



# IMPACT & FINDINGS

2021 – 2023



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# WHY EARLY YEARS?

The first five years of a child's life, and in particular the period encompassing pregnancy to age two, are a significant and influential phase of development.

Every child has the right to be as healthy as they can be, to learn and develop to their full potential. Alongside these fundamental rights of all children in the here and now, **what happens during a child's earliest years lays the foundations for their future health, wellbeing, learning and earnings potential.**

Evidence clearly shows that positive experiences early in life are closely associated with better performance at school, better social and emotional development, improved work outcomes, higher income and better lifelong health, including longer life expectancy. Conversely, less positive experiences early in life, particularly experiences of adversity, relate closely to many negative long-term outcomes: poverty, unemployment, homelessness, unhealthy behaviours and poor mental and physical health(1).



Rihanna, with her daughter, Kyah, nine months, at a family fun-day in Firth Park organised by the Sheffield Early Learning Community and supported by Save The Children. Photo: Jonathan Hyams/Save the Children

# WHY SHEFFIELD?



Firth Park shopping district, Sheffield. Photo: Thomas Duffield/Save the Children

**Sheffield is one of the largest cities in England.** It is also classified as one of the greenest cities in the country with 155m<sup>2</sup> of green space for every resident(2). It has two universities, was the UK's first City of Sanctuary(3) and has a vibrant cultural scene.

**But it is also a city of deep-rooted inequality, still struggling with post-industrial disadvantage.** Studies have shown that along a single bus route, the 83, that goes from an affluent part of the city to one that is more disadvantaged the life expectancy drops by 10 years(4).

At a local authority level Sheffield's early years statistics look promising, with 62.4% of all children achieving expected levels of progress as per the Early Years Foundation Stage in comparison to a national average of 63.4%(5). However, diving deeper into this data shows a different picture, with just 47% of children eligible for free school meals across the city achieving the expected levels.

The 2021 census also gives a detailed picture of poverty, for example a staggering 68.5% of households in Burngreave and Grimsthorpe are classified as deprived in at least one dimension(6), 33% of people over 16 in Firth Park have no qualifications(7), and 46.8% of people aged 16 and over in Shirecliffe and Parkwood Springs are deemed economically inactive(8).

Statistics like these have led us to work in the wards of Burngreave, Shiregreen & Brightside and Firth Park in the north of Sheffield. This is the area of focus for the Early Learning Community.

# WHAT'S AN EARLY LEARNING COMMUNITY?

In Sheffield, we're working in partnership to improve children's early learning outcomes – specifically speech, language and communication, and social and emotional development of children 0-3.



Richard plays with twins Charlie (1) & George 2, at home in Sheffield.  
Photo: Laura Pannack/Save the Children

We are taking a systems-change approach, working in and with communities across the north of Sheffield to understand the challenges they face and the opportunities for change. We're working together with children, families and professionals to test out new and innovative approaches to maximise local assets to support young children. **By adopting a hyper-local approach, we're able to identify not just 'what works' but 'what works here'.** This strengthens the links across a community, making it easier to embed changes. We can then use what we're learning with communities to influence local, regional and national practice and policy.

## WHO ARE WE WORKING WITH?

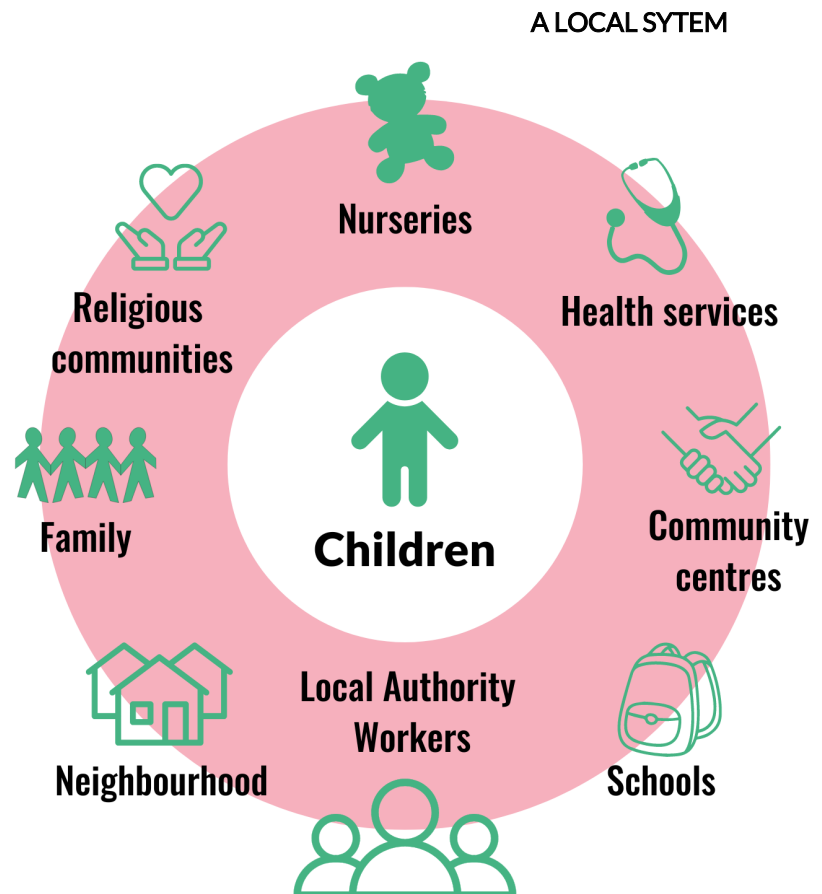
The Sheffield Early Learning Community (ELC) was started with founding partners Watercliffe Meadow Primary School, Sheffield City Council, Sheffield NHS Children's Foundation Trust and Sheffield Hallam University alongside Save the Children. Since then, the Family Hubs and Start for Life Programme, as well as a group of local community centres, have also come on board.

**The key outcomes of speech, language & communication and social & emotional development** were agreed through a strategy development process with the community and early years practitioners. We continue to work with parents, families, practitioners and the third sector across the areas as partners throughout the work in the ELC, understanding the depth of the challenges faced and co-designing solutions together. We are currently working with a network of organisations who all play a part in supporting families and children in the earliest years. Together, we're working for the best outcomes for children.

# OUR APPROACH

## SYSTEMS CHANGE

The place in which a child grows up is a complex system. The system includes the individuals, opportunities, influences, and challenges that a child encounters, all of which affect the outcome of a young person's life. Systems change is about identifying the parts of the system that could be improved and developing solutions that fit the local context. A systems change approach includes having a shared goal that local partners can collaborate on; together they can create and test solutions and find out what works best.



## CO-DESIGN & INNOVATION

Learning and networking aren't an add on to the day job, they are the day job. We continuously work with families to navigate complexity and pinpoint root causes. Our impact shows that open collaboration can achieve more than any organisation on its own – diverse and open communities offer an abundance of creativity and productivity that siloed projects and walled institutions can't. Through co-design we develop and test promising, sustainable interventions in communities, which help to inform effective policy or practice change.

# OUR FINDINGS: OVERVIEW

## FAMILY VOICE MUST BE EMBEDDED IN SERVICE DESIGN

The ELC were able to provide time and capacity for listening. They were able to put relationships first and support families in an organic way and be responsive to their needs.

## A RESPONSIVE, HYPER-LOCAL TEAM WORKS

This builds strong, trusting relationships between families and services. As a result, the impact of services is greater and helps parents to thrive.

## THE CO-DESIGN PROCESS BENEFITS PARENTS

Parents and families were often initially attending workshops to have immediate needs met, such as a food bank referral. Parents talked about feelings of isolation and how participating had helped with this.

## PEER-TO-PEER SUPPORT IS VITAL

This improves parental mental health, builds self-confidence around home-learning activities and aids improved access to services.



A playground in Sheffield.  
Photo: Thomas Duffield/  
Save the Children

## The Context

- The Sheffield ELC recognised that to create sustainable change, **there needs to be joined-up support for children and their families**. This should be shaped by the experiences of families and rooted in the specific challenges that individual communities face.
- **We worked alongside a range of local organisations and families to understand the issues they encounter and develop solutions that work locally**. We would then be able to try out innovative new approaches and test whether and how they best support families.
- To ensure that **family voices remained central** to this work we used co-design approaches with parents and practitioners in two local areas.
- We wanted to understand the challenges that are being faced, as well as the strengths and assets within the community. **Parent/carers have a unique perspective** and hearing their voices ensures that projects meet the needs of the families in that area.

## What We Did

- **We brought together two working groups** in the Burngreave ward of Sheffield, one in Page Hall (November 2021— January 2022) and one in Shirecliffe (February – April 2022). Both working groups included parents and local practitioners from statutory and voluntary services. The innovation workshops were led by Save the Children staff with members of the ELC seconded team—from the council, NHS and various other organisations— involved in the sessions.
- There were several innovation workshops, between 8 and 10 in each area, as well as creative sessions with parents and children. **The working group used different techniques such as stakeholder mapping, storyboards, exercises to identify challenges and design principles to create solutions and develop plans to test their ideas**.



# What We Learnt

- Working with families in this way takes **time and capacity**. The project needed to be extended so that we could ensure that we were properly listening to families from the local area.
- **Trusting relationships** are key. Parent/carers attended through face to face recruitment and support from professionals involved. Practitioners would walk with parent/carers from their homes to the workshops to support their attendance
- **Flexibility is needed**. The workshops and how they were delivered changed over time by responding to engagement, direct and indirect feedback. Alterations were made around timings, content, delivery style and room layout to better meet the needs of the parent/carers.
- **Understanding of the process in advance**. Facilitators were learning 'on the job' and didn't have time to digest, discuss and reflect on the often complex themes they were discussing with parents. Having time in advance to discuss the process, and seeing the process in action elsewhere would have supported the preparation process.

# Impact

- **Capacity building**. The ELC team have developed their skills in parental engagement and learnt different ways to listen to parents.
- **Embedding learning**. Two ELC team members have roles in a new Family Hubs programme, so can take their learning from the co-design into the development of that programme.
- **Partner working**. Relationships were made and strengthened through the co-design process and therefore the ELC Working Group has been created to continue that shared learning and collaboration within our network.
- **Parents are still engaged and they are continuing to share their journeys**. They have engaged with interviews, focus groups and other storytelling sessions not only focussed on the ELC work but also supporting wider Save the Children campaigns.

## What We Did

- One theme that continued to emerge throughout both co-design projects was the desire from parents/carers to **bring services for the whole family together in one place**.
- We asked parents how they wanted to do this and a key idea was to combine it with **fun activities for young children**.
- The Family Fun Day was held in Firth Park, with information stalls situated around the open space for the families to access in their own time.
- At the main entrance to the park there was a registration point where families could complete an entrance survey – this is how we recorded attendance.



Brittany, 23, with her daughter, Aleyiah-Rose, two, at a family fun-day at Firth Park organised by the Sheffield Early Learning Community and supported by Save The Children. Photo: Jonathan Hyams / Save the Children

- The event offered a range of activities for children and families such as arts and crafting, face painting, circus skills, and storytelling with the mobile library service.
- The fun day provided an **opportunity for families to speak to local organisations and services in person** – those present included: the Speech and Language Service, the Health Visiting Team, the Carer Forum, the Neuro Disability Support Team, and the local community hub.

# What We Learnt

- Families who attended were largely from the ward where the event was located, which supports the **hyper-local** theme that has been raised in the co-design projects.
- **Relationships are key** to recruitment and engagement. The majority of parents attended the event after learning about it via face-to-face recruitment.
- **Visibility** was important. The fact that families could see us as they were leaving nursery, walking through the park, or going to the shops created a lot of interest in the event.

# Impact

- When asked if they enjoyed the Family Fun Day, **100%** of the respondents said Yes! **92%** agreed or strongly agreed that the event met its aim of being fun and providing information. As a result, we have held the event again in 2023 in both Firth Park and Page Hall.
- Some specific information was highlighted as being particularly useful such as dental health, parenting, baby groups, things to do in the summer holidays and SEND services.
- One response noted that **'Speech and Language information was key'**.



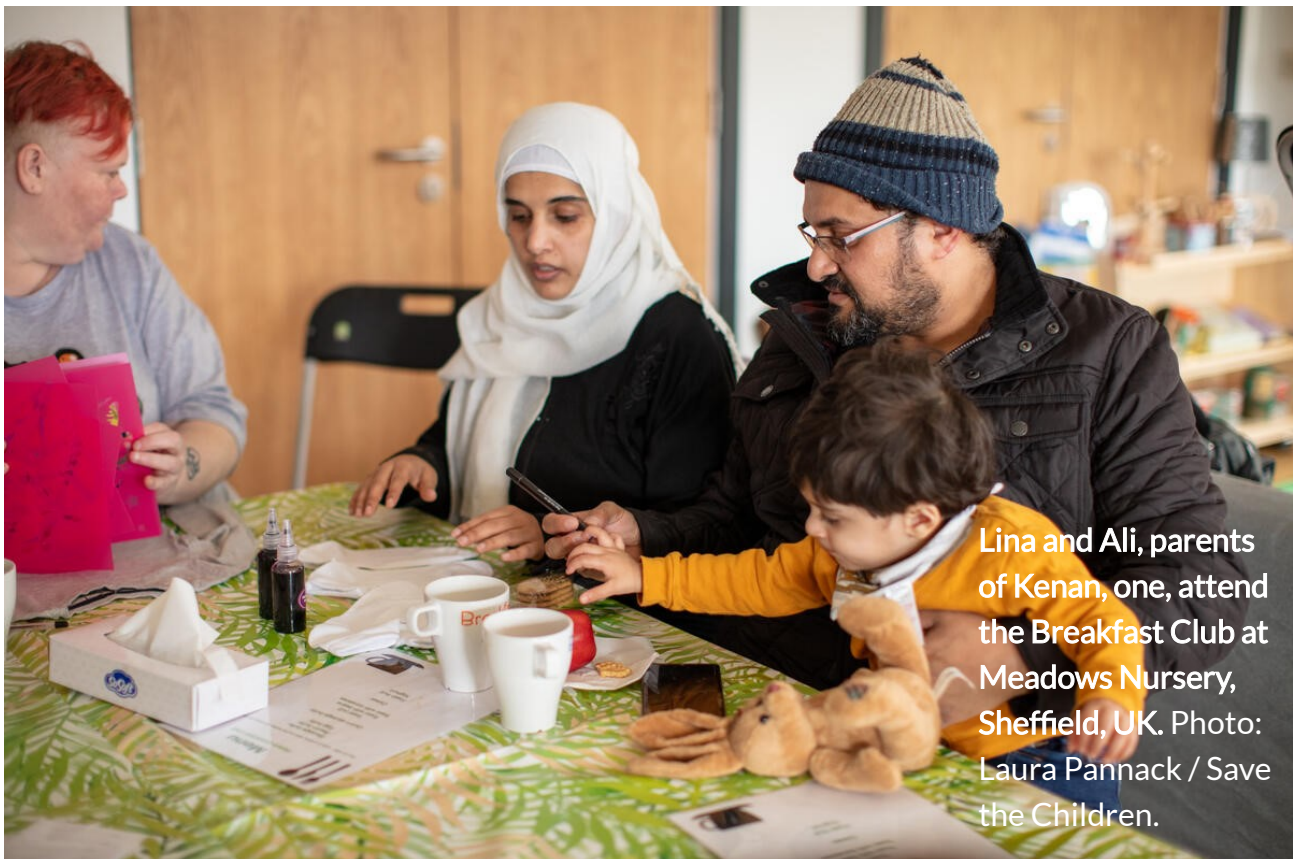
## What We Did

Following the initial research the group wanted to address the lack of **peer-to-peer support** and the impact this can have on **parental mental health**.

To explore solutions to the issues raised the group decided to test a Parents Breakfast Club that would include: a cooked breakfast and hot drinks, informal time for socialising with other parents, information from local services, child-care, craft activities, and face-to-face time with consistent practitioners.

The innovation was initially designed as a short four-week test to gauge if this was something the community wanted as well as the potential for further impact. The aim of the club was to reach more parents/carers, which it did with 28 people attending across the four weeks.

Parents/carers who were engaged in the initial co-design process stayed involved, with some supporting the delivery of the innovation testing by cooking, tracking down resources and carrying out recruitment. **Since the initial test, the club has continued and remains parent-led.**



Lina and Ali, parents of Kenan, one, attend the Breakfast Club at Meadows Nursery, Sheffield, UK. Photo: Laura Pannack / Save the Children.

# Learnings

- Creating a **relaxing environment**, which was done through the craft activities, helps to develop trusting relationships with practitioners and other parents.
- **Relationships are key** to both recruitment and continued engagement. In-person recruitment through the nursery when parents/cares were attending other sessions, or through family and friend word of mouth recommendations, were most successful. Only two parents identified the leaflets/posters as the reason they attended.
- Parent/carers want **support to continue** – 13 parents from the co-design sessions also attended at least one of the breakfast club sessions and said they wanted the group and the support they're receiving from other parents to continue. Parents want to be **listened to**, but they also want **action to be taken** – they want to be involved in what is happening in their community.

# Impact

## On family life

Parents said they felt less stressed at home after attending the breakfast club – they felt equipped with more ideas for home learning activities with their children and now knew where to go for support if needed.

“The new craft I learnt will keep me and my daughter entertained”

## On parental mental health

78% of respondents stated that attending the Parents' Breakfast Club made them feel more positive. Parents commented on how attending has improved feelings of isolation and anxiety.

“It has helped me with my anxiety and helped me feel ok to talk to new people”

## On peer-to-peer support

Parents talked about having made new friends, feeling valued when giving information to others, and how they received support from others.

“Everyone has their own experience and can offer advice and suggestions you'd never thought of”

## On increased access to services

Parent/carers stated they were likely or very likely to contact the services again, after they were provided with information at the breakfast club.

“PBC is a great idea for parents to get together, gather information, get helpful tips and eat breakfast”

## What We Did

- Following the initial research, the group wanted to **address the lack of face-to-face support**, the difficulty accessing information in their own language and the need to repeat their story multiple times.
- **The group decided to test a One Stop Shop** –this was developed to meet the needs of being face-to-face, hyper-local and a single access point to multiple services. It was trialled in two different settings, one a morning session and the other an afternoon session.
- The innovation was initially designed as a short four-week test to gauge if this was something the community wanted as well as the potential for further impact. **A range of services were engaged such as health, parenting, housing and early years prevention workers who could then signpost onto other specialist organisations.**
- 4 parents attended the One Stop Shop, 3 of those were from the Roma community (1 not stated) and were **engaged by practitioners being visible** on the street. The 3 who completed evaluations all had information, advice or referrals from multiple services, such as baby basics, oral hygiene and information about groups like baby massage.

## Learnings

- **Language differences are a barrier to engagement and developing trusting relationships.** It is important that parents have access to information in their own language and are able to communicate their needs in their first language. Establishing ways to do that will cultivate trust.
- **Creating trusting relationships with parent/carers takes time, capacity and consistency.** We know that relationships take time and capacity, but in an area such as Page Hall the need is heightened due to the other barriers that exist in the community. It also takes consistency– e.g. consistent people and consistent dialogue. Any innovation testing needs to incorporate this.

- The One Stop Shop innovation worked in bringing together the services that parent/carers wanted and reduced the need for them to repeat themselves. However, it didn't engage a lot of parent/carers as there was still an expectation that they needed to travel somewhere to get support and that can prove difficult; future innovations should consider how to **take services to families**.
- Parents who engaged in the art workshops and the One Stop Shop all needed some sort of support from wider services. Referrals were made to Early Help, Baby Basics and the Foodbank. The team were able to respond immediately. The **responsive, flexible and collaborative** nature of the team enabled that support for those families.
- There is still a lot we don't know about how to support families in this community and there is more **listening and learning** to be done with both partners and families.

Parents told us, in their own words, why it's important to include them in services and support for their children's learning and wellbeing:



## Impact

- **Although the co-design process was set up to develop innovation projects, it did have an impact in its own right.** For example, parents were happier and more confident due to the support the Early Learning Community team were providing.
- **Parents were accessing more services due to the referrals made** and the fact that they were introduced to more organisations and practitioners. Immediate needs of parents were met, with referrals to foodbanks and healthy start vouchers being provided as well as parents accessing the baby basics scheme.

# OUR FINDINGS: ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

## The Context

- During the co-design and innovation testing in Shirecliffe and Page Hall, strong relationships were built with the practitioners in the ELC team.
- The team were able to use the time and capacity that had been freed up from their substantive posts to build relationships with parents/carers. As the relationships developed, parents/carers began to open up about some of their support needs and the issues and concerns they needed more information on.

## What We Did

### ADVICE SESSIONS

This allowed the team to talk through the different options available and provide practical support such as making phone calls to assist with debt and housing issues, attending health appointments with families and completing forms. Consistent and ongoing support allowed relationships to develop which in turn allowed staff to offer more tailored support.

### INDIVIDUAL SUPPORT

Practitioners accompanied families in Page Hall to sessions when needed, made referrals to foodbanks and early years help, and signposted to other specific services.

### HEALTHY YOU, HEALTHY FAMILY WORKSHOP

Practitioners provided dental advice and support, as well as healthy eating advice with a focus on sugar in everyday foods. There was discussion of good hygiene routines for the whole family, particularly in response to Covid restrictions at that time. The workshop proved to be an informal and relaxed space which supported open discussion.



# Learnings

- **Trusting relationships are key.** Parents were more open as the relationships grew and trust had been established. They only began to talk about severe and urgent needs after weeks of support.
- **Informal and relaxed spaces for parents to come together are needed.** Parents stated that a crafts activity in the health session helped to create a relaxing environment and "got us all talking".

# The Impact

- Parents learnt new things in relation to services and **developed knowledge** to support their wellbeing.
- **Parents mental health was prioritised**, parents commented on how they felt less stressed and enjoyed the sessions.
- **Referrals and signposting** were offered to: baby basics, Speech & Language, housing support, Early Help, benefit support, and employment and learning support. One parent avoided eviction after receiving support at the advice sessions.



Cath Baker, from Sheffield City Council, at an advice session. Photo: Sheffield Early Learning Community.

# NEXT STEPS

## FURTHER LISTENING

We want to do further listening in some specific areas. In Page Hall, there was a recognition that we only engaged a small number of parents throughout the co-design process, and we have not sustained a strong presence in that area. We are carrying out a creative listening process during Summer 2023 to hear directly from parents about what life is like in their area. The project will be art based and parents will be able to engage regardless of the language that they speak. There will be an exhibition of the work during the Autumn term where the culture and families of Page Hall can be celebrated by all.

Due to the success of the Family Fun Day in 2022, we are running two further events in 2023 with the aim of reaching a wider demographic and supporting families in a range of communities. We will also be attending venues across Shiregreen and Brightside such as libraries, baby and toddler groups, and even local shops to talk to parents about accessing services for children aged 0 – 2.

## FAMILY VOICE

Ensuring that the views and opinions of families are embedded in practice within the ELC is foundational to the approach that we are taking. In partnership with parents and the Family Hubs, we are developing a model of Parent Champion pathways which will amplify the work of the ELC and will be the voice of all parents at local governance meetings.

In recognition of all the incredible stories that families have shared with us, the ELC is curating an exhibition that will be showcased in early 2024. By harnessing artwork, photography and interviews we are excited to bring the lives, struggles and ambitions of the communities we work with to the rest of Sheffield and beyond. Embedding opportunities for families to be heard at our engagement events will strengthen parent and child voice and will inform service design and delivery.

## THE FAMILY HUBS

The Sheffield Family Hubs are already implementing learning from the co-design process and have benefited from their staff being directly involved in the development and delivery of these projects. The learning has directly fed into the development of their 'Parent Panels'. The Family Hubs are keen to continue to work with the ELC on projects in the local area and generate learning that can be shared more widely across Sheffield.

By working with other ELCs, as well as place-based working teams within Sheffield, we can start to influence practice at a wider level. Collaborating with other place-based teams enables us to think about system change at the macro level and to more easily identify areas of improvement.

## CONTINUED INNOVATION AND TESTING

We will be learning from a second test of the Parents' Breakfast Club model, delivered in collaboration with partners, in other areas. This will help us to understand what the successful parts of the model are and why they work. Once this is understood we can consider how this can be applied to other projects with parents and how it can be replicated in further work across the ELC and beyond.

We will be working with the Family Hubs to support their Home Learning offer, developing innovations that enhance the home learning environment for children aged 0 – 2.

## BUILDING A CULTURE OF LEARNING

Learning is central to the work of the ELC. Our findings are shared locally within Sheffield, but also more widely to shape policy and practice that will support more children and families. We will continue to do this by creating spaces and opportunities to share and discuss learning with partners, supporting them to identify and share their own insights and connections.

## MAP OF SHEFFIELD



## GET IN TOUCH

To find out more about the work of the Sheffield Early Learning Community, please contact Sarah Godfrey ([s.godfrey@savethechildren.org.uk](mailto:s.godfrey@savethechildren.org.uk)) or Leanna Clark ([l.clark@savethechildren.org.uk](mailto:l.clark@savethechildren.org.uk)).

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Cover photo: Leanna, Deputy Manager Meadow's nursery, with Ilyas, 2.5, who is visually impaired at Meadow's nursery, Sheffield, UK. (Photo: Laura Pannack/Save The Children)



Librarian Anne reads to children at her mobile library session, at a nursery in Sheffield.  
Photo: (Juanan Eguiguren/Save the Children)

Sheffield Early Learning Community believes that services working together with families will help give every child the best start in life. We work in partnership with:



**Save the Children**

**Sheffield Hallam University**



**Watercliffe Meadow**



Sheffield Children's **NHS**  
NHS Foundation Trust