

Coaching Early Conversation Interaction and Language (CECIL) Evaluation

Implementation and Process Evaluation

Dawson, A., Huxley, C., & Garner, O.



THE LINDSELL FOUNDATION

3rd March 2022

Report 574

Institute for Employment Studies

IES is an independent, apolitical, international centre of research and consultancy in public employment policy and HR management. It works closely with employers in all sectors, government departments, agencies, professional bodies and associations. IES is a focus of knowledge and practical experience in employment and training policy, the operation of labour markets, and HR planning and development. IES is a not-for-profit organisation.

Acknowledgements

The authors are indebted to the staff at Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust Speech and Language Therapy team, Claire Duffy, Susan Guest, Eleanor Marlow, David McDonald, Bibiana Wigley and Jane Young; and the Children's Integrated Speech and Language Therapy Service for Hackney and the City, Louisa Abbey, Laura Boniface, Annabelle Burns, Rebecca Clegg, Jenny Marcall, Karen Humfress and Phoebe Reilly; for their time, enthusiasm and commitment to the project despite all the obstacles thrown at them by Covid-19. We would also like to thank all of the practitioners and managers who took part in the research during an extremely difficult year. Thank you also to Laura Barbour and Emma Legg at The Sutton Trust and Janet Grauberg for their support throughout the project and for comments on an early draft of this report. The authors would also like to thank the project's steering group for their insights: Doug Thomson (Chair of the steering group), Director of Development at Sutton Trust; Derek Munn, Director of Policy and Public Affairs, Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists; Janet Grauberg, Scale up consultant; Naomi Eisenstadt, Early years consultant; Catherine Hillis; Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, and Sarah Tillotson, Programme Manager, EEF. Many thanks to Professor Kathy Sylva, Dr Ariel Lindorff, Allen Joseph and Dr Katharina Ereky-Stevens for including our questions in the pre-intervention survey and for generally being a lovely team to collaborate with for this project. This project has also benefitted from the expertise of Georgie Akehurst and De-Jon Ebanks-Silvera at IES for carrying out observations and interviews for the project and Sara Butcher at IES for formatting the report. Finally, thank you to Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, The Sutton Trust and the Lindsell Foundation for funding this research, for supporting the changes to the planned evaluation and delivery throughout the pandemic.

Institute for Employment Studies
City Gate
185 Dyke Road
Brighton BN3 1TL
UK

Telephone: +44 (0)1273 763400
Email: askIES@employment-studies.co.uk
Website: www.employment-studies.co.uk

Copyright © 2022 Institute for Employment Studies

IES project code: 5715

Contents

1	Executive Summary	1
	Introduction	1
	Methodology	3
	Findings	4
2	Introduction	11
2.1	Background	11
2.2	Project Theory of Change	13
2.3	Interventions	16
2.4	Impacts of Covid-19 Pandemic	20
2.5	Study Research Questions	23
3	Theories of Change	24
3.1	Nottinghamshire CECIL Theory of Change	24
3.2	Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) Theory of Change	29
4	Methodology	34
4.1	Implementation and Process Evaluation Questions	35
4.2	Impacts of Covid-19 Pandemic	35
4.3	Observations	36
4.4	Case Studies and Interviews	37
4.5	Practitioner Surveys	40
4.6	Ethics	43
4.7	Data protection	44
5	Perceived Impacts	45
5.1	Practitioner behaviour and nursery environment	45
5.2	Language and communication skills among children	54
6	Implementation and feasibility	58
6.1	Incorporating learning into practice and sustainability	58
6.2	Barriers and enablers	67
7	Factors for scale-up	72
7.1	Nottinghamshire CECIL	72
7.2	Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language)	73
8	Discussion	76
8.1	Study Research Questions	76
8.2	Working with Early years settings in the PVI sector	85
8.3	Future research	86
9	References	88
10	Appendices	91

1 Executive Summary

Introduction

It is now well established that language development in the early years is critical for later life success (Stewart and Waldfogel, 2017; Law, Charlton and Asmussen, 2017) and that language social mobility gaps are created early and are more and more difficult to disrupt as we go through the life span (Hutchinson, et. al., 2019; EEF, 2018; Andrews, Robinson, Hutchinson, 2017; Fernald, Marchman, and Weisleder, 2013).

A review by the Sutton Trust of research on promising language interventions for the early years including looking at the 2017 Education Endowment Foundation review of early language development (Law et. al., 2017) and the Communication Trust's What works database¹ identified Hackney Speech and Language Therapy Team Launchpad for Language and Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust Speech and Language Therapy team 'Let's Interact' programmes as promising and so have been taken forward for evaluation for this project.

For the Coaching Early Conversation Interaction and Language (CECIL) project, each team built upon their existing programmes to incorporate further coaching elements and focused on supporting early years practitioners in Private, Voluntary, Independent (PVI) settings with the aim of improving staff practice and child outcomes around language and communication for two-year-olds. The Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) also included some work with parents, to help them support their children's language development. These projects were evaluated with IES leading on the implementation and process evaluation (IPE) and University of Oxford leading on the impact evaluation (please see Lindorff et al (2022)). This report covers the IPE section only.

Nottinghamshire Healthcare's Children's Centre Speech and Language Therapy Team: CECIL

The Nottinghamshire Healthcare's Children's Centre Speech and Language Therapy Team developed the 'Let's Interact' programme - an adaptation of '*Learning and Language and Loving It*'TM, *The Hanen Programme® for Early Childhood Educators/Teachers* (hereafter known as 'Let's Interact') – by adapting '*Learning Language and Loving It*'TM - *The Hanen Program for Early Childhood Educators/Teachers*, under licence agreement by The Hanen Early Language Program. The Speech and Language Therapy Team had previously delivered the 'Let's Interact' training programme to early years practitioners in early years settings including schools and PVI nurseries.

¹ <https://ican.org.uk/i-cans-talking-point/professionals/tct-resources/what-works-database/>

The content and format of the Let's Interact training that the team had been delivering previously included opportunities to observe high quality practice, to use and refine new skills in practice, to receive individualised feedback and time and support for self-reflection. For the current study, the Speech and Language Therapy Team added a coaching and mentoring element to Let's Interact to create an 'enhanced' version of the programme which aims to facilitate and embed longer term skills gains.

The enhanced Let's Interact training was expected to include: group training sessions (some with group video sessions), three individual coaching sessions with video and feedback to settings, two Keep In Touch (KIT) phone calls, language lead network meetings and project network sessions. Over the course of the project an initial information session for staff, text messaging and a pool of extra coaching sessions for practitioners needing extra support were also added. Let's Interact training materials and the 'Learning Language and Loving' It guidebook were also provided to each practitioner.

Twenty settings were randomised (using minimisation techniques) to take part across the early starter group (eleven settings who would receive the enhanced intervention in the 2020/21 school year) and late starter group (nine settings who would receive only the four sessions of training after the intervention ended and for which post test data was collected).

Children's Integrated Speech and Language Therapy Service for Hackney and the City: CECIL (Launchpad for Language)

The Children's Integrated Speech and Language Therapy Service for Hackney and the City adapted their Launchpad for Language programme in order to optimise it for supporting early years practitioners in PVI settings, as it was developed while working in maintained settings only.

As part of the programme, each PVI setting was allocated a link Speech and Language Therapist (SaLT) for half a day per week. This time would be spent in the PVI setting, liaising with staff, working directly with children and parents, as well as preparing resources and compiling written information and reports for the setting. Each term the link therapist and the setting lead would set priorities and make a plan about how best to use the allocated time. This would include staff training, parent training, whole cohort support and individual/ small group support for those who needed more individualised help. SaLTs would also provide ongoing support by email or phone if needed, and resources and activities for home. The therapists would demonstrate activities and offer coaching and support to enable the setting staff to carry out planned activities throughout the week (see TOC chapter for more detail on the intervention and what changed over time). Finally, the SaLTs would help support practitioners to carry out WellComm screening of children's language skills if they wanted (this could be for all children or selected children) and a language and communication environment audit. Over the course of the project this environmental audit developed into an accreditation programme that settings could go through.

The Speech and Language Therapists would work with the settings to progress through the three phases of the programme:

- Phase 1 – Mission Preparation, which includes: optional screening and assessment of children’s language and communication skills, an audit of the classroom environment, a staff workshop to introduce the approach, parent workshops, and optional further staff training sessions. Classroom activities also begin at this point usually with a whole class session activity.
- Phase 2 – All Systems Go, which includes activities such as: introducing abstract concept words and ideas, language walks, vocabulary sessions, adult-child interaction, and whole class work. Any staff training and parent workshop options continue as well.
- Phase 3 – Language Boosters, which includes small groups focusing on specific skills or needs. Whole class activities, staff training and parent workshop options continue as before. If selected, Wellcomm screening and classroom audit are repeated to measure and identify any changes or areas for ongoing development.

Twenty settings were randomised (using minimisation) to the early starter group (ten settings who would receive the intervention in the 2020/21 school year) and late starter group (ten settings who would receive a shorter version of the support through two visits to the settings in the 2021/22 school year and an additional training session as well as the WellComm screening if they wanted for the children).

Changes due to Covid-19

Both delivery teams experienced substantial changes to delivery due to Covid-19 including for Nottinghamshire CECIL taking the training online and delaying the coaching to a few months after the training had finished so that it could take place in-person. For Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language), there was also a move toward provision of sessions virtually where possible, recording videos of the SaLTs carrying out the language activities, and included running parent sessions online too.

Theories of change

An overarching Theory of Change was developed for the CECIL project which was updated over the course of the project as changes were made due to Covid-19 or refinements of the interventions. In addition, each delivery team had three Theory of Change workshops run by the IES team and including Sutton Trust and Janet Grauberg. These enabled detailed Theory of Change models to be created and refined in a feedback loop and original and final versions are included in this report so the journey that each project took can be seen.

Methodology

The IES IPE team worked closely with the intervention organisations in a ‘critical friend’ model throughout the period of March 2020–September 2021. Initially we supported them

to clarify their Theory of Change, supporting the development of their delivery model and demonstrating impact to roll out their work and leverage support for future scale up. The IPE then explored how the interventions were delivered, and identified moderating/contextual factors influencing potential impact and which may explain quantitative findings. It also sought to identify evidence of effectiveness and issues which need to be considered for a wider roll-out of the interventions. The IPE included 7 observations of online training and activities being modelled with children and/or parents, 10 case studies (including 27 interviews with practitioners and managers), 4 additional telephone interviews with individual staff at non-case study settings, and an early years practitioner survey focused on implementation at post-test only. We also included a few questions in an University of Oxford led impact survey of practitioners at pre- and post-test. Please note that overall sample numbers are relatively small as the study itself is quite small with 10 or less settings receiving each intervention, and training focuses mostly on practitioners working with two-year olds. However, we were able to interview staff at 14 of the 18 early starter settings across both interventions that were still in the study at the time the interviews took place. Although we heard a range of views on the programmes, it is possible that those who engaged positively with the programmes may have been more motivated to engage with surveys and interviews.

Findings

Our findings are grouped around the five Implementation and Process Evaluation research questions as follows:

1.1.1 What evidence is there of change in practitioner behaviour and/or perceived impacts on the nursery environment with regards to language and communication support?

Overall, the key findings from managers and practitioners suggest:

- Most practitioners reported increased skills, confidence and motivation to support children's language and communication development.
- Most practitioners reported increased knowledge and awareness of individual children's language, which allows them to identify gaps and tailor strategies to support their language and communication development.
- Practitioners also reported using strategies which enable interactions to be child led eg slowing down, balancing comments and questions, and OWLing.²
- Some practitioners on the Nottinghamshire CECIL programme had received similar training in the past which minimised the potential effect of the programme but helped reinforce good practice.

² A strategy where practitioners are encouraged to Observe, Wait and Listen in order to allow the child to lead the interaction.

- Changes to the environment were limited due to Covid-19 restrictions, but included sharing learning and resources with other parts of the setting, and parent engagement.

1.1.2 What, if any, are the perceived impacts on language and communication skills among children supported by practitioners who have received one of the interventions?

The key findings regarding perceived impacts on children's language and communication skills were:

- The context of the Covid-19 pandemic was felt to have negatively impacted language and communications skills for some children, but other children were at the expected level or had higher levels of language.
- Both programmes appeared to be universal interventions which practitioners felt supported the language of all children at their settings but were particularly beneficial for targeted approaches with children who were struggling or had speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), eg children with English as an Additional Language (EAL) or shy or reluctant children.
- Practitioners reported that improved language and communication skills also had benefits for personal, social and emotional development with increased turn-taking and verbal negotiation between children instead of just taking toys or objects from each other which could lead to conflict and fights. Practitioners also reported children displayed greater confidence talking to adults and improvements in attention.

1.1.3 Do settings find the interventions useful and are they able to incorporate them into their practice? Do they feel able to sustain this in the longer term?

The key findings regarding how useful the programme was and if settings were able to incorporate their learnings sustainably were:

- The strategies and activities learned by practitioners on the programmes were widely applicable, suitable for universal and targeted approaches.
- Support offered from the speech and language therapy teams, including coaching and responding to ad hoc queries regarding setting needs or individual children, facilitated practitioners to make the most of the programme and implement the strategies and activities.
- Practitioners generally felt supported by their nursery manager, although manager involvement with the programme was not consistent across settings.
- The strategies and activities were overwhelmingly useful and straightforward to implement into regular practice and timetables and so are possible to sustain longer term. Continuing this work in future could be supported by managers or senior staff at

settings but could be further enhanced by support from speech and language therapists.

- The level of support and structure of the programme was suitable, however some delays to the programme due to Covid-19 were disruptive.

Rather than just reading it on paper. To actually see it in practice is more helpful, because then when you do it when they're not there you have a guide to follow, like their expressions, what they're saying, how to use the puppet exactly.

Practitioner 1, Setting 6, Hackney

1.1.4 What are the barriers or enablers for nurseries to participating in the interventions?

The following summarises the main barriers and enablers for nurseries to participating in the programme:

Barriers

- **Staffing shortages** – this was extra challenging in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic as there were increased staff absences due to illness/ isolating and the need for bubbles meant staff could not be transferred between rooms or bubbles to cover for absent staff.
- **Time taken** – a number of staff, especially in the survey, highlighted not having enough time in the working day to take part in programme related activities. However, compared to similar studies, time taken was not a significantly large barrier.
- **Technical issues** – with accessing training, coaching or learning materials. In Nottinghamshire especially, the videos were not always the ideal setup in terms of quality and framing. There was a strong preference for face-to-face learning.
- **Lack of room capacity** – some staff reported that one-to-one coaching sessions took place in the nursery manager's office or in the lunch room as there was no spare room that could be used for coaching or training. This then impacted on other staff in the setting, as well as on quality of coaching if there were many interruptions.
- **Other small resource costs** – there were some small costs, but often the SaLT would do costly things for the settings such as printing resource materials.

Enablers

- **Manager support** – including assisting practitioners with videos and resolving tech issues, helping disseminate learning from the programme and allowing practitioners space and time for participating in the programme.
- **Support** – the SaLT was highly valued at each setting for their expertise in supporting children's language and communication skills and facilitating practitioners to benefit

from the programme, as well as being an approachable source of support with specific queries or needs at the setting.

- **Peer support** – other practitioners on the programme within each setting tended to help each other and some practitioners spoke of a setting focus on language and a communication/ pandemic catch-up which helped with sharing and implementing new approaches or ideas.

1.1.5 What factors may need to be considered in scaling up the interventions to deliver them in more nurseries?

While the context of the Covid-19 pandemic increased pressures around staffing, limited activities and resources, and limited interactions between different groups of children and groups of staff, it is still possible to identify factors that would be useful to consider for future delivery of scale-up of the programmes.

Nottinghamshire CECIL

Some factors to consider when scaling up the Nottinghamshire CECIL programme are:

- As the Nottinghamshire CECIL programme includes coaching sessions with individual practitioners focused around their bespoke needs in the context of their individual setting, any new members recruited to the delivery team as part of scale-up will need to be quite experienced and understand the Early years curriculum and Ofsted inspection framework, the needs of nurseries, Early years practitioners and the PVI sector, and the local context in terms of levels of need, and services and resources for signposting.
- With the current online delivery, if a practitioner missed a training session, they could often attend an alternate session on another day if there was one available. However, if future delivery becomes face-to-face, it may not be possible for practitioners to travel to another location for training, especially if delivery scales up to a wider geographical area. It might be useful to develop 'catch up' resources online for staff who cannot attend.
- Some of the Nottinghamshire CECIL programme coaching sessions took place at an alternate location, such as a local health centre, as there was not a suitable/available space at the nursery setting. If delivery expands to a wider geographical area, the delivery team will need to identify suitable locations across this area.
- As settings did not always have the technology or a stable internet connection to facilitate virtual delivery or video examples of practice, it may be necessary to allocate a budget for providing some/ all settings with technology, such as tablets, as either a loan or permanent resource.
- The Nottinghamshire CECIL programme included a handbook for practitioners to refer to. Printing and distributing these to participating settings would reduce costs for those settings. However, if delivery is scaled up to a larger number of settings, it may be necessary to allocate a budget for printing these.

- Practitioners at some settings created posters or PowerPoint presentations to share learning and remind themselves and other staff of key strategies. When scaling up delivery to a larger number of settings, a budget could be allocated for printing and distributing resources that could be shared or displayed at settings.
- Most practitioners reported being able to engage with the programme wholly within their working hours, but some reported doing reading or other activities in their personal time. It would be good to be mindful of this and to keep practitioner time needed as manageable as possible so that this is not off-putting to settings when scaling up the intervention.

Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language)

Some factors to consider when scaling up the Hackney CECIL programme are:

- If delivery of the Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) programme were scaled up to a larger geographical area, it may not be possible for staff to visit as many settings during the week as would be possible if settings were nearer because of increased travel times. Restrictions around the Covid-19 pandemic has meant that the team members were only able to visit one setting per day whereas previously they might have visited two. One solution was for a setting to be visited one day per fortnight instead of half a day each week. An expansion of the delivery area could result in having to deliver in this way for some or all settings.
- As the Hackney CECIL programme is individually tailored to the needs of a setting and its staff through the selection of modules and ad hoc advice provided by the CECIL SaLT, any new members recruited to the delivery team as part of scale-up will need to be quite experienced and understand the needs of nurseries and Early years practitioners, as well as ideally the PVI sector. As the CECIL team grows larger, this may increase the time needed by the team lead for management and supervision to ensure consistency in approaches and what is being delivered across the settings.
- During the pandemic, the team created videos and other resources to share learning remotely with settings. If delivery of the Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) programme is scaled up to a larger area, it may not be practical for the team to make ad hoc visits to settings to deliver resources and provide advice. When scaling up to a larger number of settings, budget could be allocated for printing and distributing resource packs or even a handbook or manual.
- A few settings reported that their link SaLT had printed out materials or prepared resources for them, eg laminated notices. It would be good if this could be provided consistently for all participating settings to help reduce their costs, ie for each Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) module, specific materials would be provided to all settings with the delivery of this module. A budget could be allocated for this when scaling up to a larger number of settings.

- For delivery of training options such as VERVE³, it may be practical to use a venue local to settings if they have limited space or availability. When scaling up to a larger number of settings, economies of scale could be found in inviting multiple settings to a training session. This would also help facilitate a local community of practice as practitioners will be able to meet and share their ideas and experiences.
- Several practitioners reported spending time outside of their work hours preparing sessions, doing paperwork, watching videos or doing reading. It would be good to be mindful of this and to keep practitioner time needed as manageable as possible so that this is not off-putting to settings when scaling up the intervention. Some practitioners highlighted that printing and providing resources was very helpful in this regard.

1.1.6 Working with Early years settings in the PVI sector

Several of the barriers and enablers identified during the evaluation were not just specific to the Nottinghamshire CECIL and Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) programmes, but would be relevant to any programme or organisation planning to deliver training to Early years practitioners in PVI settings.

Key considerations for working with the PVI sector were:

- **Consideration 1:** Early years settings operate in the context of strict staff:child ratios so staff availability needs to be carefully planned by setting managers. Liaising with settings to agree timings for visits or coaching sessions to fit around setting timetables and avoid disruption. If possible, budget for staff cover should be provided.
- **Consideration 2:** Printing or otherwise preparing/ providing materials and resources helps to reduce costs for PVI settings and also to facilitate dissemination of learning at settings.
- **Consideration 3:** In this study and more generally, training and/or coaching programmes have adapted some or all of their delivery from in-person to online as a response to restrictions arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. However, PVI settings may not have the technology necessary to engage with online learning, eg laptops, tablets, or a stable internet connection. For example, there may be just one computer or laptop used for administration. One possible approach could be to provide technology if needed.
- **Consideration 4:** PVI practitioners may not be very familiar with technology or have limited IT skills as they typically spend most of their time engaging with children and are rarely sat at a computer. Further to this, practitioners may not have a work email address, so email correspondence may need to be sent to a shared work email or the practitioners' personal email address. When experiencing issues with technology or IT,

³ VERVE Child Interaction is a staff training package where practitioners meet with the SaLT one-on-one on a recurring basis and use videos to observe and reflect on the practitioner's behaviour with a specific child.

staff typically described seeking help from colleagues or sometimes from the SaLT teams and did not seem to have access to IT support.

- **Consideration 5:** PVI settings may not have an extra room available for training or coaching sessions, and some PVI settings in the study reported that the nursery manager's office was also used as a staff room or training room. To reduce pressures on room capacity at settings, training/ coaching sessions with individual settings could be delivered at a venue that is local or easily accessible to the setting.

2 Introduction

This chapter will outline the original impetus for exploring language development programmes for Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) nursery staff supported by speech and language therapists, the theory of change for the coaching early conversations in language (CECIL) project as a whole, brief descriptions of the two interventions – Nottinghamshire CECIL and Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for language) – impacts of Covid-19 on the project's delivery and finally outlines the project's research questions.

2.1 Background

It is now well established that language development in the early years is critical for later life success (Stewart and Waldfogel, 2017; Law, Charlton and Asmussen, 2017) and that language social mobility gaps are created early and are increasingly difficult to disrupt as we go through the life span (Hutchinson, et. al., 2019; EEF, 2018; Andrews, Robinson and Hutchinson, 2017; Fernald, Marchman and Weisleder, 2013).

Private, Voluntary and Independent nurseries are less researched than the maintained sector (school-based nurseries or maintained nursery schools) and are less well-resourced, tend to have less qualified staff and also have less continuing professional development (CPD), (Bonetti, 2019; Pascal, Bertram and Cole-Albäck, 2020). Barriers to CPD include lack of budget to pay for the courses and paying for cover to release staff. Enablers included PVIs working directly with learning providers and practitioners having supportive managers (Bury et al, 2020). However, conversely PVIs have approximately 70 per cent of 2–4-year-olds in their care and the percentage of children who go on to be eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) appears to be increasing in the sector. Sutton Trust research (Pascal et al, 2021) showed that there were 10 per cent of FSM children attending private day nurseries in 2010 which had increased to 24 per cent in 2017. Therefore, it is critical that early years practitioners and managers within these settings are given the correct support to provide an environment where children's language can flourish.

The 2017 Education Endowment Foundation review of early language development (Law et. al., 2017) made recommendations on the areas where future research could focus its efforts to help improve language from birth to five years of age. The report presents the London Borough of Hackney as a case study example where, despite being one of the most deprived local authorities in the country, it was bucking the trend of a negative correlation between deprivation and results in the early learning goals, and was performing higher than the national average across the early learning goals. The report describes the Launchpad for Language programme as providing universal, targeted and specialist support for the environment through its evidence-based approaches and

identifying children's language and communication needs through the WellComm⁴ speech and language toolkit. Launchpad for Language is central to the Hackney Speech and Language Therapy team offer but had only been offered in maintained settings before this project. Law's EEF report also identified the Hanen training, 'Learning, Language and Loving It'™, as a promising intervention from its review of previous research and this is currently undergoing an EEF evaluation (that has been disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic). However, the Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust Speech and Language Therapy team had developed a shorter adapted version of the programme called 'Let's Interact - an adaptation of *'Learning and Language and Loving It'™, The Hanen Programme® for Early Childhood Educators/Teachers'* which had also had positive initial results and had been submitted to the Communication Trust's What works database⁵ which contains evidenced interventions to support children's language development and which is endorsed by the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists. All interventions are vetted by the What Works moderating group which included Professor James Law (the first author of the EEF review) and other prominent academics and professionals. A 2019 report by Ebbels and colleagues called for more evidence for Speech and language therapy supported programmes in health and education for children.

The current government's 2020/21 pandemic catch-up approach for the early years has focused entirely on language so far, with the rollout of the Nuffield Early Language Intervention⁶ and the Early Years Professional Development Programme which is focused on language and supported by Education Development Trust and Elklan⁷. Research for the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) (Bowyer-Crane et al, 2021) showed that for children starting school in autumn 2020, teachers felt that language development has been significantly affected by the disruption to children's education caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and a review of impacts of Covid-19 in the early years found 13 studies which showed language and communication had been negatively impacted by the pandemic and that interventions in early years settings could help (Fox et al, 2021). The proposed catch-up interventions will go some way to supporting those affected by time spent out of settings in the 2019/20 and 2020/21 years. However, there is also evidence that short term professional development programmes can face problems with sustainability and that embedding change in the setting is vital (Collins and Smith, 2021) and so both projects examined here are crucially also exploring what long term support and sustainability could and should look like⁸, including ways to mitigate barriers to improvement.

⁴ <https://www.gl-assessment.co.uk/assessments/products/wellcomm/>

⁵ <https://ican.org.uk/i-cans-talking-point/professionals/tct-resources/what-works-database/>

⁶ <https://www.teachneli.org/>

⁷ <https://www.earlyyearsdpdp.com/>

⁸ Sustainability is explored within theory of change and critical friend discussions as part of this project, but only the first year of delivery was explored in the implementation and process evaluation described in this report as it has been written at the start of the second year of delivery. A future report will explore how the second year of delivery and sustainability will work, which will be published in late 2022.

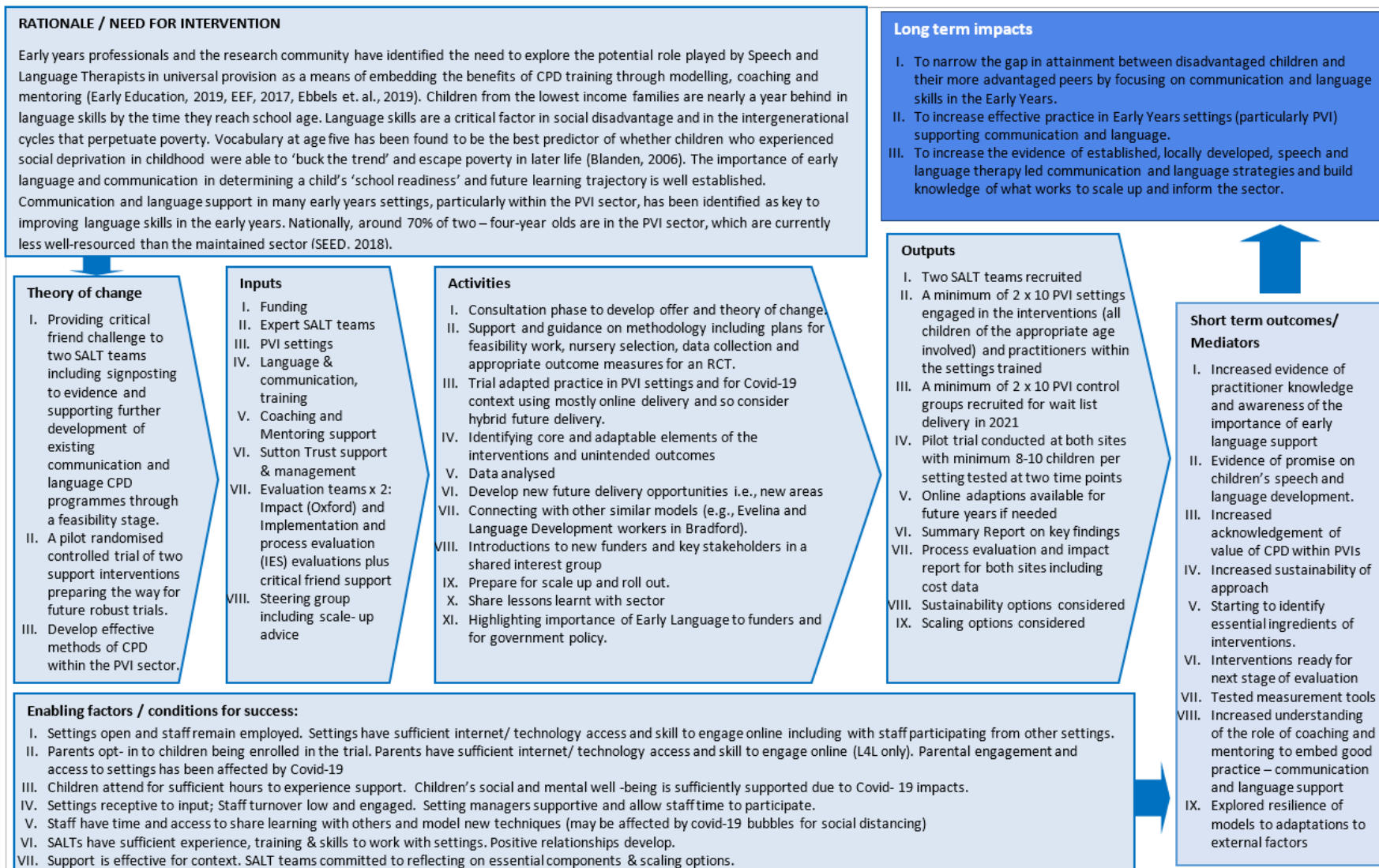
2.2 Project Theory of Change

The Sutton Trust, IES team and Janet Grauberg worked together to develop the overarching Theory of Change model for the CECIL project containing both the Nottinghamshire CECIL and Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) interventions which focused on supporting Early years Practitioners working with two-year-olds in PVI settings with the aim of improving staff practice and child outcomes around language and communication. This was first developed in June–July 2020 in a Theory of Change workshop (see Appendix A for the original model) and has been revisited in October 2020 and August–October 2021 to create the final version for this report shown in Figure 1.

The changes over the course of the project are summarised as follows:

- Addition of further literature and detail to strengthen the **‘Rationale’** section.
- Clarification of the role of the critical friend team in the **‘Theory of change’** section, which is to challenge and support, signpost to evidence and to work alongside the development of the programmes through the feasibility stage.
- Clarification of the unique roles of IES (implementation and process evaluation) and the University of Oxford (impact) in the evaluation in the **‘Inputs’** section.
- There were fairly substantial changes to the **‘Activities’** section as the support changed over the course of the year and in particular due to Covid-19 (which included looking at the adaptations the delivery teams made to their programmes and discussing longer term hybrid possibilities for delivery). This updated model also added the consultation phase and Theory of Change support which was crucial in questioning the different aspects of the models and helping move towards creating a comprehensive description of how each programme is delivered, or ‘manualising’ the programmes so they can be replicated in the future.
- The evaluation teams also provided support on selecting settings to take part, how to conduct the adapted feasibility interviews, analyse the data and how to write it up as well as their own internal evaluation work which were all also added to the **‘Activities’**.
- The Sutton Trust have made important links with other similar projects, funders and the wider sector which will be continued in the future and which was added to the **‘Activities’**.
- The main changes to the **‘Outputs’** section are the additions of considerations for sustainability and scalability which became more important as the project continued and are covered in the report under research question 5 and our considerations for the PVI sector.
- The **‘Short term outcomes/ mediators’** were also updated over the course of the project, and we drew out the increased practitioner knowledge and the awareness of the importance of early language support, evidence of promise on child’s language development and acknowledgement of the importance of CPD in PVIs as key additions. The resilience to external factors was also a vital addition given the context of Covid-19.

- The addition of adequate technology and internet connection was a crucial addition to the **'Enabling factors/ conditions for success'** that no one had predicted at the start of the project prior to Covid-19. This was often quite limited at PVI settings and was a large barrier for some of the activities given the move to video-conferencing for training, coaching and support for both projects. Parent access to resources and utilisation of the settings also changed over the year due to Covid-19 and was also added here.
- Children having sufficient support for their social and mental well-being and development was key to ensuring they were well positioned to receive language and communication support, and this came through from critical friend support and ongoing research in the sector and has been added to the **'Enabling factors/ conditions for success'**.
- The importance of the manager role and releasing staff for the time needed was also an important enabler that came up over the course of our critical friend work with the delivery teams and came through strongly in the interviews with nursery staff too, and this has also been added to the **'Enabling factors/ conditions for success'**.
- Finally, the **'Long term impacts'** section needed no refinements as these were clearly defined at the start of the project and did not change over the course of the 18 months.

Figure 1 Overarching Theory of change for the CECIL project finalised October 2021

2.3 Interventions

The Sutton Trust identified two Speech and Language Therapy Teams who have been working with practitioners in early years setting to support knowledge and practice around language and communication. The Children's Integrated Speech and Language Therapy Service for Hackney, and the City and Nottinghamshire Healthcare's Children's Centre Speech and Language Therapy Team are considered leaders in this area because of the training programmes they have developed to support early years practitioners (see discussion in Background above).

For the CECIL project, each team built upon their existing programmes to incorporate further coaching elements and focused on supporting early years practitioners working with two-year-olds in PVI settings with the aim of improving staff practice and child outcomes around language and communication.

Nottinghamshire Healthcare's Children's Centre Speech and Language Therapy Team: CECIL

The Nottinghamshire Healthcare's Children's Centre Speech and Language Therapy Team developed the 'Let's Interact' programme by adapting '*Learning Language and Loving It*'™ - the Hanen Program® for Early Childhood Educators/Teachers', under licence agreement by The Hanen Early Language Program. The Speech and Language Therapy Team had previously delivered the 'Let's Interact' training programme to early years practitioners in Early years settings including schools and PVI nurseries. Randomised controlled trials have demonstrated impact on children's outcomes from the '*Learning Language and Loving It*'™ programme (Piasta and colleagues, 2012; Girolametto, Weitzman and Greenberg, 2003; Cabell et al., 2011) and a preliminary study of Let's Interact (an adaptation of '*Learning Language and Loving It*'™) showed training was associated with increased use of some effective interaction strategies (McDonald and colleagues, 2015a, McDonald and colleagues, 2015b).

The content and format of the Let's Interact training that the team had been delivering previously included opportunities to observe high quality practice, to use and refine new skills and strategies in practice, to receive individualised feedback and time and support for self-reflection. For examples of some of the strategies used, see section 5.1. For the current study, the Speech and Language Therapy Team added a coaching and mentoring element to Let's Interact to create an 'enhanced' version of the programme which aims to facilitate and embed longer term skills gains. This coaching element developed over the course of the project and additional materials were produced such as the coaching protocol.

The enhanced Let's Interact training was expected to include: group training sessions (some with group video feedback sessions), three individual coaching sessions with video feedback and feedback to settings, two Keep In Touch (KIT) phone calls, language lead network meetings and project network sessions. Over the course of the project an initial information session for staff, text messaging and a pool of extra coaching sessions for

practitioners needing extra support were also added (see TOC chapter for more detail on the model and changes over time). Let's Interact training materials and the *'Learning Language and Loving it'*TM guidebook were also provided to each practitioner.

Recruitment and feasibility

Twenty settings were recruited by the Nottinghamshire team using targeted emails to settings. Inclusion criteria were settings with at least eight to ten children who were two years old and who were in areas of high deprivation (categorised by the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) rank and decile, IDACI rank, decile and score and number of pupils on pupil premium). Settings with less exposure to Let's Interact were prioritised and managers asked to select practitioners that had not already had Let's Interact training. These settings were randomly assigned by the University of Oxford team equally to the early starter group (eleven settings who would receive the intervention in the 2020/21 school year) and late starter group (nine settings who would receive only the four sessions of training after post-tests data had been collected). Over the course of the year three settings dropped out from the early starter group, two before delivery had begun (and so were not included in the evaluation at all) and one in March 2021 as they had missed two of the training sessions.

A feasibility stage was planned to trial the delivery of the training, the coaching and the additional support with ten settings and twenty practitioners from May to October 2020 (see section 2.4 for changes to the plan).

Children's Integrated Speech and Language Therapy Service for Hackney and the City: CECIL - Launchpad for Language

The Children's Integrated Speech and Language Therapy Service for Hackney and the City adapted their Launchpad for Language programme in order to optimise it for supporting early years practitioners in PVI settings, as it was developed while working in maintained settings only.

As part of the programme, each PVI setting was allocated a link Speech and Language Therapist for half a day per week. This time would be spent in the PVI setting, liaising with staff, working directly with children and parents, as well as preparing resources and compiling written information and reports for the setting. The plan was that each term the link therapist and the setting lead would set priorities and make a plan about how best to use the allocated time (see Theory of Change chapter for more detail on the intervention and what changed over time). This would include staff training, parent training, whole cohort support and individual/ small group support for those who needed more individualised help. SaLTs would also provide ongoing support by email or phone, if needed, and resources and activities for home. The therapists would demonstrate activities and offer coaching and support to enable the setting staff to carry out planned activities throughout the week. For examples of the activities please see section 5.1. Finally, the SaLTs would help support practitioners to carry out WellComm screenings of children's language skills if they wanted at the start and end of the year (this could be for all children or selected children) and a language and communication environment audit.

Over the course of the project this environmental audit developed into an accreditation programme (see below for further detail).

The Speech and Language Therapists would work with the settings to progress through the three phases of the programme:

- Phase 1 – Mission Preparation, which includes: optional screening and assessment of children's language and communication skills, an audit of the classroom environment, a staff workshop to introduce the approach, parent workshops, and optional further staff training sessions. Classroom activities also begin at this point usually with a whole class session activity.
- Phase 2 – All Systems Go, which includes activities such as: introducing abstract concept words and ideas, language walks, vocabulary sessions, adult-child interaction, and whole class work. Any staff training and parent workshop options continue as well.
- Phase 3– Language Boosters, which includes small groups focusing on specific skills or needs. Whole class activities, staff training and parent workshop options continue as before. If selected, Wellcomm screening and classroom audit are repeated to measure and identify any changes or areas for ongoing development.

Settings were also invited to attend two communication champions network meetings which were offered as half-hour virtual meetings this year due to Covid-19. This was a new offer for the team and they asked the settings before launching whether they would like to attend additional sessions, when to run the sessions and what topics they would like to see covered. The topics chosen were vocabulary building in the outdoors and typical language development which also contained information about when to refer children with additional needs. One setting attended the first session (with another trying but having technical issues) and no settings attended the second session.

During the course of the programme, an accreditation system for settings was also set up by the service. This used the Communication Environment Pyramid (see Figure 2) which contains 15 statements (5 at each of 3 levels) and settings would self-determine which level they felt was best matched to them and provide written evidence on this using the accreditation self-assessment form for the appropriate level they are hoping to achieve. The SaLT would then follow up with a visit to undertake an environment review to assess whether they agreed with this rating and settings would be given a rating at one of the three phases shown in Figure 2. Eight of the settings did the ratings at the start and end of the project and three asked to be accredited – each of them received the highest rating of 'Blast off'.

Figure 2 – Communication Environment Pyramid

Wellcomm screenings were undertaken at the settings that had selected this option (sometimes only a subsample of children was included depending on the setting preference). Seven settings in the early starter group and four in the late starter group opted-in to the screenings.

Recruitment and feasibility

Twenty-two settings were recruited by the Hackney team using targeted emails to settings identified by Early years consultants within the Hackney service and also by putting adverts into a newsletter that went out to early years settings within the borough. Inclusion criteria was largely the same as for the Nottinghamshire CECIL project and included targeting settings with at least eight to ten two-year-olds in areas of high deprivation (by focusing on numbers eligible for the early years pupil premium). The Hackney team also

decided to target two-thirds of the sample to be nurseries and one third to be playgroups (which was almost achieved as the sample was 15 nurseries and 5 playgroups). Two of these recruited settings dropped out of the evaluation before randomisation as they had not gathered the consent paperwork needed⁹. The settings were randomly assigned by the University of Oxford team equally to the early starter group (those who received the intervention in the 2020/21 school year) and late starter group (those who would receive a shorter version of the support through visits to the settings in the 2021/22 school year and an additional training session as well as the WellComm screening if they wanted for the children). None of the settings dropped out during the course of the evaluation.

A feasibility stage was planned to trial the support with ten settings from May to October 2020 (changes to the plan are described in the next section).

2.4 Impacts of Covid-19 Pandemic

The timeline, delivery and evaluation of the CECIL project has overlapped with substantial changes in the nursery sector due to the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent disruption to nurseries including widespread nursery closures, furlough and increased staff illness and stretched staff ratios, which have affected both the feasibility stage in April–July 2020 and the main delivery period in October 2020–July 2021. Education Policy Institute research (Cottell et al., 2021) found that 38 per cent of early years staff experienced furlough (which could be part-time or full-time) between November 2020 and February 2021 (which was part of the key delivery period of both interventions) and 72 per cent of early years settings had to close fully or partially over this same time period. These figures were substantially lower in February and May 2021 with 23 per cent of early years staff on part-time or full-time furlough and 25 per cent of settings closing fully or partially over the same time period, but still at unprecedented levels (Bonetti, Ziolkowski and Broadberry, 2021). Therefore, this context must be considered when reviewing the findings of this evaluation project.

This section outlines the changes to each intervention both in respect to delivery and consequently the timeline. It is also important to note that children's attendance at settings when they were open was lower than normal so the opportunities for practitioners to put new learning into practice while working with children, ie the dosage of the intervention, were therefore likely to be reduced.

Nottinghamshire CECIL

As it was no longer possible to pilot the training or coaching with settings, the feasibility work was changed to be interviews with six managers and six practitioners which were written up into two separate reports (the interviews were piloted with two additional practitioners). The practitioners were chosen as they had attended Let's Interact within the last 12 months so had first-hand experience of how the training had worked. The

⁹ However, they were still randomised to be in the early or late starter group and have received the programme as per the other settings but have not been included in the evaluation.

managers were chosen as they had practitioners in their settings that had attended Let's Interact within the last 12 months. The SaLT team asked managers about timing of coaching, logistics of delivery (including Covid-19 constraints), SaLT contact with the managers, information sharing within the setting and ongoing learning and development with the managers. With the practitioners, they also discussed delivery of the coaching and then also explored implementing the strategies, input from managers and feeding back to their team and sharing messages with parents. The SaLT team constructed action points on their reflections from these interviews with updates to the planned intervention. These included adding virtual information sessions for the practitioners before the intervention started so that they knew what to expect, and having one 'link therapist' for each practitioner so that they can build a relationship with them. From this work they created a coaching protocol. There was also a risk register created and a literature review on coaching to help inform the coaching protocol and future sessions.

In respect to the main delivery, all of the training had to move online using video-conferencing (using Microsoft Teams) in order to adapt to restrictions arising from the Covid-19 pandemic, where staff formed 'bubbles' with specific year groups or rooms and were unable to attend group training with other practitioners. The Nottinghamshire CECIL team reported that despite these barriers, practitioners had an attendance rate of 91 per cent which is encouraging. The training was offered on two days a week so if people missed one session they could attend the alternative session that week which four practitioners did over the course of the training. Technical difficulties meant group coaching could not happen as intended: the group coaching element of the training sessions switched to using HANEN example videos instead of videos of practitioners' own practice because of difficulties around sharing videos through the video-conferencing software. There were also large delays in providing the individual coaching. This was initially scheduled to take place alongside training sessions but eventually took place after the training sessions had finished and face to face contact was possible again. Some individual coaching was attempted online initially, but this approach was abandoned due to technical difficulties, mostly around sharing videos of practice for feedback, that could not be overcome despite best efforts from the SaLT team including looking into purchasing tablets for each of the settings and providing enhanced support with the technical side of the set up. Individual coaching started again after lockdowns had eased and practitioners were happy to meet either within the setting or another local place that was convenient to both parties. The community feel was also affected by these changes as the online format was not conducive to having small informal chats with other practitioners and/or the SaLTs during breaks, and starting an online community was investigated but not pursued due to obstacles in data sharing. Weekly texts did not really happen as planned due to some of this disruption but were used sporadically. While the Nottinghamshire CECIL team felt that online delivery was adequate and necessary in the circumstances, they expressed a strong preference for in-person delivery of both the training and the coaching for the reasons outlined above.

Overall, three settings withdrew from the evaluation during the main delivery period. Two settings withdrew after randomisation because of staffing difficulties related to Covid-19. A third setting also withdrew after randomisation as they had missed two of the training sessions, but it was unclear whether this was due to Covid-19.

Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language)

As it was not possible to pilot the Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) programme through working in settings, feasibility work was changed to interviews with six settings by three of the SaLTs which were written up into a short report. As the recruitment for the feasibility work was delayed due to Covid-19, it took place alongside recruitment for the evaluation research and therefore a pragmatic approach was taken and the first six settings that agreed to participate were used in the feasibility work. All of these settings went on to be randomised (three to the early starter group and three to the late starter group). The interviews covered suitability of settings, their priorities and support they wanted, challenges, frequency of interventions, parental involvement, questions about communication champions, staff carryover and physical environment. The feasibility work allowed the SaLT team to consider the impact of Covid-19 on the settings and what infection control measures they were implementing as well as what parent and staff sessions were still running. This meant that the team were fully aware of the barriers to undertaking the research in the 2020/21 year and could be more prepared.

One of the changes due to Covid-19 was a restriction implemented by their NHS Trust with SaLTs not being allowed to visit two settings on the same day – this resulted in timetable changes including some settings receiving one day a fortnight rather than the usual one half-day a week.

The mode of delivery changed several times over the course of the year. Initially, three settings had virtual delivery and eight had in-person visits from October–December 2020. In January–March 2021 with new restrictions on external visitors in settings due to a further national lockdown, all settings received support virtually. From after the February 2021 half-term until the end of the summer term, once things had become more flexible with external visitors to settings, in-person delivery started again in eight settings and two more returned to in-person delivery in May–July 2021 for the final term as settings were comfortable with this arrangement.

Virtual delivery included video or phone calls as well as additional support by email including sending resources. During January–March 2021 when all settings were virtual, the SaLT team also put on two virtual sessions each week that were open for parents and children to join from home. This was covering ‘Sing and sign’ and ‘Alan the Alien’ sessions which were about ten minutes each (these activities are described in Section 6.1.2). The teams also produced videos for staff and parents to watch at home which included Alan the Alien, Concept Cat and Sign of the week. These videos proved very popular.

The SaLTs had to wear PPE when visiting settings which did impact on quality of interactions with the children in particular, although this did improve over time. SaLTs also could not stay in the settings as long as normal for administrative purposes and therefore were not around for informal conversations and questions as they would normally have been.

They continued delivery into the summer for the settings that were happy to do this and open over the school summer holiday, and also began late starter delivery from August 2021 after post-test data had been collected if they were open and happy.

2.5 Study Research Questions

In order to understand and evaluate the interventions described above, the intended outcomes of the work can be reframed as a set of main, overarching research questions guiding both the Implementation and Process Evaluation (IPE) and the Impact Evaluation:

- What evidence is there that Speech and Language Therapist (SaLT)-led professional development, which includes a coaching aspect, supports development of effective practice supporting communication and language among practitioners in Private, Voluntary and Independent nurseries?
- What evidence is there that the Speech and Language Therapist (SaLT)-led professional development, which includes a coaching aspect, improves child communication and language development outcomes for two-year olds in disadvantaged communities?
- What factors need to be considered when scaling-up Speech and Language Therapist (SaLT)-led professional development, which includes a coaching aspect, to be delivered in a wider range of settings?

The implementation and process evaluation explored an additional specific set of (IPE) questions to inform the above research questions by exploring perceived impacts as reported by practitioners and managers at participating settings. A separate impact evaluation undertaken by the University of Oxford will also inform these overarching questions about the interventions (please see Lindorff et al, 2022).

3 Theories of Change

Both delivery teams had a series of three Intervention Delivery and Evaluation Analysis (IDEA) workshops (Humphreys et al., 2016) in a development package to help construct and test Theory of Change (TOC) models for the interventions¹⁰. All of these meetings were originally going to be conducted face-to-face but had to be moved to video-conferencing instead due to Covid-19. Between the workshops, there was also discussion about the TOC models at the regular critical friend meetings for the team which happened about every 4-6 weeks as and when changes to the models came up or were emerging as possibilities. The TOC models were developed by the delivery teams following the first workshops and went through various iterations of the models with input from IES and the Sutton Trust to further develop the models over the course of the project.

3.1 Nottinghamshire CECIL Theory of Change

The first IDEA workshop for the Nottinghamshire CECIL team was in April 2020 when the implications of Covid-19 were just beginning to emerge and therefore there was still quite a lot of uncertainty about how the model would be delivered in the 2020/21 academic year. The second workshop was in March 2021 almost a year later when the full picture of how delivery of the training and coaching had gone was visible, and so extra detail could be added. The final workshop was in August 2021 after the delivery had almost finished for the early starter group and therefore the team could reflect on the whole process and what needed further refinement.

The main changes to the TOC model over the course of the 16 months are as follows:

- The **‘Rationale’** section has been significantly enhanced to include previous research in the area outlining the clear reasoning behind the idea of adding the coaching to the SaLT delivered group training intervention.
- In the **‘Theory of Change’** section, detail has been added about the specific changes to the interactions with children that were expected, such as the participation in interactions and turn taking, and detail has been added about the additional value of the coaching.
- The **‘Inputs’** section has been transformed and details added to each dimension of the inputs including the importance of the background of the SaLT team doing the

¹⁰ In this context, a Theory of Change (ToC) model sets out the aims and objectives of an intervention and identifies the mechanisms and resources used in the intervention to achieve this. 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/>

training. This was seen as a crucial element for robust delivery, alongside the regular support they were given by the managers within their team. The materials provided to practitioners were also substantially developed over the course of the project to include the production of the coaching protocol for the SaLTs, which is one of the key distinctions from the previous delivery in Nottinghamshire. The coaching protocol was used by SaLTs to evaluate if the strategies taught in the training were being implemented effectively by the practitioners in their videos of practice and is a reactive and bespoke example of the SaLTs supporting the practitioners. Linked to the coaching protocol was a system to evaluate which practitioners needed the extra pool of coaching and when they were at a point that was 'good enough' and coaching could be stopped. The IES team worked alongside the Nottinghamshire CECIL team to further develop this model which can now be used from the start of future delivery (rather than introduced along the way as it was for this pilot project) and explained to practitioners. The delivery team also created a coaching reflection tool for the practitioners to complete for each coaching session. These changes are seen by the Nottinghamshire team as crucial to the support that practitioners receive as part of Nottinghamshire CECIL.

- The main parts of the '**Activities**' section remained the same in both models (aside from the addition of the 'pool of extra coaching' covered already above) but additional detail on how the sessions worked and what they included was added. However, the delivery team decided to introduce text messages to the additional support given, as the in-person interaction was not possible. The original idea behind this was to provide a way for the groups of practitioners to have a community of practice where they could share experiences, but due to restrictions from the NHS trust on using the Whatsapp app, this ended up being direct text messages which were more like reminders of strategies or events coming up and were not considered by practitioners to be as effective as the original purpose might have been. The team also added to the TOC model that they collected their own feedback on training and coaching from practitioners. They had been doing this prior to this project, but this was further developed in collaboration with IES.
- An important addition to the '**Outputs**' section of the model was the inclusion of practitioners sharing the learning with colleagues, the wider setting and managers, and embedding the learning. The team worked on developing what this could look like over the course of the year. This emerged as an important issue as there is a tension between the team not wanting to promote 'cascading' which could dilute the impact of the training but wanting to share best practice. This element still needs further development so that this can be done consistently across settings (See the considerations in the Discussion chapter).
- '**Short term outcomes and mediators**' sections have been further enhanced with specific detail, for example, that children take part in multi-turn conversations more often and engage in sustained shared thinking with adults. This was instead of the more general outcomes that were listed in the original model around accelerated language developmental progress. Some of these outcomes were also moved from the long term impacts to short term, as when discussed the delivery team felt that they were achievable in the timeline of the project. The tightening of the outcomes makes

them easier to measure in future evaluations and helps to focus the delivery team on the changes they want to make. Outcomes around support plans for individual children, referrals for children to SaLTs and environmental adjustments are all important additions that developed over the course of the project.

- The '**enabling factors/ conditions for success**' were very brief and now include a full consideration of factors that could influence the efficacy of the intervention given the experience of the project delivery this year, including: practitioners need for self-reflection, trainers' skills in a variety of different areas in addition to early language development such as problem solving, reflection and flexibility, and building a strong relationship between the practitioners and SaLTs.
- Finally, the '**long term impacts**' section are more ambitious and discuss the improvement of the setting in comparison to past performance as well as ranking of the setting in comparison to other local settings.

Figure 3 Nottinghamshire CECIL original TOC after the first IDEA workshop April 2020

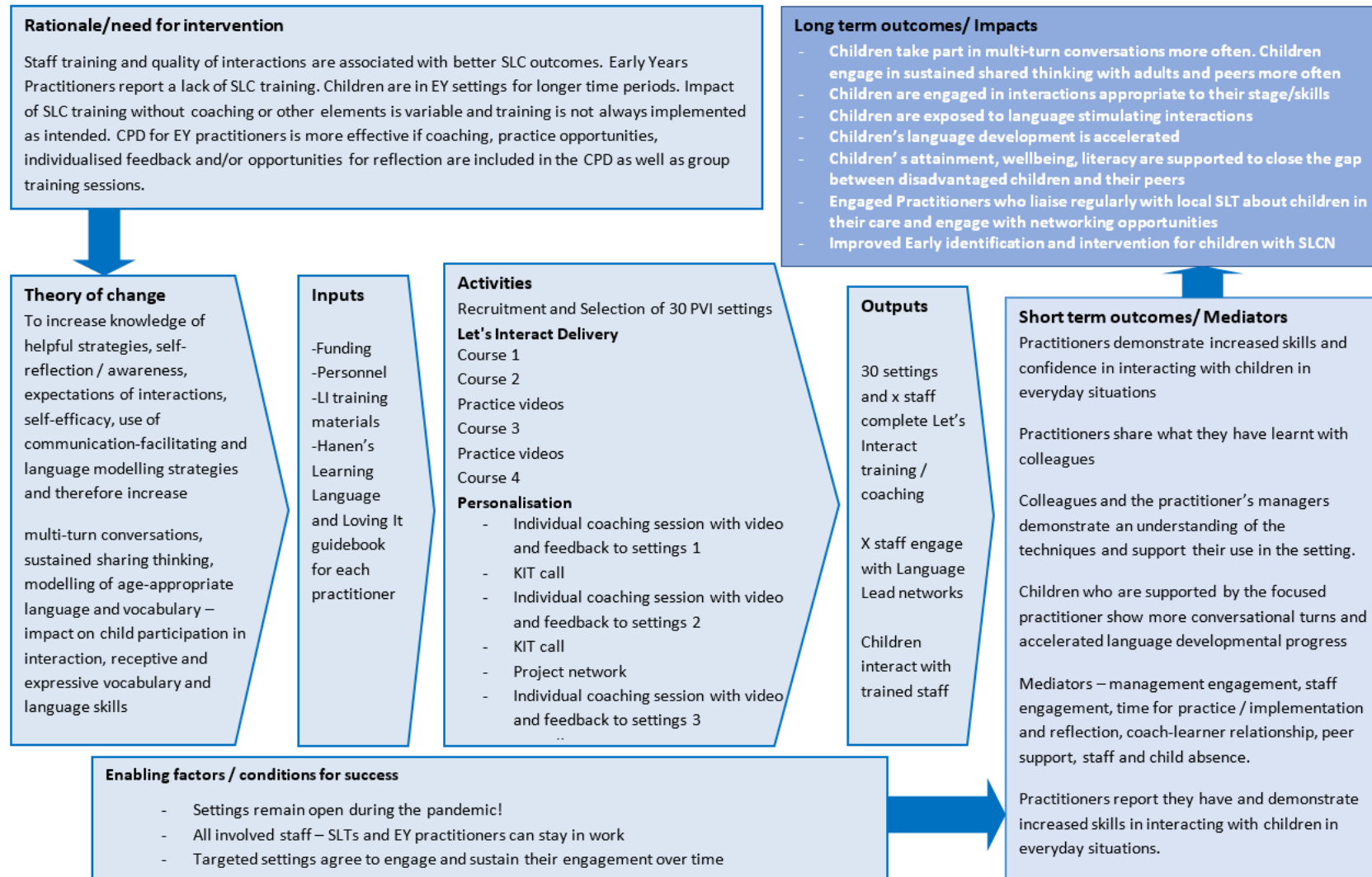


Figure 4 Final Nottinghamshire CECIL TOC after the last IDEA workshop August 2021



3.2 Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) Theory of Change

The first IDEA workshop for the Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) team was not until June 2020 as the team wanted to wait a little to see what the implications of the pandemic were and because some of the team were redeployed into different areas of support temporarily. By June 2020 things were looking a little more positive and nurseries and schools were starting to open again to more children. Although there was still quite a lot of uncertainty about how the model would be delivered in the 2020/21 academic year it was looking more possible than it had during the first period of the lockdown in March 2020–May 2020. The second workshop was in March 2021 when the impacts of further lockdowns in the autumn and winter 2020/21 could be seen on delivery (as the teams were not able to go into the settings as planned for large periods of this time). The final workshop was in August 2021 after the delivery had finished for the early starter group and therefore the team could reflect on the whole year and further updates they would like to consider for the future.

The main changes to the TOC model over the course of the 14 months are as follows:

- The full background to the development of the intervention with reference to pre-existing research was added to the **‘Rationale/ need for intervention’** section and includes the crucial role that parents play in both children’s language development and the Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) intervention.
- The **‘Theory of Change’** section now includes reference to identifying which children need support using the Wellcomm language screen and provides further detail on the specific aims of the intervention. The model also includes changes due to Covid-19 such as providing parents with virtual access to a SaLT which would not have been considered before.
- For the **‘Inputs’** the main change is the inclusion of the experience and training of the SaLTs and that they are part of an ongoing SaLT network. This was a crucial element for the Nottinghamshire team as well and highlights the importance of the skillset and experience of the SaLT teams in delivering this support across both projects.
- The **‘Activities’** section has been substantially developed to give a very detailed account of each of the three stages of the delivery of the intervention including the introductory sessions with staff and parents. It also mentions collecting feedback from parents and staff throughout delivery, which was happening before but was further refined in collaboration with IES. In addition, the accreditation process for settings has been added which can take place in the final term if settings wish and includes evidence collection by the setting and a visit by a SaLT to assess the level and moderate the evidence produced. (See Section 2.3 for more detail on this process where Figure 2 includes the detailed statements that can be used by settings to judge their own performance). The Hackney team have deemed this important enough to

offer across all the settings they work with going forward (both maintained and PVI) as a way of settings determining their own goals for their language environment.

- The '**Outputs**' section covers the same main outputs, but the language around what needs to be achieved has been refined, for example, increasing one band on the environment audit (see Figure 2) as a way of determining setting progress.
- The changes to the '**Short term outcomes/ mediators**' now include better engagement from parents and improved child functional skills, practitioners making more appropriate referrals and the development of an effective relationship between practitioners and SaLTs. These elements emerged from the critical friend discussions between the IES, Sutton Trust and University of Oxford teams with the Hackney team following implementation in the PVI. Working in PVI provided a different perspective than the team had previously experienced when delivering in the maintained sector due to differences in aspects such as practitioners experience and resources.
- The importance of embedding the learning in settings was a crucial addition to the '**Long term outcomes/ impacts**' and the inclusion of a parent long term outcome demonstrates the weight that the team put on this element of the programme which was not seen in the original model.
- '**Enabling factors/ conditions**' for success were updated to include the factors that were important due to Covid- 19 which had not been apparent at the start of the project such as children who attended throughout lockdown had more exposure to the interventions and the limits on face-to-face contact with settings.
- From discussions with the critical friend team over the course of the year, it was decided that due to the changes on the intervention due to Covid-19, the inclusion of a new '**Unintended consequences**' section to the TOC was important and this needed to cover both positive and negative impacts on delivery to summarise how Covid-19 had affected the programme. This means the team can reflect on which of these changes they might like to consider utilising in the future. For example, providing parent workshops virtually meant more parents were able to attend than might have been able to attend in-person in normal circumstances.

Figure 5 Original Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) TOC model created after initial IDEA workshop in June 2020

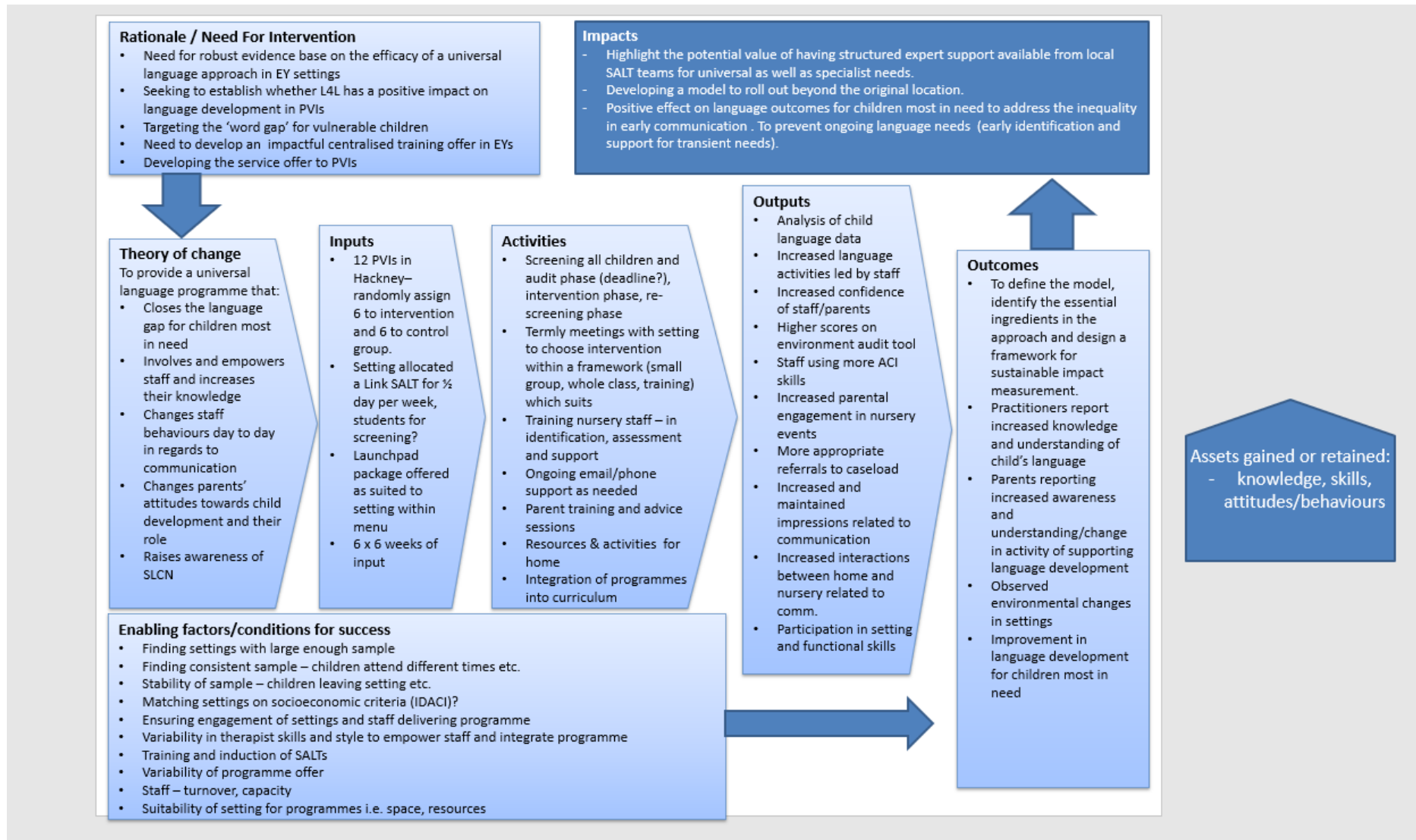
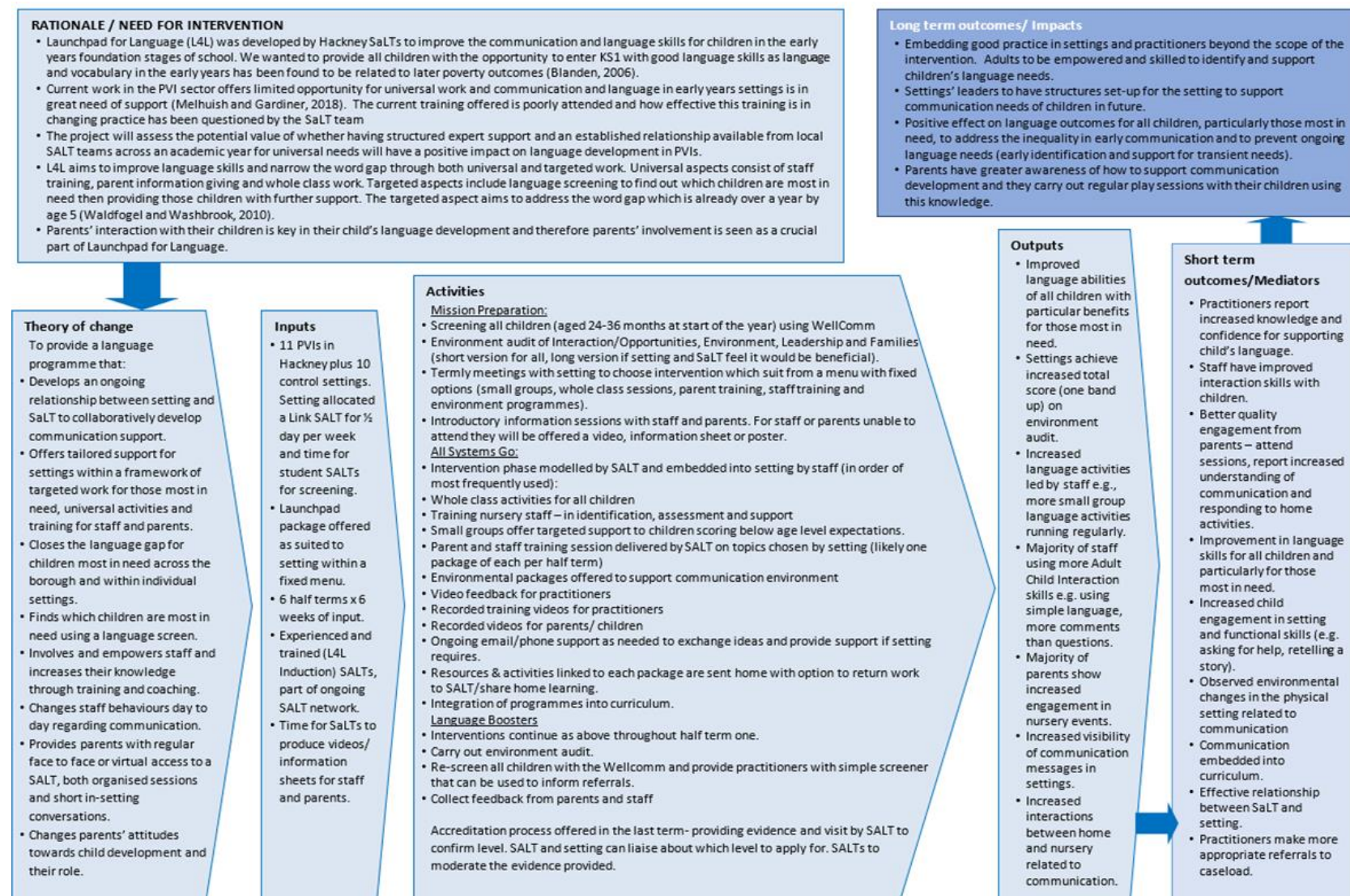


Figure 6 Final Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) TOC model after final IDEA workshop August 2021



Enabling factors / conditions for success

- Children attending the setting throughout period of project at least 15 hours per week in a regular pattern (i.e. in on the same day as SaLT).
- Impact of COVID-19 on child attendance: children who attended throughout lockdown had more exposure to the interventions.
- Identifying and supporting settings where children are at risk of language delay.
- Building a relationship between SaLTS and settings.
- Ensuring engagement of settings and staff delivering programme, including manager and/or SENCO.
- SaLTs able to empower staff and integrate programme into setting.
- Setting managers support the interventions that practitioners are running.
- Regular meetings with managers to reinforce knowledge for practitioners working with two year olds and support practitioners having time to deliver L4L and Wellcomm.
- Consistent training and supervision of SaLTs. Staff – turnover, capacity.
- Having appropriate space and resources in the setting to run the programme.
- Amount of face to face contact or able to have with settings (COVID 19 restrictions) and suitability of alternative virtual delivery.
- Ability of SaLT to stay for admin/ follow- up work (not often possible during COVID-19 pandemic) and having a space to do this.

Unintended consequences

Positive Impact on Delivery

- Intervention videos made, which can be watched and re-watched when convenient, for parents and practitioners
- Parent workshops all virtual enabling more parents to attend
- Child live virtual sessions held on zoom (twice weekly for the winter lockdown)
- Most group staff trainings were virtual- staff able to join from home.
- Seems to be a significant correlation between management being involved, and having a good relationship with staff, and the success of the project.
- Other staff in the setting picked up strategies from SALT without express teaching due to the settings involvement in L4L.

Negative Impact on Delivery

- Virtual delivery has meant less interaction between SaLTs and different practitioners. SALT unable to model approaches. No ad hoc contact with parents.
- SALT wearing masks making interaction with children (and adults) more difficult
- Communication Champions Network (SALT facilitated video calls between settings) low attendance possibly due to Zoom burnout
- SALT not able to visit two settings in one day meaning unable to pop in between visits, less flexibility.
- One setting virtual throughout and contact through email with manager has been challenging as not direct contact with practitioners and resources were not always passed on

4 Methodology

The IES implementation and process evaluation team worked closely with the intervention organisations in a ‘critical friend’ model throughout the period of March 2020–September 2021. Initially we supported them to clarify their Theory of Change, to support developing their delivery model, and demonstrating impact to roll out their work and leverage support for future scale up.

The implementation and process evaluation (IPE) then explored how the interventions were delivered and identified moderating/ contextual factors influencing potential impact and which may explain quantitative findings. It also sought to identify evidence of effectiveness and issues which need to be considered for a wider roll-out of the interventions. Drawing on the EEF Implementation and process evaluation guidance (Humphrey et al., 2016), we used a multiphase design, based around a triangulation of mixed methods

A separate impact evaluation of the two interventions was undertaken by Dr Ariel Lindorff (PI), Professor Kathy Sylva (CI), Dr Katharina Ereky-Stevens, and Allen Joseph at the University of Oxford which is available [here](#).

A steering group (‘board’) met with the IPE and Impact research teams several times throughout the study to advise and interrogate the ongoing research. The board comprised: Laura Barbour and Emma Legg at The Sutton Trust, Catherine Hillis; Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, Naomi Eisenstadt, Early years consultant; Sarah Tillotson, Programme Manager, EEF, Janet Grauberg, Scale up consultant; and Derek Munn, Director of Policy and Public Affairs, Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists.

The timeline for the evaluation was as described in Table 4.1:

Table 4.1 Timeline for implementation and process evaluation

Date	Activity
Feb 20	Inception meeting and individual kick-off meetings with Hackney and Nottinghamshire Speech and Language Therapy (SaLT) teams,
Mar–Jun 20	Regular ‘critical friend’ meetings to support teams with identifying core elements or ‘manualising’ their interventions and approaches to recruiting settings, first IDEA meetings to develop Theory of Change models. Evaluation teams write summaries of evaluation plans.
Jul–Aug 20	‘Critical friend’ support with finalising intervention design, designing participant feedback materials. First board meeting.

Sept–Nov 20	Second board meeting. Ongoing ‘critical friend’ support to SaLT teams. University of Oxford collect pre-intervention child assessment data for impact evaluation study, and run pre-test practitioner behaviour survey.
Dec 20	Mid-point progress report
Jan 21	Second IDEA workshops with SaLT teams, third board meeting, ongoing ‘critical friend’ support to SaLT teams.
Feb–Mar 21	Design research materials for case studies and interviews, ongoing ‘critical friend’ support to SaLT teams.
Apr–May 21	Undertake case studies and interviews, ongoing ‘critical friend’ support to SaLT teams.
May–Jul 21	Design and run online implementation survey with practitioners. Ongoing ‘critical friend’ support to SaLT teams.
Jun–Jul 21	University of Oxford collect post-intervention child assessment data for impact evaluation study and run post-test practitioner behaviour survey.
Jul–Sep 21	Analysis of qualitative (case studies and interviews) and implementation survey data, third IDEA workshops, ongoing ‘critical friend’ support to SaLT teams.
Oct–Dec 21	Writing summary report, early presentation of findings, fourth board meeting.
Dec 21	Submit summary report
Jan 22	Respond to comments and submit revised summary report, submit infographic.

4.1 Implementation and Process Evaluation Questions

As part of evidence-gathering for the main three research study questions, the process evaluation investigated the following questions for each of the interventions:

1. What evidence is there of change in practitioner behaviour and/or perceived impacts on the nursery environment with regards to language and communication support?
2. What, if any, are the perceived impacts on language and communication skills among children supported by practitioners who have received one of the interventions?
3. Do settings find the interventions useful and are they able to incorporate them into their practice? Do they feel able to sustain this in the longer term?
4. What are the barriers or enablers for nurseries to participating in the training?
5. What factors may need to be considered in scaling up the intervention to deliver it in more nurseries?

All of these questions were investigated using observations of practice, interviews with practitioner and managers and surveys with practitioners and managers as described in detail in the remainder of this chapter.

4.2 Impacts of Covid-19 Pandemic

Due to the changes to delivery caused by the Covid-19 pandemic the evaluation was also

adapted. The main driver for these changes was that it was no longer possible for the evaluation team to visit settings in person to conduct case studies because of restrictions around visitors and staff:child bubbles. However, as both SaLT teams moved to online delivery of training and support, this gave the evaluation team an opportunity to observe virtual support delivered by both teams, whereas previously there would have been observations of Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) delivery during the case study visits but no observations of the Nottinghamshire CECIL training or coaching. This has resulted in a richer picture of delivery for the Nottinghamshire CECIL programme, but a slightly less detailed picture of the Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) delivery as the evaluation team were not able to join SaLTs in the settings for case study visits.

The case studies and interviews were all conducted by telephone or video-conferencing instead of in-person which meant that the evaluation team were not able to collect additional contextual data by being in the setting environment or to have some of the informal conversations that often happen when fieldwork is conducted face-to-face. However, during the period when the Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) programme moved to predominantly online delivery, the SaLT team ran some online sessions for parents and children including 'Sing and Sign', 'Alan the Alien' and 'Sign of the Week', as well as VERVE¹¹ coaching with practitioners so it was possible to observe some examples of the SaLT engaging with their settings. For the Nottinghamshire CECIL programme, the evaluation team was able to observe training, refresher and language network sessions.

4.3 Observations

Initially observations were going to only be part of the case studies and had not been factored in as a separate activity. However, as case studies were not in-person due to Covid-19 we adapted to join virtually in the following ways:

We attended two training sessions for Nottinghamshire CECIL which included sessions three and four (of the four training sessions). These were three-hour sessions with a mid-point break which took place using Microsoft Teams. The training was led by a team of two SaLTs and included slide presentations, interactive exercises, group discussions, and break-out groups to view and feedback on example videos of practice from Hanen. Participants were also asked to refer to the Let's Interact manuals that they had been given by the SaLTs.

We attended two of the network meetings for Nottinghamshire CECIL. These were two-hour sessions with a mid-point break which took place using Microsoft Teams and included a mix of presentations with slides, interactive exercises, discussion and opportunities to ask questions. The sessions recapped the strategies used in the training, presented an overview of other training available from the SaLT team, discussed how learning could be shared with colleagues at settings, and then SaLTs gave an overview of

¹¹ VERVE Child Interaction is a staff training session where practitioners meet with the SaLT one-on-one on a recurring basis and use videos to observe and reflect on the practitioner's behaviour with a specific child.

services available to support children's language and how to create an Action Plan for a child followed by presenting some case study examples of children and their families for practitioners to discuss and identify any issues and decide what to do next, including when to refer children on.

We attended two of the live sessions for Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) (one of Sing and sign and one of Alan the Alien) which were short 10-minute sessions available for parents and their children to all join in together at home. These took place over video-conferencing software and participants could choose whether to turn their camera on – the SaLT engaged and interacted with those children who were visible on camera and responding. These sessions had some nice engagement and meant some parents who would not have normally been able to attend could attend virtually.

We also attended a Verve coaching session over video-conferencing which was the fifth and final week of a short course of hour sessions with all the practitioners working with two-year-olds (which was four staff in the example we saw). The staff had been recording videos of themselves working with children they found more difficult to engage with over the sessions and sharing them with the group for feedback and support. For example, they were practising strategies of improving the interactions with the children such as waiting for eye contact before speaking to the child and extending speech. They reviewed progress from week 1 to the current week in the session we saw, but there were some technical issues with sharing the videos that made this difficult online. These sessions would have normally been in-person but this was not possible due to Covid-19.

4.4 Case Studies and Interviews

IES completed **10 semi-structured case studies which included telephone or video interviews with 27 practitioners and managers**. Case studies were selected to cover a spread of areas and setting characteristics such as nursery size and level of deprivation/disadvantage/ privilege. For the Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) programme, the five case studies aimed to cover at least one voluntary setting, at least one larger setting with 24-30 two-year-olds and, if relevant, a setting which had taken part in one of the communication projects previously run in the 2019-20 academic year in the borough by an educational consultant, and this was achieved in our sample. The number of two-year-olds qualifying for the DfE's free childcare offer was considered as a measure of deprivation and we ensured case studies included settings with a mix of deprivation levels. With the Nottinghamshire CECIL programme a similar approach was taken using the number of children qualifying for the early years pupil premium as a measure of deprivation (in preference to the IDACI).

As the case studies were not in-person we aimed to achieve 2 or 3 interviews per case study setting which included at least one practitioner and at least one manager where possible. Separate interview discussion guides were developed for practitioners and

managers¹². These explored their engagement (if any) with the intervention, views on any training or coaching, perceived impacts on practitioner behaviour and the setting, any perceived impacts on children, parental engagement with children and parental engagement with them and the nursery. We also asked the nursery staff about staff time and resources needed to participate in the intervention. Nursery manager interviews additionally covered reasons for the setting's involvement and staff chosen for the programme, resource requirements and challenges including additional support for staff, how useful the programme was to the setting and suggested improvements. Practitioner interviews additionally covered the frequency of sessions and agreed priorities with the SaLT, their experiences with the sessions and how they could be improved, the level of support received from the SaLT team, their capacity to engage and what strategies/activities they would continue using.

Some settings which were originally selected as case studies were unable to give more than one interview due to staff shortages or other time constraints. In these cases (and in the case of the non-responsive settings which were originally chosen as case studies), adjustments were made to the sample. We were able to replace the case studies with other similar settings to successfully maintain the mix of the sample.

Telephone/video interviews with four additional early years practitioners/ managers allowed an exploration of a diverse range of practitioners' experiences of and views on the intervention training while minimising the burden on settings (as these were just one interview per setting). To maximise response from practitioners we used short 20-minute semi-structured telephone interviews at a time to suit them. The discussion guide was the same as for the case study interviews for practitioners, and allowed practitioners to talk about their experiences of the training and coaching/support activities, any barriers or facilitators and what they found useful (or not) about the intervention, as well as any perceived outcomes on parental engagement, on children's abilities or any unintended outcomes.

We aimed to speak to practitioners from all the nurseries not covered by the case studies. However, as there were only 18 settings in the early starter groups across both the Nottinghamshire CECIL and Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) programmes and 10 of those were already participating in case studies, telephone interviews were completed at four additional settings. Two settings from each programme did not respond to requests for interviews or did not have staff availability during the fieldwork period. At Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) setting 5, we interviewed a nursery manager instead of a practitioner as practitioners were not available.

Therefore, we were able to interview staff at 14 of the 18 early starter settings. Although we heard a range of views on the programmes, it is possible that those who engaged positively with the programmes may have been more motivated to engage with interviews.

¹² Please contact the authors for copies of the interview discussion guides via askIES@employment-studies.co.uk

The following tables show the interviews carried out at each setting and the setting's relevant characteristics for each of the programmes.

Table 4.2 Nottinghamshire CECIL settings interviewed

Setting	IDACI Decile	Number of two-year olds	Number of children on Pupil Premium	Private, voluntary or independent	Practitioner interviews	Nursery manager interviews	Total interviews at setting
N1	2	17	2	Private	2	1	3
N2	7	29	7	Voluntary	2	1	3
N3	10	26	0	Private	2	1	3
N4	2	22	8	Private	2	1	3
N7	10	15	1	Private	2	1	3
N6	8	33	1	Voluntary	1	0	1
TOTAL					11	5	16

Case study settings are marked in blue.

Table 4.3 Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) settings interviewed

Setting	IDACI decile	Number of two-year olds	Funded two-year olds	Private, voluntary or independent	Practitioner interviews	Nursery manager interviews	Total interviews at setting
H2	2	30	13	Voluntary	2	1	3
H3	5	12	-	Voluntary	1	1	2
H6	2	14	8	Voluntary	1	1	2
H8*	3	15	3	Private	2	1	3
H9	3	24	-	Private	1	1	2
H1	4	13	10	Voluntary	1	0	1
H4	1	13	1	Private	1	0	1
H5	4	1	1	Voluntary	0	1	1
TOTAL					9	6	15

Case study settings are marked in blue. *This setting was involved in an education consultant project for 2-year-olds in 2019-2020¹³

¹³ This is a programme focusing on communication that consisted of two training sessions with facilitated discussion that covered key ideas of communication and language of two year olds and then picking an

4.5 Practitioner Surveys

The **early years practitioner implementation surveys** were delivered online in May–June 2021 (when most of each intervention had been delivered) using SNAP survey software which could be completed on computer or smartphone to allow easy completion. The surveys examined current practice around language and communication support, engagement with Speech and Language Therapy teams, practitioner confidence around speech and language, some basic professional characteristics of practitioners including whether they have received other speech and communication training, and, where relevant (in the early starter group), views on and attitudes to the intervention training. The surveys enabled comparison across the intervention and control groups to explore any potential differences. A separate version of the survey was created for each of the two interventions in order to include bespoke questions relevant to each intervention as the delivery formats were quite different, although the questions covered the same themes and areas. Each survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete¹⁴.

As part of the impact analysis for the study, the team at the University of Oxford also ran **pre- and post-intervention impact surveys** with practitioners to measure specific aspects of practitioner confidence, behaviour and practice. The implementation and process evaluation team were able to add to or help develop some questions for these surveys to collect additional data on practitioner and setting characteristics, such as years' experience in role, or assessments and programme/resources used at their setting to support children's language and communication, as well as around confidence in their knowledge and skills to support children's language and communication development. We mainly focus on the results of the intervention (early starter) settings at the two time points for both Nottinghamshire CECIL and Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) as numbers were a little low to make meaningful comparisons across the early and late starter groups or across time points (pre- and post-).

Nottinghamshire CECIL

The impact analysis pre-survey included 37 respondents from all of the 18 Nottinghamshire CECIL settings (this did not include the two settings who dropped out at an early stage from the evaluation but did include one setting which later dropped out in March 2021). Over half of respondents (20) were from early starter settings and the remaining respondents (17) were from late starter settings. For both early and late starter groups, three-quarters of practitioners reported that their highest qualification was at Level 3 or 4 (15 of 20 early starters, 13 of 17 late starters), four early start and three late start

area of practice the setting wanted to develop with a follow- up visit from the education consultant Julia Manning-Morton. For more details on Julia Manning-Morton's courses please see <https://www.early-education.org.uk/julia-manning-morton>.

¹⁴ Please contact the authors for copies of the surveys via askIES@employment-studies.co.uk

practitioners were Level 5 or 6, and one early and one late starter practitioner was Level 2. For both early and late starter groups, a little under a quarter of practitioners had been working as an Early years professional for two years or less (4 of 19 early starters, 4 of 17 late starters), a third of early starters and over half of late starters had been working for three to nine years (7 of 19 early starters, 10 of 17 late starters) and over a third of early starters and less than a quarter of late starters had been working for ten years or more (9 of 19 early starters, 3 of 17 late starters).

The vast majority of practitioners in both early and late starter groups reported that their setting assessed children's language skills (16 of 20 early starters, 17 out of 18 late starters) and all late starters and almost all early starters (15 of 16) who reported this specified that they used EYFS Development Matters. Other assessment approaches described included The Early years Prime Areas Tracking tool (a locally developed tracker based on Development Matters) and a 2-year progress check. Somewhere around half of practitioners in both groups (8 of 20 early starters, 11 of 17 late starters) reported using a particular programme or resource for supporting language. Programmes and resources used varied widely for both groups and included: Every Child a Talker, Let's Interact, support plans from a speech and language therapist, Tapestry, Tiny Talk, Makaton signs, Home Talk and Jolly Phonics.

The practitioner implementation survey for the Nottinghamshire CECIL programme included 18 respondents from 14 of the 17 participating settings (as this was after the last setting dropped out in March 2021). Most respondents (16) had been working with two-year-olds since September 2020 and two had started working with this group since then. A little under half of respondents were from early starter settings (8) and the remaining respondents were from late starter settings (10). In the early starter settings, practitioners who were participating in the training were invited to complete the survey and in late starter settings, setting managers or lead contacts were asked to respond on behalf of practitioners at that setting in order to minimise the sharing of staff personal data, ie personal email addresses.

The Oxford impact post-survey with practitioners for the Nottinghamshire CECIL programme (Nottinghamshire) included 19 respondents from 14 of the 17 participating settings. Under half of respondents were from early starter settings (7) and over half were from late starter settings (12). A little over half of the participants (11) completed the survey online and a little under half completed the survey on paper (8). During data collection, the evaluation teams at IES and Oxford found that some practitioners did not have individual work email addresses so this may be reflected in the split preference for completing the survey on paper or online.

Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language)

The impact analysis pre-survey included 55 respondents from 18 of the 20 Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) settings. Over half of respondents (32) were from early starter settings and the remaining respondents (23) were from late starter settings. For both early and late starter groups, the majority of practitioners reported that their highest qualification was at Level 3 or 4 (17 of 27 early starters, 21 of 22 late starters), nine early

start and one late start practitioner were Level 5 or 6, and one early start practitioner was Level 2. For both early and late starter groups, around a quarter of practitioners had been working as an Early years professional for two years or less (7 of 27 early starters, 5 of 21 late starters), a third had been working for three to nine years (9 of 27 early starters, 7 of 21 late starters) and over a third had been working for ten years or more (11 of 27 early starters, 9 of 21 late starters).

The vast majority of practitioners in both early and late starter groups reported that their setting assessed language skills (25 of 27 early starters, 22 out of 23 late starters) and more than three-quarters of those who reported this specified that they used EYFS Development Matters (22 of 25 early starters, 18 of 22 late starters). Other assessment approaches described included Tapestries visual cards or a speech and language therapist or SENCO assessment. Over two-thirds of practitioners in both groups (19 of 27 early starters, 18 of 23 late starters) reported using a particular programme or resource for supporting language. Programmes and resources used varied widely for both groups and included: visual cards, emotional language box, support from a speech and language therapist, language groups, Makaton signs and Talking Walk-In which was a drop-in initial assessment session for early years children.

The practitioner implementation survey for the Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) programme included 31 respondents from 17 of the 20 settings that were recruited. The majority (29) had been working with two-year-olds since September 2020 and two had started working with them after that point. A little under half of respondents were from early starter settings (14) and the remainder were from late starter settings (17). All practitioners working with two-year olds at early and late starter settings were invited to complete the survey.

The Oxford impact post-survey with practitioners for the Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) programme included 21 respondents from 9 of the 20 settings that were recruited. A little under half of respondents were from early starter settings (8) and over half were from late starter settings (13). Four-fifths of the participants (17) completed the survey online and around one-fifth completed the survey on paper (4).

The interviews and surveys with practitioners, as well as case study interviews with nursery managers, let us identify aspects of the interventions which individuals and nurseries found useful, as well as feeding back on the practical aspects of participating in the intervention including barriers and enablers which can now inform further development of the interventions needed in order to deliver these at a wider scale. We also explored perceived impacts on staff, children and at a wider nursery environment level.

Analysis

Qualitative data analysis

Interviews were digitally recorded with the agreement of participants and the interviewer also took notes. We analysed the data using a 'framework' approach, drawing themes

and messages from an analysis of interview notes/ recordings and observations at nursery settings. Framework is an Excel-based qualitative analysis tool that ensures that the analytical process and interpretations from it are grounded in the data and tailored to the research questions. Framework allows full within-case analysis (looking in detail at each individual case) and between-case analysis (comparing individual cases and groups of cases).

Analysis of survey data

Analysis of the early years practitioner implementation survey was light touch exploring some current practice around language and communication support, engagement with Speech and Language Therapy teams, practitioner confidence around speech and language, some basic professional characteristics of practitioners including whether they have received other speech and communication training, and, where relevant, views on and attitudes to the intervention training. The quantitative analysis included basic descriptive tables using SPSS and, where appropriate, statistical tests comparing the intervention and control practitioner groups. 'Open text' responses were thematically analysed to identify emerging themes.

4.6 Ethics

IES submitted an application to the IES internal Ethics Panel which outlined the key features of the study, and set out the ethical issues involved and mitigations in July 2020. The IES evaluation team met with the ethics committee to discuss the relevant issues in August 2020 and received approval on 6th August 2020. Additionally, we also went through the Barnardo's ethical procedures as one of their nurseries was involved in the project. We received ethical approval from Barnardo's on 4th May 2021.

Settings were initially provided with an information sheet with brief details of the project and the timeline and then settings that expressed an interest in taking part received a Memorandum of Understanding, explaining in more detail what the project entailed and the responsibilities of the evaluators, the Speech and Language Therapy team and participating settings. This MOU linked to a privacy notice which detailed how the data from the study would be used, stored and shared. The privacy notice was also linked to in the implementation survey. Informed consent was sought from nursery staff before taking part in interviews and surveys – verbally for interviews and written for the practitioners proceeding to take the survey¹⁵.

IES did not work with children or children's data. However, the impact evaluation team (University of Oxford) did collect personal data from children, eg date of birth, assessment data, and applied for the relevant ethical approval from the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee.

¹⁵ For copies of the MOU, information sheet or privacy notice please contact the authors.

4.7 Data protection

IES recognises that data protection is of the utmost importance and is fully committed to complying with the Data Protection Act 2018 and GDPR legislation.

The Institute for Employment Studies' basis for processing personal data is legitimate interests and a legitimate interest assessment was conducted in September 2020.

Practitioners interviewed for the research were asked to agree to the interview being recorded and transcribed. They were given written assurance of anonymity and confidentiality for themselves and their nursery. Contact details of nurseries and staff taking part in the research were kept on password protected files in secure folders accessible only by the research team. No nurseries or individuals are identified in the report or any other outputs of the evaluation.

A detailed data sharing agreement was developed between both evaluation teams and the delivery team which stated which data would be shared by whom, how and why to ensure full data security throughout the project.

5 Perceived Impacts

This chapter discusses findings pertaining to the first two Implementation and Process Evaluation (IPE) questions which focus on perceived impacts of participating in the programmes:

1. What evidence is there of change in practitioner behaviour and/or perceived impacts on the nursery environment with regards to language and communication support?
2. What, if any, are the perceived impacts on language and communication skills among children supported by practitioners who have received one of the interventions?

The following sections draw upon information from interviews and surveys with practitioners and managers to explore any reported changes in practitioner behaviour, the nursery environment, and child language and communication outcomes as described by practitioners. This chapter also includes findings describing practitioners self-reported confidence in their knowledge and skills for supporting language development which were included in surveys delivered as part of the impact analysis. Please note that the number of staff who responded to both the IPE and impact evaluation surveys is quite small as the total number of practitioners in the study working with two-year-olds was small so these findings should be interpreted with caution. For each finding reported from the survey, we have included the number of respondents who answered that question in brackets at the end, eg (Total N = 12).

5.1 Practitioner behaviour and nursery environment

A key focus for both interventions was to train practitioners to use a range of strategies and activities that would help them to support children's language and communication skills. This also included making changes to the nursery environment where relevant to facilitate opportunities for children to engage in language activities. This first section explores the evidence for any changes in practitioner behaviour, as well as any perceived impacts on the nursery environment with regards to language and communication support and sharing learning more widely with colleagues.

5.1.1 Nottinghamshire CECIL

Managers described choosing practitioners to participate in the programme on the basis of who would be best placed to implement the learning and share their knowledge with other staff. This was usually those who had most contact with the two-year-olds, and in some cases, it was the nursery manager. Two thirds of practitioners surveyed had previous experience of engaging with the SaLT team before Summer 2020: half had referred a child having difficulties with language and communication, two had received

training or attended an event about supporting children with language and communication and one had accessed support for a child in their family (Total N = 18).

Changes in practitioner knowledge

A number of practitioners had either previously attended a similar training course, such as the 'Let's Interact' training course with the SaLT team (or Every Child a Talker)¹⁶, or had been trained by colleagues from their setting's Senior Leadership Team who had received this training. The Let's Interact course is very similar to the Nottinghamshire CECIL programme (as discussed in the Introduction chapter), consisting of 4 teaching sessions and group video coaching. The Nottinghamshire CECIL programme has a minimum of 3 additional individual coaching sessions, regular accessible support and networking opportunities. Out of the five nursery managers interviewed, three had previously had Let's Interact or Every Child a Talker training, and another had helped deliver training with SaLTs. The manager who had Every Child a Talker training was the language lead for the setting and reported that they had learned similar strategies to those covered in the Nottinghamshire CECIL programme, including OWLing¹⁷ and using Makaton signs. At one setting the practitioners also reported having attended Let's Interact training themselves. One manager reported that they were originally told only staff with no previous Let's Interact training were eligible (which was only two staff at their setting), but when the programme started they felt that the majority of participants from other settings seemed to have had prior Let's Interact training. In practice, half of the practitioners had received Let's Interact training before taking part in the Nottinghamshire CECIL which was not the intention, but the SaLT team found that settings that had already been involved with them were more likely to be keen to be involved again.

The practitioners who had been exposed to past training from attending a programme or learning from colleagues felt that the Nottinghamshire CECIL programme reiterated previous learning. Some of these practitioners noticed fewer differences in their behaviour and felt that the programme offered little additional learning for them. However, many practitioners reported that they had benefited from reinforcing previous learning and the opportunity for increased reflection.

You can get complacent, especially the longer you've worked in a setting. It's made me more aware of the different strategies and things to use and promoting language within the setting again.

Practitioner 1 setting 3, Nottinghamshire.

¹⁶ A nationally funded universal level programme designed to improve the skills of early years practitioners to support speech and language development, run between 2008 and 2011. In Nottinghamshire, delivery included Let's Interact training (https://foundationyears.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/ecat_guidance_for_practitioners_31.pdf).

¹⁷ A strategy where practitioners are encouraged to Observe, Wait and Listen in order to allow the child to lead the interaction.

Some practitioners who had not previously completed Let's Interact training commented that the programme had given them new ideas and helped them understand why they did things the way they did.

[The training] put a name to everything we do and made me realise why we do what we do; makes me be reflective on my own practice.

Practitioner 4, Setting 6, Nottingham

Another practitioner commented that the learning from the programme supported their existing behaviour and reassured them to continue in the same way.

Both practitioners who were familiar with Let's Interact and those who weren't, highlighted that the coaching sessions had been useful for reinforcing learning. The Let's Interact training had included group coaching sessions, but the one-to-one coaching sessions were new for the CECIL programme. Participation in one-to-one coaching sessions appeared to have improved confidence for all practitioners interviewed regardless of previous training. One practitioner who had attended training previously reported that feedback from the coaching sessions had helped with their ongoing development, and in another setting, the nursery manager felt inspired to administer one-to-one videos with the practitioners like the coaching sessions. Only one practitioner who had participated in Let's Interact felt that the one-to-one coaching sessions were redundant.

Changes in practitioner behaviour

All practitioners responding to the implementation survey reported that they had noticed changes in their practice from taking part in the programme (Total N = 8). Just under half of all practitioners who participated in the programme (18 in total) responded to the survey so it is possible that those who responded to the survey were the most engaged with the training and programme. In interviews, practitioners reported gaining a greater awareness of the effect and value of their interactions with the children, which made them more reflective about their practice. They felt that they gave more thought and consideration to their interactions with the children, and carried these out with increased deliberation. One practitioner described how before asking questions they now take time to consider whether the children will understand what is being asked and will be able to respond. Another practitioner reported similar behaviour, as well as using a strategy of asking children fewer questions and commenting on their actions more.

[I learnt] just to use a balance of comments and questions to make sure there isn't too many of either and to balance them.

Practitioner 2, Setting 3 Nottinghamshire

Practitioners from the intervention group who responded to the Oxford impact post-survey reported feeling quite confident about supporting children with differing needs, but a few were less confident about specific support needs around EAL or need for referral. All seven practitioners reported being very or fairly confident in their knowledge and skills to help typically developing children make good progress in their language skills (Total N = 7), and six practitioners felt very or fairly confident about their ability to help children with

delayed language development, with one practitioner somewhat confident about this (Total N = 7). As with the implementation survey, less than half of practitioners participating in the programme responded to the survey so it may be that those who engaged best were more motivated to respond to the post-test survey, six practitioners indicated that they were very or fairly confident around assessing children's language to identify any need for support and one practitioner felt slightly confident around this (Total N = 7). Four practitioners reported that they were very or fairly confident in their knowledge and skills in helping children with EAL make good progress in their language skills, while one practitioner felt somewhat confident and two were not at all confident (Total N = 7). Similarly, three practitioners were very or fairly confident in their knowledge around making referrals for extra support for children with language difficulties, whereas three were somewhat confident and one practitioner felt not at all confident regarding this (Total N = 7).

During interviews, nursery managers also noticed positive changes in practitioner behaviour. A deputy manager who participated in the Nottinghamshire CECIL programme said it had given them and their staff an opportunity to reflect on how to approach strategies to improve the two-year-olds' communication and language development. This has enabled them to be more proactive and prioritise the activities and strategies that had the most impact in supporting communication development, while ensuring that support was tailored to specific needs.

All nursery managers and practitioners noticed a difference in their colleagues' behaviour, except for one practitioner whose colleagues had attended previous training delivered by the SaLT team. Nursery managers noticed that practitioners who had been on the programme were more aware, considered, patient and confident. One example of this was practitioners waiting longer for the child to speak. After participating in the Nottinghamshire CECIL training, practitioners were more likely to tailor their communication to different children rather than treating all children in a group in the same way. This included the practice of using fewer words with particular children who could not understand longer sentences. One nursery manager reported that practitioners were using a wider vocabulary and were changing how they pronounced words when teaching the children. In another setting, the nursery manager reported that practitioners had been promoting open-ended questions, and one practitioner was working with child monitoring and identifying appropriate strategies.

Practitioners also reported noticing changes in their colleagues' behaviour, either those who were also on the programme or those who had strategies (and the reasoning behind the strategies) shared with them. They commented that colleagues were more self-reflective and aware of their communication, implemented more strategies, and shared their experiences of using those strategies. Practitioners observed that peers who had been on the programme were more able to offer personalised support to the children and could set up small activities to support the two-year-olds' language and development. Staff were more motivated to maximise and make the most out of opportunities for interaction with the children. This included adding questioning words when participating in an activity such as going on a walk.

Sharing learning with colleagues

Practitioners were keen to share their learning with colleagues formally and informally, enabling wide implementation of practice. The model of delivery for Nottinghamshire CECIL intentionally did not include formal cascading of learning by practitioners to peers as this risks dilution of the programme and chose to focus on sustained support from a SaLT via coaching. However, the Nottinghamshire CECIL team encouraged practitioners to share some of the knowledge which they hoped would influence practice at the setting. All staff surveyed reported sharing ideas and strategies: three-quarters each had shared learning with their nursery manager or with colleagues who also worked with two-year-olds, over a third also shared with colleagues who worked with children of other ages and a quarter with a room leader or specialist lead such as a SENCO (Total N = 8). Among practitioners in the intervention group who responded to the Oxford post-survey, four felt that they were very or fairly confident in their knowledge and skills to engage colleagues in changes to language practice, and three felt they were fairly or somewhat confident to do so (Total N = 7).

During interviews, nursery managers reported that ideas and strategies were disseminated across the nursery team and at many settings, all staff became mindful of the key messages of the programme. Managers described how practitioners fed back information at staff meetings: presenting new ideas, engaging in discussions, and modelling strategies for staff which were then incorporated into regular practice. One practitioner, who was also a senior nursery nurse, reported putting up displays to remind colleagues to use the strategies she had shared. Practitioners also sought advice from colleagues on how to implement the strategies in practice. However, the necessity of Covid bubbles created difficulty in sharing resources, sharing ideas or planning together. One practitioner explained this was inefficient because some of the children's needs/interests overlapped but they could not sit down with the member of staff responsible for the other child to discuss it.

At one setting the practitioners on the programme created PowerPoint presentations based on different training sessions which they shared with other staff. However, where other staff had previously received Let's Interact training from the SaLT team, there was less opportunity for sharing as colleagues were already familiar with some strategies and approaches.

One nursery manager presented an example of a practitioner disseminating learning on the job:

We have had a new member of staff join us and actually my youngest member of staff who is on the training course actually said 'could I have her with me for the morning'... and it's been actually really lovely to hear her telling someone a lot older than her (but not experienced) everything she had learned on this training course and explaining to this lady that this is how she got this little boy responding to her.

Nursery manager 2, Setting 2 Nottinghamshire

Parent engagement and feedback

Due to Covid-19 restrictions, staff reported having limited interactions with parents. This made it difficult to engage with parents or receive feedback on parents' and children's progress at home. However, among practitioners from the intervention group who responded to the Oxford post-survey, five felt fairly confident in their knowledge and skills to suggest activities that families could do to support children's language development and two felt somewhat confident (Total N = 7). One nursery manager who was interviewed reported successful efforts to engage with parents via updating their social media pages with Nottinghamshire CECIL news, leading to parents asking for the activity sheets.

Staff reported that parents were supportive of the programme and requested updates, but often casually. Staff were keen to remind parents to engage with their children and gave them ideas of how to do so, which they felt parents had been responsive to. For example, at one setting, a practitioner reported that one parent did not want to move their child to another setting until the setting had finished participating in the programme, ie summer 2021. Another practitioner reported that parents said they had seen improvements in their children's language, but the practitioner was unsure whether this could be attributed to the programme.

5.1.2 Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language)

Participants in the Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) programme included practitioners with a range of previous experience and roles, such as SENCOs, room leaders and some nursery managers. A little under two-thirds of practitioners surveyed had previous experience of engaging with SaLTs, including this SaLT team: around a third had referred a child having difficulties with language and communication and around a quarter had received training or attended an event about child language and communication (Total N = 30). Some managers specifically chose practitioners to take part in the programme who either worked directly with children with special needs or who they felt would be best placed to pass on their learning. However, in some cases, the whole team took part in the training.

Changes in practitioner knowledge

Both nursery managers and practitioners reported that practitioners taking part in the programme had developed a better understanding of children's speech and language and were more able to recognise certain behaviours in the children, as well as giving them more ideas and ways of communicating with children to better understand them. Practitioners described being more responsive and agile, using different approaches if a child did not understand them at first. They developed new ideas and ways to incorporate learning targets for specific children. Many practitioners described working with their Hackney CECIL (Launchpad) SaLT to identify and develop these. One practitioner felt that she was now more patient with the children, especially those who might be shy, bilingual or have selective mutism.

During interviews, nursery managers noted that better knowledge on language and communication amongst practitioners had improved their confidence. One nursery manager reported that the practitioners on the programme at their setting were new to the two-years-old age group, and that the programme helped them become knowledgeable on the level of language that the children should be at. Nursery managers reported that practitioners also felt more confident to observe the children and make referrals if they thought they were struggling. One room leader observed that colleagues who were previously nervous about leading group sessions could now do so with confidence. Another nursery manager mentioned practitioners were more confident talking to parents as well.

Changes in practitioner behaviour

Overall, practitioners reported positive changes in their behaviour and practice due to incorporating strategies from the programme and having an increased knowledge and awareness of children's speech and language. Several practitioners highlighted how helpful it was to see the SaLT model an activity or approach first and then explain what they had been doing, as well as giving the practitioner feedback when they tried the activity themselves. As a result of these changes, practitioners felt they were able to maintain the children's attention for longer, give them more opportunities to speak, and better understand and identify children's unique needs. However, staff views varied as to the extent to which they felt that the way they interacted with children and supported their language and communication development had changed. Among staff responding to the implementation survey, around a third each felt it had changed slightly, quite a bit or a lot, with one saying they were not sure (Total N = 13). All those who said it had changed a lot had had previous experience of working with a SaLT.

Practitioners reported that learning the importance of keeping children's focus, and having strategies to achieve this, made a significant difference to their own and the children's behaviour. Nursery managers and practitioners both felt that practitioners had more patience when working with the children, were taking care to speak more slowly, and were using more focused language. By taking more time with the children and letting them interact at their own pace, they found that the children were speaking more. One practitioner described how they have been able to communicate more effectively with the children by learning to get down to the same level as the child, speak slowly and give the child a chance to speak more than the adult. Practitioners also reported using strategies where they first waited for the child to make eye contact and gain their attention, before speaking or interacting with them. One practitioner said this was challenging but effective, and that watching a video of themselves in a VERVE¹⁸ session had been particularly helpful for facilitating this behaviour change. Furthermore, practitioners reported seeing this behaviour in their colleagues too, and nursery managers confirmed that practitioners'

¹⁸ VERVE Child Interaction is a staff training session where practitioners meet with the SaLT one-on-one on a recurring basis and use videos to observe and reflect on the practitioner's behaviour with a specific child.

behaviour had positively changed. Practitioners described how seeing the benefits of their changes in practice on children's speech, motivated them to continue using the strategies.

Practitioners who responded to the Oxford post-survey reported feeling quite confident about supporting children with a range of needs. Six practitioners reported being very or fairly confident in their knowledge and skills to help typically developing children make good progress in their language skills and one practitioner felt somewhat confident (Total N = 7). Practitioners were asked about their confidence around helping children with language delay or EAL and in both cases five practitioners felt very or fairly confident about their ability to help children with language delay, one practitioner was somewhat confident and another only slightly confident (Total N = 7 each). Six practitioners indicated that they were very or fairly confident around assessing children's language to identify any need for support and one practitioner felt slightly confident around this (Total N = 7). Similarly, six practitioners were very or fairly confident in their knowledge around making referrals for extra support for children with language difficulties, whereas one practitioner was somewhat confident regarding this (Total N = 7).

Overall, the Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) sessions encouraged practitioners to reflect more on their practice and be more aware of their interactions. This then led to practitioners changing their behaviour and considering how they could do things differently, such as choosing what to comment on in conversations with a child. One nursery manager felt that this had given practitioners at their setting a boost after the pandemic and improved motivation. In some cases, this also involved building on or reinforcing existing skills, such as increasing their use of Makaton signs in daily practice.

Sharing learning with colleagues

All practitioners in the implementation survey had shared ideas and strategies with colleagues at their setting: around two-thirds each had shared ideas with their nursery manager, and colleagues who also worked with two-year-olds, and over a third each had shared with a room leader or specialist colleague such as a SENCO or with colleagues who worked with children of other ages (Total N = 13). Among practitioners from the intervention group who responded to the Oxford post-survey, five felt that they were very or fairly confident in their knowledge and skills to engage colleagues in changes to language practice, and two felt they were somewhat confident to do so (Total N = 7).

During interviews, practitioners described supporting their colleagues to implement practices and activities, regularly sharing their expertise and resources across the setting through formal and informal channels. Such support was often facilitated or encouraged by nursery managers. Nursery managers and practitioners reported that children from a range of age groups including pre-schoolers (four-year-olds) and toddlers (two- to three-year-olds) benefited from the programme and responded well to the activities as learning was shared across practitioners working with different age groups. At one setting, the room leader reported sharing ideas and information on the programme to other staff during room meetings, as well as writing a report for the nursery manager for all the rooms. The nursery manager explained that the interventions and learnings were rolled out to pre-schoolers and younger children.

Initially we thought it would be just for the two-year-olds but they [the practitioners] cascaded it down to our pre-schoolers and they really loved it – Alan the alien has been a big hit for them.

Nursery manager 1, setting 2, Hackney

The Senior Leadership Team at the setting intertwined this learning with the topic planning so that the strategies could be used with other age groups. For example, the environment supports such as Sign of the week and Speaking spaceship were located in a room that was used by other children as well so the whole setting could be involved.

At another setting, one practitioner reported that after the SaLT left, staff at their setting would have a meeting to identify what each child needed support with and discuss how they could tailor and implement what they had learned to help them. They commented that 'having different ideas and talking amongst ourselves helped' because all staff have a key child who has different development levels to their peers. Staff learned how to further enhance that child's development and speech based on their existing understanding of the child.

Parent engagement and feedback

According to staff interviews, parents had responded positively and shown interest in the Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) programme overall. However, parental engagement was not as significant as nursery managers and practitioners had hoped, with the restrictions around Covid-19 limiting opportunities for engagement. Some parents had communicated to nursery managers and practitioners that they were pleased with the introduction and delivery of the programme, mentioning for example the benefit of one-to-one sessions with children and practitioners, and one setting described receiving feedback from some parents and carers describing perceived impacts on children's language through Tapestry, their online journal platform for engaging with parents and carers.

Nursery managers and practitioners reported that parents had engaged with the programme at home to different extents. For example, some engaged parents asked for suggestions on how to do activities at home and help with language. Several staff mentioned that parents had implemented Makaton signing at home, especially parents of non-verbal children. Settings shared resources and activities from the programme with parents, including YouTube links and worksheets. However, staff highlighted the difficulty in determining whether parents were actually using the resources at home, especially with Covid-19 restrictions giving practitioners fewer opportunities to follow up with parents. This mixed experience is reflected among practitioners from the intervention group who responded to the Oxford post-survey: four felt very confident in their knowledge and skills to suggest activities that families could do to support children's language development but three felt only slightly confident in this regard (Total N= 7).

Several nursery managers and practitioners reported receiving positive feedback from the parent workshops such as the workshop on Alan the Alien, and other workshops where parents could see what the SaLT was doing and repeat it at home. One nursery manager

felt parents at their setting would have benefited from hearing the SaLT explain face-to-face about the importance of language because of their status as an external expert which would have helped to reinforce the messages around language coming from the practitioners. However, parents were unable to enter settings for the most part during the pandemic and holding the sessions virtually diluted this potential impact. This limits the ability of the evaluation to determine the full impact of one of the unique elements of the Hackney CECIL programme (having SaLTs in the setting). Parent workshops were also considered useful as a social tool for connecting parents with other parents and children, especially in the context of the pandemic. The survey findings indicated that only a small number of settings participated in parent sessions, with just under a quarter of survey respondents saying they participated (Total N= 13). The interviews suggest Covid-19 restrictions likely contributed to this. All three settings which participated in parent sessions had previous experience with SaLTs.

5.2 Language and communication skills among children

This section explores any perceived impacts on language and communication skills among children supported by practitioners who had had participated in either Nottinghamshire CECIL or Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language). As the interventions were delivered in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and national/ local lockdowns, some children had not attended settings as regularly as they would have under normal circumstances as parents/carers opted to keep children at home, or settings had to close temporarily or run limited services with staff on furlough (see Changes due to Covid-19 section for details of this). For this reason, we also asked staff whether they felt that language and communication skills among children at their setting had been affected by the pandemic as this could have undermined any impacts of the interventions for children at the settings.

5.2.1 Nottinghamshire CECIL

In the implementation survey, four-fifths of practitioners from both the early and late starter settings felt that the language and communication skills of children that they worked with had been affected by the pandemic, around two-thirds of these staff felt that the impact of the pandemic has been mixed with some children falling behind and others ahead, three staff felt the children were struggling more than usual and another three felt that the children's language was about the same as other years (N = 17). In interviews with staff, several commented that some children had not attended the setting for a couple of months or more due to the pandemic, and that some children were 'behind' or had 'regressed'. There was speculation as to whether excessive time with devices/screens or with dummies in their mouths had contributed to this decline in language. Staff also observed impacts on children's social skills and interactions, describing issues such as difficulties with sharing and attachment issues. One specialist lead felt that some children had become more reserved and that it was difficult to build a bond or relationship with them so they could interact. Practitioners at one setting noted

that because of 'covid bubbles' the two-year-olds had not been able to interact with the three-year-olds which they felt usually benefitted their language development. However, some staff felt that children at their settings had not been impacted. Others noted that some children appeared to have benefitted from increased interaction with adults when they had stayed home, and one practitioner explained that, as they had had fewer children attending the setting, this had enabled more attention and interaction for individual children.

All staff at early starter settings who were surveyed agreed that the strategies and ideas they had learned from the programme had led to improvements in the language and communication skills of children that they had used them with, although half agreed only slightly, a quarter agreed quite a bit and another quarter very much (Total N = 8). While some staff in interviews commented that it was difficult to attribute children's progress with language and communications skills to the programme specifically, a number of staff reported that they had observed progress with particular strategies or with specific children at their setting that they had worked with in a targeted way. One practitioner identified strategies such as giving children more time to answer and modelling language as being very beneficial to children's language

You can see a difference in the way kids are picking up language and conversation.

Practitioner 1, Setting 3, Nottingham.

Examples of improvements seen among targeted groups included: children whose language and communications skills had been below age norms or had been struggling initially and who were now more responsive, using more words and even sentences, and shy or quieter children who had become more confident and opened up. One room leader identified strategies such as OWLing as playing a role in this. There were also examples of progress among children with more advanced language skills benefitting from extending their vocabulary, with one manager emphasising the importance of also working with 'good talkers'. In addition to language outcomes, another manager observed that children's interactions at the setting were calmer and higher quality with less 'snatching' of toys or resources from other children.

5.2.2 Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language)

In the implementation survey, two thirds of practitioners from both the early and late starter settings felt that the language and communication skills of children that they worked with had been affected by the pandemic, over a third of these practitioners reported that this impact had been mixed with some ahead and some behind, around a quarter said children were struggling, another quarter had seen no difference, one practitioner reported that the children were ahead compared to usual cohorts and three practitioners were unsure (Total N = 31).

Most staff interviewed at the early starter settings felt that the language and communication skills of children in their setting had been affected by the pandemic. Some felt that the children had regressed slightly in their language and communication, describing their language as 'limited', 'below age' or less fluent than in previous cohorts of

this age. One practitioner reported that children had forgotten what they had learned previously, but that they did start using the words again and form sentences during delivery of the Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) intervention. Staff also reported that children's social and emotional skills had been affected and that when they came back to the setting after being kept at home for a while due to the pandemic, they were shy and less willing to engage with activities or that there was more fighting among the children. There was speculation that impacts on language and social skills may have been due to staying at home, limited interaction with other children or adults, or possibly use of devices such as tablets. Several staff reported that Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) had helped them address these issues with one describing it as being like 'a restart or refresher' for the children. However, others felt that the pandemic had not affected the language and communication skills for this cohort in their setting. One manager noted that their current cohort of two- to three-year-olds had a high level of communication and language, but that their older year group had been adversely affected.

Generally, practitioners and managers who were interviewed felt that the programme had had a positive impact on children's language outcomes. In the practitioner implementation survey, three quarters of staff agreed 'very much' or 'quite a bit' that the strategies and ideas they had learned from the programme had led to improvements in children's language and communication skills, two practitioners thought there had only been a slight impact and one respondent was unsure (Total N = 13). In the interviews, staff identified groups which they felt had particularly benefitted from the strategies. Some staff reported that children who had been struggling or slower with their language were now starting to join words together and create sentences, eg with three words.

I feel like they're using more words and I feel like some children, where they were able to put, say like, two words together, they have built it up [...] I've seen there was [one] child and he's using more than two and sometimes more than three so it has been helpful and it has impacted on them.

Practitioners 1 and 2, Setting 2, Hackney

One manager felt that the programme had particularly helped children for whom English was an additional language and children with special education needs, and others observed that some shyer children were now more expressive and confident to participate in larger groups or speak with adults that they didn't know.

We have children who were quite shy, very introvert, but after the programme was implemented and we've done the sessions with them they were able to become more confident, they were able to participate in a larger group rather than smaller group always. They were able to say what they know rather than just be quiet, just maybe because they were aware of their language.

Practitioner 1, Setting 9, Hackney

Interviewees gave examples of impacts on language development which included improvements in vocabulary, with one specialist lead highlighting the role of Alan the Alien

and Concept Cat activities in facilitating this. Other reported impacts included increased concentration and listening skills, more turn-taking, and more use of negotiation or verbal requests, such as asking for toys, which resulted in fewer physical altercations. One practitioner felt that the children with more advanced skills had particularly benefitted from these social aspects, eg waiting for their turn in the conversation. In one example, a practitioner noted that children at her setting were now 'using signs to tell [staff] what they need', such as asking for milk.

Some parents also reported to setting staff that they had observed differences and progress in their children's language and communication including using specific concept words/phrases, and increased confidence.

6 Implementation and feasibility

While the previous findings chapter focused on immediate outcomes from the programmes, this chapter explores whether settings found the programmes useful, practicable and sustainable in the longer term as set out in the next two Implementation and Process Evaluation (IPE) questions:

1. Do settings find the interventions useful and are they able to incorporate them into their practice? Do they feel able to sustain this in the longer term?
2. What are the barriers or enablers for nurseries to participating in the training?

The following sections draw upon interviews and surveys with practitioners and managers to explore views on usefulness, incorporating strategies and approaches into everyday practice, sustainability of these practices, and barriers or enablers to participating in the training. Please note that the number of staff who responded to the surveys is quite small as the total number of practitioners in the study working with two-year-olds was small so these findings should be interpreted with caution. For each finding reported from the survey, we have included the number of respondents who answered that question in brackets at the end, eg (Total N = 12).

6.1 Incorporating learning into practice and sustainability

This section discusses feedback on whether settings found the programmes useful, whether they were able to incorporate them into their everyday practice and whether they felt able to sustain this in the longer term as part of their approach to working with two-year-olds.

6.1.1 Nottinghamshire CECIL

Overall, nursery managers and practitioners thought that the programme had been useful for their setting, including settings where colleagues had previously participated in Let's Interact training with the SaLT team. Practitioners were able to implement strategies from the programme into their practice and setting environment to support the children's language and communication skills, and intended to continue using the strategies.

Usefulness of the programme

Nursery managers and practitioners were enthusiastic about the benefits of the programme to the setting and their practice, and were willing to recommend it to others. They felt that it presented a beneficial package of support in terms of theory and input

from different aspects of speech and language therapy. Even where staff had similar previous knowledge or training, such as Let's Interact, (a course previously offered by the SaLT team which was adapted from the Hanen programme), the Nottinghamshire CECIL programme was seen to dig deeper, enhance previous knowledge and serve as a refresher of basic strategies. Staff reported benefitting from the training sessions, coaching sessions and other resources and these are discussed in more detail below.

Training sessions

Nursery managers and practitioners reported finding the training sessions to be clear, concise, and helpful in explaining strategies and good practice. All practitioner implementation survey respondents found the training sessions useful (Total N = 8). During interviews, practitioners mentioned finding all the strategies they learned to be useful and straightforward to implement, highlighting in particular:

- **OWLing** (Observe, Wait and Listen) where practitioners were encouraged to observe the children to see what they are interested in, wait silently and expectantly for the child to respond or lead the interaction, and then listen attentively without interruption.
- **Balancing comments with questions.** Some practitioners reported learning to ask fewer questions, and continue with a focus on the child's response rather than introducing new questions.
- **The language extension wheel.** This was a template provided in the training handbook that practitioners or others could use to explore ways to extend language and talk about a topic by filling in example sentences under six headings for how they could use examples of language to 'inform', 'explain', talk about feelings and opinions', 'project', 'pretend' and 'talk about the future'.

Practitioners also referred to implementing other strategies such as making the children wait to support turn-taking, word displays, encouraging child-led play and creating opportunities to communicate by keeping toys back so children begin to ask for them.

Practitioners also described being more reflective as a result of the training. For example, one practitioner said that it 'definitely makes you think twice' and commented that children are listening to and processing everything you say (Practitioner 1, Setting 7 Nottinghamshire). Another practitioner reported that once the strategies were put into practice, previously unidentified language needs came to light.

If you ask a question, knowing to give them time to respond as opposed to moving on straight away or assuming they haven't understood it straight away.'

Practitioner 1, Setting 3, Nottinghamshire on OWLing

Coaching sessions and support from a SaLT

Nursery managers and practitioners responded very positively to the one-to-one coaching sessions with the SaLT, and one nursery manager suggested that it was the most useful aspect of the programme. As previously described under section 5.1.1, practitioners felt coaching specifically reinforced their learning. Another manager felt it was useful for

practitioners at their setting to hear from a SaLT first-hand (as they would normally get limited exposure to SaLTs). Several practitioners and managers gave examples of when they had asked the SaLTs for advice regarding specific children or specific groups of children, eg louder children, and one practitioner interviewed noted that it could be difficult to get access to a SaLT from local services since the onset of the pandemic.

Three quarters of staff who were surveyed said that the coaching sessions were very useful, and the others felt that they were quite useful (Total N = 8). The coaching sessions involved practitioners taking a video of themselves interacting with a child using strategies taught in the training and then receiving feedback from the SaLT on their strengths and areas to improve. Generally, the coaching sessions were felt to be most useful when conducted face-to-face rather than over video conferencing software, especially given the IT issues faced by numerous settings. Staff mentioned the benefits of having one-to-one time with the SaLT and individualised feedback, although one practitioner commented that doing it with other team members made it less daunting. Practitioners described initially feeling a little nervous at the prospect of videoing themselves, but that the overall experience had been enlightening and helpful. Feedback from the SaLT was detailed and comprehensive and gave the practitioners relevant suggestions for improving their practice. Practitioners felt this significantly helped them to implement the strategies as well as improve their confidence 'watching yourself back has been very useful, helps to see what kind of practitioner you are' (Practitioner 1, setting 4, Nottinghamshire).

In the second to last coaching session we talked about how some louder children can be demanding of attention and it leads to the quieter ones being overlooked. [The SaLT] gave me strategies for making the louder ones wait without feeling like I'm being rude or ignoring them. In the last session we reflected on that because we found the same children who were involved, the quieter children, were more confident and chatting freely.

Practitioner 1, Setting 6, Nottinghamshire

Another practitioner said the coaching session was helpful for determining which strategies were appropriate for which children - they found that for the particular group they were working with, who were quite advanced, the language wheel was the best strategy to focus on.

However, a couple of practitioners reported that the videos highlighted that they were already implementing the strategies, and as a result may have been less useful¹⁹. One nursery manager reported that although the initial training sessions were useful, the programme had been delayed, with very little interaction and communication from the SaLT for a few months, other than a text reminder, which was dissatisfying. This was due to disruption to delivery from Covid-19, and issues while transitioning to a new SaLT. With this example as an exception, the interviews revealed that nursery managers and

¹⁹ The Nottinghamshire CECIL team found that after 3 sessions only 30% of practitioners were demonstrating the strategies needed and therefore additional sessions were required so this was a minority view.

practitioners overwhelmingly viewed the intervention positively. The Nottinghamshire CECIL team also reported that the instructions they had given for those videoing had developed over time as the quality of videos initially was not consistent across practitioners. For example, some practitioner videos focusing on the child more than themselves or practitioners resting the video somewhere and not moving it with the interaction.

As well as leading coaching sessions, SaLTs were available for KIT calls which practitioners found useful where they had accessed them. Practitioners felt that SaLTs were available for ad hoc support and provided useful advice. Several practitioners reported asking for and receiving help with a specific child. One practitioner reported finding the KIT call repetitive, but benefited from some ad hoc support where she asked the SaLT for advice for what to do if she does not understand a child. Practitioners also referred to receiving text messages from the SaLT team on techniques and strategies. Two survey respondents said they had attended Network meetings²⁰ organised by the SaLT team which they both found very useful.

Additional support

Staff also provided feedback on other resources used alongside the training and coaching. Participants were given a (Let's Interact) participant handbook, which provided resources to support learning in both the training and coaching sessions. The participant handbook was designed to be used in conjunction with the *'Learning Language and Loving it'*TM book²¹. One nursery manager highlighted that the *'Learning Language and Loving it'*TM book had been very useful, and that practitioners referred to it often. At one setting, the nursery manager created a shorter information booklet to bring into the rooms instead, as the handbook was found to be overwhelming. Staff at this setting commented that the information booklet had helped with implementation as it gave real life examples. Practitioners were able to refer to a particular strategy if they thought it would be useful for a particular child.

Putting learning into practice

All practitioners reported implementing strategies from the training and incorporating feedback from the coaching sessions which they felt had benefitted their day-to-day practice and the learning environment. Three quarters of staff surveyed said they had

²⁰ The SaLT team organised a pair of Project Network Meetings in May 2021 for practitioners taking part in the study which provided a refresher of some of the learning, interactive exercises and signposting to resources. Practitioners taking part in the research were also invited to attend the Language Lead Network sessions run by the SaLT team once a term where practitioners who have chosen to specialise in speech, language and communication have an opportunity to meet with other language leads, receive updates and continue their learning/training.

²¹ *Learning Language and Loving It Guidebook: A Guide to Promoting Children's Social, Language, & Literacy Development in Early Childhood Settings* by Elaine Weitzman and Janice Greenberg. Published by The Hanen Centre. It is designed for professionals who work with young children and contains practical strategies.

been able to put their learning from the training and/or coaching into practice every day, with one doing this sometimes and another occasionally (Total N = 8). Practitioners reported in interviews that one aspect of their practice which they felt had particularly benefitted from the programme was being able to respond and adapt their practice to the language and communication needs of each child.

Practitioners reported having greater awareness of language development, which they felt had enabled them to identify different children's needs: 'You can spot if there is a child you need to focus on more, to improve their language development.' (Practitioner 1, Setting 3, Nottinghamshire). One nursery manager said that the training led practitioners to think about how to help or further improve language for certain children. Practitioners described adapting their practice to engage children with different levels of speech, including tailoring their language. One practitioner commented that she had learned to use one-word sentences with the children who had little speech, and longer sentences with the more advanced children, which enabled them all to engage at the same level. Other strategies mentioned by practitioners included using very simple sentences and then reducing it to one word if any children still did not seem to understand, for example saying 'coat' instead of 'get your coat on'. Practitioners referred to implementing strategies to increase engagement of quieter children in particular.

Sustainability

All nursery managers and practitioners reported (in both the interviews and the practitioner implementation survey) that they planned to continue with all the strategies, although some stressed that many of the strategies were not new to them and were already being implemented, especially by those who had previously participated in Let's Interact training. They felt that the strategies would be applicable for all children at their setting but especially those who need extra encouragement with language and communication. The booklet was identified as an important ongoing resource for practitioners to refer to and enable continuation of the strategies. One nursery manager also emphasised the importance of practitioners as a resource and the need for continuous training. One practitioner outlined their nursery's plans to embed the new learning into their setting's long-term practice by having a strategies checklist to circulate among practitioners, as well as a strategy of the week, videos and observations.

6.1.2 Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language)

Nursery managers and practitioners universally expressed the usefulness of the programme for the setting. All participants were able to incorporate the programme successfully into their setting to support the children's language and communication skills. Staff reported that the interventions had fit in well with their existing curriculum and routines, allowing them to incorporate the activities and strategies easily across the setting and to continue them without the presence of the SaLT.

Usefulness of the programme

The nursery managers interviewed reported finding the programme useful for meeting their aims in supporting children's speech and language. The programme was suitable for settings with a range of needs, due to the adaptability of the programme and focus on different aspects of communication. As part of the CECIL Launchpad for Language delivery model, settings chose which modules best suited the needs of their setting and this was reviewed on a termly basis with the SaLT. As the designated SaLT would visit or video call with the setting every week/ fortnight, they were able to respond to the current needs or activities of the setting and adapt their offer from week to week. The range of activities and strategies available to choose from (the 'Menu of interventions') meant that even at settings where two-year-olds were reported to exhibit high standards of speech and language already, the interventions helped advance their language, for example, increasing their use of expressive language and concept words. Staff also felt that the options offered had helped them meet other aims important to the setting, such as improving the children's social skills and understanding of friendship. The programme was also beneficial for settings wanting to focus on a particular child's needs, and it was valuable that the options offered catered to different levels. Many settings were multicultural, and nursery managers found the interventions helpful for supporting children learning English as an additional language. One nursery manager felt that it had enabled practitioners to refresh their practice, especially after the pandemic. The role of the SaLT in providing this wide-ranging support is explored in the next section.

SaLT support

A core feature of the Hackney CECIL programme was that nurseries had access to a SaLT who would come into the setting to run sessions, provide one-to-one feedback and assist with the interventions, as well as providing ad hoc support throughout the course of the programme. Around two fifths of practitioners responding to the implementation survey reported that the SaLT attended their setting once a week for a half day, a little under a third had a one day visit fortnightly and a little under a third reported another frequency such as for one hour a fortnight (Total N = 14). Most practitioners felt that this suited their needs but one practitioner who reported that they had received a couple of visits each term indicated that they would have preferred shorter more frequent sessions²² (Total N = 14).

Staff reported in interviews that the SaLT would also help practitioners prepare for the week ahead and discuss what they had learned from previous week's sessions. The SaLT was regarded by nursery managers and practitioners as a valued resource to the team, who was easily approachable for expert knowledge and insight. Surveyed practitioners were asked how they viewed the SaLT working with their setting and were

²² The Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) delivery model typically comprises either a half-day visit each week or a full day visit once a fortnight. However, during the Covid-19 pandemic most delivery moved to online at request of the settings so it may be that the practitioner here is referring to physical in-setting visits when there may have been online sessions delivered by the SaLT as well.

able to select more than one option. Around three-quarters of practitioners described the SaLT's role as an additional resource they could go to, a little under a third described them as a member of the team, and a little under a quarter viewed them as an expert adviser (Total N = 13). The interviews confirmed that staff and also children regularly treated the SaLT like another member of the team. The presence of the SaLT was felt to be useful for assessing children's needs and answering questions about support with specific children, as well as with incorporating learning into practice. The majority of implementation survey respondents felt the support from the SaLT was effective in explaining strategies and good practice, with only one respondent saying it was neither effective nor ineffective (Total N = 13). One practitioner interviewed mentioned the SaLT was adaptable and helpful to all members of staff and provided wider support including creating signs for toilets for SEN children in the nursery. One nursery manager reported that they struggled to book time with SaLTs from their local services, so appreciated the support from the Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) SaLT.

Practitioners found the SaLT to be hands on and supportive, willing to provide advice and regular one-to-one feedback. This could be through formal training or coaching, or through ongoing feedback while working with staff at the setting. The SaLT showed the practitioners how to implement activities and was positive and encouraging of them to change their behaviour.

Rather than just reading it on paper. To actually see it in practice is more helpful, because then when you do it when they're not there you have a guide to follow, like their expressions, what they're saying, how to use the puppet exactly.

Practitioner 1, Setting 6, Hackney

Practitioners reported that the SaLT pushed them and showed them how to enhance their practice by taking their learning from the activities/ sessions and implementing it in other aspects of their practice. The SaLT also facilitated the smooth running of activities by assisting staff and adapting activities to make them more suitable or comprehensible for the children. For example, one practitioner explained that the children struggled with the Colourful semantics activity²³, so the SaLT helped to simplify it, after which the children began to understand it. Practitioners felt that observing the SaLT in role play sessions was very helpful for understanding the intervention and then being able to put that learning into practice. One nursery manager reported that just having a fresh face in the setting helped motivate the practitioners to implement the practices.

The sessions helped with the practitioners' confidence, and they felt able to carry out activities effectively themselves. For some activities however, practitioners thought that the training sessions were unnecessary. For example, implementing the Sing and Sign activity required little support and guidance from the SaLT and one practitioner reported that the SaLT had just sent them YouTube links which they could have found themselves. However, it is worth noting that the SaLT team had recorded videos of themselves

²³ Colourful semantics is of the approach used in the Rainbow Sentences package, where children use colour coded words to understand types of words and use these to form sentences.

modelling activities and practice as an adaptation to the pandemic when they were unable to access settings in person and had shared these via YouTube for ease of access.

Feedback on the activities

Nursery managers and practitioners reported that a range of activities and strategies taught in the training sessions were helpful for supporting children's speech and language. In the implementation survey, practitioners confirmed participating in a range of activities: over three-quarters of practitioners had participated in whole group sessions, over half in environment activities, over a third each in small group activities and staff training sessions, and a little under a quarter had been involved in parent sessions (Total N = 13). All sessions were described by surveyed practitioners as useful, with the majority of practitioners describing them as very useful (around two thirds of practitioners for each activity). The following are some of the activities that practitioners reported in interviews as most useful and implemented regularly:

- **Sing and Sign** was a whole group or small group activity using Makaton signs to accompany songs, and **Sign of the Week** was an environment support resource²⁴ that supported staff to learn more Makaton signs and use them in their daily practice. Some settings already used Makaton and found the Makaton-based activities/resources useful to reinforce their practice. Nursery managers were keen to encourage further use of Makaton, and found it was valuable because it could be used across age groups and levels of need.
- **Alan the Alien Learns About Nursery** was a whole group or small group activity that used a puppet (Alan the Alien) to explore everyday vocabulary using nursery objects to help Alan learn new words. Practitioners valued this activity because it was inclusive and increased participation of the less confident children.
- **Concept Cat** was a whole group or small group activity which used a cat puppet to show children concepts such as 'in' or 'on'. One practitioner described how Concept Cat had been useful for engaging quiet children who preferred to speak through actions. Another practitioner described also using Concept Cat with the older children or children in the more advanced language group.
- **Speaking spaceship** was an environment support resource. It was a spaceship filled with exciting items for the children to find and talk about with support from staff. Practitioners said it enabled participation from quieter children and gave children the opportunity to talk in small groups. One practitioner commented that it was particularly useful for describing textures.

These activities were often valued for engaging a wide number of children. One practitioner said the children liked that the activities were visually engaging. Other

²⁴ Meaning it is left in the room for practitioners to use throughout the week.

practitioners highlighted the benefits of activities tailored towards children with individual needs, such as 'Stop and go'²⁵ and 'What's in the box?'²⁶.

WellComm assessments

As part of the Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) 'menu', settings had the option for children at their setting to be assessed using the WellComm speech and language assessment tool and some settings chose to do this. Around half of practitioners responding to the implementation survey had implemented WellComm assessments with the SaLT (Total N = 13). All who had implemented the assessments reported that they were useful for identifying children's current language capabilities (Total N = 6). In the interviews, staff also reported that they found the WellComm assessments to be useful, especially the element where the SaLT allocated children into green, amber and red categories of language and communication skills. One practitioner described how it enabled them to pinpoint who needed extra help and base some of the activities around what would help them. At this setting the SaLT also developed a plan for a child whose additional needs had not been identified yet, and it was useful for the SaLT to have one-on-one assessments of individual children's needs. One nursery manager, however, reported that within their current cohort there was little differentiation in terms of ability, so it did not make sense for them to group children into levels. Almost all surveyed practitioners who had used the WellComm assessments felt relatively confident to carry out the WellComm assessments without a SaLT supporting them with one practitioner feeling neither confident nor unconfident (Total N = 5). Some interviewees were not aware of what these assessments were, so perhaps more time could have been given to describing the menu options with wider staff.

Putting learning into practice

Settings reported successfully integrating the learning into their practice. When asked how often they had been able to incorporate the learning into practice, over half of practitioners surveyed had done so every day, a little under a quarter had done so occasionally, two practitioners had sometimes and one practitioner said they had not yet put their learning into practice, but they were planning to (Total N = 13). Nursery managers reported that the activities combined well with topics the class was going to cover and sometimes aligned certain activities with parts of the curriculum. One practitioner outlined how they ran sessions regularly, with Concept Cat and Sign of the week taking place every morning, and sometimes in the afternoon, then Speaking spaceship around twice a week if they were able. Another practitioner had incorporated learning into their daily practice and reported that Concept Cat was used for activities around maths and physical positioning, as it helped teach placement of objects. Both nursery managers and practitioners reported that little time adjustment was needed to

²⁵ A game to test children's listening skills. The practitioner has the children do a task or action and when the 'Go' sign switches to 'Stop', they must freeze.

²⁶ Cards depict a box with words to describe what is in the box and the child must guess what is in the box

incorporate learning into daily practice, since the strategies fit well into the daily routine, such as using Makaton signs.

There was also evidence of practitioners using strategies responsively and flexibly as well as regularly. One practitioner mentioned that on days when they had more children than usual in their circle time group, it was particularly important to implement strategies to keep their focus, which was usually challenging. As a result, they would condense games and songs to keep them concise in order to successfully maintain the children's attention.

Sustainability

Nursery managers and practitioners were keen to continue all the strategies and activities throughout the setting. All implementation survey respondents felt they were likely or sure to keep using strategies and ideas from the support from the SaLT once the programme has finished (Total N = 13). A practitioner at one setting said in their interview they intended to continue the strategies and activities with the children until they started primary school, due to the benefit of repetition for children of this age. Staff interviewed at this setting suggested that once the foundation was laid it would be possible for them to roll the strategies and activities out to the new children coming up as well. Practitioners and managers did not see any barriers to sustaining the practices long-term. They reported that these activities were easy to implement without the SaLT present, and that children found them engaging and enjoyable. Staff reported children even engaging with the activities without staff present, such as showing the Alan the Alien puppet to their friends. These have been important factors in their decision to continue with the activities.

6.2 Barriers and enablers

This section first explores any barriers that settings encountered when participating in the programme, implementing learning, or achieving outcomes. This is then followed by discussion of the enablers to participation, including those which helped to mitigate the effect of some barriers.

6.2.1 Nottinghamshire CECIL

Barriers

The barriers experienced by practitioners in Nottinghamshire included time and other resource costs, especially staff shortages, which were exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. There were also significant issues with technology and virtual delivery.

Nursery managers reported time costs arising from the programme. One manager noted that the programme was labour intensive, especially when recording videos for the coaching sessions. Another said that staff came in earlier but did not have enough time to read up on the material and understand it. Over half of practitioners surveyed said they had to spend extra time engaging with the programme in addition to their normal working hours, whereas three were able to fit it into their normal working day (Total N = 8).

These time costs were exacerbated by challenges with covering staff, described by practitioners and managers in interviews. These issues mainly stemmed from staff shortages relating to Covid-19 and bubbles which made it more difficult to cover staff. They reported issues with ensuring that both practitioners on the programme were free at the same time and with organising time for staff to attend the training. One manager expressed the view that a lot of time was required to release two staff, especially with staff on furlough. This manager also reported that their office was used as the staff room and a meeting room, so it was inconvenient to lose this resource when practitioners were using it for one-to-one sessions. The timing of the SaLT visit could also cause challenges. Another manager described how the SaLT came in at an awkward time (which ran into lunch). However, the SaLT was able to change the timing of their visit slightly to better fit the schedule at the setting. The Nottinghamshire CECIL team reported that they learnt that the middle of the day did not work well for delivery due to demands on staff coverage for lunch and so they agreed mutually suitable alternatives with practitioners.

The Covid-19 pandemic caused a number of challenges for settings including the implementation of bubbles where staff were allocated to a specific group of children in order to reduce the risk of infection within settings. Issues arising from bubbles included: practitioners struggling to juggle Nottinghamshire CECIL around other responsibilities, needing to rearrange coaching sessions, and making it more difficult to cover staff. One setting reported engaging in heated discussions regarding the Covid-19 risk in switching staff to record videos for the coaching sessions so they had to do it outside. Covid-19 also delayed delivery of the programme which was unhelpful in some cases as in the case of the setting which had no SaLT contact for a few months.

Technical issues were reported by several practitioners and managers in interviews, and were the most common issues with accessing training, coaching or learning materials reported by practitioners in the implementation survey: three-quarters of practitioners reported problems trying to watch shared videos, and over a third each experienced issues with internet connection issues or video-conferencing software (Total N = 8). In the interviews, staff explained that issues were found with uploading videos and a common problem was the sound on videos being too low. The SaLT team offered to send new tablets to the settings but then discovered that this would not solve the problem so the tablets were not sent in the end. One setting manager also felt frustrated over the lack of communication about the new tablets.

Some practitioners struggled to engage with the virtual group training sessions held with other settings and would have preferred them to be held face to face. They reported that the virtual sessions felt segmented and unnatural. One manager felt that with virtual delivery people held back more and they expressed the view that 'if it was a face-to-face group it would have been more rounded and rich.' (Nursery Manager 1, Setting 3, Nottinghamshire) Another practitioner felt one-to-one training sessions would have been more helpful. They said that the virtual group training sessions had felt a bit rushed, with everyone trying to ask questions and no time for your own input. Other practitioners also thought that face-to-face coaching sessions would have been better and would have reduced the barriers from technical issues.

Enablers

Key enablers to the programme identified by practitioners included support from SaLTs, managers and peers. In many cases this support helped to mitigate the barriers such as finding availability for training. Even with partially/ wholly virtual delivery, practitioners reported being able to access sufficient SaLT support, including ad hoc email support with queries around setting needs or individual children. At one setting, where Covid-19 had caused delays, KIT calls with the SaLT enabled practitioners to reengage with the programme.

We are in a group on Teams where we can ask questions and they [the SaLT] give us their email. At the end of every teams session you are given the opportunity to stay on Teams and ask questions and they give support.

Practitioner 2, Setting 3, Nottinghamshire

Practitioners on the programme described other practitioners and managers as being supportive and accommodating the needs of the programme through providing them with resources, office space and occasional support with technology. One practitioner reported being given time off by their manager in lieu later in the year to make up for the overtime required from the programme. Practitioners reported that managers were helpful and flexible overall, listening to them and offering ideas for implementing strategies. One practitioner described their manager as being 'hands-on', 'really supportive' and having 'so much experience and knowledge' (Practitioner 1, Setting 7, Nottinghamshire). Both practitioners and managers mentioned the benefits of peer support where there was more than one practitioner on the programme as they could support each other without necessarily needing much additional support from other staff at the setting.

6.2.2 Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language)

Barriers

The main barriers experienced by settings participating in the Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) programme included time and other resource costs, the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on delivery, and staffing issues.

Both practitioners and managers reported that, in some cases, practitioners were having to work outside of their normal working hours to prepare activities and group work, watch or read through resources, and complete paperwork. One manager noted that it sometimes took the two practitioners on the programme an additional two hours a day to research and prepare activities. One practitioner reported that the VERVE requirements were the most challenging and time consuming, such as finding the time to video themselves and finding staff to help them.

It is difficult to find time to do everything within the working hours when we have nursery. It is very challenging, I end up doing my work in the holiday.

Practitioner 1, Setting 2, Hackney

So once all the kids go home you would spend about 20 minutes getting the resources ready for the next sessions.

Practitioner 1, Setting 9, Hackney

Another time-related barrier arose regarding scheduling visits to the setting around the SaLT's timetable and availability. One practitioner commented that the SaLT arrived at inconvenient times, such as before all the children had arrived, or that arrival of the SaLT would interrupt other activities.

When it's really busy it can put a bit of pressure on the staff members.

Practitioner 1, Setting 9, Hackney

Covid-19 restrictions also created challenges for settings. A significant barrier were the staff bubbles which settings had to implement. One practitioner reported that bubbles created difficulty in sharing resources and sharing learning with other staff. It also created issues with space, as often practitioners had to take over a whole room in the setting to undertake one-to-one sessions with the SaLT. Staff taking part in the programme usually had to be in the same bubble, which limited which staff could be chosen by the manager to participate.

Some settings reported staff shortages and absences. One practitioner also mentioned this made it difficult to find time to leave the room as they needed to maintain staff ratios. While half of the practitioners surveyed had not experienced issues with accessing training, coaching or learning materials, a quarter had experienced issues related to the pandemic such as staff shortages, two reported internet connection issues and one had problems trying to watch shared videos (Total N = 10).

Covid-19 restrictions also limited parent engagement and prevented face-to-face parent workshops from taking place, and at times SaLT engagement with settings was also limited to online. While SaLTs were able to enter most settings by spring 2021 with suitable precautions such as masks, some staff emphasised that they would have preferred face-to-face training sessions to online engagement.

Enablers

Two key enablers to participation were support from setting managers and from SaLTs working in the settings, which reduced or eliminated time and other resource costs for some settings. Practitioners and managers reported that their link SaLT was very supportive and helped prepare the activities and provide props and resources, which took some burden off the setting staff.

[The SaLT] was always prepared to do things for us, laminate things, so she was always hands on. [They] would help out and do things for us if we don't have the time to do it.

Practitioner 2, Setting 2, Hackney

Practitioners also reported that nursery managers were generous with allowing time and resources to facilitate practitioners' participation in the programme, for example by covering staff where needed/possible. Almost all practitioners surveyed felt supported by their manager/senior staff members to put their learning from the programme into practice and introduce new ideas: a little under half felt well-supported, over a third felt quite supported, one felt a bit supported and one was unsure (Total N = 13).

Although Covid-19 posed many problems to delivery, practitioners at one setting reported that bubbles were beneficial to programme delivery and would continue to be implemented at the setting. They reasoned that the smaller groups allowed practitioners to spend more time with each child and better support language and communication skills. Bubbles also fostered better relationships between the practitioners and children, as each group of children would interact with the same adult consistently.

7 Factors for scale-up

This chapter discusses findings pertaining to the final Implementation and Process Evaluation (IPE) question:

1. What factors may need to be considered in scaling up the intervention to deliver it in more nurseries?

The following sections incorporate themes and findings from the previous two chapters on perceived impacts and implementation and feasibility, as well as drawing upon interviews and surveys with practitioners and managers to explore factors to consider for future delivery and scale-up of the programmes. Please note that the number of staff who responded to the surveys is quite small as the total number of practitioners in the study working with two-year-olds was small so these findings should be interpreted with caution. For each finding reported from the survey, we have included the number of respondents who answered that question in brackets at the end, eg (Total N = 12).

7.1 Nottinghamshire CECIL

The vast majority of practitioners and managers interviewed were positive about the programme and several managers expressed the view that they would send more of their staff on the training if they could. Almost all practitioners in the implementation survey said they would definitely or probably recommend the programme to other settings, and one practitioner thought they would maybe do so (Total N = 8). One manager who was interviewed felt that participating staff had become more proactive in their approach towards the children and some staff suggested that the information and approaches could be used with a wider range of ages at their setting. However, there were areas to consider for future delivery and possible scale-up.

Several practitioners described managers at their setting as being very supportive of their participation in the programme and ensuring they had time to participate. In some cases, managers also supported them with implementing strategies, offered advice and helped the practitioner with filming videos of practice. This was clearly beneficial to those practitioners' experience of the programme. This suggests that key questions to consider for future scale-up are what kinds of support from senior leadership were particularly helpful, and how can the SaLTs support managers who have not previously participated in Let's Interact training so that they can better support participating practitioners. In addition to this, several practitioners mentioned that colleagues had participated in the Let's Interact training previously offered by the SaLT team. One manager explained that they were unsure of the difference between previous Let's Interact training and the Nottinghamshire CECIL programme, and practitioners who had experienced both felt that the content was very similar. The CECIL programme built on Let's Interact by including

individual coaching sessions, in addition to the group coaching already offered as part of Let's Interact. However, it is worth noting that the disruption to the delivery of one-to-one coaching sessions probably contributed to this confusion as coaching was delivered at a much later point than originally planned. This meant that for some settings the individual coaching happened after the training sessions had ended instead of taking place between training sessions to support and reinforced ongoing learning from the training sessions. It may be helpful for the SaLT team to consider how to explain the additional value of the Nottinghamshire CECIL programme to settings already familiar with the Let's Interact training. Conversely, it is also important to consider the support needs of settings where staff are not familiar with the strategies and format of the Nottinghamshire CECIL programme and cannot support their learning in the same way.

Staff at most settings reported no costs associated with participating in the programme except for some printing costs. Most practitioners reported in interviews that all programme activities took place during their working hours, but some did do some reading or other activities at home or in their own time. However, over half of the practitioners who responded to the implementation survey had spent time in addition to their normal working hours engaging with the programme (see barriers section), perhaps suggesting that practitioners felt less comfortable opening up about challenges in interviews (Total N = 8). One issue that was mentioned in interviews was the need to ensure there was enough staff to cover staff:child ratios or to pay for staff cover. Several practitioners mentioned the support of managers in helping them to participate in the programme and one practitioner appreciated being able to move from a Monday training group to the Friday training group. While the pandemic has exacerbated staff pressure through furlough, needing to self-isolate or shield, and the need for bubbles, this is likely to remain a key issue for the PVI sector and some flexibility in delivery will be an important consideration for future scale-up.

Finally, several staff commented on their preference for face-to-face training in a physical location rather than virtual training using video conferencing. All staff who raised this understood that this had been an unavoidable adaptation due to the pandemic, but emphasised the value of practitioners being in the same room and able to discuss and interact with SaLTs and practitioners from other settings much more easily. One manager mentioned that funding for technology such as tablets or laptops to support online training at the outset would have been useful. While virtual delivery would likely facilitate delivery to a larger number of settings, it is worth noting that it can present challenges for PVI settings in terms of the technology required and the preferred modes of engagement for a workforce that spends a large proportion of its time interacting with children and/or parents and carers in person, and relatively little time sitting at a computer or in an office.

7.2 Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language)

Overall, the Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) programme was very positively received with all practitioners and managers interviewed suggesting that this was something they would like to continue with and would recommend to other PVI settings. The vast majority of practitioners surveyed agreed that they would definitely recommend

the support from the SaLT to other nurseries/ settings, one practitioner would probably recommend it and only one practitioner was unsure (Total N = 13). However, it is worth reviewing feedback from settings to identify any potential issues for future scale-up for both settings and the SaLT team delivering the intervention.

Generally, settings reported relatively little direct cost to the setting from participating. Some settings reported a need for printing materials, whereas others reported that their SaLT brought materials for them to use and display at their setting. The SaLT team may wish to consider whether they would want to provide materials for all settings in future or whether this cost would be prohibitive. No setting expressed the view that this cost was excessive, but printing materials did require extra time in addition to their usual activities. While managers reported that relatively little time was needed to support staff participating in the programme, feedback was mixed from practitioners themselves. Some practitioners reported that they had been able to carry out all programme activities during their working hours, whereas others reported preparing sessions or watching videos in their own time. However, almost all practitioners responding to the implementation survey felt able to fit engaging with the programme within their existing responsibilities and working hours, while one respondent was unsure (Total N = 13).

It is also worth noting that the impacts of the pandemic such as having staff on furlough or self-isolating, and having to teach children in bubbles so staff couldn't be deployed to cover children in other groups/ bubbles placed particular pressures on staffing resource and maintaining the required staff:child ratios. While this situation was more acute in the context of the pandemic, the need to maintain staff:child ratios can make releasing staff to activities outside of working with the children challenging and would most likely be a key consideration for PVI's considering participating in the programme. However, the Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) model of link SaLTs attending the settings and working in the room with the practitioners and children helped to mitigate this issue somewhat although care was needed around the timing of SaLTs' arrival at a setting. One setting experienced issues initially as their link SaLT arrived when they were in the middle of activities with the children which they found disruptive and difficult to accommodate with the required staff ratios but they were able to agree a more suitable arrival time for the SaLT. Going forward, it may still be useful for the SaLT team to continue to consider how they can keep their delivery flexible and responsive to the needs of PVI settings, and to build this into their model of staff time needed to deliver the intervention. One manager suggested that it would be good for the intervention to cover a wider age range which might also serve as a way to reduce the internal staffing pressures at settings for a particular year group.

The need to maintain bubbles meant that settings experienced particular pressures around space and the capacity for practitioners to share learning with other staff at the setting. However, there may be challenges with these aspects even once bubbles are no longer necessary. For some settings, the nursery manager's office also served as the staffroom and the location for any one-to-one sessions with the SaLT. This would then disrupt the nursery manager's work. One aspect to consider for future delivery with PVI's could be whether there are suitable alternate venues that could be used for one-to-one

sessions that might still be relatively convenient for practitioners. Similarly, the lack of a dedicated staff room or spare classroom may mean it is difficult for staff to gather and present knowledge or model approaches to all colleagues. In response to the need to work remotely, the Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) team produced videos and resources to share strategies with practitioners, and it may be helpful to review current materials and consider whether resources could be collated into packs or handbooks which could be shared with settings so that current and wider staff could refer to these in order to reinforce and disseminate learning.

8 Discussion

The final chapter will bring together the key findings from across our five research questions from both Hackney and Nottinghamshire evaluations, drawing out differences between the interventions when applicable. These findings have led to considerations for teams working with language interventions in the PVI sector which are highlighted. Next steps for future research with the two teams are also covered.

8.1 Study Research Questions

8.1.1 What evidence is there of change in practitioner behaviour and/or perceived impacts on the nursery environment with regards to language and communication support?

Overall, the key findings from managers and practitioners suggest:

- Most practitioners reported increased skills, confidence and motivation to support children's language and communication development.
- Most practitioners reported increased knowledge and awareness of individual children's language, which allows them to identify gaps and tailor strategies to support their language and communication development.
- Practitioners also reported using strategies which enable interactions to be child led eg slowing down, balancing comments and questions, and OWLing.
- Some practitioners on the Nottinghamshire CECIL programme had received similar training in the past which minimised the potential effect of the programme, but helped reinforce good practice.
- Changes to the environment were limited due to Covid-19 restrictions, but included sharing learning and resources with other parts of the setting, and parent engagement.

From the interviews with nursery managers and practitioners, and practitioner implementation survey responses, we found reported changes in practitioner knowledge and in practitioner behaviour with regards to language and communication support across both interventions. We obtained different perspectives to support these findings, including managers reporting on practitioner behaviour, and practitioners reporting on behaviour of their practitioner colleagues as well as reflecting on their own behaviour. Practitioners described using a range of strategies and activities to help them support children's language and communication skills. Through training and coaching sessions, practitioners felt they had increased their understanding of children's speech and language and learned skills to interact with the children in appropriate ways to support their development. Practitioners reported gaining greater knowledge of the level of language

and communication skills the children would be expected to have, which helped them more easily identify where there were gaps. They also felt that they had learned skills to help address these gaps and alter their behaviour accordingly. Examples of reported changes in behaviour included letting children lead the interactions by slowing down and letting children speak more, but also reflecting and tailoring the interactions to individual children when needed. This made overall interactions with children more effective. Practitioners felt they had gained skills which could be applied universally to all two- to three-year-olds, and were more confident and motivated to support children's language and communication development.

In Nottinghamshire, some practitioners had previous training on supporting children's language and communication skills, either internal or external, which they felt reduced the possible impact of the programme on behaviour. The Let's Interact programme which many of the nursery managers had completed is very similar in content to the Nottinghamshire CECIL programme but the CECIL programme adds in one-to-one coaching sessions to further embed ideas and allow practitioners to reflect on their own practice. For this reason, practitioners reported that a number of the strategies being taught were not new to staff who were familiar with the Let's Interact training. However, all practitioners felt their practice had benefited from previous learning being reinforced and through reassurance from the SaLT. This was often due to the opportunity for increased reflection through videoing their own practice and working with the SaLT in coaching sessions, as well as improved confidence. Overall, practitioners reported reflecting more on what works to engage children more, especially those with further need. Whilst there is a benefit of regular training for practitioners, the programme would potentially have made a greater difference to the behaviour of practitioners with less of an existing knowledge base. However, in many cases the settings taking part in the programme did not have practitioners who had not been exposed to any past training, or managers preferred to choose practitioners based on bubbles or staff who were working with two-year-olds.

Consideration 1: Carefully reviewing the prior CPD experience of the staff in targeted settings will be an important step for delivery teams working in the PVI sector so that differences between prior and current training/ support can be highlighted to ensure that participants recognise the added value. This is important not only of the staff taking part directly but also the managers and wider colleagues.

Environment

As a result of Covid-19 the level of reported impacts on the nursery environment were limited. Covid-19 has made physical environment changes more difficult, as practitioners had to stay in their own bubbles and sometimes could not share rooms. Some practitioners put up signs in shared classrooms and shared their learning with colleagues, but interviewees reflected that more could have been done without the restrictions of Covid- 19.

Practitioners reported sharing ideas, learning and resources with colleagues. Managers and practitioners were enthusiastic to disseminate knowledge. Practitioners described sharing learning with their managers (especially in Nottinghamshire), the staff they shared

a room with and then also with staff in other rooms. Sharing of knowledge largely relied on who had taken part in the programme, and their interest eg in one setting the manager took part. Settings in Nottinghamshire appeared to have more formal sharing mechanisms, potentially due to the handbook which facilitated dissemination. Other staff and managers at Nottinghamshire settings were also more likely to have had prior language and communication training, which may make them more likely to understand the value of the training and where there are opportunities for sharing knowledge. The Hackney model is more diffuse with sharing happening organically, so formal sharing may be more difficult. Settings in Hackney also did not refer to a handbook or similar resource. In Hackney, SaLT teams could consider how to facilitate more formal sharing and cascading. Sharing did not seem to be an integral part of either model, and settings would benefit from having a specific roll out strategy or clearer way to disseminate learning to the rest of the team and avoid knowledge that is passed on being diluted. It is important to note that the context of Covid-19 made sharing more difficult, as practitioners were restricted by bubbles and staff shortages.

Staff interviewed, reported that the effects of the pandemic had also limited parents' engagement with the programmes and settings. Staff at some settings described that parents were engaged and attended parent workshops, which were positively received, and that they shared resources with them such as worksheets. However, the effectiveness of this engagement was reduced, especially since parents were not allowed to visit the setting. Covid-19 also affected how accurately practitioners could report on parent involvement. For settings in Nottinghamshire on the CECIL programme, while social media presented an opportunity to share news with parents and engage with them (and in fact the pandemic may have led to more engagement with social media), parent engagement and feedback was still limited. General enthusiasm and interest from parents suggest in other circumstances there would be more opportunity for parent engagement.

Consideration 2: More could be done by the intervention teams to support clear and easy ways for practitioners to share learning within their settings and to increase parental engagement. This could include producing a specific plan for how to share learning with other practitioners and parents. They could also review the materials they have and consider whether these could be adapted or revised to facilitate use as a universal reference resource or for sharing learning with other practitioners and parents, to be provided to all settings. However, it should be noted that while both CECIL programmes support the sharing of learning among peers, neither programme includes a formal cascading element as the training needs to be delivered by an appropriately qualified specialist such as a SaLT.

8.1.2 What, if any, are the perceived impacts on language and communication skills among children supported by practitioners who have received one of the interventions?

To summarise, the key findings regarding perceived impacts on children's language and communication skills were:

- The context of the Covid-19 pandemic was felt to have negatively impacted language and communications skills for some children, but other children were at the expected level or had higher levels of language.
- Both programmes appeared to be universal interventions which practitioners felt supported the language of all children at their settings but were particularly beneficial for targeted approaches with children who were struggling or had speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), eg EAL or shy or reluctant children.
- Practitioners observed that improved language and communication skills also had benefits for personal, social and emotional development with increased turn-taking and verbal negotiation between children instead of just taking toys or objects from each other which could lead to conflict and fights.

When considering the perceived outcomes of the two programmes on children's language and communication skills it is important to consider the context of the global Covid-19 pandemic that started during the feasibility stage of the evaluation and meant that many parents and carers kept their children at home at times during the evaluation period. Practitioners and managers from both programmes felt that this had impacted on some children's overall language and communication skills when they came back to settings, as well as impacts on their personal, social and emotional development. The overall feedback from staff was that this impact had been mixed with some children behind compared to cohorts in previous years, some at the normal level for this age group and in some cases children's language level was higher than usual. Staff speculated that some children may have benefitted from increased interactions with adults at home or lower staff:child ratios in settings.

Generally, staff felt that the programmes had a positive impact on children's language and communications skills at their settings. In particular, they highlighted examples of how strategies and activities from the programmes had benefitted children who were struggling or behind with their language, who were shy or quiet, or for whom English was an additional language. Practitioners reported that the programmes had helped them to identify a child's language level which allowed them to tailor their activities or approach with each child. Strategies such as using fewer words and letting the child lead interactions allowed children to engage at a level they could manage so that staff could build confidence and language skills from there. Similarly, staff were able to use activities or strategies to extend vocabulary and interactions among children with a high level of language. Both practitioners and managers reported that it was gratifying and motivating for them to be able to see the strategies 'working' and children who were receiving targeted support making progress.

There were also perceived impacts observed on children's wider communication and social skills. For both programmes, staff reported improvements in concentration, listening skills and turn-taking. Furthermore, some staff felt there was more use of negotiation and verbal requests among the children, such as asking for a toy, and less 'grabbing' or 'snatching' resulting in fewer fights between the children. One practitioner reflected that the children with more advanced language skills had particularly benefitted from the social aspects, such as improved listening skills and waiting for their turn in the conversation.

This aspect was felt to be particularly beneficial when children had had limited interactions with other children and adults due to restrictions around the Covid-19 pandemic.

Overall, practitioners' perceptions of impacts upon children's language suggests that both programmes were universal interventions that supported the language of all children that the practitioners worked with, but were both particularly beneficial for targeted interventions where children needed extra support. This aligns with longer-term outcomes identified in the Theory of Change models of both programmes where they aimed to see improvements in language and communication for all children, but also wanted to see particular progress with children who were struggling, to help narrow the gap between children. With regards to the short-term outcomes, practitioners reported examples of increased child engagement in settings and improved functional skills such as asking for things/ help, increased turn-taking, and sustained child-led interactions with shared thinking between children and practitioners.

Consideration 3: Practitioners felt that the programmes had benefits for a range of children attending their settings and there was wider variation in the language skills and support needs of children across the settings. When delivering the programmes, SaLT teams need to ensure that they provide a range of strategies for supporting children who are struggling and for developing the language of children whose skills are more advanced.

8.1.3 Do settings find the interventions useful and are they able to incorporate them into their practice? Do they feel able to sustain this in the longer term?

To summarise, the key findings regarding how useful the programme was and if settings were able to incorporate their learnings sustainably were:

- The strategies and activities learned by practitioners on the programmes were widely applicable, suitable for universal and targeted approaches.
- Support offered from the speech and language therapy teams, including coaching and responding to ad hoc queries regarding setting needs or individual children, facilitated practitioners to make the most of the programme and implement the strategies and activities.
- Practitioners generally felt supported by their nursery manager, although manager involvement with the programme was not consistent across settings.
- The strategies and activities were overwhelmingly useful and straightforward to implement into regular practice and timetables and so are possible to sustain longer term. Continuing this work in future could be supported by managers or senior staff at settings but could be further enhanced by support from speech and language therapists.
- The level of support and structure of the programme was suitable, however some delays to the programme due to Covid-19 were disruptive.

Overall, staff at settings felt that the programmes were useful and met language and communication aims at a variety of settings in Hackney and Nottinghamshire, including multicultural settings requiring EAL support. The fact that the support was from SaLTs specifically was seen as an added benefit as they valued their particular expertise as

language experts. Staff reported that the SaLT support and guidance was beneficial, especially ad hoc targeted support to help specific children who were struggling in Hackney. Settings successfully incorporated the strategies and activities into their practice as they were straightforward, adaptable and aligned well with settings' curriculums and aims. As such they were often used daily as part of a regular practice/ timetable, as well as responsively when needed. Practitioners reported that they could see in which circumstances the activities and strategies would be useful and who or what for, and they engaged a wide number of children. SaLT support was particularly helpful for facilitating implementation for Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language participants). On the Nottinghamshire CECIL programme, coaching was highly valued by nursery managers and practitioners for improving practice and the handbook was very useful as an additional reference. Coaching was also valued in Hackney, when it was delivered as part of VERVE, and should be continued one-to-one and face-to-face where possible. However, coaching was sometimes felt to be relatively demanding (on time, space and other resources) and was unprecedented for many practitioners. Support for practitioners (from managers in particular) and other enabling factors for coaching were therefore very important. Participants of the Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) programme reported that some activities required more SaLT support than others.

Consideration 4: Staff particularly valued having access to the support and expertise of the SaLTs to advise on practice in their settings and approaches to use with individual children, where normally their interaction with the local SaLT team might be quite limited.

Consideration 5: The one-to-one coaching was felt to be especially valuable for embedding learning and building confidence but releasing staff to participate could be challenging.

Consideration 6: The SaLT team should make it clear to participants and managers in advance which activities may require more support (for example coaching), and where possible provide resources for practitioners to read through and learn on their own, to make the most of the SaLTs' time.

Consideration 7: Face-to-face support is the clear preference for training and coaching delivery, and this should be prioritised for future CPD support in PVI's.

Managers and practitioners at both settings thought that the practices would be sustained long-term, although only one setting outlined formal plans for sustaining implementation.

Practitioners generally felt they had ample support from the nursery manager, but manager involvement was relatively inconsistent across settings. Where managers had past training such as in Nottinghamshire, they were very engaged and had established respect for the SaLT.

Consideration 8: The programmes could be made more useful if managers were encouraged to have priority meetings or collect staff views on confidence and knowledge around supporting language and communication, before and after the programme with the practitioners. This would help managers determine what practitioners see as the most pertinent issues and would most like to focus on.

It did not appear in the interviews that managers are having discussions with practitioners pre-programme, possibly due to Covid-19 restrictions. Managers should have those discussions post programme at a minimum, to make practitioners aware of the process, as manager engagement was shown to be an enabler for participation in the interventions. This would make practitioners feel more motivated and listened to, and managers would benefit from being responsive to the needs of practitioners on the ground.

While restrictions put in place for the Covid-19 pandemic had limited practitioners' interactions with parents and carers, several staff reported that parents were engaged with and interested in the programme, and some had observed progress in their children's language. However, some settings reported that parents and carers had not engaged much with the programme.

Consideration 9: Speaking with parents and discussing their child's needs when agreeing priorities for the programmes could be beneficial for nursery staff and improve parent engagement with the programmes.

Wellcomm assessments in Hackney were a helpful holistic approach for identifying priorities and different needs so the programme could be designed to address all needs in the setting.

Consideration 10: Wellcomm assessments were well received, and it would be appropriate to make them an essential part of the Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) programme to gauge needs of the setting.

It is important to note the low level of attrition of settings from this project (especially given the context of Covid-19), demonstrates both the commitment of practitioners but also that the interventions were useful and feasible.

8.1.4 What are the barriers or enablers for nurseries to participating in the interventions?

The following summarises the main barriers and enablers for nurseries to participating in the programme, which are expanded on in the next section:

Barriers

- **Staffing shortages** – this was extra challenging in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic as there were increased staff absences due to illness/ isolating and the need for bubbles meant staff could not be transferred between rooms or bubbles.
- **Time taken** – a number of staff, especially in the implementation survey, highlighted not having enough time in the working day to take part in programme related activities. However, compared to similar studies, time taken was not a significantly large barrier.

- **Technical issues** – with accessing training, coaching or learning materials. In Nottinghamshire especially, the videos were not always the ideal setup in terms of quality and framing. There was a strong preference for face-to-face learning.
- **Lack of room capacity** – some staff reported that one-to-one coaching sessions took place in the nursery manager's office or in the lunch room as there was no spare room that could be used for coaching or training or because there was only one computer/room with wifi and this was in the manager's office or a staff room. This then impacted on other staff in the setting, as well as on quality of coaching if there were many interruptions.
- **Other small resource costs** – there were some small costs reported, but often the SaLT would do costly things for the settings such as printing resource materials.

Enablers

- **Manager support** – including assisting practitioners with videos and resolving tech issues, helping disseminate learning from the programme and allowing practitioners space and time for participating in the programme.
- **SaLT support** – the SaLT was highly valued at each setting for their expertise in supporting children's language and communication skills and facilitating practitioners to benefit from the programme.
- **Peer support** – other practitioners on the programme at one setting could help each other and some practitioners spoke of a setting focus on language and communication/ pandemic catch-up which helped with sharing and implementing new approaches or ideas.

8.1.5 What factors may need to be considered in scaling up the interventions to deliver them in more nurseries?

While the context of the Covid-19 pandemic increased pressures around staffing, limited activities and resources, and limited interactions between different groups of children and groups of staff, it is still possible to identify factors that would be useful to consider for future delivery of scale-up of the programmes.

Nottinghamshire CECIL

Some factors to consider when scaling up the Nottinghamshire CECIL programme were:

- As the Nottinghamshire CECIL programme includes coaching sessions with individual practitioners focused around their bespoke needs in the context of their individual setting, any new members recruited to the delivery team as part of scale-up will need to be quite experienced and understand the Early years curriculum and Ofsted inspection framework, the needs of nurseries, Early years practitioners and the PVI sector, and the local context in terms of levels of need, and services and resources for signposting.

- With the current online delivery, if a practitioner missed a training session, they could often attend an alternate session on another day if there was one available. However, if future delivery becomes face-to-face, it may not be possible for practitioners to travel to another location for training, especially if delivery scales up to a wider geographical area.
- Some of the Nottinghamshire CECIL programme coaching sessions took place at an alternate location, such as a local health centre, as there was not a suitable/available space at the nursery setting. If delivery expands to a wider geographical area, the delivery team will need to identify suitable locations across this area.
- As settings did not always have the technology or stable internet connection to facilitate virtual delivery or video examples of practice, it may be necessary to allocate a budget for providing some or all settings with technology, such as tablets, as either a loan or permanent resource.
- The Nottinghamshire CECIL programme included a handbook for practitioners to refer to. Printing and distributing these to participating settings would reduce costs for settings. However, if delivery is scaled up to a larger number of settings, it may be necessary to allocate a budget for printing these.
- Practitioners at some settings created posters or Powerpoint presentations to share learning and remind themselves and other staff of key strategies. When scaling up delivery to a larger number of settings, a budget could be allocated for printing and distributing resources that could be shared or displayed at settings.
- Most practitioners reported being able to engage with the programme wholly within their working hours, but some reported doing reading or other activities in their personal time. It would be good to be mindful of this and to keep practitioner time needed as manageable as possible so that this is not off-putting to settings when scaling up the intervention.

Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language)

Some factors to consider when scaling up the Hackney CECIL programme were:

- If delivery of the Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) programme were scaled up to a larger geographical area, it may not be possible for staff to visit as many settings during the week as would be possible if settings were nearer because of increased travel times. Restrictions around the Covid-19 pandemic has meant that the team members were only able to visit one setting per day whereas previously they might have visited two. One solution was for a setting to be visited one day per fortnight instead of half a day each week. An expansion of the delivery area could result in having to deliver in this way for some or all settings.
- As the Hackney CECIL programme is individually tailored to the needs of a setting and its staff through the selection of modules and ad hoc advice provided by the CECIL SaLT, any new members recruited to the delivery team as part of scale-up will need to be quite experienced and understand the needs of nurseries and Early years

practitioners, as well as ideally the PVI sector. As the CECIL team grows larger, this may increase the time needed by the CECIL team lead for management and supervision to ensure consistency in approaches and what is being delivered across the settings.

- During the pandemic, the team created videos and other resources to share learning remotely with settings. If delivery of the Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) programme is scaled up to a larger area, it may not be practical for the team to make ad hoc visits to settings to deliver resources and provide advice. When scaling up to a larger number of settings, budget could be allocated for printing and distributing resource packs or even a handbook or manual for settings.
- Some settings reported that their link SaLT had printed out materials or prepared resources for them, eg laminated notices. It would be good if this could be provided consistently for all participating settings to help reduce their costs, ie for each Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) module, specific materials would be provided to all settings with the delivery of this module. A budget could be allocated for this when scaling up to a larger number of settings.
- For delivery of training options such as VERVE, it may be practical to use a venue local to settings if they have limited space or availability. When scaling up to a larger number of settings, economies of scale could be found in inviting multiple settings to a training session. This would also help facilitate a local community of practice as practitioners will be able to meet and share their ideas and experiences.
- Some practitioners reported spending time outside of their work hours preparing sessions, doing paperwork, watching videos or doing reading. It would be good to be mindful of this and to keep practitioner time needed as manageable as possible so that this is not off-putting to settings when scaling up the intervention. Some practitioners highlighted that printing and providing resources was very helpful in this regard.

8.2 Working with Early years settings in the PVI sector

Several of the barriers and enablers identified during the evaluation were not just specific to the Nottinghamshire CECIL and Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) programmes, but would be relevant to any programme or organisation planning to deliver training to Early years practitioners in PVI settings.

Key considerations for working with the PVI sector were:

Consideration 11: Early years settings operate in the context of strict staff:child ratios so staff availability needs to be carefully planned by setting managers. Liaising with settings to agree timing for visits or coaching sessions to fit around setting timetables and avoid disruption. If possible budget for staff cover should be provided.

Consideration 12: Printing or otherwise preparing or providing materials and resources helps to reduce costs for PVI settings and also to facilitate dissemination of learning at settings.

Consideration 13: In this study and more generally, training and/or coaching programmes have adapted some or all of their delivery to online as a response to restrictions arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. However, PVI settings may not have the technology necessary to engage with online learning, eg laptops, tablets, or a stable internet connection. For example, there may be just one computer or laptop used for administration. One possible approach could be to provide technology if needed.

Consideration 14: PVI practitioners may not be very familiar with technology or have limited IT skills as they typically spend most of their time engaging with children and are rarely sat at a computer. When experiencing issues with technology or IT, staff typically described seeking help from colleagues or sometimes from the SaLT Team and did not seem to have access to IT support. Further to this, practitioners may not have a work email address so email correspondence may need to be sent to a shared work email or the practitioners' personal email address.

Consideration 15: PVI settings may not have an extra room available for training or coaching sessions, and some PVI settings in the study reported that the nursery manager's office was also used as a staff room or training room. To reduce pressures on room capacity at settings, training/coaching sessions with individual settings could be delivered at a venue that is local or easily accessible to the setting.

8.3 Future research

Both delivery teams are keen to ensure that changes in practitioner skills and behaviour can be maintained and perhaps even enhanced by providing further support in a second year of delivery. Building on research for the Education Endowment Foundation by Collins and Smith (2021) about the implementation of professional development programmes, it will be important to focus on the mechanisms that underpin both the programmes to ensure they are evidence based, can be carefully defined and can be replicated. IES are examining the feasibility and effectiveness of that additional support in a second phase of this project over the 2021/22 academic year. We will be carrying out further interviews with the settings in spring/ summer 2022 to find out their views about how practice has been sustained in the second year and what has helped or hindered that process. In addition, we will also be carrying out further Theory of Change work in summer 2022 to cover sustainability of practice. For further detail on this work please see the overarching report by Barbour (2022).

The research in this report has explored how experienced and hardworking SaLTs can help support early years practitioners, but other professionals such as early years specialist teachers, language development workers and communication workers also have a range of different qualities that they can bring to help develop practitioners' skills (and are currently being used in programmes across the UK) and so a variety of further models could and should be explored.

Finally, further research could also explore whether different models of support surrounding programme content (such as individual coaching and regular support in settings) examined here could be used to support other training packages such as the Hanen '*Learning Language and Loving It*'™ programme which is one of the most

promising programmes working with three-year-olds (as discussed in the Background), and is being robustly evaluated by EEF in the 2022/23 academic year using a large scale RCT following the cancellation of the impact evaluation of the previous trial due to run in the 2020/21 academic year. Please also see Barbour 2022 for further details of how this work is developing. We look forward to continuing working with the PVI sector and the dedicated staff working in settings across the country whose resilience has no bounds.

9 References

Andrews, J., Robinson, D., and Hutchinson, J. (2017). Closing the Gap? Trends in Educational Attainment and Disadvantage. Education Policy Institute, London. Available at: <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/closing-gap-trends-educational-attainment-disadvantage/>

Barbour, L (2022). Coaching Early Conversations Interaction and Language. Sutton Trust: London. Available at:

<http://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/coaching-early-conversations-interaction-and-language>

Bonetti, S. (2019). The early years workforce in England. A comparative analysis using the Labour Force Survey. Education Policy Institute, London. Available at: https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/The-early-years-workforce-in-England_EPI.pdf

Bonetti, S., Ziolkowski, S. and Broadberry, J. (2021) The Covid-19 pandemic and the early years workforce: February 2021- May 2021- Staffing decisions in an uncertain environment. Education Policy Institute, London. Available at: <https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/EPI-NDNA-july2021-report.pdf>

Bowyer-Crane, C. et al. (2021). The impact of Covid-19 on school starters: Interim briefing 1- Parent and school concerns about children starting school, Education Endowment Foundation: London. Available at:

https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Impact_of_Covid19_on_School_Starters_-_Interim_Briefing_1_-_April_2021_-_Final.pdf

Bury, et al, (2020). Understanding the Early years Workforce: Qualitative Research Findings. The Nuffield Foundation, London. Available at:

<https://www.natcen.ac.uk/media/1857585/Understanding-the-Early-Years-Workforce.pdf>

Cabell, S. Q., Justice, L. M., Piasta, S. B., Curenton, S. M. et al. (2011) 'The Impact of Teacher Responsivity Education on Preschoolers' Language and Literacy Skills. *American Journal of Speech Language Pathology*, 20 (4), pp. 315–30.

Collin, J. and Smith, E (2021). Effective Professional Development: Guidance Report. Education Endowment Foundation, London. Available at:

<https://d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net/eef-guidance-reports/effective-professional-development/EEF-Effective-Professional-Development-Guidance-Report.pdf>

Cottell, J. et al (2021). The Covid-19 pandemic and the early years workforce: November 2020- February 2021- Staffing decisions in an uncertain environment. Education Policy Institute, London. Available at: <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/the-covid-19-pandemic-and-the-early-years-march-2021/>

Ebbels, S.H. et al. (2019). Evidence- based pathways to intervention for children with language disorders. *International Journal of Language and communication Disorders*, 54 (1), 3-19. DOI: [10.1111/1460-6984.12387](https://doi.org/10.1111/1460-6984.12387)

Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) (2018) The Attainment Gap 2017. Education Endowment Foundation: London. Available at: https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Annual_Reports/EEF_Attainment_Gap_Report_2018.pdf

Fernald, A., Marchman, V., and Weisleder, A. (2013). SES differences in language processing skill and vocabulary are evident at 18 months. *Developmental Science*, 16, pp. 234-48. <https://doi.org/10.1111/desc.12019>

Fox, L., et al (2021). Mitigating Impacts of Covid-19 in the Early years- Rapid Evidence Review. University of York and National Institute for Economic and Social Research. Available at: <https://www.york.ac.uk/media/educationalstudies/documents/newsevents/UoY-mitigating-impacts-of-covid19-in-early-years-rapid-evidence-review.pdf>

Girolametto, L., Weitzman, E. and Greenberg, J. (2003) 'Training day care staff to facilitate children's language', *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 12, pp. 299–311.

Humphrey, N. and colleagues. (2016) Implementation and process evaluation (IPE) for interventions in education settings: An introductory handbook . London: Education Endowment Foundation. Available at: https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Evaluation/Setting_up_an_Evaluation/IPE_Handbook.pdf

Hutchinson, J. et al. (2019) Education in England: Annual Report 2019, EPI: London. [Online] Available at: <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/annualreport-2019/>

Law, J., Charlton, J., Asmussen, K. (2017). Language as a wellbeing indicator. Early Intervention Foundation, London. Available at: <https://www.eif.org.uk/report/language-as-a-child-wellbeing-indicator>

Law, J. et al. (2017). Early language development: Needs, provision, and intervention for preschool children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Education Endowment Foundation: London. Available at: https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Law_et_al_Early_Language_Development_final.pdf

Lindorff, A., Sylva, K., Ereky-Stevens, K. & Joseph, A. (2022). Coaching Early Conversation, Interaction and Language (CECIL) impact evaluation. Oxford, UK: Oxford University. Available at:

<http://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/coaching-early-conversations-interaction-and-language>

McDonald, D. and colleagues (2015a). Increasing early childhood educators' use of communication-facilitating and language-modelling strategies: Brief speech and language therapy training. *Child Language Teaching and Therapy* 31, 305-322

McDonald, D., and colleagues. (2015b). Addendum to 'Increasing early childhood educators' use of communication-facilitating and language-modelling strategies: Brief speech and language therapy training.' *Child Language Teaching and Therapy* 31, 323.

Pascal, C., Bertram, T., Cole- Albäck, A. (2020). Early years Workforce Review: Revisiting the Nutbrown Review- Policy and Impact. The Sutton Trust, London. Available at: https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Early_Years_Workforce_Review_.pdf

[Pascal, C. and colleagues \(2021\). A Fair Start? Equalising access to early education. The Sutton Trust, London. Available at:](https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/A-Fair-Start-1.pdf)

<https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/A-Fair-Start-1.pdf>

Piasta, S. B. and colleagues (2012) 'Impact of professional development on preschool early years practitioners' conversational responsivity and children's linguistic productivity and complexity', *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 27 (3), pp. 387–400.

Stewart K. and Waldfogel J. (2017) Closing Gaps Early. The Sutton Trust. Available at: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/business/consulting/assets/documents/closing-gaps-early.pdf>

Weitzman, E., & Greenberg, J. (2002). *Learning Language and Loving It: A guide to promoting children's social, language, and literacy development in early childhood settings* (2nd ed.). The Hanen Centre: Toronto.

10 Appendices

Appendix A- original overarching theory of change model for the CECIL project

