although a third of survey respondents reported E1, E2 or E14 postcodes.</p>
Participatory appraisal summer activities: face-to-face and via home packs (Phase 2)	<p>The second wave of data collection was distributed to increase the sample and engage with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families not online and accessing the Family Playrooms engagement platform e.g. those who are digitally excluded, financially vulnerable and carers. Families across different geographical areas of the borough. <p>Figure 1 shows the distribution of these activities. In total, over 2,000 families were engaged and of these, 397 families contributed to the data through participatory appraisal activities based on the research questions.</p> <p>90 families – Burdett Bunting: Bunting creation on the Burdett Estate</p>

⁷ Compare https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Borough_statistics/Research-briefings/BoroughProfileEducation.pptx and https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Borough_statistics/Population/MYE_2017_Factsheet.pdf

	<p>157 families – Summer by the Sea: Data capture via a range of participatory tools alongside play pack distribution events</p> <p>150 families – It takes a village: Outdoor workshops and home deliveries of art packs for participants to create their visual interpretation of “the best start in life”</p>
In-depth interviews (Phase 3)	18 in depth interviews were conducted with parents in order to delve further into the four themes raised through the fieldwork conducted up to this point.
Workshops to share findings and develop recommendations	<p>Two workshops were delivered to share the findings and develop recommendations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Winter Warmer, in conjunction with the “Impact of Covid-19 on Families” study • Islands of Adventure – designed to include children’s feedback <p>Taking part were more than 50 local families, representatives of local stakeholder organisations including Tower Hamlets Local Authority, and ActEarly researchers.</p>
Workshops to develop a Families Action Plan	The community research team has shared the findings and recommendations with the wider Bromley by Bow team and facilitated the co-production of the BBB Families Action Plan, a sub-set of the wider BBB Centre Plan. The component parts of the plan are presented later in this report.
Total families engaged	573 families submitted a response to the research question. 50 families or other stakeholders contributed to the development of recommendations.

5.3 Analysis

Analysis began with close coding of the first and second waves of data, which were then categorised within each “lens” of the research (challenge, dreams and change). Codes were then grouped and overarching themes were identified from these initial codes. The team divided into pairs, each pair exploring a theme through a different lens’ data. Whole group discussions on each theme based on these reflections formed the basis for expanded analysis of these initial data.

From this process of group deliberation, interview protocols were then created to further explore each overarching theme with parents/carers in the third wave of data collection. The interview data was analysed using framework analysis and further reflective conversations. Finally, the team used their initial post-interview reflections, process conversations and summaries of findings in the first two waves of data to compare against the conclusions from their reflective conversations.

Throughout the analysis, the biggest methodological concern was the extent to which the research was affected by its unique set of circumstances. These findings are presented both as representing long-lasting parenting priorities and as reflecting the particular responsibilities and burdens of this time, as participants consistently articulated themes across time frames and research “lenses”.

5.4 Sharing findings for future action

Informal sharing ran throughout the project across the Family Playrooms social media and messaging updates. Furthermore, as discussed in section 3.2, collaborative sharing and action planning workshops were built into the research methodology. Through this process, and through implementing the Bromley by Bow Action Plan and the recommendations for wider stakeholders, the community research team have committed to sharing findings back to all participants and supporting change in the local community.

5.5 Principles

The research team needed to form a way of working grounded in the values of community research. In the first training sessions, the team established clear ethical commitments formed around six principles, which were returned to at various stages in our process. The principles were: we keep everyone safe; we act in service; we are focused on the purpose; we are transparent; we respect people’s information and participation; and we are curious. Weekly team meetings were spaces to check in, reflect on progress and method, record changes and adjust the process. During data collection periods, dedicated reflection sessions focused on one principle in turn.

Two principles in particular gained increased meaning during this research period: “we keep everyone safe” became especially poignant due to the increased danger and uncertainty within face-to-face work, whilst every potential in-person interaction was strictly risk-assessed; as the team witnessed the intensified challenges and distress of parents, the principle of “we act in service” ensured that every interaction involved “giving back” to families, through a high quality experience, secure relationship and appropriate information and resources.

6 Results: Drawing together “a best start in life”

Study participants were asked about their challenges, dreams for the future and the changes they want to see in Tower Hamlets, before and after considering the results of the study. Individually, these questions tell us about the immediate and widely encompassing stress and responsibility, which eclipsed other concerns for parents during the pandemic; the deeply held dreams around “the best start in life”, aspects of which were still accessible even during the most severe restrictions of lockdown; and families’ aspirations for their local area to hold a sense of community, truly “child-friendly” spaces and enhanced opportunities for children. This section presents the cross-cutting themes resulting from triangulation. More detail about the individual analysis for each question can be found in Appendix 1.

The two dominant themes within participants’ responses concern “Environment and Space” (families’ use of the local environment) and children’s access to “Play and Activities”. Alongside these two topics are broader needs of “Stability and Security” amidst uncertainty; and relationships within and between family and the wider community through the theme of “Connection and Support”. Ideas more associated with health rather than happiness – such as healthy eating and physical exercise – are less likely to appear as themes in their own right throughout the research, but are integrated in how people interact with the environment around them, build their daily routine, and seek support and information.

In this section, the four themes are presented in several parts:

- How participants consider and discuss this theme;
- The specific challenges posed this year – and the adaptations participants made to tackle lockdown;
- Re-imagining this theme for the future;
- Community-developed recommendations.

6.1 Environment and use of space

6.1.1 The importance of space

Home is the first reference point for other spaces participants consider. Like many parents in Tower Hamlets, many of the interview participants grew up outside of the UK, and with touchpoints and memories of what it means to feel at home depending on childhood experiences these varied. For one participant, gardening is deeply associated with her childhood home; for another, it is spending time in the kitchen; for several, the sense of a community just outside the house is important. Home can be a place to relax, be safe and “be yourself” but can also be a place of hard work. In children’s submissions for the “Best Start Village”, little is made of the home, unless children are concerned about someone without a home:

“I built an eco-friendly house for people because I think it would be nice to live in a green place with flowers. The person could be homeless or a refugee so I wanted to welcome someone into our community.” (Child⁸)

Spaces outside the home are presented as enabling new and different activity, including skills development, exploration and socialisation:

“Human beings are social animals right? So even if we see some unknown people if we go outside and see unknown people, then we feel fresh.”

This is particularly powerfully displayed when participants considered “intermediate” settings, such as libraries, cafes, children’s centres, community centres and mosques, in comparison to public open spaces such as parks and streets, which were connected with leisure activities. Whilst at home, parents/carers speak of having a list of tasks to achieve, whilst going to different places can provide time to themselves:

“I was going there for cycling, cooking sessions, there was crochet club. There was the boxing, I didn’t manage to do it... this helped me to learn more skills, making more friends, going out and I’m really happy with this stuff. Yes that’s the most important, it makes me go out and take off my routine and have my relax time.”

“[I am missing] not having the usual outlets to use to maintain wellbeing. Play groups/gyms/leisure activities etc.”

⁸ In these results, most extended quotes are attributed to parents/carers, whilst shorter quotes come from a mixture of conversations or input with both parents and children, from parents/carers or from children themselves. On the occasions where children have said the longer quotes, this will be highlighted.

Within this routine of chosen activities, there is a sense that “other things will come from it”, as participants are open to meeting new people or getting involved in unexpected interactions. Moreover, spaces which are seen as “wild places”, outside human control, can offer a “sense of freedom”.

6.1.2 Challenges and adaptations

6.1.2.1 The lockdown challenge of restriction

Families discuss the limitations and restrictions on the spaces available to them during lockdown. Participants identify the overwhelming challenge of “staying indoors” with family during lockdown, the lack of space in the home and the general lack of housing in the borough:

“If I had a magic wand I'd have a big house and a garden and everyone has got their own space so we don't have to worry about the limited things that we can do.”

The challenge combined the intensity of the company - “to stay together all the time in a tiny flat”, “everyone at home the same time all the time”, “staying with kids at home” – and, as parents, maintaining the rules that have been imposed on them, “saying no to going outside”. Some parents/carers report children not leaving their house in months.

Spaces which families had used regularly being closed seems to have particular effect on families’ social experiences and their routine. The biggest impact on the family was understandably school and nursery closure, but Idea Stores, cafes, attractions, museums, exercise spaces and many other leisure options were missed. In this research therefore, discussion of space outside of the home is largely focused on the outdoor environment, particularly parks and gardens – perhaps unsurprising during the collapsed world of lockdown.

6.1.2.2 What were the adaptations to lockdown?

Adapting homes for multiple use

Technology extended the home to be a site of learning, socialising and work, in use by the whole family for much of the day. Interview participants talk about rearranging their space to fit these multiple uses:

“The drawers were in the bedroom so we moved them here. And the dining table we kept it at one corner so we get more space in our hall. [My son] sometimes does scooter and cycling at home as well.”

This was accompanied by organisation, decluttering and tweaking configurations to make the space work. Participants discuss working on the table alongside their children attending virtual school, doing exercise in the shared corridor of their flats, and using the kitchen and bathroom for messy play.

The role of parks

Perhaps more than ever, people have found green spaces a lasting and important asset for families' wellbeing this year. Parks were almost universally popular, featuring heavily in top tips, the "Best Start" village and the changes families wanted to see for the future.

The outdoors is intertwined with physical activity and play, "getting outside and enjoying nature" and a sense of discovery, through watching bugs, gathering leaves and seeing the sunset. Activities involve walking regularly, getting "fresh air" to "help the mind" and change perspective, "listening to the birds singing", playing sports and socialising outdoors. Walking, particularly in the park, is the most commonly mentioned form of exercise.

6.1.3 Future focus

6.1.3.1 Child-friendly is safe, clean and green

More outdoor child-friendly spaces which are safe, green and play-centred is the second largest change people want to see: *"more parks", "more green spaces", "more places to play and learn in a safe environment", "more open spaces for them to play", "for children go out without any concern", "more green space for children to ride bikes"*. It was important that these spaces are possible for all children to use.

From the dreams of participants, we have clues about what this could look like in Tower Hamlets: familiar, accessible, feeling safe, full of play equipment and rich in nature, both flora and fauna. The outdoors is a place to interact with nature and in the "Best Start Village" is bright and vibrant. Children drew rainbows, good weather, flowers, trees, rivers, parks and playgrounds:

"I made a pond where children can feed ducks. The pond will have weeds, flowers, grass and ducks, and lily pads." (Child)

"J[] is three and a half. She likes trees and sunset and she likes watching sunrise and the moon and spotting it behind the clouds." (Parent and child)

Important amenities are water fountains, toilets that are consistently open to the public and playgrounds "with a shelter". People want more soft play equipment, outdoor gyms and access to sports facilities, tree planting and community gardens. Crucially, the spaces need to be "high quality and looked after", particularly for green spaces with "better maintenance to ensure they are cleaner and less littered":

Spaces to gain independence

Rujina is a stay-at-home mum to three children whose ages range between 6 – 11 years old. During lockdown she noticed various things about her immediate and wider environment which presented challenges for raising a happy and healthy family. These ranged from risks of letting them play outside the house:

"They prefer the front yard. But the front yard is on the road so it's not quite safe. I mean I know my kids won't go to the main road but it's just strangers walking past, I always have to keep an eye on them."

It wasn't just strangers which presented a threat:

"In front of where I live there's quite a busy road. And I feel like the fumes from that road is not good for the children in the area. So maybe if that road could be, because the traffic gets very, very busy especially during the school runs. So maybe if they could slow down the traffic somehow but I don't how they would do that. So I'm not sure but in that sense maybe it's not green enough for the children."

She also felt the challenges of keeping her children contained indoors:

"Just keeping them entertained. You know you're in the house and you just feel like enclosed, stuffy. Like I'd have to have the garden door open, like we'd need more air."

There was a noticeable absence of extracurricular activities for pre-teens:

"[My daughter's] secondary school don't have any after school clubs. That is one thing I think they could make an improvement on. Or having more youth centres or youth groups, even a community centre as youth centres and having activities for them. Like weekend after school activities where they can go and just make friends there."

This led to a wider discussion about play equipment being downsized and the need for children to manage their own risks:

"Well what they've done now. I think when we were in the first lockdown they've changed all the activities that they had in the park and my children used to go to things, and everything is a lot... smaller. And it had a really big spider web there before the lockdown. And first they took the spider web down and now there's a very small like miniature spider web. And it's not as fun as it used to be. I feel like they do need to fall and hurt themselves to understand that if I run like that, I would fall over. If I do this I would fall and hurt myself. So the kids need to understand that."

Taking appropriate risks, an important part of children's development, needs to happen outside the home as well as inside it. Rujina's experience and aspirations suggest this is not inevitable, but that through design, dedicated space and regular social interaction this could be possible.

“With the weather temperatures increasing we need spaces where kids can play with water or/and swim. Nurseries are too busy and too small with very little outside spaces for kids to run and get sun/vitamin D, daily. The parks/grass are super dirty and not safe for babies/toddlers. I am always taking things from my baby’s hands as she picks up from the grass all kind of garbage.”

11 participants consider issues around pollution on the streets and active transport: wanting cleaner air, fewer cars, more cycle lanes and reducing traffic particularly around schools. Also related to this theme is the need to feel safe on the streets.

6.1.3.2 Indoor and outdoor play spaces

Alongside the outdoors, the wider infrastructure and buildings that made up the “Best Start Village” particularly included play spaces and centres for activities, both indoor and outdoor. Building further infrastructure to meet children’s needs is important for 31 people. 20 people mention indoor play spaces, largely petitioning for children’s centres to be reopened, and wanting more youth centres. Participants ask for more facilities to do sports and to swim, including one suggestion of an open water lido, more hospitals and health centres.

There was a strong feeling that children and young people need more options for socialising and learning together, particularly youth centres, and that this could positively impact whole families and communities. This is connected to renewed “access to community spaces” as “a safe space to meet like-minded friends”, for adults as well as children:

“Youth clubs were more than just a space for young people to go - they were the hub of a community where all the family became engaged and got involved”

“A space for adults to relax and unwind, alongside kids’ activities - so both needs are met in the same space”

“To have more safe areas for children to play and some more fun ways for kids to learn e.g. showing them more things to make them understand and we could also have a club any one could join and socialise” (Parent and child)

6.1.3.3 Roles and responsibility

Creating controlled and safe play spaces hinges on details such as how the entrances in a playground function, who are the familiar faces and how different groups use the space. One mother talks about a local playground:

“You come in through one gate and the child comes in through another. So if there was the same entrance for enter and exit, that would be a lot easier for the parents to keep an eye on the kids... sometimes the older teenage kids would just come and smoke in the area... I don't think the kids notice it but the parents are a bit more on the edge [about the] multiple gates on the big area.”

To develop the existing green and play spaces in Tower Hamlets, some families also mention the communal responsibility between people who use the space. This can be transformative. Building spaces for children to be challenged but not threatened, and are able to go beyond their comfort zone to grow and explore, involve people as well as structure.

6.1.4 Recommendations

- **Co-produce with families more safe, child/family-friendly and accessible play spaces locally, for all ages.** Capitalise on families' renewed interest in the outdoor to make more of the number of green spaces locally. Develop fit for purpose, sustainable designs with families, local stakeholders and expert designers. Ensure there are more indoor spaces for young people.
- **Focus on making well-used public spaces more child-friendly.** Develop cycling provision. Spend time "re-imagining" public spaces and streets to be child-friendly.

6.2 Play and activities

6.2.1 Play and opportunity

For research participants, the largest need for change in Tower Hamlets (and the biggest challenge for the future) is for more activities to be provided outside the home. 31 families see the lack of opportunities and activities for children as a real long-term challenge, and over 20% of respondents suggest “more activities” as a crucial change for Tower Hamlets.

Within the catch-all term of “more activities” a variety of needs are being met – from cooking clubs connected to healthy eating and building life skills, to boxing classes to provide fun physical activity and Lego clubs for socialising and problem-solving. Families reflect this wide range of perspectives: activities were seen to enrich, to educate, “for new challenges”, to socialise with others and to combat boredom, as an alternative to the “phone and tablet” – and both to enhance quality of life as a family as well as provide opportunities for their children alone.

The “Best Start Village” provides context for what play might mean in detail for Tower Hamlets – it contains play that is active, sometimes combative (such as wrestling or karate), creative (such as music or art), and social, provided in an environment of encouragement. Technology and screens do not feature heavily: in the Best Start Village, they appear as an arcade hero, cinema and movie making space. Play involves parties and friends, people getting together and playing games together.



6.2.2 Challenges and adaptations

6.2.2.1 The lockdown challenge of entertainment

Normal routines were significantly disrupted during lockdown periods, leaving families with questions about “how to pass the time”. The word “keeping” turned up over again, suggesting a parent trying to maintain a combination of activity and mood within their household. Parents tried to “keep” children motivated, happy, active, busy and interested in learning:

“Not being able to entertain the children enough. Kids get bored of home schooling; it's very hard to keep them motivated!”

“Controlling kids’ eating habits, keeping them active.”

An expectation of children being “entertained” was coupled with children feeling “easily bored”:

“You're constantly hearing 'I'm bored' and it's like we've kind of exhausted all of the activities for the day and it's not even lunchtime yet so I'm not really sure what to do right now.”

This had particular significance for families with children with additional needs: *“keeping my son who has Downs syndrome occupied and happy”*; *“having 3 children full time at home whilst on maternity leave with a baby still breastfeeding - and keeping everyone safe and happy, as my eldest son has special needs”*; *“my daughter who's 5 has autism, so it's difficult to maintain her at home”*

Families discuss missing their normal events and activities, from swimming lessons to messy play sessions.

6.2.2.2 Time pressure

Time, whether quality time, “me time”, or juggling time, is a constant companion to discussions around play:

“Right now I would love to just pause time, where I can get my cooking done and have a shower and then go and pick them up.”

6.2.2.3 Adaptations to lockdown

Parents/carers “relying on themselves” – quality time in the family unit

Managing children’s activities has involved a large amount of industry on parents’ parts, facilitating games, picnics and arts and crafts sessions. In most accounts, and particularly in younger families, this entailed a wide variety of activities throughout the day. Related to this is the idea of family “quality time”, “trying to

be more present with children” and the promise to “spend time together, play, explore and learn together”. This could be facilitated through “fun” activities, spending regular time together on a dedicated activity, but also through using regular moments in the day.

“We’ve started eating together on weekends when it’s easy for us to do so! It’s fun for our toddler to see everyone eating as a family, and try different foods together!” (Parent and children)

“Spend quality time together - with meaning. Sing songs. Watch a movie together. Play games - and video games. Or do yoga as a family. Go on a bike ride” (Parent and children)

One mother spoke of the approach which children’s centre sessions had enabled:

“When we were forced into lockdown during the year it was really important to me that the children keep up with their skills that they were able to develop whilst attending these children’s centres. So in the home we had the resources to understand about play and how important it was for us... not necessarily toys but just be really resourceful with random things around the house. Making music. Play with plastic bottles and loo rolls and trying to make things. And that was really important for us to keep up with their motor skills, and just with their interactions with each other as well... Before people used to always say ‘Why do you go to children’s centres a lot?’ And so when we were forced into lockdown, I wasn’t as worried thinking where do I start? How do I entertain these little three children? I think looking back, I think that they did it in the children’s centres, how creative they were with paint or shaving foams and random things that you can do to be creative.”

One of the silver linings of lockdown was that parents had more time to see their children developing and growing:

“Sometimes we’re just so busy and never have time to stop that [in lockdown] you were able to kind of just sit and relax and just watch them be as creative as they can be. And it allowed me to understand where they were with their development. It kind of made me feel really quite happy actually. it has brought us a lot closer.”

“Nothing makes me more happy than the look of appreciation and gratitude from those I love.”

Establishing routine and demarcating time

Building in routine is especially important in the context of existing routines being significantly disrupted. Routines ran on advance planning: *“plan things out the day before - otherwise you could spend the whole*

The Best Hour Ever - Imagination and boredom?

When children designed the “best hour ever”, they focused on imaginative games to have shared adventures and role play. These ideas were as simple as creating a den or creating a play outdoors. Organised activities that were also mentioned included: free swimming, more dance music instruments, a circus club, nature bingo/orienteering to find local landmarks activities, play adventures, baking, trampoline, and mindfulness for children and parents.

In interviews, parents also reflected on their experience of unstructured, imaginative play at home, to develop characters and stories:

“It’s really important to let children have their home time to imagine and do what their heart wants to do. And not put too much pressure on them to keep on doing something. Sometimes you need to let them do whatever they want in their imagination...When she’s playing with her dollhouse she can play for hours and hours without having any problem. But sometimes she would just want me to be another character and play with her.”

Several interview participants specifically talked about the insight role play gives into their children’s understanding of relationships:

“During the day the activities are... pretend play.... And that’s when their creative flow really comes through and they’re quite comical sometimes. Sometimes they pretend to be the parents and I think it’s just allowing them to be expressive and it’s really interesting to see how they see us as parents. They say ‘I’m going to be mummy today’ and things that I do say that I’m not really aware of sometimes, it’s like, do I say that?”

Boredom itself was seen very ambivalently amongst interview participants, with families seeing it as a problem to be solved. However, one parent linked boredom to the imagination, and the importance of stories to transform the empty time:

“Boredom is really good. It gives children the time to think and imagine. I think boredom is good for the brain; the brain can relax and ponder into something imaginative. And you know where I tell my daughter stories, I tell her all different kinds of stories. I tell her about witches, aliens, deep dark forests and all these things. And magic and coins. All sorts of stories. So what that does is it opens her imagination.”

These reflections open up questions about the skills that structured activities can best be developing in order for parents and children to feel confident in their unstructured time.

treats, and a sense of normality. For parents, self-care means moments to themselves such as “staying long in the night with nobody wanting anything from me”, “making sure I have some alone time to drink tea and reflect every day”.

Technology as an entertainer

Participants talk about their changing relationships with technology during this period. In most families, it was felt that screen time had increased. Some families used technology to enrol their children into new activities, such as chess club or Spanish lessons, whilst others used video games for children to socialise with friends. Most commonly it was seen as a way to relax and for parents to have a break, although parents seemed to be constantly negotiating how far this should extend:

“The TV was on 24/7... it was on a lot more than we would have hoped but we're going through a national crisis...- if this is what's going to make them happy for now, let's just do it... We were trying to understand our own routines with work [too]. You'll get a Zoom call and [then] YouTube is on, Netflix is on. Luckily at that time they were all into the same thing so we didn't have to fight over different programmes, but yeah screen time definitely went up.”

Building on individual interests

Several interview participants stress how important knowing children's existing interests was for happy play, particularly those activities which would hold their attention and where they were comfortable to explore independently. Parents found different types of activities worked for each child and many interview participants saw play as a chance to develop and deepen their children's skills and understanding.

Sometimes this is linked explicitly to the development of children's identity and future aspirations:

“My son, he wants to become a mechanic or engineer. He loves fixing things and opening things up, so engineering and stuff... And I can see that and school has have picked up on that as well. If I get something that needs to be unscrewed I let him do it because he loves unscrewing things. Most of my stuff doesn't have a back to it or a screw because my son has been busy with a screwdriver and taking things apart. And putting batteries in the toys and he's so interested, he loves things like that.”

6.2.3 Future focus

Given the number of activities continued within the home under lockdown, it is no surprise that families' responses explore a wide variety of children's activities needed for recovery, either as a source of inspiration to be continued at home, or a development of skills in another setting. Some participants

explicitly couple these activities with anticipated concerns around leaving the house and the need to create new routines as families transition towards normality:

“Continuous activities for families to come out will create more freedom” (Parent and child)

Physical activity is the biggest ask from families, largely around “free sports and exercise sessions” and swimming lessons, but with several suggestions about schemes involving prizes for children. Families also recommend opportunities for children to imagine and express themselves. Continuing the quality time which families have enjoyed together is another desire for families. This includes both regular activities and one-off events and festivals:

“They can introduce program where mother and child can participate together like exercising, dancing, colouring etc.”

“More fun days in community” (Parent and child)

Finally, creating spaces and activities which encourage socialisation and friendships is an important theme:

“To unite groups of children who know one another” (Parent and child)

“A space for kids to hang out together where everyone is included” (Child)

There is some debate about how families know about available sessions and some of the barriers to “opting in” to existing schemes. Four participants suggest better communication of the activities already available.

6.2.4 Recommendations

- **Establish activities for families to support proactive mental and physical health.** Put on activities which allow children to get active and explore the outdoors. Share activities which allow expression and collaboration - for parents and children to do together. Ensure that opportunities to socialise with other children are prioritised during reopening, both virtually and in “real life”.

6.3 Connection and Support

6.3.1 The value of connection and support

Participants most often share examples of positive connection with family, friends and fellow parents, for instance meeting for coffee, and the sense of community as seen in local events, active residents' associations and neighbourliness. This connection is to share laughter, swap tips, "support each other, gather together, talk about what's bothering you", "play", "share how you feel with others", "keep in touch" and "have a proper conversation". It is valuable for its own sake, but also for a sense of motivation and encouragement:

"Connection for me is socialising... Sharing your feelings. Sharing your joys... Whenever you think of happiness you've always shared it with other people. So I think sharing and connection kind of goes hand in hand."

To the research participants, support means taking action, practical help, providing reliable childcare, dropping resources off, being at the other end of a call or present at crucial events, a listening ear. Support is adaptable and mutual, both professional such as counselling or children's services or from family, friends and neighbours.

6.3.2 Challenges and adaptations

6.3.2.1 The lockdown challenge of juggling

Participants spoke of two major changes during lockdown: increased responsibilities and decreased support. Parents juggling roles was the second major theme of lockdown challenges. Working parents particularly expressed the increase in demands on their time and a sudden lack of support:

"Supporting my partner through the illness whilst having to work full time and provide childcare. Missing my family and particularly not being able to see or look after my mum who is having treatment [for an illness]."

"I had to change my times. My husband had to change his times for going to work. And then we were trying to juggle looking after her so one person would leave the house, come back, look after the little one while the other one left the house and comes at night. So we never got to see each other, we only saw each other at night. And so we didn't have that connection. My daughter couldn't see her grandparents so she was very depressed and she was angry. She wouldn't talk on the phone to them, she would say she's angry. It was work, work, work and no time for sitting, or eating, breathing, spending time with your partner or anything... it was getting difficult looking after my daughter, just me and my husband in my house. She would never get tired. Her timetable

was all over the place. We were exhausted. I was getting migraines continuously. And we just gave up and said 'We're going back to the grandparents'."

If it truly does “take a village to raise a child”, the pandemic has meant that more than ever parents have been required to do the impossible: expected to provide almost solely for their children’s needs and development. A family’s world shrunk considerably. The lack of “weak ties” – such as friendly conversations in a café or groups in the Idea Store – is the impact most frequently commented upon. The closure of spaces to connect with other parents/carers and the lack of casual conversations had a dramatic impact:

“And then we went into lockdown and within days I was having a lot of anxiety attacks just because of this connection thing, because I felt suffocated, it's sad to say but I felt suffocated thinking that it's just me, my husband and my kids and no one else.”

When reflecting on the support missing during lockdown, parents most commonly mentioned children’s centres being closed. A need for more external support was particularly commented on by parents with children with additional needs and new parents at a time of transition:

“As a new mum, it's been hard to build a support network, make new friends and cope without practical family support.”

“Not able to get any respite for myself. I am a carer, so my mental health has been challenging, also emotional and physical health too.”

6.3.2.2 What were the adaptations to lockdown?

Parents worked hard to stay in touch with their closest ties

Many families adapted their communication methods for the pandemic to stay in touch with those closest to them, largely focusing on family and friends, and less frequently neighbours, other parents, and existing volunteer groups and communities (such as church).

The interview participants spoke about their community heroes during Covid, in order to explore the support that was maintained around a family. Almost universally, these were close family or near neighbours, and could be relied upon to talk to at any time, but also practical tasks, such as shopping or cooking – as one participant described, a “faithful supporter”:

“Any time I'm having any problems or anything. Just to speak to someone. She's been there. She's cooked for me, brought it over.”

“My 17-year-old daughter, she has been my rock throughout the pandemic. She's my psychologist. She's my helper. She's my masseuse. She's my everything. I can't explain to you how much she has done for me and how much she means to me. .. The other day I was so unwell and I was on the sofa because I suffer from migraines. And I needed to cook and when I woke up I saw the cooking was done. Everything was done.”

Communication was largely virtual – but online doesn't “feed the soul”

Normally more than one method of communication is used within the family and regularity is prized. Communication methods are largely virtual: video calls and phone calls were almost equally popular, with messages, online activity groups (such as quizzes), WhatsApp groups, social media, socially distanced visits or meet-ups, watching TV and writing letters all suggested.

However, participants (both adults and children) clearly deeply miss a sense of “closeness”, “physical contact”, particularly “not being able to meet up with family and friends”. With several interviewees, there was a nuanced understanding of what online communication could provide for them – largely to achieve goal-oriented meetings with reasonably clear boundaries:

“I mainly use the internet and this video conferencing for work purposes. And I think that really works. Because when you do things like a conference call you can formalise it and when it's formal there are rules and not everyone is talking at once and you're not feeling like no one is hearing you or you can't hear anyone kind of situation. When it's formal... it's been quite effective... [With family] the Zoom calls were nice but I still didn't feel connected... When things started easing... we were able to take a breath and see family.”

6.3.3 Future focus

6.3.3.1 Spontaneity and reconnection

20 families identify connection as an area of continuing concern for the future. As well as a lack of different forms of contact – “not going close to other people”, “not having close contact and prolonged contact” - people also express the impacts of their present disconnection on their future life. When discussing otherwise positive connecting activities, participants associate them with significant levels of fear, which could have longer-lasting effects on our interactions: “not much connection with community and fear from unsubstantiated fear mongering through media”, “fear of unknown, feeling strange and lonely in social gatherings”, or “not being able to see grandparents without worry”.

Going back to basics

Mehar is a highly motivated, energetic and confident woman, used to seeing extended family and friends regularly. She takes part in community work to be connected to others. At the beginning of lockdown, “things... shutting down in front of us” was a frightening experience for her and was a stark contrast to her normal life.

There have been some benefits to such an intense focus on the family:

“In some ways it's been quite a beneficial thing that my kids have been able to be home more than being out. Because it's helped us strengthen our foundation, our values, the love between us. So in that sense I think connection between us has improved. But they have left in the overall sense when they want to feel connected with their extended family and their friends and going out and the usual thing that kids get up to.”

Mehar turned to online methods to keep connection. Video calls have worked for Mehar particularly in work and learning settings:

“When it's formal, there are rules and not everyone is talking at once and you're not feeling like no one is hearing you or you can't hear anyone... it really works and it's been quite effective.”

She also started an online course. However, to join in community activities, such as her women's weekly gathering, or to talk to her family and friends, video calls “just didn't feed my soul”. According to Mehar, “on video calls you can't read the nonverbal cues. It's there but it's just not real.”

For Mehar's own sense of support she prizes feeling connected to her local community:

“Physically I don't need the support because I'm well in myself and I have my husband. The mental support that I need which a continuous connection is being sought out, that's not happening.”

“Even though you have neighbours, unless you both open the door at the same time, you don't get to say hello to your neighbour or your neighbour doesn't pick up the phone and say 'Hey how are you doing? Do you need anything?' And a lot of people are suffering in silence because of that.”

Mehar is concerned about the effect on spiritual and mental health, in a community which is lacking normal rituals and the “second home” of community centres and religious institutions: “Friday prayers come with a weekly dose of... current affairs” Other activities that were embedded into day-to-day life, such as entertaining children offline, keeping physically active and parents taking time for themselves, have also been disrupted. Her solution to this is to “go back to the basics” as a community, with knowledge and experience proactively “pumped” back into the community, through groups, activities and training sessions, because “people are forgetting, people have forgotten.” Mehar has plans to do exactly this with her women's group:

“This is something that's on our to-do list. To get everyone motivated because we can see how everyone is becoming very demotivated.”

One participant articulates the desire for spontaneity:

"I can't wait for the normalcy to return where you could just decide to barge into your friend's house and give them a surprise. And if I wanted some sort of help from the doctors or I wanted to be seen by a nurse, I could just walk in and do that and not fill in these 101 forms and do all these different processes. It's just become more complicated right now."

6.3.3.2 What could family support look like?

Family support is linked to the use of space: in the "Best Start Village", the places that could house support and friendship are more often mentioned than the people themselves, including friends' houses, community centres and venues for play:

"For me, the local library was a main kind of connection because I would go there and I would meet parents of similar aged children.... I would meet new faces, some familiar faces and over time you start sharing. And even resources that I could take from community centres and bring them home and do stuff."

Fully re-opening children's centres and community centres, early years support, language help, online safety, job opportunities, mental health support and domestic violence prevention are also suggested. Training for parents was seen as a powerful way to validate and support families:

"We need to think about doing a lot of courses with parents right now to support children. Because ultimately a lot of it is in our hands. And so to help children in the house, parents can do courses on how to manage children's mental health, their wellbeing, exercise"

One parent suggested this could work through proactive, targeted and "holistic need family assessment". When participants considered support, this was on a neighbourhood level, with organisations more joined-up:

"From a service point of view, I think it's very important if GPs or midwives or healthcare visitors are the first point of contact for mums to be, that they should be given a list of these other services available in your area. Because I think if you don't know that, then you won't even know where to look but if you have somebody give you the roadmap then you have the choice to go and connect into that."

6.3.4 Recommendations

- **Increase opportunities to connect local people and neighbourhoods to each other and better information flows.** Provide creative forms of 'casual' neighbourly connection as we exit lockdown. Invest in access to information, focusing on places parents naturally engage and consume information e.g. existing networks.
- **Connect and strengthen parents' existing local support system.** Increase the impact of "intermediate" spaces of supporting parents. Build more opportunities for collaboration and stronger connection between providers of family support, particularly place-based partnerships
- **Explore new ways to establish peer support between parents/carers.** There are opportunities both for peer support between adults at similar life stages and with older adults to share their experience. Design new activities to promote 1-1 support between parents / carers and other community members. Support learning and exchange between communities in Tower Hamlets and beyond.

6.4 Stability and safety

6.4.1 Establishing safety and independence

Ensuring children's safety appears in various forms throughout the research, particularly. When children were invited to express their dreams through the “Best Start Village”, safety and protection is also present particularly through superheroes as protectors, but the village also contains elements of fear and uncertainty. Dark or uncertain places that change perceptions and are approached with fascination include “a haunted castle with a ghost coming out, a dragon holding humans, and a dinosaur with fire on the tongue”, and a house of mirrors. This seems to resonate with the interest in fighting sports and one boy's interest in knives – all ways of dealing with danger.

Adults are more likely to mention some of the nurturing qualities they wanted to introduce into the village:

“Encouragement. Things like this to be creative, explore ideas, confidence building. Growing up from a big family I was not encouraged to express myself. I try to do this for my little ones, ask them, encourage them, give them a choice.”

“Bonding and spending time with kids. During Covid I have been working from home – I'm usually busy working out and about - and I realized that I want to spend more time with my family.. Both parents more involved!”

One child's creation of a “school of feelings”, and another's contribution of “finding your passion, love and enjoyment” also supports this theme.

6.4.2 Challenges and adaptations

6.4.2.1 The challenge of income

This research documents increasing challenges to the foundations of a family's material stability, particularly around financial precarity, job opportunities and adequate housing⁹. Having jobs and a stable income is the second largest future challenge identified by families, which is also consistent with wider observations and experiences: particularly in Tower Hamlets, the rise of foodbank use and Universal Credit enrolment. The anticipation of rising food prices due to Brexit and the impact of “the economy/ jobs and all the repercussions that follow” meant that financial security is far from assured or expected even after the coronavirus pandemic.

⁹ . These are more fully explored in other evidence, such as long-term trends in the IGP's prosperity index, and more recent changes such as foodbank use and Universal Credit uptake in Tower Hamlets.

These concerns have direct impacts on the family's sense of stability and wellbeing:

"It has been a very depressing time for everyone because obviously the income has been reduced... And so mentally it's just been very hard to actually cope and get by... it affects your daily life and it affects your relationship with everyone. But children don't understand that parents have to go through this stress. And they can't understand why mum isn't spending so much time. Or why is mum looking upset? Children pick up really quickly. One day I was praying and I was crying in my prayer and my daughter sat next to me and then when I turned around, I saw she drew a picture of a lady crying with a scarf on. And I said to her 'Who is this?' and she didn't want to tell me it was me. But then I said 'It looks like me' and she said 'Yes mum it's you, I drew you because you were crying'. They pick up these things so quickly."

6.4.2.2 Fear, uncertainty and wellbeing

A background theme throughout the research is fear of coronavirus and the changing norms around behaviour in response to this: *"Very scared of the Virus and being worried about germs coming from outside food and outdoor shoes etc. Worried about cleanliness"*. Parents were dealing with loss, worry for loved ones and the constantly changing advice on how to "keep my family safe".

This uncertainty is perhaps also present when participants talk about "overcoming stress" and managing their own mental states. Several participants mention the need for access to mental health support. 21 people speak about the current challenge of maintaining "mental wellbeing" and "emotional health", often presented in self-supporting and positive language: "be strong", "stay positive and connect with positive people", "appreciate life". The top tips conversations were surrounded with associations with happiness and a desire to spread this within neighbourhoods - hearts, flowers, smiley faces, pictures of friendship and rainbows.

6.4.2.3 Adaptations to lockdown

Small interventions for wellbeing

Parents/carers recognised the increased pressure that they themselves were under, but also that they were the foundation for wellbeing in the home:

"It's very important to have good mental health for parents in order to have a good healthy family. Because obviously being a parent is very overwhelming and it's very important to compose yourself mentally before you start the day."

Building wellbeing into the home

Several participants reflected on the small interventions they devised to support their children's emotions.

Explaining change

Many participants vividly remembered how they explained coronavirus to their children and stressed the importance of communicating the change clearly and matter-of-factly.

Managing responses to situations

Parents/carers were aware of how important their response to small everyday incidents could be:

"My sister-in-law she has two boys. But all day she's crazy, crazy, shouting 'Why did you do this? Go, come back, do this'. But you need to be calm throughout the day... My daughter knows that accidents happen, I won't shout at her for it but she tells me 'Mummy I dropped a whole glass of water' or 'I broke a glass in the kitchen can you come?' ... especially during the lockdown that has been a challenge for parents to stay calm. Because there was so much happening in the house. So I would start off the day with deep breathing and things like that because I know every day is a challenge to get by and every day so much will happen."

Regular moments of trust and individual attention

Treating every child as unique and worthy of attention could be built into routines in practical ways:

"In my home we have a thing called 'mum and me' time. So this is like five or ten minutes and I give this weekly to all five of my children - even my 22-year-old... Or whenever they want to they can tell me anytime 'Mum I want a mum and me time today' or 'I need a mum and me time tomorrow'. They come to my room and we sit on the sofa and this is the time that we discuss any sort of issues they have... The children can open up and talk to me about their problems or things that they need even if they're saying 'I need a calculator. I need new shirts' or anything... they get undivided attention and I think children really appreciate things like that."

Bringing other people in

Finally, acknowledging that you might need some outside help could transform a situation:

"At some point my daughters kind of regressed, they just weren't really into anything. Sometimes there was a lot of irritability. I wasn't understanding what they were feeling, trying to speak to them and they were just really understanding this is it; they're going to be stuck at home day and night. So it was really kind of managing their worries and any kind of anxieties that they had. There was a lot of fighting with the children, having to sort that out... I had to seek out some support from their teachers - they weren't just really talking to me, and they wanted to just be in bed. So luckily [the teachers] were lovely enough to come by and to say hi from the balcony and that really lifted their spirits... that really did help."

Having someone “at the other end of the phone” seemed particularly important for the adults to keep their own “mental stability”. Parents/carers then listed multiple strategies they had valued during lockdown to maintain their children’s motivation, which are explored in the case study.

Work provisions and Wi-Fi as enablers of family life

Alongside work’s importance in providing income to the home, some parents found that the role they took on in work was also useful to develop their children’s independence. There were a variety of experiences of work during lockdown, with parents juggling shifts and some feeling isolated from colleagues and a sense of purpose in their job. At its best, work could be supportive and flexible to the challenges at home. Within this, technology has played a huge part in this adaptability:

“This has been a really good learning experience that you can still be productive, you can still be an effective member of the team if you're working from home. And hopefully, I'm hoping employers will learn to be flexible, especially if you're a parent or caretakers of any kind. So I'm hoping that's something that will change and it will be a prominent change where having a conversation with your employer to say 'Can I work from home?' will not be a difficult conversation, it will be something that's built into the system now.”

“I just feel that the most important thing right now is the Wi-Fi connection in the house. And that's how I feel supported because that runs practically everything now. Absolutely Wi-Fi is our support.”

6.4.3 Future focus

6.4.3.1 A community safety net

Relieving the pressure on families involves systematic, widespread change and targeted support to the most “vulnerable” families. Support should be “proactive” and “holistic” – and particularly for families in financial need:

“Family support especially where parents are struggling financially. When parents suffer kids suffer more, they just don't show it straight away.”

One gap in societal support is access to cheap, healthy food. School meal vouchers were experienced as a great financial help and encouraged to continue, whilst families had many ideas around improving the food environment:

“Adverts regarding healthy food everywhere from superstores to bus stops. “

“Cheaper, healthier food” (Parent and child)

“Free food/fruits” (Parent and child)

“Healthy eating and nutrition advice for families from schools, nursery and preschool (i.e. 5 a day schemes) and council”

“Free school meals for all school children”

“Healthy eating places for families /friends” (Parent and child)

“Open up discounted veg & fruit shop”

Work and income are seen both as challenge and a support. The ideal work fits around family needs and builds solidarity from local neighbourhoods upwards:

“I think people will end up having to rely on each other more in the local than globally. We’ve seen the impact on Covid on small businesses.”

Finally, digital inclusion was ever-present throughout the research, as families struggled to have enough devices in the home, to use new software and to afford enough data. Ways to combat this included ideas such as free WiFi in parks during working hours.

6.4.3.2 Conversations and curricula for mental health and recovery

In the changes families identified for the future, there is a particular concern around “touching base with children and their mental health” and nurturing them through the pandemic - “giving them praise and thankfulness for coping through this tough and confusing time” – as well as the need for the school curriculum and environment to reflect this. Participants consider the stress of exams, the importance of learning through play, more flexible school hours, the impact of bullying, and counselling and other activities to support children’s mental health.

Parents and carers are also prepared for a future challenge of adjustment after this lockdown – as one parent stated, “coming back to normal status/behaviour and liking your family again”. Upskilling parents/carers to anticipate and feel in control of this transition and in broader parenting topics more generally was well-received:

“I think we need to think about doing a lot of courses with parents right now to support children. Because ultimately a lot of it is in our hands. And so to help children in the house, parents can do courses on how to manage children's mental health, their wellbeing, exercise and things like that. And maybe teaching parents how to keep their kids entertained. I think we need to relearn these things.”

6.4.3.3 Equipping settings for inclusion

For families, inclusion means tackling racism, free access to activities and opportunities, adaption for all learning needs and reducing inequalities. Families also identify more support needed for families coming to UK around language issues.

In schools, a common theme is the need for more support staff and advocating for better funding for schools, alongside access to extra tuition particularly for secondary school pupils.

6.4.4 Recommendations

- **Develop skills-based programmes for families** - ensuring access both for parents and children. Support and empower parents to look after their children's mental and physical health. Involve whole families in expanding healthy lifestyle promotion; life skills and finance management workshops.
- **Protect families' access to basic needs.** Parents / carers made recommendations to support and advocate for structural change to ensure that everyone's basic needs are open to them. This includes reducing inequalities and tackling racism. Shaping the food environment, access to technology and adequate support with finances were the most common responses. Continue championing digital inclusion as a right for families - to ensure access to learning, connection and opportunities online. Support families through holistic family assessments, keeping the focus on most vulnerable families. Build more opportunities for all families to better access to cheap, healthy food - including a supporting environment to make healthy food purchases.
- **Build on the experience of the pandemic to further develop a supportive learning environment for children.** The pandemic has shown the importance of nurturing children's wellbeing and resilience. This should also impact educational priorities. Parents / carers identified a desire for more individualised and focused support for their children's learning. Build on conversations around mental wellbeing to embed this focus into the curriculum. Champion funding for schools and other community organisations to provide more tailored support for learning.
- **Ensure flexible employment provisions continue, alongside support for the local and circular economy.** Advocate and promote for employers to remain flexible with work arrangement options for their employees, including WFH for new parents / carers to be continued. Promote schemes that buy and re-use locally.

7 Building a response: The BBB Families

Action Plan

Through a series of sessions with the wider Bromley by Bow team, to both reflect on and deliberate the findings from this research, and establish Bromley by Bow's response, the community research team has facilitated the co-production of the Bromley by Bow Families Action Plan. The component parts of the plan are presented below.

Table 5 Bromley by Bow Families Action Plan (1 of 2)

Recommendation by theme										
	Environment and space		Connection and support			Play activities	Stability and security			
Action	1. More and better play spaces	2. Public spaces more child-friendly	3. Opportunities to connect and share information in neighbourhoods	4. Strengthen collaboration between organisations	5. Peer support	6. Activities for children and families	7. Skills-based family programmes	8. Protect families' access to basic needs	9. Supportive learning environment	10. Support flexible employment and local economy
1. Invest the legacy of Active Together (a family physical activity programme) into a programme of resident-led events and CDC activities developed. Identify two new neighbourhoods in which to work (hyper-local approach in N-W6)	X		X		X	X		X	X	
2. Work with SCUK to engage stakeholders and resident families, facilitating the involvement of parents , as a priority, in the co-production and trial delivery of an early learning project .	X		X	X	X	X		X		
3. Work with ActEarly to engage stakeholders and resident families, facilitating the involvement of children , as a priority in the co-production and trial delivery of a play activity that suits their needs.	X		X	X	X	X		X		
4. Work with UCL to audit and produce a map of play facilities available, and develop with children a quality marker and new activity .	X	X	X	X	X	X		X		
5. Capture families' experience of housing and views of quality , in relation to children's health. With UCL.								X		
6. Share BBB ActEarly recommendations/research with local residents e.g. Thoughts on the Street (recommendations temporarily painted onto the pavement in different sites to form a family treasure trail, inviting local people to share their views via social media), and a community visual art expressing views on the findings.			X							
7. Share BBB ActEarly recommendations/research with other organisations incl. Network 6.			X	X						

Table 6 Bromley by Bow Families Action Plan (2 of 2)

	Environment and space		Connection and support			Play activities	Stability and security			
Action	1. More and better play spaces	2. Public spaces more child-friendly	3. Opportunities to connect and share information in neighbourhoods	4. Strengthen collaboration between organisations	5. Peer support	6. Activities for children and families	7. Skills-based family programmes	8. Protect families' access to basic needs	9. Supportive learning environment	10. Support flexible employment and local economy
8. Proactive contact with members of the community to signpost to BBB services/activities available, and encourage them to continue to come and participate.			X	X						
9. Work with BbBHP, PCN, Residents and Patients to develop a strategy to support children, young people and families in N-W6 , including the expansion of social prescribing.			X	X		X	X	X	X	
10. Training in outreach and engagement with 'what we do' resources. Training and Development Plan from HR			X							
11. Invite parents routinely engaged to provide peer support and connect up interested parents .					X					
12. Active Together Summer event -including a series of physical activities informed by ActEarly findings e.g. Troll Hunt, CDC outdoor activities. Engage stakeholder organisations .			X			X				
13. Community Research to identify what parents need to respond to their children's activity needs in the way that works for them now and sustains into the future.						X				
14. Consult with community research/board to identify if these are the best actions to take and any others	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	

8 Conclusion

Throughout this pandemic, Bromley by Bow's research team has had the privilege to witness the deep commitment parents have to their children's happiness and health, juggling seemingly impossible competing tasks, and the mental resilience that they have displayed to ensure that this can happen. Through this struggle, many families identified and shared how they have been keeping happy and healthy and dreamed together of what would make the "best start in life for our children".

Families' discussions shed light on four themes in particular: the use of the space, navigating restrictions and opportunities within the environment; the role of play and activities in a child's development, learning and growth; establishing a stable base for family life, both emotionally and materially; and the connection and support surrounding a family.

There are clear ways that Tower Hamlets can support families, as suggested by parents and children themselves: adapting our environment to be more child-friendly in the deepest sense of the word; building a more inclusive borough for stable livelihoods, including targeted help for parents, such as training, finance and information, as part of this; supporting the adjustment back to connection with others; and establishing a commitment to play and opportunities for children to experience the world.

The ten recommendations which accompany this research aim to articulate these needs and form the basis of action for local families, stakeholder organisations and the council, including the Bromley by Bow Centre, which has responded through developing the Families Action Plan.

Appendix 1: Three questions - Examining the “best start” from the lenses of challenges, dreams and changes

In this section, our three lenses of challenges, dreams and changes will be examined in turn to explore what they contribute to “the best start in life” for children in Tower Hamlets.

A1.1 Challenges

Parents reflected on the biggest challenges they were facing during lockdown, and the challenges they anticipated would be the most serious for Tower Hamlets residents over the next few years. There were 122 responses to current challenges faced by families, largely collected at the beginning of the summer of 2020, dominated by the challenge of keeping children entertained at home, juggling parental roles and dealing with the restrictions of “staying indoors”.

“In the lockdown the biggest challenge is we look after the children and make them happy- we try our best in this difficult time.”

In comparison, the weighting of future challenges is towards a far broader range of concerns. The need for more activities for children is again prominent, but this is very closely followed by financial and job security, building healthy habits, supporting mental health and connection to others. Juggling parental roles and the use of space do not even enter the top 10 concerns parents had, although are present in the feedback.

Table 7: Current and future challenges for parents/carers

	Current challenges (122)	Future challenges (217)
1	Managing children’s activities	Activities for children
2	Juggling parental roles and routine	Finance and job security
3	Changed use of space at home	Mental health and emotions
4	Connection to others	Connection to others
5	Access to money and food	= Building healthy habits
6	= Mental health and emotions	Environment
7	Safety	Adjustment and safety
8		Parenting
9		Learning
10		Physical activity

Other	Juggling parental roles and routine, Changed use of space at home, Crime, Fair government, Housing, Access to play, Care for all
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A1.1.1 How do families' challenges reveal the role of parenting in crisis and in recovery?

Perhaps more than the other lenses, reflections on current and future challenges are firmly based around life within the family unit. Both timeframes hold similar challenges, although with different emphasis. This suggests that there are certain stable elements to the roles parents are taking. From their responses, parents see themselves as the first line of responsibility to maintain their child's whole world – from their activities, to their food, access to environment, and mental health. More broadly, this is built on a base of financial security, parental support and connection to family and friends.

Participants are expecting lasting future impacts related to this period, largely through managing safety, adjusting to an as-yet-undefined “new normal”, and coping with “disconnection”. This is connected to a sense of anxiety and pain, alongside the recognition of something that has altered irrevocably through our experience:

“Covid-19 will be [the] biggest challenge for my family and for my community. Family, friends and others lost our dearest family members and friends. It will take long time to forget. [Plus] health issues - physically and mentally, people affected...”

Finally, the two most popular future challenges concern how to guide children's time and how to ensure financial stability for a family, both of which can be seen as some of the most fundamental work of parenting. This suggests that the experience of this pandemic has been of amplifying existing concerns, rather than the creation of new ones, and further implies many of the challenges identified will not easily subside.

A1.2 Dreams - Lives of health and happiness in a pandemic

To understand the assets in our parenting community, we gathered 366 “top tips” from families about how they were building their own health and happiness in this period of difficulty and change. Participants shared their understandings and aspirations of parenting and family life: the top tips represent the fleeting but realised dream, when families are operating at their best within their current circumstances. The main

categories of top tips include ways: to take exercise, to connect with family and friends, to be in nature, to build routine, to introduce play, to support a positive mindset and to encourage healthy eating. The most striking and consistent feature of the top tips is their character: often practical, immediate, low-cost and routine-creating.

Secondly, we asked families to contribute to a dream for the future of a best start in life. This was facilitated through a community art project, with the strapline “If it takes a village to raise a child – what would you put in the village?” Parents and children contributed an array of wild, wonderful and occasionally recognisable ideas, from ninja classrooms and haunted houses to “a council office for daddy” and “animals to play with”. We had 150 annotated entrants for our village and even more unannotated submissions, largely created by children and supported by parents. Two themes dominate in the entries: nature and play spaces.

Table 8: Dreams for the best start in life from parents/carers and children

	Top tips (366)	Best Start Village (150)
1	Physical activity	Nature
2	Connection	People
3	Environment and nature	Animals
4	Mental health and emotions	Learning
5	Play and activities	Play (general)
6	Healthy eating	Creativity
7	Family time	Food
8	Routine	Attitudes
9	Healthy habits	Roads and transport
10	Learning	Houses
Other	Contributing, Structure	Shops and jobs, Play park, Community spaces, Health services, Active play, Exploring the unexpected, Technology and play, Superheroes, Comfort

A1.2.1 How do families’ dreams and best actions reveal “the best start in life”?

A feature of a positive picture of health and happiness for the children draws on two strong foundations: the environment arounds us and the experience of play. From families’ top tips, it is clear that these

foundations are accessible even now, during one of the most restricted periods of British life. Active routines and creative opportunities persisted throughout lockdown for many families.

Building safety and independence is important both in this world and the “Best Start Village”, whether through the mental resilience of parents, or the protection of superheroes; fear and uncertainty are also present in both.

The largest difference between the top tips presented and the dream of the village lies in their spheres of control and access: top tips are largely centred in only two places, at home and in the park, and on simple actions built into day-to-day life. Our research was conducted at a time which was in some ways the antithesis of the phrase “it takes a village to raise a child”: an immediate world, largely dominated by the family unit, with a struggle to remain connected with friends, family and neighbours, largely virtually. In contrast, in the “Best Start Village”, parents and other institutions of the local community create a safe world “to guide, to nurture, to educate and to care”, and encompass a far wider scope of experience and opportunity for children.

A1.3 Changes for a happier and healthier Tower Hamlets

448 responses suggested changes for a happier and healthier Tower Hamlets. Heading the list is access to children’s activities, then improving the quality and suitability of the outdoor environment, largely related to green space and play spaces. This was followed by suggestions around infrastructure and healthy eating, support for children’s learning, physical activity and mental health. Changes residents suggest are often very specific and perhaps can be interpreted as the resources parents need outside of their home environment.

Table 9: Changes for a happier and healthier Tower Hamlets, from parents/carers and children

Changes for a happier and healthier Tower Hamlets (488)	
1	Play and Activities
2	Environment
3	Healthy eating
4	Physical activity
5	Infrastructure
6	Learning and development
7	Parental support
8	Inclusion and safety
9	Mental health
10	Healthy habits

A1.3.1 What do these changes reveal about the role of society in the “best start in life”?

The changes suggested tell us about parents’ perception about how their local community, civic spaces, council and wider relationships can better support children to have the “best start in life”. These suggestions are dominated by the provision of facilities and activities, navigated by the family “opting in” to these spaces. These are largely instrumental responses and often the data lacks explanation for the motivation behind these suggestions. Where this motivation was given, it seemed parents attribute three particular responsibilities to wider society: building a sense of community, creating truly “child-friendly” spaces (from healthy eating environments, to clean safe roads, to playful green spaces), and enhancing the opportunities available for children. This was explored further through in-depth interviews.