

MARGATE

EARLY LEARNING COMMUNITY

Learnings from our

2022/23 innovation projects

About us



The Margate Early Learning Community (MELC) was established in 2018 by Save the Children UK, Kent County Council, the Margate Task Force* and Cliftonville Primary School.

MELC aims to improve early learning outcomes for children aged 0-5 growing up in poverty. MELC is a place-based, systems change initiative, meaning the project seeks to stimulate impactful and sustainable improvements across the local early years community over a period of several years. It does this by bringing together a wide range of stakeholders, including families, services and organisations, to share knowledge, collaborate and innovate to improve outcomes for children.

This is because [evidence](#) shows that early childhood is a critical time for the development of later life outcomes: 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.

To date, MELC has:

- Funded and supported 16 projects delivered by local partners. All projects were informed by insights from local parents and carers, and practitioners;
- Established an Early Years Network for local professionals; and
- Distributed financial support grants.

*Margate Task Force changed its name to the Thanet Multi-Agency Task Force in 2020. It is a group of professionals working with families with complex problems who struggle to access services through mainstream routes.

Why Margate?

Margate is a seaside town in the South of England. It has a total population of around [46,000](#), of which around [2,000](#) are children aged between 0-4.

In 2019, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government looked at levels of income, employment, health, education, housing services, crime and living environment to measure the level of deprivation in neighbourhoods across England. The neighbourhoods that MELC is working in are among the [10% most deprived](#) in England.

In 2020, funder Local Trust looked at which neighbourhoods in England have the highest levels of combined social, cultural and economic deprivation and called them '[left behind](#)' neighbourhoods. MELC is working in two of these neighbourhoods (Cliftonville West and Dane Valley), which have the highest levels of community needs.

Early learning outcomes in six of the seven Margate District Wards are also lower relative to the national average. In 2021/22, [65%](#) of five-year olds across the United Kingdom reached a good level of development in language, social skills and physical development. This compares to 44% in Cliftonville West, 52% in Margate Central and 57% in Dane Valley.



Overview:

2022/23

Innovation Projects



In early 2022, we held sessions with families and practitioners based in Margate to better understand the challenges faced by early years children growing up in the town and co-design solutions together. This was followed by a wider local consultation. Findings were used to identify three priority areas in which there was a lack of services available: support to access existing services, family wellbeing and outdoor play.

MELC then invited local organisations and services to submit project proposals to expand and/or adapt the way they were working with families to better suit needs across these three areas (an 'innovation project').

Between September 2022 and August 2023, MELC funded and supported 12 innovation projects. This report summarises the key learnings across the projects as a whole, and the key learnings from each project (in alphabetical order) grouped by theme. We have also spoken to families living in Margate about the key learnings across the projects as a whole, and we have added their reflections as 'family tips'.

We hope that sharing these learnings will help to strengthen early years practice across Margate and improve outcomes for children.

Margate seafront, UK.
Credit: Rhiannon
Adam / Save The
Children.



Key learnings

From across

the 12 innovation projects

Promotion

Ongoing promotion and outreach activities to engage families are more successful than one-off efforts at the start of a project, but resources (especially funds and staff) will need to be allocated accordingly.

Key learnings

- Use multiple ways to promote the event including online (include videos / photos) and existing networks / partners (engage at the planning phase to raise awareness early).
- **Family tip:** We look for events on Facebook (especially on group pages such as Thanet Mums Meet Ups), and on the websites of the Children's Centres, local newspapers and organisations that we already know.
- Community outreach activities may be needed (e.g., door-to-door knocking to remind families about an event), especially when looking to engage minority ethnic groups such as Margate's Roma community. Translated leaflets are not enough.
- Word of mouth is important. Encourage participants to promote your event.
- **Family tip:** We agree. We listen to suggestions from friends.
- Reminders before an event (in-person / call / text / email) can encourage attendance.

"We have been putting highlights videos and photos of our sessions on our nursery Facebook page ...This has ... been great for advertising any upcoming sessions as it has created interest from other families visually seeing what has been on offer and seeing how engaged the children have been." Sunshine Preschool Margate

"Residents were passionate about their local area when engaged so being on their doorstep or in their street may have increased participation." Dane Valley Resident's Association

"We have found that word has spread amongst our parent body which has led to other families wanting to attend future courses." Holy Trinity & St John's CE Primary School

"Day-before, in-person reminders encouraged good levels of attendance at most drop-ins." Kent Community Health Foundation Trust

Activities

Be flexible with your agenda – use feedback to inform future activities – and be sure to think about activities for all ages, abilities, cultures and weathers.

Key learnings

- A less prescriptive format can work best. Consult with families to agree future activities together.
- Activities should be inclusive. Think about ages, abilities and cultures.
- **Family tip:** Think carefully about what families like to do. Some cultures would not think to join a parenting group, but often use outdoor spaces for playing.
- If you need to create space to engage with parents and caregivers, or for parents and caregivers to engage with an activity, consider providing activities for children to do (e.g. toys, crafts or even a creche).
- Providing outdoor-based activities can be uniquely challenging. Think about weather-proofing activities (e.g. provide wet-weather clothing) or indoor alternatives for bad weather days.

"We ... check-in with the women as to what they need and want to learn and don't impose our own agenda." Beyond the Page

"We have been able to ensure that there is a small, quiet, less overwhelming place for any SEN children and families to use if needed." Sunshine Preschool Margate

"It was important that we delivered [child's play during the session]. This is to allow parents to focus on the engagement activity knowing their children are playing safely." Dane Valley Resident's Association

"Plans may need to change at the last minute due to weather / unexpected circumstances e.g., staff strikes... have a 'poor weather' alternative on standby." Cliftonville Primary School

Relationships

Building relationships of trust with families and meaningful collaboration with other services takes a long time but can improve reach and impact.

Key learnings

- Building trust between families and professionals can take time. Having the same faces present at each event can help.
- Do not use interpreters known personally to the local community as families may worry about breaches of confidentiality.
- Connect and collaborate with neighbouring services.
- Engage with networks of professionals, such as the Margate Early Years Network, to meet and learn from other partners in the local area.

“The project’s main achievement was building trust between [the] team and local Roma families, and this was largely achieved through being present month on month with the same professionals.” Kent Community Health Foundation Trust

“Don’t use local translators known to the community, as Roma families will be wary of this due to worries about breaches of confidentiality.” Kent Community Health Foundation Trust

“Work collaboratively with community partners on projects that are of mutual benefit, to help deepen relationships and build good will and trust.” Windmill Community Gardens Margate

“Being part of the MELC has encouraged us to think more strategically, particularly to avoid duplicating services and instead working in partnership where possible.” Thanet Community Churches

Other key learnings

- Adopt a long-term (12 months+) approach. Projects often work best with longer timelines, which funders need to support.
- Choose venues carefully. Is it accessible by foot/wheelchair users/bus/car; do communities already go there; is it big enough; is it safe; what facilities are there available e.g. pram storage, toilets including disabled toilets?
- To encourage attendance consider offering free or reduced-price tickets, or offering incentives (e.g. free fresh fruit and vegetables to take home).
- **Family tip:** Families may not be entirely comfortable receiving or asking for something for free.
- Findings from monitoring and evaluation (M&E) activities are valuable and can be used to improve a project. Activities do not have to be resource-intensive and only done at the end of a project. Plan and allocate resources to do M&E activities little and often e.g. record any informal chats with families and staff observations.

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Clocktower, Margate
seafront, UK. Credit:
Rhiannon Adam / Save
The Children.



Key learnings

Thematic focus:

Accessing support

These innovation projects aimed to address a lack of support for families to take the first step towards accessing local services including children's centres, charities, health services etc.

Autism Apprentice CIC

Autism Apprentice delivered free, tailored, online advice clinics for individual families caring for an autistic child aged 0-5 years which offered them support and practical strategies.

Key learnings

- **Timely communication** with relevant local service teams ensures referrals.
- **Delivering virtually** reduces travel so more families can be helped.
- As the team has significant **relevant expertise and lived experience**, they can provide a wide range of support and build trust quickly with families.
- **Support families for as long as needed**, rather than for only a set period of time.
- Families may miss appointments, particularly for free services. **Sending text and email reminders** can encourage attendance.

Feedback

“After my session I felt like a great weight had been lifted”.

“The ladies I had my private meeting with were a breath of fresh air. They were absolutely amazing and such a help. They were both very knowledgeable and had a great understanding. I was extremely pleased with my meeting. Thank you so much”.

What next: Autism Apprentice will continue to deliver services to families and plans to increase the range of services offered to include virtual carers groups, peer groups, stay and play groups, and expert talks. Sources of funds will include the new specialist Stefan Taye School in Minster-on-Sea, opened by sister company Autism Apprentice Reconnect CIC.

Project report



Beyond the Page

The United Mothers project provided a free weekly English as a Second Language (ESOL) session for women, with a creche provided alongside the class. Research was also conducted using peer researchers to explore migrant mothers' experiences of Early Years services in Margate.

Key learnings

- Offer what is wanted and needed (United Mothers offers women ESOL and community) and **take a long-term approach**.
- **Do not be prescriptive**. The needs of the group inform the content of the sessions.
- **Word of mouth** is an effective recruitment tool, especially due to longstanding relationships with the women and their communities.

Feedback

Of 30 survey respondents (women across the United Mothers project):

- 99% feel less lonely since starting at United Mothers; and
- 100% feel that United Mothers helps them to feel part of the community.

"[The weekly class] really helps...before I joined here I was a little bit depressed and worried about my son. Now I am ok here, when I come here, I feel really good."

"This is the only time in the week I get to relax."

What next: Beyond the Page will be seeking charity status to allow it to access more sources of funding to continue to run the United Mothers project. A written report on the findings of the research project will be published by end-2023 and disseminated widely to encourage services to think more about inclusivity in practice regarding migrant families and early years in Margate.

Project report



Holy Trinity & St John's (HTSJ) CE Primary School

The Family Thrive project rolled-out the Thrive approach across the school, with a focus on Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stage1 children.

Key learnings

- **Observing and listening to the children** informed what was put into the Thrive cabin space.
- It was a challenge getting the parents to engage with workshops and drop-in sessions. Despite the positive impact of **word of mouth**, to encourage attendance at the next sessions **financial incentives** may be offered.
- Parents were unable/unwilling to fill-in written feedback forms. **Verbal feedback and questionnaires** were used instead.
- A **longer-time period** to implement the project was needed.

What is the [Thrive approach](#)?

The Thrive approach provides parents and adults who work with children and young people the knowledge, skills and tools to optimise social and emotional development.



The Thrive cabin space. Credit HTSJ

Project report



What next: HTSJ has allocated funds from its inclusion budget to continue to support the Thrive approach. It is also hoping to support similar projects in other schools, which it will charge a fee for to generate income for the school.

Kent Community Health Foundation Trust

The Roma health drop-in project aimed to improve the access of families from the Roma community in Cliftonville to health services for 0 - 5-year-olds.

Key learnings

- The **venue** was trusted by the community but **limited in size** which restricted project reach.
- At first, day-before, **in-person reminders** encouraged good levels of attendance. Subsequent interest was generated by **word of mouth** but attendance did drop-off.
- **Additional funding for interpreters** (who are not known to the community) to promote the project door-to-door could have helped encourage attendance. Translated leaflets are not enough.
- A foodbank and a raffle were also provided to **incentivise attendance**.
- Engaging Roma families takes time. The same health worker and translators were present at each session to **build trust** between families and professionals.
- There are many **subgroups within the Roma community**, and language barriers may prevent integration.
- Efforts to promote health eating need to be **culturally appropriate**.
- It was a **challenge to capture feedback and measure progress**. A survey with multiple-choice answers may have been useful.

What next: Roma families will be encouraged to attend a weekly drop-in baby clinic at Cliftonville Children's Centre. Many elements of the health drop-ins will be replicated at the baby clinics, including promoting healthy lifestyles and providing interpreter support as needed. The Thanet Health Visiting team's strategy is also moving towards a more localised, 'face in the community' approach.

Project report

Thanet Community Churches

This project included stay and play sessions at Cliftonville Community Centre, 1:2:1 support for families and 'Accessing Support Journey' online Vlogs.

Key learnings

- For vulnerable families, barriers to accessing support include trusting professionals. Place **targeted support services** (1:2:1 parenting support) **in venues where universal provision is also accessible** (stay and play groups).
- Where possible, **involve the same professionals** delivering the targeted support in the universal service.
- Having an **online presence** is an effective way of engaging local families, but this cannot replace face to face contact. The most successful promotion method seemed to be **word of mouth**.

Feedback

Of 31 survey respondents, there was an average rating of 4.69 when asked how the group helps parents connect more with local services. (1 = not at all helpful / 5 = extremely helpful).

"I would like to thank everyone for creating a safe fun space which allows children to grow within themselves. We are so grateful this group was set up. It encourages us to get out the house and socially interact with other children and parents the leaders have made us feel so welcome".

What next: Thanet Community Churches aims to continue to provide services to children and families in Margate from Cliftonville Community Centre, with at least one weekly stay and play session (at 10am on a Friday). It plans to sustain the project with external funds and by using volunteers.

Project report



Key learnings

Thematic focus:

Outdoor play

These innovation projects aimed to address a lack of access to safe, clean outdoor play spaces suitable for families which include children aged 0 - 5 in the Cliftonville and Dane Valley areas of Margate.

Dane Valley Residents Association (DVRA)

DVRA held sessions with residents in Dane Valley to better understand how they access play spaces across Dane Valley, and to identify barriers to accessing safer play.

Key learnings

- To **keep residents engaged**, sessions were held over a shorter period than planned (four months versus six).
- Using a mapping activity helped to **overcome reading, writing and language barriers**. Residents (adults and children) could mark on, for example, where they regularly visit.
- Providing **activities for children** during the session meant that the adults could focus on the mapping activity.
- Sessions were held in community venues, but **door-to-door knocking** may have increased participation.

Feedback

Many of the adults said that the mapping activity "*brought back good childhood memories.*"

The original proposal to Save the Children was about the redevelopment of the Dane Valley park play area. However, after the engagement sessions the feedback showed that this is not what the residents want.

What next: The findings and six recommendations will be used to apply for funding to develop a 3-year project around access to safer play and accessing services. The recommendations include bringing opportunities to play within 15 minutes of all residents and increasing access to existing play sites.

Project report



Thanet Community Churches

This project included 'play and grow' sessions at a community allotment in Dane Valley, beach play sessions ([with Tide and Seek Beach School](#)) and a half-term holiday beach school.

Key learnings

- Making the sessions **free** removed all financial barriers for local families.
- To be inclusive, every participant received a **personal welcome** from the session leaders so that they could respond to any barriers, for example, language.
- Running **outdoor sessions can be challenging**. Attendance was lower in extreme cold/wet weather (despite having some shelter) and activities had to be adapted.
- **Gathering formal feedback 'little and often'** would give the staff enough time to collect and collate the information received.

Feedback

Of 43 survey respondents, 90% gave 5 stars (extremely helpful) when asked if the groups supported parents in supporting children's wellbeing through child play and learning.

"It's really wonderful to have a safe space for the children to explore and connect with new people and environments."

"The activities provided are engaging and support my child's development through interaction and play. He loves the group. It is also great for me as a mummy. The organisers are so friendly and supportive and have really taken time to get to know us as a family."

What next: Thanet Community Churches has secured funding to continue to provide three free play and grow sessions a week from September 2023 to March 2024 (10am Monday, Wednesday and Thursday at Forget-Me-Not Allotment). Beyond March 2024, it hopes to continue the sessions with external funds, by using volunteers, and by hiring the space to other groups including for children's birthday parties.

Project report

Windmill Community Gardens Margate (WCGM)

WCGM held several outdoor activity sessions, including weekly 'cabbage patch' parent and carer/toddler groups, offering free or reduced priced tickets.

Key learnings

- A **tiered pricing model** for services (full price, reduced price, pay-it-forward and free tickets were available) had mixed success.
- **Accessibility was increased** by adding sessions on different days/times, opening-up sessions to older siblings, and adapting activities to suit all ages and abilities.
- **Promotion** through existing settings (e.g. nurseries) and services was successful, but engaging families with English as an additional language was a challenge.
- **Staff observations are highly valuable** at telling a project's 'story' and impact and informing ongoing developments to a service.

Feedback

Of 44 survey respondents, since attending a session at WCGM:

- 96% took part in more outdoor activities
- 100% reported an improvement in mental and physical wellbeing.

"I don't have a garden so it's great to be able to come here and my child can play in a natural environment."

"It is so good coming to the garden as my child doesn't get the chance to play with others often and I get to meet other parents."



What next: The project will continue with funding from the National Lottery Community Fund covering 50% of running costs until May 2025, and other costs being covered by income from the sale of produce and tickets, and other external funds. The project is also sustained by using volunteers to maintain the gardens and support the delivery of services. Cabbage patch sessions are weekly at 10.30am on a Tuesday.

Project report



Dreamland, an amusement park, in Margate, UK. Credit: Rhiannon Adam / Save The Children.



Key learnings

Thematic focus:

Family wellbeing

These innovation projects aimed to address a lack of accessible support promoting whole family (parent/carer and child) emotional wellbeing for families with children aged 0-5.

Cliftonville Primary School

The Cliftonville Explorers project purchased a minibus to provide trips and experiences for families attending the school with a child aged 0-5 years in the household.

Key learnings

- **Knowing the school families so well** allowed the project to engage families who would benefit most.
- The trip schedule was **informed by parent feedback**.
- It is more effective to have **discussions with parents** (e.g. about the barriers they face) in an informal setting (the minibus) rather than in-school sessions.
- Having **poor weather alternatives** is recommended.
- The project has had **wider impacts** for the school. The minibus has been used to transport pupils within the local community e.g. to attend a maths club and a science innovation day at other schools.

Feedback

"It was so nice to have the day planned out for us, it helped ease my anxiety."

"The minibus was great, and it was really nice to go all together as a group, so I didn't have to walk in on my own."

"My daughter has a disability, and some parents can be so judgmental, so it was so nice to have this opportunity with familiar parents."

"It's been such a good day; one we will remember forever."

What next: Cliftonville Primary School is planning to continue the project for as long as it can sustain it. It will be able to transport pupils within the local community and offer families free days out to local parks, to beaches, for walks etc. It will also hopefully be able to occasionally offer trips to paid attractions using funds from second-hand uniform sales.

Project report



Silvers Social CIC

Silvers Social delivered a programme of free activities which included baby ballet, service fairs/professional talks, play sessions, family coffee mornings, dance activities and family community meals.

Key learnings

- Attendance was on a **drop-in basis**. Some weeks numbers were much higher than expected and staff were put under pressure.
- Families preferred an **informal model of attendance** by external professionals (e.g. being present during a coffee morning rather than giving a presentation).
- **Partnering with other organisations** (e.g. children's centres) has many benefits including greater reach and being able to provide a holistic offering for families.
- The general feeling about filling in feedback forms was not positive. **Sitting with families to support them to complete the feedback form** was helpful.

Feedback

"It is a lonely place being a parent and now I have met another parent in the same situation as me. Just to be able to have a coffee and a chat."

"I don't want everyone knowing why I am here. So, it was good to be able to speak to the prescriber and get linked into further support. If they just stood at the front and spoke at me, I wouldn't have reached out. My confidence is low as it is, and I sometimes get embarrassed. It was just nice to sit down 1-1 over a coffee and chat. They have linked me into services I never knew existed."

"The community meal we came too was great as I can never treat my kids to a meal out and they made it feel like a family meal."

What next: Silvers Social will continue to deliver baby ballet, art attack, and monthly coffee mornings with access to support services. These will be funded using revenue from the wider Silver Slippers business.



Spurgeons (Fegans) and Thanet Community Churches

'Our Space' is a weekly two-hour session at Cliftonville Community Centre which includes a 90-minute parent group alongside a creche provision, and a final 30-minute parent-and-child activity session.

Key learnings

- Vlogs (short videos) and photos (not just text) were needed to **clearly communicate** that this was not a stay and play session.
- Content for the parenting session was **co-produced** with the parents which was so effective it removed the need for the planned 1:2:1 support.
- The **creche team was welcoming, experienced and flexible**. As the confidence of the children and parents grew, the children spent more time in the creche.
- To **reach families of different ethnicities** a longer-term approach (and funding) would be needed to build trust, with engagement on an outreach basis.

Feedback

Parents said that the group was unique in that it specifically catered for parents and children separately.

"I receive so much support and great advice from the group and the workers I always feel safe to speak up about what is going on and talk about my worries."

"My kid's engaged with other children and adults helping his interaction skills. This group has been fantastic throughout its a shame there isn't more like this."

What next: 'Our Space' will run for an extra three terms (at 9.30am on a Tuesday) using funds from an underspend in the original budget. Spurgeons will work closely with Thanet Community Churches to look at external funding options to continue the project even further.

Project report

Sunshine Preschool Margate

Sunshine Preschool provided free, themed family woodland sessions for up to 40 participants (children and parents/carers) twice a month.

Key learnings

- **Session were not preplanned.** Instead, discussions with families were used to plan them.
- **Using videos and photos** of sessions on Facebook encouraged new families to attend future sessions.
- There were a lot of no-shows, perhaps because sessions were booked so far in advance. **Overbooking / sending reminders may** have helped to encourage attendance.
- **Bad weather was a challenge** as attendance dropped. Advertising that wet weather gear was provided could have encouraged attendance.
- One person organising everything was too much. **Family volunteers** could be helpful.

Feedback

"These activities are wonderful I could never do them in my own house. It's so lovely to watch her get messy and have so much fun."

"His confidence has grown massively since he's been coming here. He loves being able to walk that plank by himself now."

"This is such a good thing to do for everyone and not just families on benefits."

What next: No more sessions are currently planned but more sessions may be run in the future. Although the project could continue to access the woodland area and nursery resources, more volunteers would be needed to help organise and run future sessions.

Project report



What's next for MELC?

MELC will continue to invest in innovation projects in the community, supporting local organisations and services to test and learn from new approaches in order to improve outcomes for early years children growing up in poverty.

A wide group of local organisations, services and families will be involved in developing the next set of projects that receive MELC's innovation funding. We anticipate these projects will run over a longer period of time and receive higher levels of funding than the majority of projects funded in 2022-23, to support wider impact for families and further learning for local practitioners. A new 'community innovation pot' will also soon be open to applications from the wider Margate early years community, to ensure MELC continues to support smaller-scale innovation.

MELC will also continue to facilitate an Early Years Network for local professionals and distribute financial support to families through our Early Years Grants programme.

Children and families supported by our Early Learning Communities programme take part in festive arts activities at the Turner gallery, Margate. Credit: Magnus Alanko / Save the Children.



THANK YOU!

If you have any questions about this report, any of the innovation projects, or MELC more broadly, please visit the [MELC webpage](#) or contact:

Freya Nowell (Early Learning Community Lead – Margate)
f.nowell@savethechildren.org.uk

Claire Rosato-Scott (Evaluation and Learning Lead – Margate)
c.rosato-scott@savethechildren.org.uk

