



Department
for Education

Short Breaks Innovation Programme

Lessons Learned Report

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What was the Short Breaks Innovation Programme?

Introduction to the programme

Short breaks (sometimes referred to as ‘respite care’) are provided by local authorities under the Breaks for Carers of Disabled Children Regulations 2011. Local authorities must provide a range of short breaks for disabled children and young people as well as for their parents or carers to support them in caring for their children.

In 2021, the Department for Education (DfE) successfully bid for £30 million from His Majesty’s Treasury (HMT) to award extra funding to local authorities to:

- provide additional short breaks
- improve access to short breaks for under-represented groups
- test innovative delivery models for short breaks

This fund established the Short Breaks Innovation Programme, a 3 year programme that ran from April 2022 to March 2025. In Year 1, £5 million was made available for the local authority applicants who scored highest against stipulated success criteria. In Year 2, this increased to £10 million, and in Year 3, it increased further to £15 million.

Successful local authorities were those who best demonstrated that their project could deliver the broader aims of the programme. These included:

- the improvement of health, education and well-being outcomes for young people with disabilities and their families
- a reduction in the pressures on high needs and other budgets (by, for example, reducing the need for educational transitions from mainstream into specialist settings, or moves into the care system)
- an exploration of possible future structural reform and service redesign, in the context of broader special educational needs and disability (SEND) system reform

Needs addressed

One of the objectives of the programme was to develop bespoke short breaks to address currently unmet needs. While nearly all projects targeted children and young people (CYP) whose needs could be identified under the broad headings of autism (ASD), Social Emotional Mental Health (SEMH), or broader (potentially undiagnosed) neurodivergence, the project innovations tended to focus on children and young people within those categories whose needs nevertheless remained unmet, for example:

- those identified as Children Missing in Education (CME)
- children and young people waiting for a diagnosis or EHCP to meet the threshold for access to short breaks services

- children and young people whose needs fall narrowly short of a threshold, but nevertheless remain significant
- early years children unable to participate in existing provisions
- children and young people with acute needs too complex for current providers to meet safely
- children and young people unable to leave the house to access current short breaks provision (usually for reasons relating to mental health)

Activities delivered

Short breaks vary due to the fact that local authorities are free to create bespoke opportunities for children and young people and families according to their individual and local needs. Nevertheless, we found that most local authority innovations sought to:

- engage children and young people via personal and social development activities
- introduce and develop life skills
- support parents or carers and the family unit by providing meaningful breaks or holidays
- maximise the effectiveness of existing local authority short break initiatives through measuring impact and using data to inform strategic decision making
- redesign commissioning mechanisms

Projects included, but were not limited to:

- delivering short breaks in places that are hard to reach
- targeting those needs unmet by the current offer, such as transition into adulthood or early years
- establishing a new joined up, multi-agency approach to delivery (this previously required parent-carers to navigate multiple systems)
- building on historic practices by injecting greater rigour or evidence informed practice
- adapting historic practices to a rapidly shifting social landscape (particularly post-COVID-19)
- developing new technologies to identify the approaches which deliver the greatest positive impact for children and young people and their families
- targeting and removing the initial barriers that children and young people and their families face when trying to access a short break

What is the aim of this report?

This report collates lessons learned from across the programme for the benefit of all local authorities to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of their short breaks offer. Given the limited scope of the programme, the evidence base provided here is not exhaustive or conclusive, but suggestive. It draws on multiple in-depth interviews with the local

authorities who participated in the Short Breaks Innovation Programme, as well as their annual impact reports. We anticipate that the innovations discussed below will resonate with local authorities beyond the programme. The report therefore aims to provide all local authorities impetus to strategically reconsider their historic approaches considering today's changing landscape.

Table 1: Participating local authority projects

Local authority	Project name	Years in programme	Needs addressed	Project overview
Camden	Rebuilding Bridges	Years 1–3	CYP aged 6–25 primarily with SEMH and/or ASD	Rebuilding Bridges sought to re-engage socially isolated CYP using 1:1 mentoring, therapeutic support and skills workshops.
Plymouth	Thriving Futures	Years 1–3	Complex SEND or SEMH	Plymouth expanded its short breaks offer with a range of activity based clubs and care packages to develop independence, life skills and opportunities for future progression. The focus was on the safe transition to adulthood, maximising life chances.
Sunderland	Breathing Space	Years 1–3	SEMH, autism, CYP at risk of exclusion	Sunderland used a hub model to provide bespoke support for early help, autism, SEMH, mentoring and complex needs.
Wakefield		Years 1–3	CYP with SEND of a wide range of ages	Across 3 years, Wakefield developed a wide range of approaches to short breaks, targeting different needs of CYP with SEND, their siblings, and their parents. These included, but are not limited to, coaching, holiday clubs, family engagement work, social groups and elective home education groups.

Bristol	Pathways	Years 2–3	CYP aged 8–18 with social isolation linked to social communication needs and anxiety, and CYP persistently absent from school (EBSA).	Pathways supported CYP aged 8–18 with social isolation linked to social communication needs and anxiety. The project deployed one to one ‘advanced project workers’, targeted social groups and therapeutic approaches.
Derby		Years 2–3	CYP 8–25 with a wide variety of needs and disabilities	Derby targeted unmet need by creating positive opportunities for CYP with complex SEND to take part in new community based alternative provision to increase social interaction, immersive technology spaces, as well as developing a platform to amplify the voice of CYP and better measure impact of service provision.
Norfolk	SEMH Short Breaks	Years 2–3	CYP with SEMH	Norfolk County Council designed short term activities for children with SEMH in conjunction with external providers, which offered bespoke, positive experiences for both children and their parents or carers.
Rotherham	My Family Support	Years 2–3	Complex SEND	Rotherham put in place a professional network around a cohort of CYP with complex ASD, SEMH and EBSA needs. They focused on training personal assistants to move CYP towards emotional wellbeing, community engagement and school attendance.

Southwark	Thrive to 25	Years 2–3	ASD, complex needs, behaviours of concern	Southwark developed 5 work streams to support CYP aged 0 to 25 (and their families), comprising early years stay and play, holiday provision, social and interest groups for young adults and positive behaviour support.
Suffolk	Friends and Networks	Years 2–3	CYP with EBSA	The Friends and Networks project was designed to provide a range of engaging and alternative activities for children disengaged from traditional education. The aim was to support each participant to make measurable gains in their school attendance.
Surrey	Stronger Families	Years 2–3	CYP with complex needs (requiring 1:1 or 2:1 support) and their families	The Stronger Families programme aimed to deliver positive outcomes for CYP with complex needs (and their families) through a range of new and innovative services.
Bracknell Forest	Skills for Life	Year 3	CYP 14–25 with SEND (primarily with ASD and challenges with mental health)	Bracknell delivered an educational youth programme offering a series of life skills workshops and opportunities for socialisation whilst providing weekend breaks for parents and carers. It also offered preparation for adulthood workshops that covered employment, health, safety, personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE), first aid, mental health and travel.
Enfield	Empowering Families and Networks	Year 3	CYP 4–17 with learning disability or autism, displaying behaviours of concern	Enfield focused on empowering parents, carers and professionals with Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) as a foundation for change. The programme comprised intensive PBS training as well as expanding on short breaks provision.

Essex	Supported Waiting	Year 3	CYP with autism or ADHD	Essex County Council adapted its short breaks registration systems and developed new short breaks provision for CYP with evidenced need but no diagnosis of autism or ADHD to support CYP and families while waiting for a diagnosis.
Greenwich	Befriending, Inclusion and Transition Programmes / Complex Needs Summer Scheme	Year 3	CYP 16–25	Greenwich sought to improve mental and physical health, increase independence, strengthen peer relationships and improve transitions to adulthood. They did this through a training offer, innovative peer mentoring and a specialist summer scheme.
Medway	Rocc Expansion and Workforce Development	Year 3	CYP 5–25 with SEND (primarily with ASD, Global Development Delay, ADHD, Down’s syndrome).	Medway developed its offer to expand provision for growing numbers of CYP within the local authority. It also changed its recruitment approach to meet workforce gaps in residential short breaks.
Portsmouth and Southampton	Inclusive Wellbeing Hubs	Year 3	Neurodivergent CYP aged 11–25 (ADHD, autism, SEMH, sensory processing difference, school absence)	This was a joint city initiative across Portsmouth and Southampton designed to deliver non statutory, needs led spaces where neurodivergent CYP, often ineligible for a short break, benefited from after school holiday and weekend provision in one of 10 Inclusive Wellbeing Hubs.

What did we learn about short breaks?

Innovation in short breaks commissioning is as necessary as in the intervention itself

The programme offered participating local authorities the opportunity to innovate their delivery of short breaks. However, given that these new projects often operated in addition to, and separately from, the authority's business as usual short breaks offer, it provided an opportunity for local authorities to re-evaluate how they commission services, work with internal and external stakeholders, and deliver impact. As one report put it, "Funding provided a valuable opportunity for the team to pilot new services and embrace a different way of working"¹. Rotherham also noted the significant role that internal structures surrounding particular services play in ensuring their effectiveness².

The most common lens through which projects examined how local authorities operated their short breaks programmes was through the commissioning process. It is normal and right for local authorities to have clear service eligibility criteria and thresholds to ensure fairness and sustainability when commissioning services. However, several local authorities described scenarios in which these criteria did not always ensure that the right support was offered to the right families. At times, a formal diagnosis is required to access services, but the pre-diagnostic phase can last years due to increased demand. Thus children and young people are unable to access a short break in the pre-diagnostic assessment phase, meaning the programme often fails to function as an early intervention, and will not, therefore, prevent downstream and costlier interventions at the end of a lengthy diagnostic assessment, during which time needs may have escalated.

Many local authorities expressed their frustration at commissioning processes that were preventing the right families receiving support at the right time. Therefore the freedom to offer a short break through the innovation project was described by one local authority as "a breath of fresh air".

The lesson here is not to remove all eligibility criteria, thresholds or processes; all local authority projects in the programme worked within some form of criteria or parameters to determine which children and young people and families would receive a short break. The lesson is rather that a more flexible approach to commissioning short breaks can generate a much more effective offer of early intervention support. Indeed, in many cases, local authorities described the opportunity to strategically redesign commissioning processes as having the most impact, over and above any delivery innovations in the approach itself. This was reflected in the way that project innovations, when compared to what was

¹ Breathing Space, Year 3 Evaluation & Impact Report, Sunderland

² Short Break Innovation Pilot Evaluation, Rotherham

historically offered, were often quite modest, but it was the commissioning processes that were different.

Camden in particular exercised greater freedom around commissioning placements and is looking to apply lessons to its business as usual commissioning processes. In Derby, the more flexible approach to commissioning will be reflected in a whole service redesign informed by lessons from the programme. Essex homed in on a more flexible commissioning process as the main objective of its innovation (as opposed to the offer itself). This report will later look at Derby and Essex's projects in more detail.

Recommendation

Develop a vision for what maximum impact in short breaks would look like in your local authority. Where do the current internal structures inhibit that vision? Where might possible changes be made to facilitate impact?

Short breaks can be an effective support for the growing SEMH and EBSA cohorts

As originally conceived, the policy intention for short breaks was to support parent-carers, such that their caring responsibilities remain sustainable in the long term. Typically, this has related to parent-carers of children and young people who cannot take care of their own everyday needs, due to physical or developmental difficulties. A short break, or respite care as it was previously known, was therefore “most commonly found in relation to[...]children who are looked after for short periods away from home to give both them and their families a brief break”³.

While this understanding acknowledges support for both children and young people and parents or carers, Section 6 of the Children Act 1989 makes more explicit that a short break is a service designed for parents or carers, “who provide care for [disabled] children” in order that they can “continue to do so, or to do so more effectively, by giving them breaks from caring”⁴.

More recently, however, policy development around short breaks has adopted a more balanced approach, emphasising the inextricable link between meeting the needs of both parent-carer and children and young people. This balance is reflected in DfE's 2011 publication on short breaks, which states that, “children benefit from new interests,

³ Department of Health and Social Security, September 1985, Review of Child Care Law, Report to Ministers of an Interdepartmental Working Party, para 6.1

⁴ Children Act 1989, sch 2, par 6(1)(c)

relationships and activities, while parents and carers can catch up with everyday activities (sleep, cleaning, shopping), attend to their physical and psychological wellbeing, and maintain and develop social networks”⁵.

It is in the context of this widening policy scope that the Innovation Programme was launched and applicants were judged on the basis of being able to meet currently unmet needs. The unmet needs which a large proportion of local authority applicants chose to target related to the Social, Emotional, Mental Health (SEMH) and Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) cohorts. Many local authorities have observed rising rates of children and young people with SEMH or EBSA, particularly since COVID-19, but these groups would historically be out of scope for a short break. Participating local authorities therefore saw the opportunity of additional funding to meet these unmet needs, without impacting existing provision.

While parents of children and young people with SEMH and/or EBSA, as well as those with physical disabilities, undoubtedly benefited from this targeted provision, it nevertheless demonstrated a shift from a parent and carer centred approach towards a child centred approach. It also increased the understanding of disability and broadened the eligibility criteria for receiving support from short breaks.

As Section 3 of this report outlines, we have learnt that short breaks, deployed to target SEMH and EBSA can be extremely effective. Therefore, looking beyond the programme funding, many participating local authorities will need to consider how to balance continuing their historic parent and carer focused support and potentially redirecting resource toward a more child centred approach, particularly for those with SEMH or EBSA. Most will attempt to adjust their approach to balance both priorities, something which local authorities nationwide could consider.

Recommendation

Evaluate the disability demographic of those CYP in your local area who are accessing short breaks. How could a broader understanding of short breaks help to address increasing demand for support from other cohorts of CYP?

The move to a more child centred approach must not be to the detriment of a whole family support

We have already highlighted the shift from a parent and carer focus to a more child centred approach in short break provision. The most recent DfE publication in 2011 reflected this

⁵ Department for Education, March 2011, ‘Short breaks for carers of disabled children: Departmental advice for local authorities’, para 1.1, available on gov.uk

by rebalancing the historic focus on parents and carers to present both parents and carers, and children and young people, as equal beneficiaries. As one local authority put it, the offer “improved the wellbeing, social, and emotional development of young people while at the same time delivering positive impacts on parent-carer wellbeing”⁶.

However, due to the recent growth in SEMH diagnoses and the post-COVID-19 prevalence of EBSA, it is possible for this child centred approach to progress to the detriment of the original objective of supporting parent-carers. This might be the case where, for example, a short break is less of a break for the parents and more akin to a home visit from a mentor for their child. While this might have a huge impact on the young person, it does not provide a break for the parent or carer.

A key lesson drawn from the programme is that any shift which is detrimental to providing respite to parent-carers would be a mistake; short breaks play a critical role in the lives of parent-carers who rely on them to sustain care for their children. As one local authority described in its impact evaluation: “respite was identified as more crucial than intensive support in some[...]cases, and was a key ingredient in the most successful interventions”⁷.

Almost all participating local authorities included in their project design a parent-carer or family strand:

- some provided new spaces to develop parent-carer networks
- some delivered bespoke courses in understanding and managing challenging behaviour
- some developed an inclusive family holiday offer

In every case where parent-carer or whole family support was offered, the qualitative or anecdotal evidence collected from interviews and/or questionnaires indicated a significant positive impact on the emotional wellbeing of parent-carers.

In Sunderland, parent-carers described a programme funded, parent support group, as a “lifeline”, “godsend” and “game changer” – a view that was corroborated by 100% of parent-carers who noted an improvement to their emotional wellbeing after attending a healthy parent-carer course as part of Sunderland’s offer. Surrey used an outdoor education centre to provide bespoke and fully inclusive family holidays, where providers were both trained and equipped to care for disabled children and young people in such a way that provided much needed respite for parent-carers, without separating the family. A family in Surrey with a son diagnosed with ASD described how going on holiday had been impossible for the duration of their son’s life, and making use of this provision – where their disabled son was effectively cared for alongside them – was a lifeline that enabled both him and them to relax, easing the daily pressures of family life.

Despite recent and helpful developments in understanding who the primary beneficiaries of short breaks are, parent-carers and families must not fall by the wayside. The programme wide impact of whole family support underlines the importance of balancing a child centred and whole family delivery model.

⁶ Breathing Space, Year 3 Evaluation & Impact Report, Sunderland.

⁷ Empowering Families and Networks, Year 3 Evaluation & Impact Report, Enfield

Coproduction and multi-agency join up drive positive impact

During in-depth interviews, participating local authorities often cited silo working as a significant barrier to success. In most local authority areas, parent-carers would have to repeat conversations with Children's Services, schools and health professionals, as well as filling out multiple applications, making access to short breaks laborious and frequently ineffective. Isolated teams within local authorities would often process distinct applications for support from a single family, leading to inconsistent and unpredictable responses from the local authority.

Being able to demonstrate a plan for thorough coproduction was a programme requirement. In most cases, this involved parent-carers and health officials, and in some cases, it also involved schools. In every case, this multi-agency approach to the design, commissioning and delivery of short breaks was cited as a key driver of success.

While we will discuss further the design and delivery of various approaches, it is again worth highlighting the impact of a coproduced approach to commissioning placements. It was clear from speaking to multiple stakeholders that there are often families who are well known to one part of the system, but unknown to others. Introducing a multi-agency approach ensured that a wider range of families were considered for support. Families often describe assessments and decisions around need as feeling like a lottery. This appears to be a more equitable approach to commissioning and more fully demonstrates the range of needs within local families.

One London borough within the programme described a historic breakdown between the council and residents with disabled children that was easily resolved with an invitation to coproduce the innovation project. Other authorities used the programme funding to establish collaborative working groups comprising the local authority, schools, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAHMS) and NHS England to design, commission and evaluate bespoke services. In each case, the coproduction at the heart of each project within the programme was key to its success.

Recommendation

Bring together stakeholders to discuss the existing offer and develop a vision for the future of short breaks in your local area.

Accountability and impact assessment drive success

A consistent message we heard across the programme was that the opportunity to design services from scratch, including monitoring and an impact assessment by local and central government, drove higher levels of success. Several local authorities discussed how inertia had set in over time and had prevented continuous improvement and high expectations for what could be achieved through well designed short break services.

Applications to the programme required a detailed project plan, anticipated deliverables and, most importantly, key performance indicators (KPIs) to demonstrate progress against the following programme objectives:

- An improvement in the emotional and educational outcomes of children and young people and parents or carers
- A reduction in escalations resulting in children and young people moving from mainstream schooling to specialist settings
- A reduction in family escalations or crises leading to children and young people entering the care system

Successful local authorities were required to report monthly on progress against their KPIs and produce an end of year impact report for DfE. As one local authority commented: “Just having these monthly and quarterly rhythms meant that we always wanted to be on the pulse with what our project was achieving and how it could have greater impact[...]this is not something that existed quite as clearly before entering the programme”.

Eleven local authorities spent more than one year in the programme, and 5 local authorities delivered throughout all 3 years. At the end of each year the various stakeholders responsible for project delivery had the opportunity to reflect on the impact assessment and create a more bespoke offer in line with the findings for the forthcoming year. Often, decisions were made to discontinue one strand of a project and channel more resource into a higher performing one. Having the right accountability and reporting measures in place were significant to clarify which approaches had the most impact.

To do this, local authorities had to be clear on what they were trying to achieve through their offer. One authority said:

“Being governed by the overall programme benefits and our local KPIs helped focus the mind on what we were aiming for. Across the system, there appears to be ambiguity about what a short break actually is and who should benefit. Having the parameters of the programme’s objectives, but the freedom to design contextualised services enabled a strategic approach to offer what was previously lacking in direction.”

Wakefield committed to continuous improvement across 3 years of the programme. It ran after school clubs in special schools as a project strand from Year 1. In response to its

demonstrable impact on emotional wellbeing in Year 1 and 2, this provision was expanded to a further special school in Year 3. However, the local authority also identified a growing number of electively home educated (EHE) children and young people with complex SEND who would not be able to access this after school provision. Therefore, Year 3 offered the opportunity to expand by offering a similar provision to this cohort of EHE children and young people and their parent-carers. Of the parent-carers involved, 61% felt it led to more than 3 areas of improvement across their daily lives and caring responsibilities. This commitment to continuous improvement and strategic expansion toward clear objectives were cited as key drivers of success within the programme.

Recommendation

Introduce project management tools such as KPIs, accountability boards and risk logs as means to evaluate the impact of respective short break approaches.

Which innovations worked well?

This section presents some of the successful innovations to both process and approach to short breaks adopted by participating local authorities. The aim here is not to be prescriptive but to share best practice for potential adoption or adaptation by other local authorities experiencing similar challenges.

One to one, multi-agency, therapeutic support

Multiple projects within the programme focused on delivering one to one support to children and young people and their families. For example, in one year alone, The Royal Borough of Greenwich, found that 90% of children and young people who participated and 93% of parents noted increased confidence and independence in the lives of their children having received one to one mentoring. Across the programme, however, this one to one support covered a wide range of approaches to intervention, from, for example, a 15-minute conversation with a mentor to an individualised and coproduced plan of support across all elements of the system.

Bristol City Council designed and delivered a one to one strand of support within its Pathways project which proved especially effective with children and young people in the growing EBSA cohort (see 2.1 above). The objective was to use advanced project workers (APWs) to re-engage and re-integrate this cohort into their education setting. This innovation responded to a perceived gap in provision within the existing system and offer, where an EHCP requires school attendance, and local authority constraints stipulate that short breaks can only be offered outside of school hours. This meant that the EBSA cohort lacked a clear intervention which could provide a pathway back into education, or simply social engagement.

The pathway provided by the APW begins with an initial assessment of need, collating the views of the child or young person, the family, as well as outside agencies involved, such as the school and/or CAMHS. After a 4 week period gathering evidence to create an accurate picture of the child or young person's needs, the APW develops bespoke, individualised goals with them. These goals constitute small steps towards reintegration into social activities and ultimately education; they could include simply leaving the house for a short walk, participating in a group task or attending a session held on the school premises. The relationship built between the APW and the child or young person was key to increasing confidence.

However, the role of the APW goes beyond providing a safe base. Whereas mentoring approaches regularly use goal setting and offer one to one sessions, the innovative element of APWs is that they are trained psychologists, and therefore provide therapeutic support underpinned by psychological theory.

Additionally, the APW works as an advocate for the children and young people across the system, representing their relational, educational and psychological needs before decision makers.

This intervention has proven especially effective in Bristol. Prior to the programme, 77% of children and young people eligible to receive an intervention attended school less than 10% of the time. After the intervention, this dropped to 19% of children and young people. Prior to the intervention, only 9% of children and young people attended school more than 80% of the time, with none in full time attendance. After the intervention, 62% of the cohort attended school more than 80% of the time, with 31% attending full time.

In addition to this, parent-carers felt supported and validated by the support they received, with 63% reporting that increased adaptations to the school environment were made following intervention.

Positive behaviour support

Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) is a research informed approach, backed by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), to support children and young people who display behaviours of concern. The approach marks a shift away from managing challenging behaviour, particularly through issuing consequences, towards understanding these behaviours as expressions of the child or young person's underlying needs. Strategies often focus on reducing triggers, improving communication and supporting emotional regulation, with the goal of improving relationships.

Embedding and enhancing PBS strategies formed part of several projects within the programme. Enfield entered the programme in Year 3 and delivered a pilot project to empower parent-carers, families and professionals with PBS strategies, including strands to train stakeholders in PBS and implement it on the ground. In one year of delivery between April 2024 and March 2025, Enfield trained 482 adults from introductory training to PBS Coach Level certification while 49 children and young people received intensive PBS support.

Sunderland delivered support across multiple hubs focusing on different needs. In Year 3, it rolled out PBS in its SEMH and complex needs hubs through training and implementation to support the goal of reducing disruptive behaviours and reducing placement breakdown.

As part of its project, Southwark increased the implementation of PBS through recruitment and training, focusing on early intervention and developing a community of practice across the health, social care, education and community sectors to improve knowledge, skills and confidence in delivering PBS informed approaches.

It is hard to predict what would have happened without this PBS intervention, however, emerging findings from the programme indicate a positive impact, consistent with the evidence presented in NICE's 2015 full report on challenging behaviour in those with

learning disabilities⁸. In Southwark, 69% of attendees who applied the learning from the training reported a reduction in behaviours of concern and 72% reported improvements in family resilience. In Sunderland, 75% of children and young people experienced an improvement or no change in their frequency of disruptive behaviour. In Enfield, while data was limited, at least 18% of children and young people displayed fewer behaviours of concern in the home.

For PBS to have a real impact, local authority participants all highlighted the need to embed the approach across the system where it can be implemented consistently in the home, the school and health and social care settings⁹. Southwark's community of practice¹⁰ was developed with this in mind, and includes quarterly meetings, newsletters and a shared repository of tools, strategies and research.¹¹

Harnessing technology to assess the impact of interventions

Many local authorities in the programme felt there was an absence of robust data on the relative impact of their short break interventions. During in-depth interviews, they used phrases such as “scattergun” or “hit and hope”, indicating a need for improved information collection to support impact assessment. However, the absence of data seemed to stem primarily from the challenges of measuring improvement in the lived experiences of the children and young people involved.

Derby City Council's project targeted this issue using an app. *Includmi* mimics an interface with which children and young people have grown very comfortable – that of a social media platform – to input emotional data necessary for effective support. Historically, to harvest such wellbeing data from the EBSA cohort, a caseworker or mentor might have to spend months building trust, sometimes by communicating through a bedroom door, before the child or young person would feel comfortable enough to share their emotions. Derby's innovative app expedites this process, collecting this vital data in real time.

The app allows the child or young person to create a one page profile that is accessible by all decision makers and stakeholders involved in their care. At various intervals the app prompts the child or young person to input live information covering their overall wellbeing, posts about what is happening in their lives, their goals and preferences about how they wish to be treated. What was previously a very resource intensive, long term intervention is now instantly available because of how comfortable children and young people feel using this secure interface.

⁸ <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng11/evidence/full-guideline-pdf-2311243668>

⁹ Empowering Families and Networks, Year 3 Evaluation & Impact Report, Enfield

¹⁰ <https://localoffer.southwark.gov.uk/care/positive-behaviour-support/>

¹¹ Thrive-to-25, Programme Report 2024/25, Southwark

For those children and young people who can leave their bedroom to receive a more traditional short break, the app is also able to correlate improvements in wellbeing with specific interventions, thereby showing the relative impact of various approaches. Given that the children and young people's profiles include data on sex, ethnicity, presenting needs and diagnoses, the app also enables mentors, decision makers and parents to see in real time which interventions are most effective for specific individuals and across populations.

This data is invaluable in terms of value for money, allowing the local authority to focus on those interventions which are proving to have the greatest impact. The data provides the information needed for a local authority's short break approach to become more strategic, targeted and evidence based.

A new approach to commissioning

Parents struggling to access a short break often cite the stringent criteria and/or thresholds that local authorities use to allocate their resources, including short break provision. In many local authorities, one such criterion is a formal SEND diagnosis. Local authorities across the country report a growing number of applications for SEND assessments, increasing the time that children and young people spend on pre-diagnostic waiting lists as well as families and their children enduring a protracted period without the support they require.

To simply remove the diagnosis criterion for a short break would result in an influx of requests for support – far more than local authorities could ever meet with current resources.

Essex County Council sought to address the issue of offering short breaks to children and young people without a formal diagnosis through an innovative approach to commissioning. The council created a more tiered approach to commissioning, where low cost, high impact short breaks, such as regular family days out, were made accessible to a wider cohort of children and young people and families in the pre-diagnostic phase. The council created an online portal where parent-carers could attach a letter confirming their pre-assessment status and gain immediate access to a wide range of inexpensive, prepaid family activities.

The number of families using this low cost means of intervention meant that 28% more families were supported compared to the previous year. While this type of short break will not indefinitely meet the needs of children and young people with more acute needs long term, parent feedback indicated this additional layer of support could relieve pressure within the family as they wait for an assessment and prevent escalations or crises requiring more resource intensive interventions during that period.

It was expected that, as part of the programme, innovations should seek to achieve efficiencies in the given local authority's high needs funding budget while improving the services offered. Essex's innovation is a good example of meeting this objective.

Other local authorities incorporated more user friendly commissioning approaches to support their innovated services. Southwark used the eequ.org booking platform, used by many local authorities for their holiday and food programmes, to demonstrable effect. The authority worked with the developers to tailor the online platform to its short breaks offer, which facilitated centralised registrations and eligibility instead of relying on individual partners and providers using their own systems. This resulted in the following benefits:

- Improved local authority oversight, enabling Southwark to quickly and efficiently check the eligibility of new registrations and signpost to other services in cases where criteria were not met
- Greater equity of provision during periods of high demand by setting booking limits
- Improved data quality and accessibility through a consolidated dashboard which enabled the local authority to draw down reports in real time to support contract monitoring, performance reports and freedom of information (FOI) requests
- Improved navigation and booking experience for families with all provision listed in one place and optional filters by age, location and date
- Reduced administration for providers following the introduction of a self-serve model as opposed to email and phone based booking processes

Since introducing the new platform, registrations for short breaks in Southwark rose from approximately 100 to 400 unique children and young people between April 2022 and April 2025.

Many local authorities highlighted the challenges they faced in reaching the right families with their enhanced services. With an average score of 4 out of 5 for ease of use from Southwark's parent-carer feedback, it is likely that such platforms could help local authorities reach these families with such services and therefore maximise their impact by harnessing the functionality that such platforms offer.

What is the future for short breaks?

It was always the intention to pass on the lessons learned from the programme to benefit service delivery beyond the participating local authorities. There are 2 key ways in which we envisage the lessons learned from the programme being taken forward into the future.

Local reform of short breaks services

We acknowledge that the great variety of short breaks, and the sociological and geographical contexts in which they are delivered, mean it is challenging and inappropriate to issue a comprehensive set of guidance for decision makers. One of the factors behind the programme's success has been the flexibility enjoyed by local authority participants to innovate services in a way that fits their objectives and contexts.

Therefore, rather than issuing narrow directives as to what constitutes an effective short break, we anticipate that the innovations emphasized here will provide local authorities with impetus to reconsider how they could adapt these services to suit their own local context. It is unlikely that any one project could simply be replicated in another local authority and achieve the same success. Nevertheless, many of the challenges discussed here exist nationwide, and the interventions highlighted could provide local authorities with an evidence informed platform from which to start their own conversation, build momentum and test innovative solutions to the challenges they face.

National policy development

A month after launching the Short Breaks Innovation Programme (May 2022) the Independent Review of Children's Social Care was published. This recommended a review of the law around Children's Social Services to:

- Recommend a solution to the patchwork of legislation that currently governs social care for disabled children
- Improve how the law on social care for disabled children fits in with the law relating to social care more broadly
- Review the outdated language and definitions underpinning the law on social care for disabled children

DfE asked the Law Commission to undertake such a review of the law on social care for disabled children in England, including of section 17 of the Children Act 1989 and section 2 of the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act 1970. This review seeks to "simplify and strengthen the law, ensuring that the system is fair and works for children, parents and

other care givers, and local authorities” and that the law “is focused on the provision of support and services in family based care”¹².

On 8 October 2024, the Commission published a consultation paper which presented some of its findings and emerging views on the current legal framework for disabled children’s social care and its provisional proposals. Key among these was a recommended pathway towards the improvement of short break services.

While the Law Commission’s work is wholly independent of the Short Breaks Innovation Programme, its final report was published [here](#) on 16 September 2025. DfE will consider the recommendations made in the Commission’s report alongside the findings from the Short Breaks Innovation Programme. It will then respond accordingly within 12 months.

¹² <https://lawcom.gov.uk/project/disabled-childrens-social-care/>



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