

Coaching Early Conversations Interaction and Language (CECIL) Evaluation

**Theory of Change process with CECIL Preston
and Nottinghamshire**

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1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the original impetus for exploring language development programmes for Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) and maintained nursery staff supported by coaches working within the maintained sector. It also gives an overview of the CECIL programme so far and how the current project fits into this work.

1.1 The role of early years settings in supporting language and communication

Successful development of early language skills, such as vocabulary, is important for a variety of outcomes later in life, including academic achievement, the ability to get a job, and mental health (Bleses et al., 2016; Law et al., 2017; Stewart and Waldfogel, 2017). Indeed, poor early skill development tends to negatively impact social mobility in the long term (Stewart & Waldfogel, 2017). In the UK, a large socioeconomic achievement gap currently highlights the difference in academic achievement between children from low-income backgrounds and their more advantaged peers (EEF, 2017), and recent research has shown that inequality in early childhood has not improved since the early 2000's, despite investment (Cattan et al., 2022).

In England in 2021, 68% of 0–4-year-olds were enrolled in childcare settings (DfE, 2022), and there were 21,600 group-based providers (PVIs), 9,600 school-based providers, and 28,200 childminders throughout the country (DfE, 2022) which suggests that childcare settings are crucial for developing these early skills. Research has shown that the quality of these settings is key to ensuring good outcomes, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Melhuish & Gardiner, 2023). The DfE have placed an emphasis on helping develop early years practitioners' language and communication skills in the early years over the last three years as part of the early years education Covid-19 recovery package which includes the creation of Stronger Practice Hubs (SPHs) in 2022 and their expansion in 2023. The Early Years Recovery package includes the Early Years Professional Development Programme (EYPDP) available to all practitioners qualified to at least a level 3, online training available to all early years practitioners, and 'Experts & Mentors' an initiative targeted at specific settings which includes mentor support for practitioners and expert coaching support for leaders. Alongside these training initiatives is a network of 18 SPHs running evidence-based programmes (with EEF as the evidence partner), which includes seven language and communication interventions that are now rolling out to over 700 settings around England. This builds on the existing work that EEF have been doing over the last seven years on exploring how best to support early years practitioners.

As part of their mission to identify what works in education, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) commissioned a review of effective professional development which was published in 2021 (Collin and Smith, 2021). This was followed by a guide for early years professional development

in 2023 (EEF, 2023). The current Coaching Early Conversations, Interaction and Language (CECIL) research builds on the first two recommendations¹ from these reviews:

1. **When designing and selecting professional development, focus on the mechanisms.** We believe that establishing the mechanisms of an intervention through a detailed theory of change process is key to beginning to understand how the intervention could lead to stakeholder outcomes.
2. **Ensure that professional development effectively (1) builds knowledge, (2) motivates staff, (3) develops teaching techniques, and (4) embeds practice.** The CECIL work is built on these four main structures and focuses on interventions which we believe could also effectively demonstrate these areas. Of particular importance to the CECIL model is embedding practice.

The EEF's review of effective professional development in education also noted that short-term professional development programmes can face problems with sustainability and that embedding change in the setting is vital (Collin and Smith, 2021). The early years professional development guidance (EEF, 2023) drew out two mechanisms for embedding change which are particularly relevant for early years settings. These are 'providing prompts and cues' and 'prompting action planning'. Both these elements can be seen very clearly in the interventions explored in this project – through sharing posters of key strategies, working with action plans with practitioners and managers, and ensuring long-term sustainability is considered from the start of both projects. Exploring what long-term support for sustainability could and should look like, including ways to mitigate barriers to embedding learning throughout the setting, is a key step in supporting practice in the sector. This is particularly critical in the early years sector because annual turnover of this group of staff is considerably higher at 18% in group-based providers and 9% in school-based providers (Dawson, Williams and Nancarrow, 2023) than other professions. Data from the job search website Adzuna suggests that one of the reasons for this could be the rate of pay, with the median salary in the sector being £21,500 over the past year, which is a third less than the average median salary across all vacancies advertised at £30,000 (Muir, 2023).

1.2 Coaching Early Conversations Interaction and Language

The Coaching Early Conversations Interaction and Language (CECIL) programme of work seeks to explore how coaching can be used to support early years practitioners to embed and sustain learning around supporting children with their language and communication. The initial stage of CECIL comprised two evaluations focused on coaching delivered by speech and language therapists (Dawson, Huxley and Garner, 2022; and Dawson, Garner and Nancarrow, 2023). These evaluations explored the impact of two speech and language therapy-led interventions on PVI nursery practitioners supporting early childhood language and communication skills, using the Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust Speech and Language Therapy team's 'Let's Interact' programme (Nottinghamshire CECIL) and the Hackney Speech and Language Therapy Team's 'Launchpad for Language' programme (Hackney CECIL, for the first report only).

¹ The third recommendation is about implementation and will be relevant during the times interventions are being tested.

IES carried out implementation and process evaluations (IPE) for both projects. Findings from these evaluations highlighted the value to settings and practitioners of the expert knowledge and advice that speech and language therapists provided, as well as the importance of coaches understanding the context of early years settings. Both the Nottinghamshire and Hackney speech and language therapy teams were experienced in working with early years settings.

The next stage of CECIL seeks to extend this work by exploring coaching support delivered by expert early years professionals. CECIL Preston explores the Language Development Worker model of providing sustainable continuing professional development (CPD) to early years practitioners, where expert early years professionals deliver coaching with support from speech and language therapists. The Language Development Worker model was developed by Communicate SLT and in the current project this model is piloted with early years settings in Preston. Over the course of the pilot, the evaluation team worked with Communicate SLT to develop and record this model. The current project also returns to the CECIL Nottinghamshire SLT-led project to adapt this from a model of training combined with follow-up support to a model focused on follow-up support only. Please note, there is also a concurrent CECIL project underway based around Merseyside (CECIL Merseyside) which is exploring a sustainability model supported by expert early years professionals acting as mentors. This project will report in early 2024.

Both the CECIL Preston and the CECIL Nottinghamshire models explored what sustainability support would be best if settings have already received an evidence-based training programme around supporting children's language and communication. As part of the CECIL Preston pilot, sustainability support was delivered to early years settings where practitioners had previously participated in the Hanen Learning Language and Loving it™, *The Hanen Programme® for Early Childhood Educators/Teachers*' intervention. Further information about the evidence base for The Hanen programme® and delivery in the pilot settings is provided in Appendix A.

2 Method

The IES implementation and process evaluation team worked closely with the two CECIL teams in a 'critical friend' model throughout the period of March 2023 to August 2023, alongside Laura Barbour and Imogen O'Neill at the Sutton Trust and Janet Grauberg, independent consultant, to develop their Theory of Change (TOC) models. In this context, a TOC model sets out the aims and objectives of an intervention and identifies the mechanisms and resources used in the intervention to achieve this.² With Nottinghamshire, this was through one Intervention Delivery and Evaluation Analysis (IDEA) TOC workshop (Humphreys et al., 2016) building on the TOC models developed in the two previous stages of the CECIL project with them. IDEA workshops focus on outlining the background evidence for an intervention and intervention delivery history (which becomes the rationale of the TOC), discussing the activities, staffing and materials that make up the intervention (which become the TOC, inputs and activities sections of the TOC), and finally thinking about the mechanisms for change for the intervention which lead to the outputs and outcomes (which also covers the enablers for the TOC). For Preston, through two IDEA workshops, we built a completely new TOC based on ideas from the Communication Worker model they had worked with before, but updated to be the Language Development Worker model described in the previous section. This was piloted with three local settings that Communicate SLT had worked with previously.

IES also worked with Janet Grauberg and the team at Sutton Trust to continue developing the overarching TOC for the CECIL project, identifying themes from across the different CECIL strands. This work is discussed in more detail in the forthcoming report on CECIL Merseyside to be published in early 2024. Finally, this team and other organisations working to support early years practitioners with speech and language training came together at a discussion day in July 2023 to share learning and work on priorities for the future within the sector.

The timeline for the TOC work was as described in Table 2.1:

² A step-by-step explanation of the process of creating a TOC model can be found here: <https://www.thinknpc.org/resource-hub/ten-steps/>

Table 2.1 Timeline for Theory of change Development and critical friend support

Date	Activity
March 2023	Initial project set-up meetings.
April 2023	Teams draft/edit their initial TOC model.
May 2023	CECIL Nottinghamshire IDEA workshop (in-person), and first CECIL Preston IDEA workshop (virtual).
May–June 2023	CECIL Nottinghamshire and CECIL Preston update TOC models. Follow up TOC call with CECIL Preston. Overarching CECIL IDEA workshop with IES, Sutton Trust and Janet Grauberg.
July 2023	Final IDEA workshop with CECIL Preston (in-person). Early years discussion day (in-person) with all CECIL teams and other organisations working to support early years practitioners with speech and language training.
August–October 2023	Writing summary report. IES, Sutton Trust and Janet Grauberg finalise overarching CECIL TOC.

3 CECIL Preston

For CECIL Preston, Communicate SLT adapted their Communication Worker model, where speech and language therapy assistants delivered support and training to early years settings, to create a new model focused on sustaining learning from previous training, and where support was delivered by experienced early years (EY) professionals supported by speech and language therapists (the Language Development Worker model). Communicate SLT have been delivering the Communication Worker model in Blackpool where they are currently commissioned by Blackpool Borough Council and the Blackpool Better Start Partnership to provide universal and targeted language and communication support to children and families, EY settings, and the EY workforce. Further information about the Communication Worker model can be found in Appendix B. In the current project, Communicate SLT piloted delivery of the new Language Development Worker model with early years settings in Preston.

In this chapter, we describe the Language Development Worker model, the delivery pilot activities, and the development of a Theory of Change model to identify key elements of the Language Development Worker model and the mechanisms for sustaining and embedding learning around supporting children's language and communication.

3.1 The Language Development Worker model

The Language Development Worker model developed for CECIL Preston focuses on embedding and sustaining learning from previous training around supporting children's language and communication needs at a universal level, i.e. all children at the setting. As the model has been revised and updated in response to the pilot delivery, we have commented on differences between the pilot delivery and the proposed model for future delivery.

A summary of the Language Development Worker (LDW) model is given below:

Each setting is allocated an LDW who delivers coaching and support, and liaises with the settings. LDWs are expected to be experienced early years practitioners or teachers who are familiar with The Hanen programme® and strategies. Ideally, they would also be qualified as a Hanen tutor, but they could also complete the training for this once recruited. The LDW is supervised by a speech and language therapist (SLT) with experience of engaging with early years settings to provide support at practitioner/staff, child and setting levels. The SLT also joins the LDW on some visits to the setting and works with the LDW to develop a plan of support/targets for the setting, provides expert/clinical guidance and knowledge, signposts to resources, and helps problem-solve where needed. A lead SLT oversees the overall delivery, supporting the delivery team (LDWs and SLTs) as needed, and supervises the SLT.

In the case of this pilot delivery, Communicate SLT had an existing relationship with the Preston settings, as they had previously delivered Hanen training in those three settings for the EEF efficacy trials of the Learning Language and Loving It™ (LLLI). This would not necessarily be the

case for future delivery, so the relationship building stage during the initial setting visits and the early-project network session would be especially important.

The Language Development Worker model evolved over the course of the programme as a result of discussions in the IDEA workshop and learning from the pilot delivery of the model. The final version of the model is summarised below.

In the initial stage of activity, the LDW and SLT share information about the programme, set expectations, build relationships with settings, and understand the needs of settings/practitioners and set targets and learning goals. This includes:

- Initial information sessions are delivered online to outline the programme for managers and practitioners (45 mins).
- An early-project network session for EY practitioners and setting leadership at participating settings to give an overview of the project, set out expectations, provide a review of the audit tool, and present opportunities for EY practitioners to build relationships with other local settings (60 mins virtual). This element was added to the model after delivery of the pilot was completed so this did not happen as part of the pilot delivery.
- Two initial audit and target setting visits to settings which are carried out by the LDW and SLT assigned to that setting (approximately 60 mins each). The first visit includes explanations of the visits, outlining expectations, relationship building, and familiarisation with the setting (e.g. observing interactions and environment). In the second visit, the LDW and SLT work through the audit tool and agree targets with the setting. In the delivery pilot, there was one initial visit to cover these points that lasted 90 minutes and the delivery team felt that this was insufficient time to cover all these activities.
- After the initial visits, settings then receive an initial audit and target setting visit record document and a plan for support, which is completed and shared with the setting by the LDW and SLT.

The next phase of the model focuses on embedding and sustaining learning and includes:

- Participating practitioners at the settings receive individual coaching sessions that are tailored to the setting's needs and targets. These are delivered by the LDW either in person or virtually based upon the settings' preference and the aim of the support session (approximately 60 mins per session). The frequency of these is agreed with the setting, depending upon practitioners' confidence and needs, and ranges between weekly to monthly. In the pilot delivery, staff at settings received up to four coaching sessions. There was a mix of face-to-face and virtual sessions across each of the settings, and one support session took place over the phone. The coaching element is discussed in further detail in the Theory of Change section.
- Regular contact is available between visits if needed (virtual check ins, calls, emails). During pilot delivery, the LDW would check in about support needs when they were contacting settings by phone or email to arrange coaching sessions.
- The LDW also encourages and supports the EY practitioners to give feedback to their setting team as an integrated part of their day-to-day work/staff meetings.

Early years practitioners receiving the coaching are given access to Padlet, an online platform for resources to support settings and for sharing of good practice including SLUK, AFASIC, Hanen,

BBC Tiny Happy People, Literacy Trust, 'Walk and Talk' NHS and LA resources locally. Each setting is also provided with a copy of Hanen's 'Learning Language and Loving It™' guidebook (Weitzman & Greenberg, 2002) if they do not already have this. Materials used by the LDW and SLT to deliver the coaching and support include: a coaching protocol packet; template documents to record all forms of contact and support; the Hanen Interaction Strategy self-reflection rating for use with practitioners; the Communication Friendly Setting Audit for use with settings; an audit and target setting visit record document and plan for support completed and shared with settings by the LDW and SLT; an internal competency rating scale completed post initial and final visits by the LDW and SLT; and a confidence rating scale to be completed by EY practitioners at final visit. The coaching protocol packet comprises a suite of materials used as part of the coaching work, including the confidence and competency rating scales listed here, combined with a flowchart capturing the principles around coaching processes and decision making. Further discussion of the coaching protocol packet can be found in the chapter 'Theory of Change CECIL Preston'.

Once coaching is in progress and settings are working towards their targets, there is a mid-project network session to share successes and barriers, give an overview of the project, review the audit tool, share settings' targets and experiences of the project, and provide opportunities for practitioners to build relationships with other local settings (60 mins virtual). During pilot delivery, only one of the three settings was available to attend the mid-project network session.

The final stage of the model focuses on measuring progress and planning to sustain learning. There is one final setting visit with both the SLT and LDW to reflect upon the support and impact, as well as planning for how to maintain the changes independently (in person-approximately 60-90 mins). These visits took place for all settings that participated in the pilot delivery. Finally, feedback is sought from practitioners and settings during or following coaching visits, at the mid-project network session and via the end of project feedback form, so that the delivery time can continue to develop the model and resources in line with evolving practitioner and setting needs.

At the end of the programme, practitioner and setting progress and outcomes are measured through the following approaches:

- The SLT and LDW use the audit tool to produce competence rating scores after the initial and final setting visits to measure progress. These are used to inform the support and are not shared with settings or practitioners.
- At the final visit, practitioners at settings are asked to rate their confidence in specific areas and activities, reflecting back to the start of the coaching and at completion.
- The percentage of targets met or partially met is calculated upon the final visit.
- The SLT and LDW review reflections on impact for the settings' practitioners through discussion with practitioners during support sessions, at the final visit and through a Microsoft feedback form.
- The SLT and LDW review reflections upon child impact gained from discussion with practitioners during support sessions, at the final visit and through a Microsoft feedback form.

3.2 The CECIL Preston delivery pilot

In the CECIL Preston pilot, the Communicate SLT team delivered the Language Development Worker model in early years settings in Preston. This enabled the CECIL programme to investigate how an integrated approach, drawing on the skills and experience of both education and speech and language professionals could work, and whether this was feasible as a model of using a local skills-mix approach to support the language and communication of children in that area.

The CECIL Preston pilot study recruited from the eight settings in the Preston area that had participated in the original disrupted EEF-funded Hanen trial (September 2019 to July 2021) and had been allocated to the treatment group and received LLLI training. As Communicate SLT had delivered the LLLI training for that trial, the settings already had a relationship with the organisation. All eight settings were emailed about the CECIL Preston programme and invited to attend a virtual information session. Five settings booked onto the sessions where they were able to find out how the support would work, what was involved and ask any questions. Two were able to attend on the day and two received information over the phone. These settings were offered a period of coaching-based support delivered using the Language Development Worker model, to help embed and sustain their learning around language and communication and around implementing the Hanen strategies. Three settings opted to receive the support and participated in the CECIL Preston pilot. These were all state-maintained nurseries in a school setting. The coaching was targeted at the two practitioners/teachers at each setting who had received the LLLI training; although in one setting one staff member had left the setting so there was only one staff member remaining who had received the training. Delivery of the support ran from April to July 2023.

3.3 CECIL Preston Theory of Change

The Communicate SLT team had two IDEA workshops (Humphreys et al., 2016) in order to develop and refine a TOC model for the Language Development Worker model. The initial IDEA workshop took place virtually across two sessions that were seven weeks apart (April-May 2023). The first of these sessions took place before delivery of the model had started, the second session took place after the initial setting visits had been completed. The second IDEA workshop took place in-person after delivery of the support had been completed (July 2023). There was also support via email, and a catch-up meeting around the mid-point of delivery (June 2023) allowed for further discussion of the delivery paradigm as it was being developed.

In the first workshop, the evaluation team supported Communicate SLT to map the proposed Language Development Worker model to a TOC framework. This involved summarising the evidence and need for their approach, and identifying inputs, activities, mechanisms of change, outputs, short- and long-term outcomes, and enablers or conditions for success. In the second IDEA workshop, Communicate SLT were supported to reflect on their completed delivery and refine some of the details about the model, update the model with any changes made and also identify changes they would make to the model for future delivery.

The main changes to the TOC model between the initial and final workshops are as follows:

A key aspect of the model was around the materials and format of the coaching element, i.e. the follow-up sessions. Initially, the team had envisioned producing a coaching protocol/delivery tool that would describe in detail all the processes and decision-making around the structure of coaching sessions. For example, what support to offer in response to which needs, how many sessions to offer, etc. However, in practice, they found that the materials they had developed (e.g. a comprehensive list of targets that settings or practitioners could work towards) or were already utilising (e.g. an internal competency rating scale completed post initial and final setting visits by LDW and SLT), combined with a flowchart capturing the principles around coaching processes and decision making, were sufficient. These materials ensured that the team was consistent and constituted a working 'protocol packet' that provided structure but was also flexible to the needs of individual settings and practitioners. The team also decided a frequency range for coaching sessions with staff to be agreed with settings depending upon practitioner confidence and need, ranging between weekly to monthly. Practitioners completed an internal confidence rating scale at the end of the support reflecting on their confidence at the start and end of the support, and this information was combined with an internal competency rating completed by the LDW and SLT. The Theory of Change section was expanded to outline key elements of the coaching approach. In addition to this, the final model included more detail around how progress would be measured, including both self-reflection/rating tools completed by the settings/practitioners, and measures completed by the allocated LDW and SLT for that setting.

Another area of development was the initial set-up and on-boarding process for the support. On reflection, the Communicate SLT team suggested changes to two components of the support for future delivery. First, they suggested that the initial audit and target setting visit with the LDW and SLT allocated for that setting should be split into two visits of 60 minutes each; as they had found it challenging to fit everything into one visit, and felt it was valuable to get to know the setting first and introduce them to the team and the intervention. The first setting visit would include an explanation of the visits and associated expectations for engagement and support for participating staff, relationship building, and would enable the LDW and SLT to familiarise themselves with the setting, e.g. observe interactions and environment. Then, in the second setting visit, they would work through the audit tool and agree targets with the setting. The second change suggested was to schedule an additional network session towards the beginning of delivery, to allow practitioners at participating sessions to meet and share their targets and ideas for addressing these, so that they could create a community of practice and support each other along their support journey. As the mid-project network meeting occurred quite late in the academic year (because of the timing of the CECIL Preston project) only one setting was able to attend, whereas a session earlier in the year could be scheduled for a less busy time. The initial network session would also be an opportunity to give an overview of the intervention and the support needed from settings for participating practitioners, especially if setting managers could be encouraged to attend. This would hopefully facilitate the sharing of successes and experiences at the mid-delivery network meeting as the community of practice would have been established at the first network meeting.

The TOC process enabled the Communicate SLT team to reflect on the skill sets required for the LDW and SLT roles, as well as how these roles worked together to support the settings. The LDW needed to have experience of working in early years settings as a practitioner or teacher to support children, delivering training, and in coaching and/or giving video-feedback, as well as being a qualified tutor for Hanen 'Learning Language and Loving It™' programme. The supervising SLT needed experience of training and coaching staff in early years settings with

providing universal support to all children at their setting, in addition to the usual targeted support the SLTs may provide. They did not necessarily need to be a qualified Hanen tutor, as their clinical expertise should give them an understanding of the evidence and processes behind the strategies taught in LLLI and other similar programmes. Also, more detail was added to activities to outline how the SLT supports the LDW.

Discussion around enabling factors and factors for success, identified several key aspects. The Communicate SLT team felt it was important for settings to establish a culture where language and communication was prioritised and practitioners were supported to develop, sustain and implement good practice. The final TOC set out more explicitly the role of the Language Lead in promoting good practice in the setting. Early Years settings in Preston can select a practitioner to specialise in and lead on language and communication at their setting. This language lead participates in the language lead network which is supported by Lancashire County Council and the NHS Speech and Language Therapy Service³. The language lead receives a termly newsletter and attends a network meeting each term. Their role includes: promoting a communication friendly environment at their setting; demonstrating good practice and supporting colleagues; disseminating relevant information about language and communication, practice and training/support opportunities; being a contact for their local NHS speech and language therapist; and supporting work with parents to promote a positive home communication environment. A short-term outcome/mediating factor identified the need for language leads to be active in this role, and the final TOC identified a long-term impact where setting leadership values the language lead role, ensuring that the lead has time to fulfil this role and that the role is always filled.

Overall, support from leadership was felt to be key and this was incorporated into changes to the information and set-up activities at the start of the trial. The Preston team felt that ideally there would be two trained practitioners at each setting; to provide each other with peer support and create a community of learning within their setting. They also recognised that the high level of turnover typical of early years settings meant that this was not always possible in practice. One additional aspect that the Communicate SLT team identified was around the qualities needed for the organisation delivering the support. This included being flexible in their delivery to fit the needs of the settings, e.g., being able to offer appointments outside of office hours (9.00–17.00) as early years settings may offer provision for children from early until late, and having availability within the team to attend on different days of week as needed. While delivery for CECIL Preston had only taken place in school early years settings, the Communicate SLT team felt that the flexibility in delivery and tailored support meant that the approach used would be equally suitable for supporting practitioners in private, independent, and voluntary settings.

At the final IDEA workshop, Communicate SLT shared a summary of their experience of piloting the Language Development Worker model with three EY settings in Preston which included discussion of outcomes and examples of feedback from the settings.⁴ Overall, there were positive outcomes for each of the main measures identified in the Output section of the TOC. For all participating settings, practitioners had seen an increase in their self-rated confidence score (12-13%) and their competence score rated by the LDW and SLT (10%). Across the participating

³ <https://www.lancashire.gov.uk/early-years-support-and-training/communication-and-language/language-leads/>

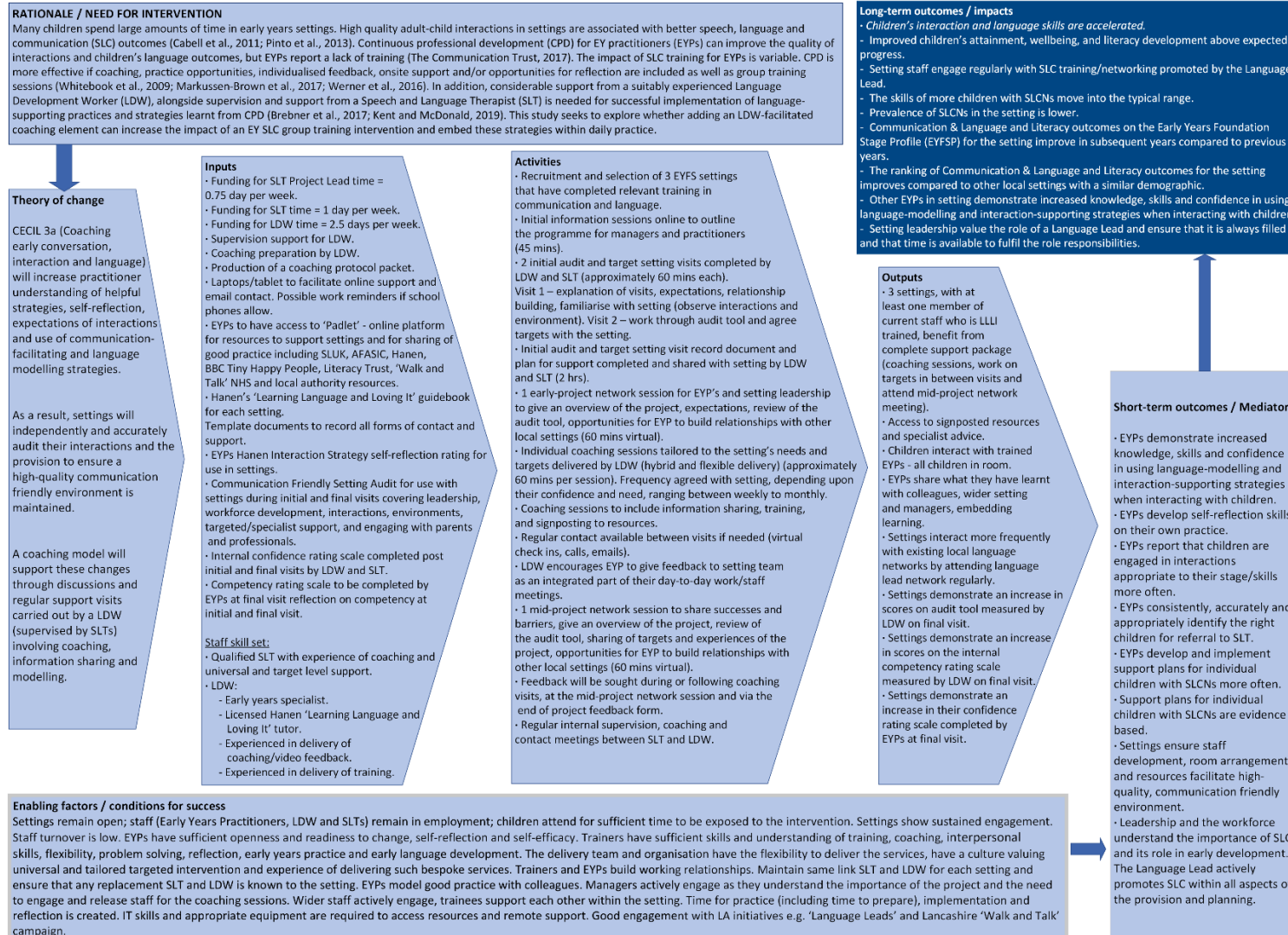
⁴ Please note that this feedback was collected and reported by the delivery team, Communicate SLT, and not by an independent evaluator.

settings, 81% of targets had been achieved or partially achieved. The LDW and SLT were also able to observe some of the short-term outcomes identified in the TOC, such as changes to the setting to facilitate a high-quality, communication friendly environment. During discussion of the findings, the Communicate SLT team reflected that there had been positive outcomes and improvement across settings with different levels of confidence and competence. At one setting where staff were quite experienced and familiar with the Hanen strategies, the LDW and SLT were able to help them with strategies to support children who were reluctant talkers, and all three children were talking by the time programme delivery finished. The setting also highlighted this aspect of the support in their feedback about the programme. In addition to the changes to the TOC described above, Communicate SLT also described some key learning points for future delivery. This included making clear to settings the available timing for visits, e.g. after school sessions, and explaining to settings the expectations around protecting time for coaching visits whilst in ratio.

The final TOC CECIL Preston model is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Final CECIL Preston TOC finalised August 2023

Zoom in to enlarge text.



4 CECIL Nottinghamshire

In this chapter, we give an overview of how CECIL Nottinghamshire has developed and the learning so far, describe the current model, and discuss the Theory of Change work undertaken in this current project to adapt this from a model of training combined with follow-up support to a model focused on follow-up support only.

4.1 CECIL Nottinghamshire (2020/22)

At the start of the CECIL programme, the Sutton Trust identified the Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust Speech and Language Therapy team's 'Let's Interact' programme (Nottinghamshire CECIL) as an intervention using coaching with early years practitioners to sustain and embed learning around supporting children with their language and communication. The CECIL Nottinghamshire model and its ongoing development have been explored in two previous CECIL projects that both included theory of change and evaluation elements.

The implementation and process evaluation of the first CECIL project (Dawson, et al., 2022) found that practitioners felt that the Nottingham SLT-led intervention was feasible for practitioners and showed potential perceived impacts on practitioners' confidence, knowledge and skills and children's language and communication skills (especially for children who were struggling with language, those with EAL or Speech, language, and communication needs (SLCN)). However, there were some barriers for settings. These included issues around digital access and digital literacy for early years practitioners, as well as the challenges to practitioners, managers and children that Covid-19 placed, such as disruption to practice, not having suitable spaces for interventions, and children being in settings a lot less than expected, which had a knock-on effect on their language development. The University of Oxford undertook an associated impact evaluation exploring the impact of the programmes on children's language and communication skills, using a small, randomised design. The research found that the Nottinghamshire CECIL programme was associated with a difference between the intervention and control groups over time (Lindorff et al., 2022, and the whole project summarised in Barbour, 2022). However, the study sample was small and had some attrition in the endpoint assessment measures, so the results need to be interpreted with some caution.

The second CECIL evaluation examined Nottinghamshire's sustainability work with the control group from the first evaluation (known as the late starters, because they received the CECIL programme support in the following academic year). Lessons learned in the 2020-21 delivery were applied with this group, sustainability support was added and also delivery was less affected by Covid-19. This latter point meant that the training could go ahead as originally planned for the project in-person and with coaching in-between the

training sessions, as well as adding two sustainability follow-up support sessions a few months after the initial work, and a pack of sustainability resources. The evaluation found that there were positive perceived impacts on practitioners' skills and confidence in supporting children's language development, as well as perceived impacts on children's language development and in particular for those who were struggling or had SEND. The sustainability work was seen as helpful and could be incorporated into settings' practice. Enablers for sustainability included manager support, the valued support of the SLT and having the support face-to-face. Barriers to the sustainability of the work were reflective of the current landscape for nurseries – staff time and resources were difficult to juggle with a lot of staff sickness and staff turnover, and technical issues still caused difficulties sometimes. Recommendations for future work were also outlined, which have been built on in the current project (see TOC section).

As discussed, the previous two CECIL Nottinghamshire projects explored how learning could be embedded and sustained after a setting received the Nottinghamshire team's 'Let's Interact' training. However, in the current project, the CECIL Nottinghamshire model is adapted in order to embed and sustain learning from the Hanen Learning Language and Loving it™, The Hanen Programme® for Early Childhood Educators/Teachers' intervention. The evaluation team worked with the CECIL Nottinghamshire team to develop this model through an IDEA workshop, as well as ongoing support and discussion via email.

4.2 The CECIL Nottinghamshire model

The current CECIL Nottinghamshire model built on the previous two versions of the model developed in the prior evaluation projects. An important element of all three models was that the support is delivered by SLTs who have expertise in early years language development as well as having also been trained in coaching, so that they can support practitioners in the most effective ways. No piloting of the model was delivered during this project as adjustments were made based on learning from the earlier work. A summary of the CECIL Nottinghamshire main model is given below.

Following the LLLI training, the team felt that an initial information session for managers and practitioners was crucial to outline the sustainability programme and share the resource pack, which is called the 'Lets keep interacting sustainability menu', so that they are all engaged and have a full understanding of what is expected.

The sustainability menu includes sections on key parts of the LLLI handbook with signposting to particular pages to read, videos to watch, activities for shared learning, reflective practice questions, and resources for parents. It also covers children's language development, key strategies (observe, wait and listen; face-to-face; respond with interest; adjust your language; label, expand and extend), learning activities for practitioners to try with others in their settings, and a guide for practitioners on how to record interactions and use them to improve practice so that they can continue their learning within their settings after the support had finished. The sustainability menu also included templates for planning their video interactions, reflecting on the interactions, and an action plan.

The delivery of the sustainability sessions includes:

- An initial visit to settings to make an action plan with senior leaders regarding their priorities around skills development for individual practitioners and/or cascading learning across a setting.
- Setting visits, once per half term, to meet with senior leaders to review the CECIL action plan and align the work with their setting development plan/workforce development plan.
- The practitioners who had received the LLLI training would receive one coaching visit per half term to review and continue developing the skills they had learned on their training using reflective approaches, and to support them to cascade activities in their setting.
- Additional support could be provided to settings depending on need, including a pool of extra online coaching sessions and additional communication by email or phone if required. The coaches would use a framework developed in the earlier projects to determine who needs the additional support, using a RAG rating and an extra coaching decision-making framework evaluating the practitioners' skills across a range of strategies (based on a coaching record and progress form the coaches complete after each session). The record of coaching document notes how practitioners were scoring on the strategies, areas of strength, areas of support, actions agreed and additional information. These feed into the coaching summary, an Excel spreadsheet that the coaches filled out and then used to monitor progress over the sessions.
- A closure meeting online would also be given to each setting to review progress made over the year and agree next steps with senior leaders and practitioners. Coaches would use coaching planning and reflection tools with practitioners before and after each coaching session.
- In addition, termly network meetings would be offered to practitioners to bring practitioners together across an area to share best practice.

To help practitioners stay on track, text messages to confirm tasks and appointments across the time could be used and the Learning Language and Loving It™ (LLLI) guidebook (Weitzman & Greenberg, 2002) and strategies posters would also be provided to each practitioner. The CECIL Nottinghamshire team developed a coaching protocol for SLTs to follow in earlier stages of the CECIL work, including the background to the coaching programme; instructions on what to include in each of the three main coaching sessions; how to use the planning tool, reflection tool and action plans with the practitioners; how to decide if practitioners need additional coaching; and a record of coaching for them to fill out after every session. It was decided that this coaching protocol would be an ongoing piece of work to review and amend as needed to suit practitioner need.

4.3 CECIL Nottinghamshire Theory of Change

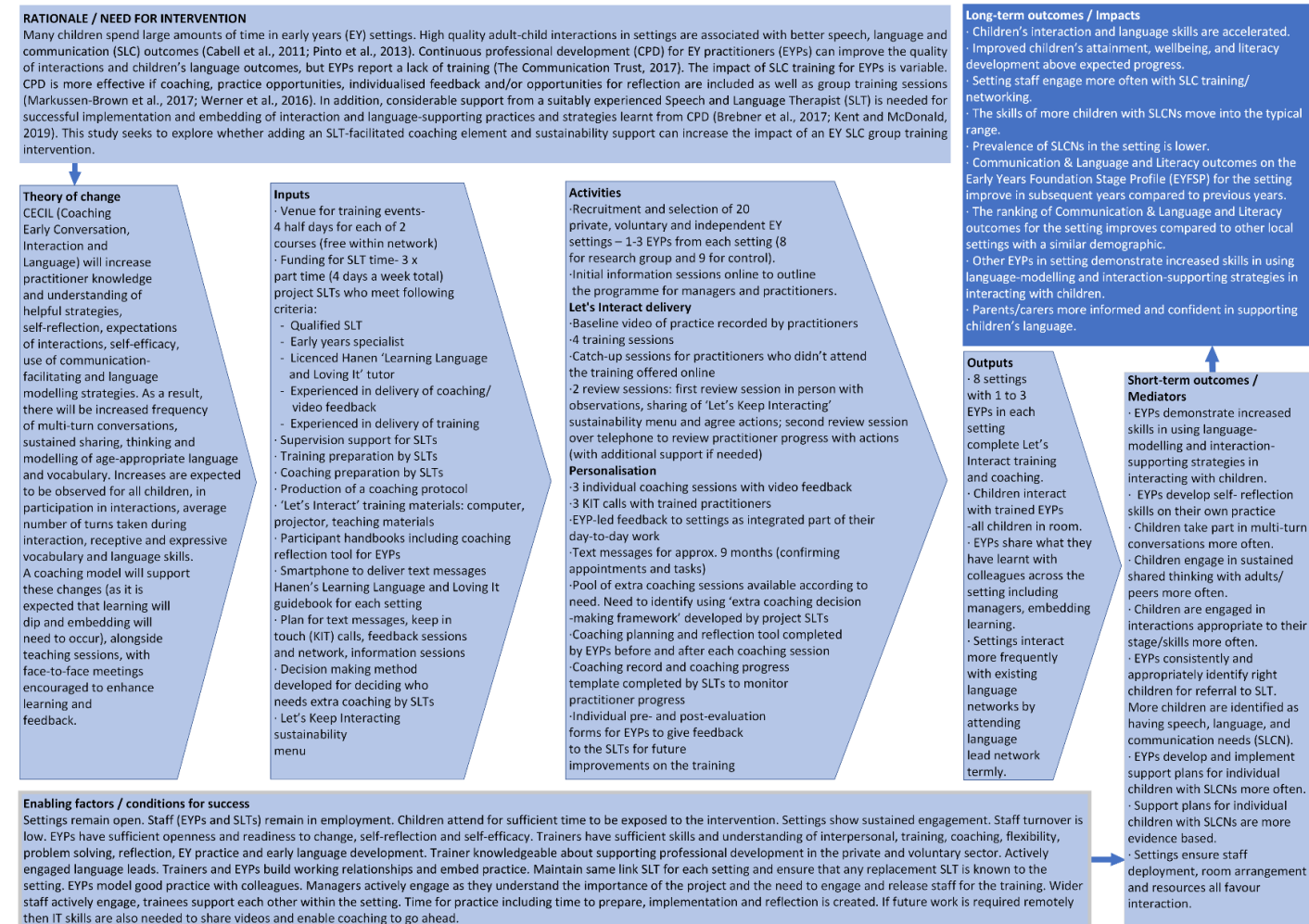
The Nottinghamshire team had one in-person IDEA workshop, alongside support via email to help build on the pre-existing TOC model that was developed in the first stage of CECIL (Dawson et al., 2022) and refined in the second stage of CECIL (Dawson et al.,

2023). The model produced after the second stage of CECIL is shown in Figure 2 and forms the starting point for the current project. The workshop explored learning from the different stages of CECIL work Nottinghamshire had already completed, and what would be the ideal model if we were testing this again after practitioners had completed an evidence-based programme such as Hanen LLLI (rather than the Let's Interact programme it had previously been tested with). One key area of discussion drew upon findings from the second evaluation of CECIL (Dawson et al., 2023), which had identified some considerations for the scalability and sustainability of the model. These considerations are discussed alongside changes to the TOC model as relevant. The TOC model was updated by the delivery team following the workshop and went through a couple of iterations with input from the evaluation team before being finalised in August 2023.

The original TOC model from the CECIL Nottinghamshire second stage evaluation is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2 CECIL Nottinghamshire sustainability model developed July 2022

Zoom in to enlarge text.



The overall main changes to the TOC model over the course of this project are as follows:

- The previous evaluation of CECIL Nottinghamshire included a Let's Interact training component, this has been removed from the current TOC as we are expecting this now to follow on from Hanen LLLI training instead (or a similar evidence-based programme) – the main changes to the model for this take place in the Inputs, Activities and Output sections.
- The two review sessions (following the training) from the original model are now suggested to be once per half term for practitioners, so there would be six over the course of the year if all used, and they recommend a minimum of three. The previous model included time for training so there was limited time for more coaching sessions, whereas in this new model there is more time available for coaching sessions. This means the delivery team can be more flexible in the number of sessions they offer (Activities). Having the coaching sessions take place more regularly was also one of the suggestions from the previous evaluation.
- There are new specific sessions added in for managers too, to help keep them engaged with the process and to ensure that the work is built into their workforce development plans and cascading plan (Activities). This also builds on learning from the previous evaluation to further engage managers in order to ensure buy-in as well as addressing a consideration around losing knowledge or momentum around language and communication when a staff member moves to a different year group or leaves the setting. These sessions are also specified as visits and it is expected that some or all coaching sessions may take place in the same visit which addresses a consideration identified in the second evaluation where staff expressed a preference for face-to-face delivery over remote delivery.
- Keep in touch (KIT) calls now take place 'as and when needed' in between sessions rather than specifying three needed (Activities).
- Termly network sessions have been reinstated (the original phase 1 CECIL Nottinghamshire model included one network session, but this was taken out in the sustainability model as they had been difficult to arrange during the pandemic) (Activities). This builds on suggestions from the previous evaluation where practitioners had requested more contact with other settings to support their learning.
- A new output has been added looking at practitioners establishing their skills in a wider range of contexts and resources, as the Nottinghamshire team felt this was a natural progression for the embedded practice to take (Outputs). This change addressed a consideration identified in the second evaluation where tailored support could be offered to different settings, in line with their needs, e.g. supporting older children or reluctant talkers.
- The cascading plan has been added to the outputs as this is now part of the work SLTs will do with managers (Outputs) and an important part of the learning from the last evaluation, where having more detailed support for this was outlined as something practitioners would want. It also addressed additional considerations around making resources and support available to all staff at a setting and not only those who

participated in the coaching, and supporting new managers when they start at a setting.

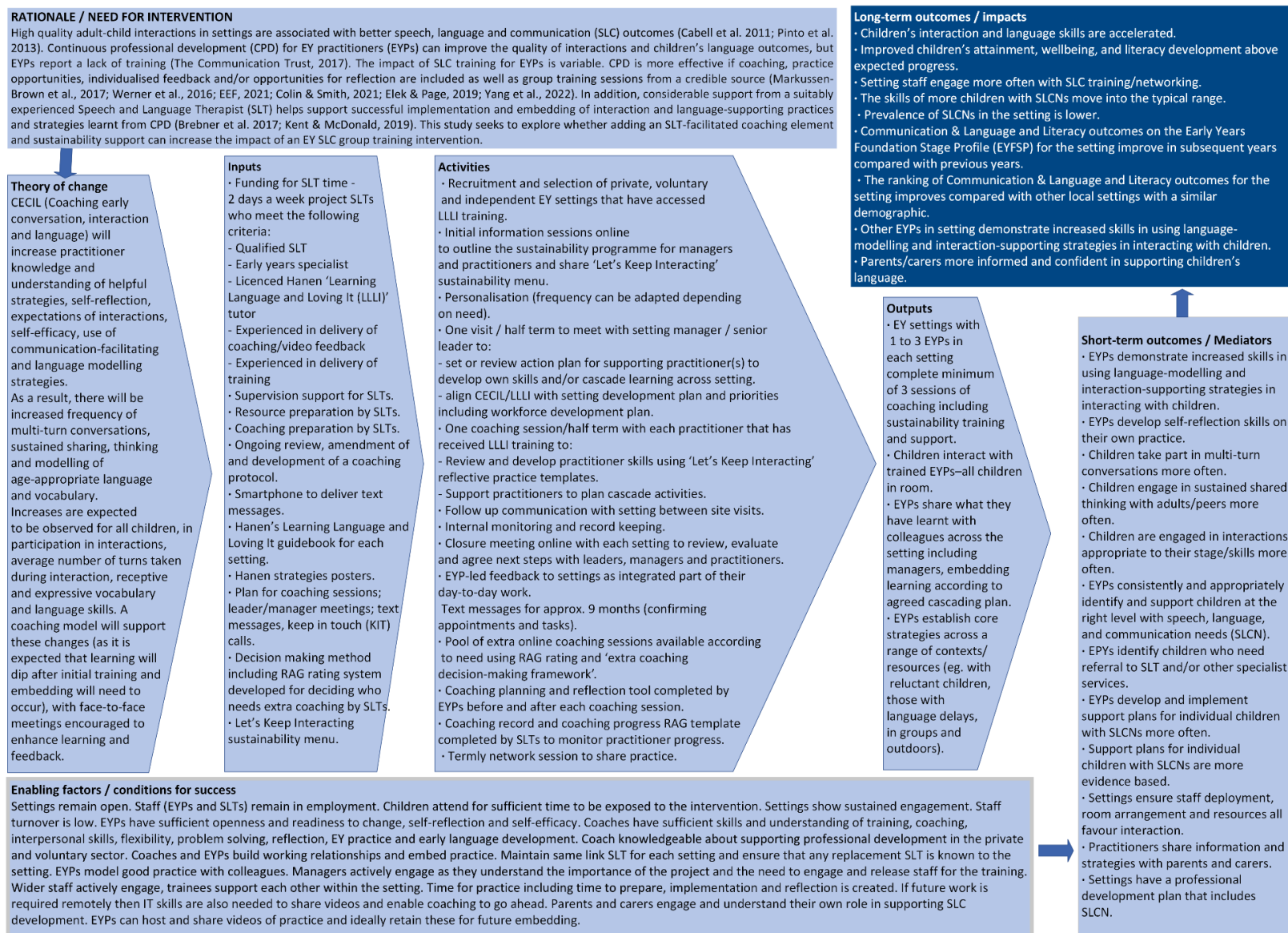
- New short-term outcomes have been added, covering practitioners sharing practice with parents and carers to extend the learning as much as possible and embed it for children and secondly, that settings have a professional development plan that includes speech, language and communication needs (short-term outcomes/mediators). This change addressed a consideration in the second evaluation which identified potential for parent training/coaching sessions and expanding networks, especially if SLTs' enthusiasm and knowledge could also be disseminated to these individuals outside of the settings.
- New enablers have been added including that parents/carers engage with settings and have their own role in supporting SLC development linked to the related new short-term outcome. A second addition is that practitioners can host and share videos of their practice and ideally retain them to share as examples with other colleagues, to help embed the practice (enabling factors/conditions for success). Both of these came out of learning from the last evaluation as there had previously been little focus on parents/carers, and digital issues were still a barrier for some practitioners.

One consideration that was not addressed in the current changes was the suggestion that some kind of qualification may help to acknowledge the benefit of the programme to professional development. Findings from the second evaluation showed that CPD was important to many managers and practitioners, and that, in some cases, the programme had led to new roles being created for practitioners who had taken part, such as mentors or language leads. This is something that could be considered for future iterations of the model.

The final TOC CECIL Nottinghamshire model is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3 Final CECIL Nottinghamshire TOC finalised August 2023

Zoom in to enlarge text.



5 Discussion

This chapter brings together the findings from the TOC development process with the CECIL Nottinghamshire and CECIL Preston teams. Next steps for future research with the teams are also covered.

5.1 Shared features of the CECIL Nottinghamshire and Preston models

The CECIL Nottinghamshire model described in this report brings together learning from the two previous CECIL evaluations, as well as building on the professional development literature. The CECIL Preston model has been developed alongside a pilot where learning from delivery could be incorporated directly into the model as the project progressed. The current project aimed to build sustainable models to follow on from evidence-based training that can be embedded within settings, and help the sector continue to maintain learning and improve skills in language and communication. The final versions of the models developed during this research are now ready to be tested within settings following training delivery. They could potentially be used as a follow-on support offer for language and communication training accessed via Stronger Practice Hubs as part of the Government's Early Years education recovery programme. Looking across the models, we have identified critical aspects that occur in both the CECIL Nottinghamshire and CECIL Preston models.

Shared features of the CECIL Nottinghamshire and Preston models include:

- delivery by expert professionals with expertise in working with early years, language and communication, as well as coaching specific expertise;
- the importance of coaching/mentoring to embed and sustain knowledge and practice from evidence-based training;
- self-reflection being critical to continued progress, and as a skill for practitioners to take forward in their practice;
- regular contact (once per half term for Nottinghamshire model, monthly for Preston model) with flexibility dependent on practitioner need;
- discussions with setting managers to decide where the focus of the improvement work will be (setting action plans for Nottinghamshire model, and setting targets for Preston model);
- encouragement of sharing learning with other practitioners within the setting (cascading plan for Nottinghamshire model, Language Lead role in Preston model);
- facilitating network sessions for settings to share practice with other local settings and create a community for peer learning, as well as being able to signpost to local resources,

support/referral pathways and relevant training (termly for Nottinghamshire model, twice a year for Preston model);

- regular supervision for coaches where they can share their experiences/learning, seek support, discuss strategies, reflect on their own practice, and draw upon wider experience and expertise; and
- both involve ongoing review and development of the coaching protocol, to ensure that it fits the local needs and context, and incorporates the latest available evidence.

Additionally, learning from the two projects suggested some further refinements to the model would help future implementation which can be taken forward in any future CECIL models. These included:

1. Providing extra support for cascading or embedding learning in the setting, as exactly what is most helpful for this is still to be established.
2. How to train new delivery team members who have not already been involved in delivery of a Hanen or related project, or have existing relationships with settings; as both of these factors help develop relationships quickly but are not always possible in a scaled-up version of either model.
3. Ensuring managers/headteachers are committed to releasing staff for the time needed, as this continues to prove difficult in the sector due to staff ratios, staff sickness, staff turnover and competing priorities.
4. Improving practitioner digital skills so that they can have some sessions online if needed – this was less of an issue than we saw in previous CECIL evaluations but still could be improved further.
5. Helping to create a culture which values language and communication and facilitates best practice (e.g. inclusion in professional development plans for individuals, workforce development plans for the setting and setting priorities).

Overlapping features of the learning across all CECIL projects are also discussed in more detail in the CECIL Merseyside report section on the CECIL overarching theory of change.

5.2 Future research

Future possible research could continue to extend this work, now that the models have been piloted, by exploring and comparing the models examined in CECIL (CECIL Nottinghamshire, CECIL Preston and CECIL Merseyside) on a larger scale with settings that have already received Hanen or other evidence-based programmes. We will be reporting on the pilot of CECIL Merseyside in early 2024. Continuing to investigate the mechanisms of change that we have started to unpick in the overarching theory of change work for CECIL (described in the CECIL Merseyside report) will be an important part of any next steps, building on the two professional development reports for the EEF by Collin and Smith (2021) and EEF (2023) and ideally involving an examination of child outcomes through direct measurement rather than relying on practitioner report.

Finally, we also feel a review of the professional development landscape for early years settings including maintained, PVI and childminders is overdue. Exploring how and when CPD is used for these groups and in what form, will be an important step in determining what is feasible for the sector, as well as establishing what is evidence-based; given that challenges to the sector only seem to be getting larger, with the introduction of an expansion of free childcare hours, but with higher staffing crisis and nursery closures.

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Appendix A: Hanen Learning Language and Loving It

For this current CECIL project, we worked with the teams on developing models that could embed and sustain learning after setting staff had participated in evidence-based training on supporting children with their language and communication. In discussions with the Nottinghamshire and Preston teams, it was agreed that we would use the Hanen Learning Language and Loving it™ (LLLI), *The Hanen Programme® for Early Childhood Educators/Teachers'* intervention⁵ as the basis for the follow-up support. Hanen LLLI is a training programme for staff working in early years settings, to promote opportunities for children's social, language and literacy learning. The programme is delivered through a mix of group training workshops and individualised coaching sessions including video feedback.

Key reasons for selecting this as the basis for the embedding and sustaining support models were that Learning Language and Loving it™ had an evaluation underway at the same time as the current project and both teams were very familiar with the content having worked on delivering the intervention in the past (which also meant some settings that had received the training in the past could make up a small pilot group for Communicate SLT CIC to work with in Preston). Importantly Learning Language and Loving it™ currently has some of the best potential for evidence-based interventions for this age group available. The 2017 Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) review of early language development (Law et al., 2017) identified the Hanen training, 'Learning, Language and Loving It'™ (LLLI), as a promising intervention from its review of previous research.

The Communicate SLT team (leading the CECIL Preston work described in this report) have delivered LLLI at each stage of the EEF evaluations. An overview of Communicate SLT's involvement in the evaluations and key findings are presented in the next section.

EEF-funded evaluations of Hanen Learning Language and Loving It

Communicate SLT have been involved in three EEF-funded evaluations of the Learning Language and Loving It™ – The Hanen Program® for Early Childhood Educators where they delivered the Learning Language and Loving It training to settings in the intervention group.

The first evaluation was originally planned as a randomised controlled efficacy trial running from September 2019 to July 2020, to test for evidence of an effect of the intervention on child language and communication outcomes (Bury et al., 2022b). Communicate SLT delivered the

⁵ <https://www.hanen.org/Programs/For-Educators/Learning-Language-Loving-It.aspx>

LLLI programme to nursery staff in 147 state-maintained nursery settings who were supporting children aged 3–4 years old. The nurseries were located in West Yorkshire and the North-West of England. However, delivery was paused in March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In the academic year 2020/21, activity resumed with the remaining programme content delivered over an additional 30 weeks and the training moved from in-person to online delivery. The impact evaluation aspect was cancelled in March 2021, but the implementation and process evaluation (IPE) was completed. The IPE explored schools' experiences of the intervention, any enablers or barriers and perceived outcomes. Findings from the IPE were generally positive with nursery staff reporting greater confidence implementing strategies and awareness of children's different conversational styles, which enabled them to be more responsive to individual children's needs. They also felt that the training had made them more reflective of their practice and improved peer-to-peer feedback at their setting. Additionally, schools felt that children had benefited from interacting with Hanen LLLI-trained staff.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the Hanen Centre developed new materials so that the LLLI training could be delivered either virtually or flexibly in a hybrid. The EEF then funded a pilot study to evaluate whether a mixture of online and face-to-face training delivery was feasible and if it was suitable for both Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) and maintained settings (McKaskill et al., 2023). Findings from the pilot study were intended to inform adjustments to the LLLI programme prior to a new efficacy trial starting in November 2022. The pilot study ran from February 2022 to July 2022, and Communicate SLT were responsible for delivering a hybrid model of the LLLI programme to 17 state-maintained and PVI nursery settings in the Liverpool City Region. The proposed hybrid delivery model was to provide half of the training workshops through live online webinar and three-quarters of the video feedback sessions via video call. Overall, participants gave positive feedback about the mixed-mode delivery. Some barriers were identified around online delivery including participants reporting low confidence with technology, technical issues, and distractions external to the training. However, these barriers were overcome through preparation in advance of sessions and did not lead to settings dropping out of the pilot. The study also found that there were no key differences observed between how PVI and maintained settings engaged with the mixed-mode delivery.

Finally, the EEF funded a new randomised controlled efficacy trial running from September 2022 to July 2023 to test for evidence of an effect of the hybrid model of the LLLI intervention on child language and communication outcomes (Bury et al., 2022a). Communicate SLT have delivered the hybrid model of the LLLI programme with 150 state-maintained and PVI nursery settings across three DfE Regional School Commissioner regions: the North, East-Midlands and the Humber, and the West-Midlands. The delivery of the CECIL Preston pilot ran from April to July 2023, so during this time Communicate SLT were delivering both programmes concurrently.

In light of this recent experience, the Sutton Trust identified an opportunity to build on learning from the first CECIL study, by working with Communicate SLT to adapt their Communication Worker model to develop an approach to sustain learning from the LLLI programme, through a coaching-based programme of support.

Appendix B: Communication Worker Model

The Language Development Worker model which is explored in the CECIL Preston strand of the current project is adapted from the Communication Worker model which Communicate SLT currently deliver to Early Years settings in Blackpool.

In the original Communication Worker model, communication workers work with early years settings to support language and communication needs for all children at their setting, including children who have been referred for specialist language and communication support, through training, resources, and ongoing support. Communication workers are generally SLTAs with Level 3 qualifications, who are supervised and supported by SLTs. As part of their offer to early years settings, communication workers provide support with: screening children's Communication and Language skills using assessment tools such as the WellComm and Speech and Language UK Early Talk Boost trackers; understanding the Speech, Language and Communication (SLC) needs of the children in the setting more generally; understanding local pathways for speech, language and communication support and referrals; supporting individual children after a referral is made; using and implementing the Communication Trust's Early Years Commitment⁶ resources; and identifying a Communication Champion among the setting staff to access local training and networks for SLC; as well as providing training in Speech and Language UK's early years programmes and interventions, and other relevant language and communication training as needed.

⁶ The Communication Trust's Early Years Commitment is a set of resources provided by Speech and Language UK, developed in collaboration with Blackpool Better Start, and piloted in 10 early years settings and childminders within Blackpool. The resources guide settings, or staff teams, through actions that they can take to support communication development for children at their setting.

<https://speechandlanguage.org.uk/talking-point/for-professionals/the-communication-trust/more-resources/early-years-commitment/>