



# Evaluation Report

## OVO Foundation report: Education Inequality in the early years

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# Institute for Employment Studies

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# Executive Summary

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## Introduction

OVO Foundation is the charitable arm of OVO Energy and has supported projects which give children and young people all over the world a greener, fairer future since 2014. OVO Foundation wanted to expand the education projects they support and following an evidence review decided to focus on early years. Three projects were chosen for support: Doorstep Library, Parental Engagement Network (PEN) and Tales Toolkit. IES in collaboration with Sutton Trust and Professor Kathy Sylva (University of Oxford) were commissioned to help support Theory of Change development, provide monitoring and evaluation support and help evaluate the impact of the projects on children's communication and language skills from June 2019 to December 2021. The projects were all affected by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and therefore the plans for evaluation were updated to examine the changes the projects made to adapt to the crisis. This report outlines the initial plans to evaluate the three projects and the development of the Theory of Change models for the interventions. The report then describes the way the Theory of Change models contributed to new means of online engagement for the projects, and subsequently to new evaluation strategies following the start of the Covid-19 pandemic.

## Doorstep Library

The central premise of Doorstep Library is to instil a love of reading for pleasure in the home and to help parents feel better equipped to create a positive home learning environment. Each family is offered a weekly visit by two volunteers during which time, they read with the children, and lend them books. Volunteers will make a note of what books were chosen and by whom and also make a note of what children like for future reference. Afterwards, the volunteer will write weekly reports on each visit, including the number and ages of children they have seen, how many books are borrowed, who chose the books, and what motivates the children to read. Another important aspect of Doorstep Library is to signpost other services to parents. Parents are encouraged to be involved in the reading sessions and to read with their children outside of the volunteers' visits as well. This project saw an increased focus on under 5s and some new training for Doorstep Library staff and volunteers.

The evaluation team helped Doorstep Library create a Theory of Change model that they can use in the future from an early draft. The evaluation was going to initially survey

parents to establish their child's communication and language skills, but due to Covid-19 this was replaced with an interview with the delivery team and an update on their impacts from their Impact Report with Future Proof Impact Ltd to explore what changes they have made to their offering. Doorstep Library have been unable to continue their in-person delivery, but have been able to offer a mix of services to help fill the gap such as online interactive story sessions with volunteers and existing families, sending books out to children and weekly newsletters. Results from the Impact Report by Future Proof Impact Ltd showed seven out of ten parents (70%) thought that Doorstep Library prepares children for school or pre-school, and also showed that there was increased enjoyment of exploring books and reading in children. Doorstep Library were working on a new website at the time of writing this report and were exploring ways of providing online reading sessions to existing and new families to let them continue to access their services remotely.

## Parental Engagement Network (PEN)

PEN's early years literacy sessions use a soft toy-mouse as a key transitional object to support their Transitions to Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). Practitioners visit families at home or have meetings in settings and every child is given their own Mouse and information on Mouse Club. Practitioners then support home learning through Stay and Play sessions run in settings. In these sessions, parents are also provided with a wide range of additional resources for using at home. In this project PEN extended their work to new regions.

The PEN team already had a Theory of Change but some further refinement was needed to fully capture the rationale and the mechanisms of change. The evaluation was initially going to analyse the data the delivery team collects from schools on Development Matters outcomes (Early Education, 2012, pre- and post measures) for children of the parents taking part in the training. However, due to Covid-19, this was replaced with an interview with the delivery team, seven interviews with practitioners (please note, teachers, school staff, nursery staff and childminders are collectively referred to within this report as practitioners throughout) and two parent interviews. Since Covid-19, the PEN lead has carried out online meetings with practitioners where possible and is working hard to establish and maintain networks for sharing problems and best practise across the programme.

Practitioner engagement has been mixed, dependent on how affected their school has been due to Covid-19, but many practitioners have found ways to incorporate the Mouse into their remote learning such as creating videos to show parents how they can use Mouse and the resources at home. Practitioners reported in the interviews that they used the Mouse as a conduit to connect with parents and children. They set activities up for families at home, to do with Mouse. Parents and practitioners told us how useful Mouse had been around the transition to school by preparing children and encouraging things like eating and potty training. Practitioners and parents also told us how helpful Mouse

had been around developing 'softer skills' such as communication, confidence, and reasoning. Access to IT was also a barrier for families with remote learning, but practitioners had dropped off mice and resources at families' homes to help defend against this barrier where possible. Looking forward, PEN were also looking at alternative ways to deliver training to new practitioners including online (either 1-2-1 or in groups), creating videos for practitioners about the project and setting up the sharing of good practice between practitioners and parents.

## Tales Toolkit

Tales Toolkit had previously focused on training practitioners to use their play-based storytelling resources, centred around a narrative framework consisting of character, setting, problem and solution. The OVO Foundation project marked a shift in focus for Tales Toolkit to directly involving parents and the home learning environment. The aim of the new project was to facilitate sustained shared thinking in the home by using storytelling activities that focus on language and communication skills, social emotional development, and literacy. The delivery team have been designing training for practitioners, to enable them to develop a parental understanding of play-based storytelling and to support parents in their use of the Tales Toolkit concept and resources at home. The training will also aim to develop practitioner's knowledge and motivation to engage parents. There will also be three training videos for parents to watch in sessions with the practitioners.

The evaluation team worked with Tales Toolkit to move from two draft Theory of Change models they had (one mainly for practitioners and one for parents) to one all-encompassing model they can use going forward. The evaluation initially was going to explore children's language and communication outcomes collected from the schools, but due to Covid-19 the evaluation moved to include an interview with the delivery team, five practitioner interviews and four parent interviews.

During lockdown and school closures, Tales Toolkit quickly created a website to share information and resources with parents who were already involved through schools. This way, parents had direct access and could download what they wanted. Tales Toolkit also created new Covid-19 focused resources with illustrations specific to the pandemic. These resources, mirroring what was happening in real life, were designed to enable children to express how they were feeling through storytelling and provided emotional support at a crucial time which parents valued. During lockdown, practitioners found the Tales Toolkit resources invaluable and used them in a variety of ways either stand-alone or in combination with other activities. Practitioners described in interviews that they found that by the end of Reception, children were choosing their own stories and vocabulary to write and draw their own stories. Practitioners and parents also said that Tales Toolkit led to strong outcomes for children with EAL, speech and language issues and also reluctant writers. However, during lockdown, some families had difficulties accessing resources including not being able to print materials off (as not all have printers or the internet). In some cases, families did not have access to basic resources such as pencils or paper

(resources that would normally be available in settings). In these circumstances, the delivery lead suggested that families use everyday objects they may have around the home and from the area around them when they can go on walks. The plan is for Tales Toolkit to carry on with the webinars for practitioners and parents once a month and for these to be recorded and stored for future use. They will finalise the new training materials later in 2021 which will benefit from additional online offerings.

## Recommendations

### Recommendations for the projects

2020 brought extreme challenges to all three delivery teams and they were all able to take nimble action enabling them to continue to provide resources, services and support to the families likely to be the most affected by the crisis. While the pandemic continues to cause disruption to face-to-face services, virtual training, stay and play/ reading/ storytelling sessions will engage families and children with a love of reading in the short term before the services can return to normal.

Because of the changes necessitated by the pandemic's restrictions, all three projects will go forward under less-restricted circumstances with new online resources and skills that will strengthen them in the future. Although the pandemic has been catastrophic in many ways, it has forced all three projects to embrace online engagement in ways that will enhance their offer in the future and be more cost effective.

Recommendation 1: Making partnerships with Local Authorities may enable the project teams to continue or extend their work to a larger number of families.

Recommendation 2: Forming links with schools and groups of schools such as teaching alliances or academy chains could help project teams to expand take-up and reach.

Recommendation 3: All projects should be looking at ways to extend their services to be accessible to all families including those with children with English as an additional language (EAL) and children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) as two of the most vulnerable groups. Online provision is one way of achieving this.

Recommendation 4: Tailored packages for nurseries, childminders and smaller schools would enable these groups to take part for a lower cost and perhaps developing adapted resources for the needs of those leading in these organisations who may not have the same level of continuing professional development (CPD)/ training as other practitioners, may help extend reach.

Recommendation 5: School readiness and preparation for the transition to school is of key importance for child and family outcomes and anything projects can do to continue or extend this support will help schools justify the time/ membership costs of taking part and can be used in Ofsted reports.

Recommendation 6: The delivery teams need to keep shouting about what they are doing and promote to a range of local charities, children's groups and businesses.

Recommendation 7: Future evaluations of the Doorstep Library, PEN and Tales Toolkit projects will need to consider blended approaches to delivery, flexible adaptations to what the projects offer, the government's new Development Matters framework and further qualitative work.

## Recommendations for the early years sector

One of the main challenges or issues raised across all the projects was families not having access to IT equipment such as laptops or smartphones or only having one shared device in a household and this was regularly mentioned by parents, practitioners and delivery teams across all three projects as a major barrier to access for online resources, training and support. This supports other recent research looking at the digital divide such as Cullinane and Montacute (2020) which shows the gap between disadvantaged and advantaged families in access to digital devices has grown larger because of the pandemic.

Our research also found that other home learning resources such as the basic needs around paper and pencils were not being met in some of the households supported by the project delivery teams. Doorstep Library have been looking for sponsorship support from local business and this might be a model other projects could consider.

Recommendation 8: The government need to urgently action calls from the early years and schools sectors to combat the digital divide and support all families to have access to an electronic device per child for learning, internet access should be treated as a basic human need in this crisis and in the same way as heating allowances are provided to those in need should be given to families without access, and local businesses should be encouraged to support provision of basic resources such as paper, pens and pencil to enable children and families to write and draw stories.

Recommendation 9: Organisations delivering to support families could also approach local businesses directly to help make available resources for home learning/play.

Recommendation 10: The early years sector should take note of ways that these projects are helping support the most vulnerable families and find ways to enhance and extend that support where possible. In addition, the early years sector should lobby/support government, the charitable sector and philanthropists to fund this kind of innovative work carried out by grassroots organisations with the aim of more rigorous evaluation in the future.

# 1 Introduction

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[OVO Foundation](#) is the charitable arm of OVO Energy, created in 2014. Beyond the focus on educational inequality here, OVO Foundation develops and funds projects that give children and young people all over the world a greener, fairer future. From installing solar panels in schools and health clinics in Kenya to supporting young homeless people into education, employment and training in the UK, OVO's sustainability strategy is at the centre of everything the OVO Foundation does.

In 2019, OVO Foundation were looking to expand the education projects they support and, commissioned the Young Foundation (2019, unpublished)<sup>1</sup> to explore which education life stage to focus on (Early Years, Primary, the Transition to Secondary, Secondary School, or Post-16) and which type of intervention projects to support (different stages of evidence and innovation). The report summarised research which showed that the disadvantage attainment gap starts in the early years and became larger over time (eg Education Endowment Foundation, 2018), with long lasting impacts (eg Sylva et al, 2010) and recommended therefore that investing in early years was likely to produce the best social return.

OVO Foundation's focus on the early years was timely as the Education Select Committee report (2019) earlier that year had clearly laid out the importance of parental engagement and the home learning environment:

*Parental support and the home learning environment have a major effect on children's life chances, it is particularly important for children's oracy and language development.... The lack of evidence about interventions to support parents and families in creating a positive home learning environment is concerning. The Government should commission research on such interventions, so that they can be based on solid evidence and rigorous evaluation to ensure that activity and funding is not being wasted on efforts that may not be effective.*

Once the focus of the overall work had been decided, OVO Foundation then ran a call in 2019 for projects which aim to close the attainment gap for disadvantaged children, already had some existing evidence, were ready to trial a new element of the project with additional monitoring and evaluation support and combined all of the following topic areas:

- Children's communication and language.
- Parental engagement.

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<sup>1</sup> Announced here: <https://www.ovofoundation.org.uk/early-years-research-jan-2019/>

- The home learning environment (HLE).

The projects chosen, following the subsequent longlisting and then shortlisting process, were [Doorstep Library](#), [Parental Engagement Network \(PEN\)](#) and [Tales Toolkit](#). OVO Foundation commissioned IES in collaboration with Sutton Trust and Professor Kathy Sylva (University of Oxford) as a critical friend and evaluation team (known henceforth as the evaluation team) to help support the projects with Theory of Change development (IES and Sutton Trust), provide monitoring and evaluation support (all teams) and help evaluate the impact of the projects on children's communication and language skills (IES only) over the course of two and a half years from June 2019 to December 2021. The projects were all affected by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 however, and the plans for evaluation were updated to examine the changes the projects made to adapt to the crisis. This enabled us to capture learning from the three teams during this tumultuous and disruptive period and the impacts the changes they made had on families and practitioners.

This report outlines the initial goals, activities and reach of these three projects, the initial plan for the evaluation and then the revised methodology due to the Covid-19 pandemic in Chapter 1. Chapter 2 describes the development of the Theory of Change models for the projects. Chapter 3 focuses on the findings from the qualitative research exploring how the charities had adapted their services due to Covid-19. Finally, the report makes suggestions for how the projects can continue to adapt and makes recommendations for the early years sector on how to continue to support children and families.

## 1.1 Doorstep Library

### 1.1.1 Project goal

Doorstep Library has been running in three London Boroughs for 10 years. They have 130 volunteers working in 14 projects. The service supports children from birth to 11 years old. The service is well-established in the areas they operate in and they have good traction with families which is very important. Volunteers usually support families for two years, although some are supported for longer depending on their circumstances.

The work with OVO Foundation was designed as a new project to look at the impact of the work of Doorstep Library on the under-5s specifically. Additional training was provided to volunteers in January 2020 by the NSPCC (co-developed), to support the development of the Home Learning Environment and Early Years development (see Chapter 2). They were also developing a series of new resources for working with younger children (detailed in Chapter 3).

### 1.1.2 Activities

The central premise of Doorstep Library is to instil a love of reading for pleasure in the home and to help parents feel better equipped to create a positive home learning environment. Each family is offered a weekly visit by two volunteers during which time,

they read with the children, and lend them books. Volunteers will make a note of what books were chosen and by who and also make a note of what children like for future reference. Afterwards, the volunteer will write weekly reports on each visit, including the number and ages of children they have seen, how many books are borrowed, who chose the books, and what motivates the children to read. Another important aspect of Doorstep Library is to signpost other services to parents and give out information such as about housing, help with finances, libraries and adult education. Parents are encouraged to be involved in the reading sessions and to read with their children outside of the volunteers visits as well. For a full description of Doorstep Library's' work please see Figure 3 in Chapter 2.

### 1.1.3 Reach

The original target numbers for Doorstep library were for 300 children between 0 and 5 to receive weekly home-based reading sessions, with 40 of those being new sign-ups (with continual recruitment starting in September 2019). Already by the beginning of 2020, 40 new children (aged 0 to 5) were signed up for Doorstep Library and the plan was to continue recruiting more in early years on a rolling basis. However, due to the pandemic, usual recruitment methods (directly with families) were not possible for a number of months. Over Summer 2020, Doorstep Library developed plans to recruit more children in Early Years by working in partnership with other organisations in the boroughs they operate in. However, these new plans were also then adversely affected by further lockdowns in London (see Chapter 3).

## 1.2 Parental Engagement Network (PEN)

### 1.2.1 Project goal

The goal of PEN is to support families that traditionally do not engage with schools/settings or in their child's learning to develop positive behaviours for learning. The three main outcomes of PEN, covering children, parents and practitioners, are: improved literacy, language and communication skills of target children (aged 3-5); improved confidence and behaviours for learning of parents/ carers to support their children's literacy skills and improved knowledge, skills and confidence of practitioners in engaging target parents/ carers.

OVO Foundation had already been working with PEN since 2018 in Liverpool schools<sup>2</sup>, but this project extended the funding available to cover additional regions and settings. The original plan for this OVO Foundation project was for PEN to train 20 early years practitioners, from 15 early years settings with each setting to get six stay and play

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<sup>2</sup> See link for announcement <https://ovo.com/ovo-foundation-funds-parental-engagement-network-projects-in-liverpool/>

sessions. Mouse Club early years literacy sessions would take place over two years and target 160 children aged 3-5 years and their parents/ carers.

### 1.2.2 Activities

PEN's early years literacy sessions use a soft toy-mouse given to each child as a key transitional object to support their Transitions to Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). Practitioners are trained by PEN (one full day) and then they visit families at home or have a one-to-one meeting before they start school to help parents get their children school ready through activities involving Mouse. They also provide resources such as the Ready for School checklist (see Appendix 1). Practitioners then run Stay and Play/Stay and Learn sessions in settings. In these sessions, parents are taught how to use the Mouse with fun activities at home to support learning and they are also provided with a wide range of additional equipment for using at home including a home learning pack, their own Mouse Club Bag, and printed out resources such as toilet training tips. Schools and families are also invited to join the PEN network to share additional resources and ideas to support learning.

A central tenet of PEN interventions is the Model Mentor Coach approach (a copy is included in Chapter 2). Developed by PEN themselves, the approach involves training practitioners to then model using the resources to parents, who have an opportunity to practise using them before taking them home. Practitioners then provide mentoring support to parents who are using the resources at home with their children. For a full description of PEN's work please see Figure 6 in Chapter 2.

### 1.2.3 Reach

The new OVO Foundation project saw PEN expanding their reach in terms of geography, by moving into early years educational settings in Greater Manchester and expanding in Liverpool.

Working in the Trafford area of Greater Manchester and parts of Liverpool, the delivery team reported facing different issues. The predominance of selective schools in Trafford raised new challenges for PEN as there is a lack of Early Years provision. The schools in Liverpool were reportedly similar to those they had previously worked with in Manchester as part of the Parental Engagement Fund project which examined the impact of PEN on the home learning environment and school readiness using a small RCT (see Barbour et al, 2018 and Jelly & Sylva, 2017).

The original plan for the OVO Foundation project was for 15 new schools to be recruited in Manchester in September 2019, 13 nurseries and two special needs settings (with another set of schools to sign-up from September 2020). Initial projections were that 160 3-5 years olds children would be included in the intervention by expanding into Trafford (80 3-4 year olds and 80 4-5 year olds). It was assumed that this would then mean 160 parents/carers would also participate.

Updated figures from PEN's quarterly report of October 2020 showed that there are 11 schools involved in Manchester (plus another 18 in Liverpool). The total cohort of children from September 2019 to July 2020) was 199 in Manchester, representing an increase of 25% from initial projections (with 706 children in Liverpool settings).

## 1.3 Tales Toolkit

### 1.3.1 Project Goal

Tales Toolkit had previously focused on training practitioners to use their play-based storytelling resources, centred around the key concepts of character, setting, problem and solution. These structural components provide a narrative framework to guide children as they develop their stories. The OVO Foundation project marked a shift in focus to also directly include parents and the home learning environment. The aim of the new project was to facilitate sustained shared thinking in the home by using storytelling activities that focus on language and communication skills, social emotional development, and literacy. The delivery team have been designing training for practitioners, to enable them to develop a parental understanding of play-based storytelling and support parents in their use of the Tales Toolkit concept and resources at home. The training will also develop practitioners' knowledge and motivation to engage parents. The delivery team were then going to develop training materials for parent sessions (see below).

### 1.3.2 Activities

Practitioners are currently trained using five 50 min recorded videos and there is going to be an additional video created in how to use the materials with parents too. The Tales Toolkit website also provides downloadable resources, webinars by guest speakers (early years experts and authors) and links to further research and they have a Facebook group to get practitioners to share experiences. In Nursery and Reception classes, practitioners regularly use model-writing sessions to create stories. Either in small groups or with the whole class, practitioners present and take ideas for some or all the information for the character, setting, problem and solution. Then, depending on their age and ability, children would do mark-making or write their own stories and draw some pictures to illustrate it. For some children, it might be appropriate for the child to talk about their story and an adult to scribe it for them.

Using Tales Toolkit, one school even created their own whole-class stories out of everyday events, which enabled the children to make a stronger connection with the story:

*The story would start with - Over the weekend, Mr Smith the caretaker [character] came into the classroom [setting] and found a funny smell [problem]. Then the teacher would ask the children to suggest possible solutions before choosing one such as 'Get a carpet cleaner to clean the carpets and get rid of the smell.'*

The original plan after the practitioner training was for all early years practitioners (Nursery and Reception) in the settings involved to train parents to use the Tales Toolkit resources at home. This would involve three short training films for parents to watch in a practitioner-led group session, with activities included during the session. The films were to be followed by a practitioner modelling a Tales Toolkit story being 'created'. Discussion time with the parents was also going to be included, then a loan library of kit and props would be available for parents to choose from and take home. For a full description of the planned activities see Figure 10 in Chapter 2.

### 1.3.3 Reach

The original target for the project was for practitioners to be trained in 17 settings. Based on three practitioners per setting, the target number of practitioners trained was 51. The target number of children aged 3-4 was 55 (15 in the first year with another 20 planned for the second year) with a slightly lower target of 50 for children aged 4-5 (10 initially then 40 in Year 2).

The pandemic made it difficult for Tales Toolkit to work face-to-face with schools. This provided an opportunity for the delivery team to shift their focus from schools and opened the way for them to contact parents directly. Updated figures provided by the delivery team in Summer 2020 showed there were 230 parent users on their website (some but not all of whom were attached to schools). In addition to their core schools, Tales Toolkit were also supporting a few childminders and two international schools.

Tales Toolkit are primarily based in London, however some delivery also happens outside of London. The initial plans included Rochdale and Stockport as the areas they are working with that have some of the highest levels of deprivation. However, the research also included settings in other areas such as Oxfordshire who they have been working with for some time and Derbyshire who are a newer area they are working with.

## 1.4 Methodology

### 1.4.1 Planned work

#### Doorstep Library

The initial focus of Doorstep Library's evaluation was going to be assessing their impact on children. As Doorstep Library do not deliver their project in early years settings, it was more challenging than on the two school-based projects to get robust data on children's communication and language in particular. The decision was made to carry out a survey of 'new' parents who had signed-up (ie those with children under 5). This survey would have been carried out online using Snap surveys which IES have access to. Questions in the survey were going to cover a range of issues including parental views of the range and quality of support offered by the volunteers, and any changes they have observed in their children, measured using age-appropriate questions from Development Matters

(Early Education, 2012): (This was similar to measures used by PEN to monitor its impact which is collected from practitioners).<sup>3</sup>

## **PEN**

PEN already had well-developed monitoring and evaluation tools in place prior to the OVO Foundation project. Having previously been part of the Parental Engagement Fund project (Barbour et al, 2018, Jelly & Sylva, 2017), the project lead was experienced in providing data for monitoring and evaluation purposes. PEN provided IES and the Sutton Trust with copies of their data gathering tools for discussion. The main focus of the evaluation team's work was therefore on the development of their Theory of Change (detailed in Section 2) and analysing the outcomes data from the settings on Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) outcomes.

## **Tales Toolkit**

Tales Toolkit were already working in partnership with Goldsmiths, University of London who had carried out an evaluation of their practitioner training (Bartoli, 2018) and were continuing to collect qualitative data. The plan for this project was to develop the parent training materials and run a pilot in the first year of project delivery with approximately 12 best practice settings who had already completed the practitioner training and then revise the materials as needed and test them in a randomised controlled trial with a larger group of approximately 100 settings in the second year. IES were going to support this by analysing the outcome data from the settings on EYFS outcomes. In addition, Professor Kathy Sylva from Oxford University was going to work closely with Tales Toolkit and Goldsmiths, University of London to support the development of their training for parents, especially the materials based on previous research, as well as reviewing their methods and tools of measuring impact.

### **1.4.2 Actual work**

Unfortunately, due to the pandemic, plans for the monitoring and evaluation of all three projects had to be changed. In consultation with OVO Foundation and the three projects involved, a new plan was devised which would enable IES to focus on the work by the projects during (the first) lockdown and the subsequent disruptions to school and family life. The section below outlines the adapted methodology applied to each of the projects. Because all three projects moved to online engagement and the development of online resources, they will be well equipped in the future for cost-effective hybrid (face-to-face, coupled with online) delivery. The evaluation contributed to these new forms of engagement through its Theory of Change work and through the findings from practitioners and parents of this report.

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<sup>3</sup> IES also advised Doorstep Library on the research tool they were planning on using for their wider impact study conducted by Future Proof Impact Ltd.

## Doorstep Library

The barriers faced by Doorstep Library in accessing families in their homes meant that it was no longer possible to gather the views of parents and carers. Instead, it was decided that IES would gather summary information from the delivery team on how the service had adjusted to the new context staff found themselves operating in.

The information in Chapter 3 is taken from data from their Impact Report (details in Chapter 3) on the service as it stood in October 2020, together with an in-depth telephone interview with the delivery team, also in October. The interview topic guide that was used for all the delivery teams can be found in Appendix 2.

## PEN

Telephone interviews were carried out separately with the delivery team and Reception teachers from seven schools, two in Manchester and five in Liverpool. The teachers we interviewed in the Liverpool schools also gave us the contact details of two parents who were subsequently interviewed. Please note, teachers, school staff, nursery staff and childminders are collectively referred to within this report as practitioners throughout. All the interviews took place between July and September 2020. The interview topic guides which were used for both PEN and Tales Toolkit interviews can be found in Appendix 3 for the practitioners and in Appendix 4 for parents.

## Tales Toolkit

Telephone interviews were carried out separately with the delivery team and five educational practitioners from four different settings; one primary school (with one Reception teacher and one Year 1 teacher), one Nursery school (with the Early Years lead), one international school (with a Reception teacher) and one childminder as Tales Toolkit is being used in a diverse range of settings<sup>4</sup>. Through the delivery team and practitioners' referrals, we were able to secure a further four telephone interviews with parents. The interviews took place between July and November 2020.

It should be noted that due to practitioners and parents opting-in to the research about PEN and Tales Toolkit from emails from the delivery teams, these findings are more likely to represent the views of those who are positive about the projects.

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<sup>4</sup> Please note that international schools and childminders were not a targeted part of the OVO Foundation funding but have been included to show the diverse ways Tales Toolkit adapted to the pandemic.

## 2 Theory of Change development

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IES and Sutton Trust's roles as critical friends to the three delivery teams included several steps as outlined in Chapter 1. But arguably the most important process for each delivery team was developing their own new Theory of Change (TOC) during winter 2019/20 so each delivery team could consider in more detail what they were looking to achieve and frame future evaluations. Each delivery team had an existing draft model which they had been using and the three teams were at different stages in respect to how developed this was. We used an in-person Intervention Delivery and Evaluation Analysis workshop approach for each project (IDEA, Humphreys et. al, 2016) as recommended by the Education Endowment Foundation for all their evaluations. This involved examining the existing TOC models which were then broken down and redeveloped for each team using a series of in-depth questions to identify clear inputs, activities, outputs and included the assumed pathway to impacts on children, parents and practitioners and establishing how these will be measured.

Once an initial model had been formed, we then used a feedback loop between the evaluation team and the delivery teams as the projects developed to allow continuous improvement and refinement of the model and made regular updates as was needed. The intention was to repeat the IDEA workshops in-person two more times over the course of the project. However, due to changes in the project because of Covid-19 we reshaped some of this time into exploring the impact of Covid-19 on the projects as discussed in Chapter 1 and we completed the work on the TOCs through some shorter virtual group meetings.

As life continues to change due to the longer-term impacts of COVID-19, the teams may want to consider these TOC documents as live documents to return to and continue to develop as some of the temporary changes become longer term. The following sections in this chapter will cover each delivery team in turn with their initial TOC model and the end point TOC model.

### 2.1 Doorstep Library

Doorstep Library were at the beginning of their journey of developing a TOC model when we started work with them and it was extremely important to make clear the impact and outcomes they were looking to improve and prioritising those that were most important for this particular project. The major difference with the OVO Foundation project compared to what they had been doing previously was focusing on the early years as the target group, adding extra support and training for the volunteers and Doorstep Library staff in how to support early years children and including extra resources in a new pack to be given to the families. This training was run by the NSPCC but had been co-developed and

included theories of brain development – trauma, bonding and attachment disorder. The initial TOC model Doorstep Library had been working with (see Figure 1) had not yet broken down the detail of exactly what was being provided by the Doorstep Library team as inputs and had only covered some of the large range of activities that Doorstep Library were doing, but it did cover the main aims and some of the key outcomes and outputs.

The IDEA workshop took place on 6/11/2019 and shortly afterwards the team produced the second model (see Figure 2) which captured the flow of the TOC more accurately from the rationale and Theory of Change sections through the inputs, activities, outputs, short term outcomes/ moderators through to longer term outcomes and impact. We also considered the enabling factors and conditions for success briefly, which had not been covered by the first model which included operational factors like being able to recruit and train enough volunteers and external input factors such as the engagement and trust from the community to allow Doorstep Library into their homes. In the proceeding months, the model went through a number of other adaptations from December through to the final version which was agreed in July (see Figure 3). There was another shorter workshop in January where we spent a greater amount of time looking at enabling factors as time had limited the discussion in the IDEA workshop. One of these enabling factors, which actually threads through the whole TOC, is the importance of the volunteers and particularly around the ‘quality’ of the volunteers, ie how good are they at delivering the work with under 5s, how engaging are they, are they making connections with the younger children and their parents/carers etc.

At the beginning of 2020, the NSPCC training was delivered to all the team leaders (the staff responsible for managing the teams of volunteers) with the plan to cascade the training down to volunteers so, the amount of information, guidance, awareness and understanding of volunteers will vary (as well as their age, experience, aptitude, attitude etc). It was important to capture the variety of different experiences of the volunteers and that they may receive their training at different points. The final model also gave more background to the rationale for the project including academic references and added extra detail to the inputs and activities not covered by the original model as the full extent of these were revealed over time. Doorstep Library added percentage targets for some of the outputs which had not previously been given a target in the TOC model, but were part of the operational model that Doorstep Library were using to report to funders, as follows:

- 60% of parents engaging with sessions
- 50% of children choose books each week (demonstrating their engagement in the sessions and in reading)
- 50% of parents choose books for their babies (demonstrating their engagement in the sessions and the importance they place on reading)

Finally, the outcomes and impact measures were further refined, including separating out outcomes for children and parents and confirmed in this model. Doorstep Library did not update the model to include online provision as they will return to the face-to-face model when this is possible. Doorstep Library reported that they were very happy with the end model and would be using it in the future.

**Figure 1 Doorstep Library initial TOC model 10/09/2019**

The table below can be read vertically with need shown at the bottom. Next is Doorstep Library's response and the activities that they deliver. These lead to the outputs which in turn lead to a series of outcomes. Finally, the ultimate outcome(s) are the overarching result you are aiming for. The ones in grey text as these represent aims but may not be able to be measured.

Ultimate Outcome:	Life chances are improved for children	reduced impact of disadvantage/social mobility
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Key outcomes:			
Parents are comfortable reading regularly themselves and with their children	Children (and parents) are reading for pleasure Early intervention supports school readiness	Greater opportunities for educational progression and work opportunities for both children and parents	Increased confidence and decreased isolation.

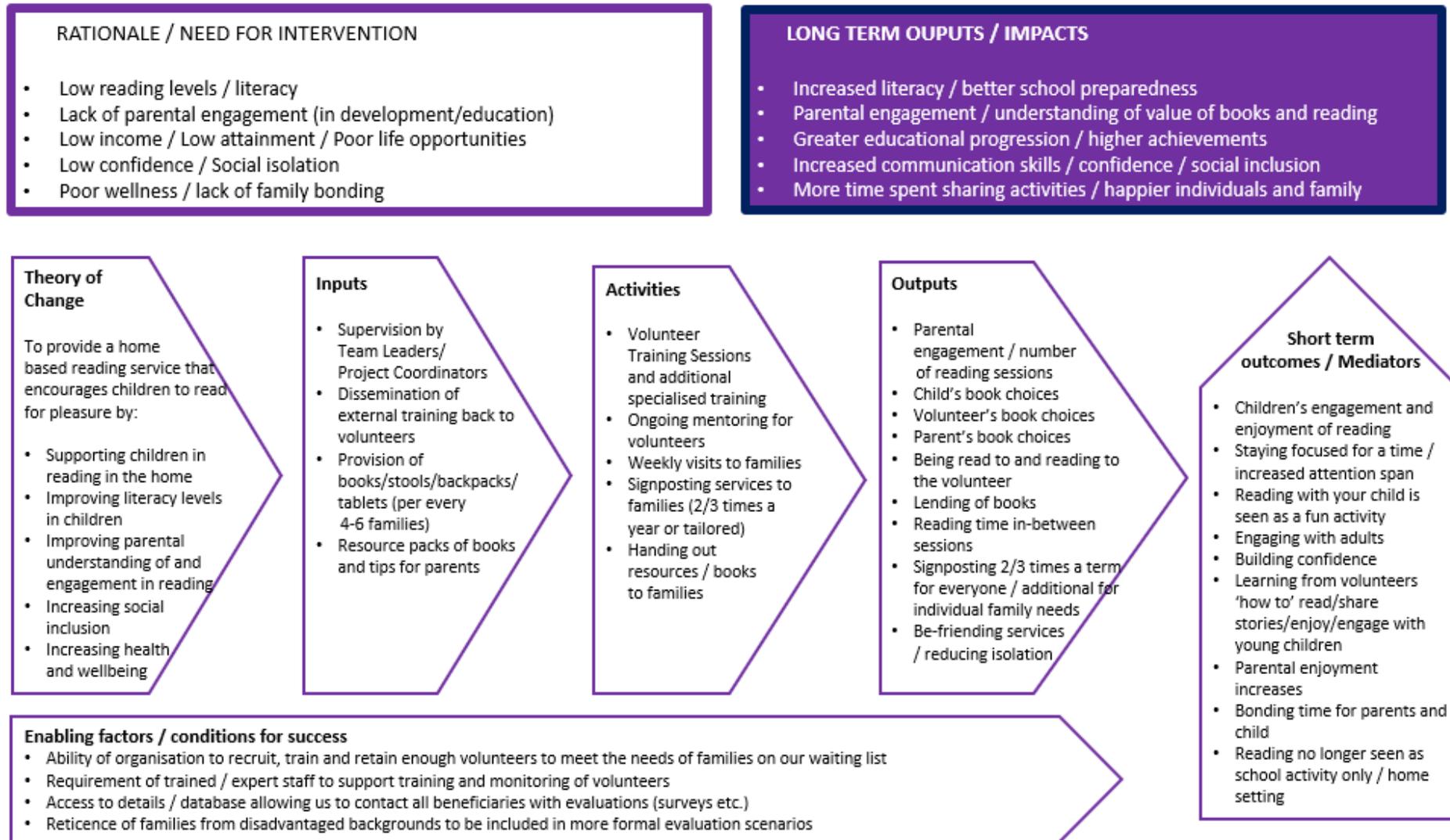
Outputs:			
Volunteer pairs read to 4 families each week	Children read with volunteers, parents and by themselves	Children and parents reading levels increase	Parents and children are attending additional services, being part of the community.

Activities:			
Reading activities in the family home, or on the doorstep	Lending of books to young people	Access to books, and information about community services, courses and events	Volunteer support and visits Signposting to available and relevant community support services

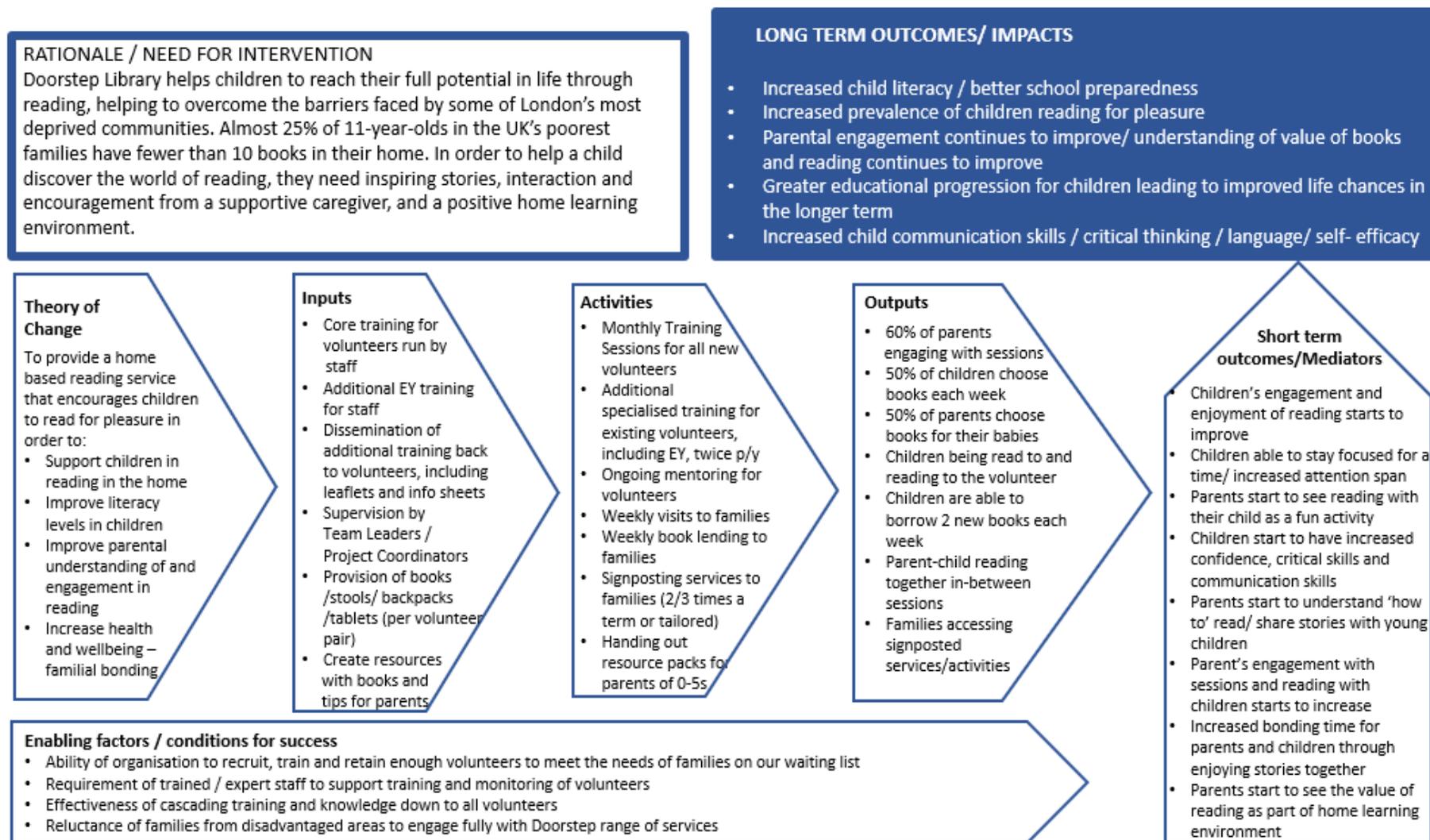
The need:			
Parents don't read with their children	Low reading levels among children impact on education	Disadvantaged children are in a worse position than peers	Lack of confidence and Issues of isolation

The need:	Activities:	Outputs:	Key Outcomes:
Parents don't share activities with their children often	Opportunities to share stories and have fun together	Children and parents engage more through shared activity time	Increase in family bonding – health and wellbeing

Figure 2 Doorstep Library TOC model 02/12/2019 (after initial IDEA workshop)



**Figure 3 Doorstep Library TOC model 10/07/2020 (after feedback loop revisions from both IES, Sutton Trust and Doorstep Library)**

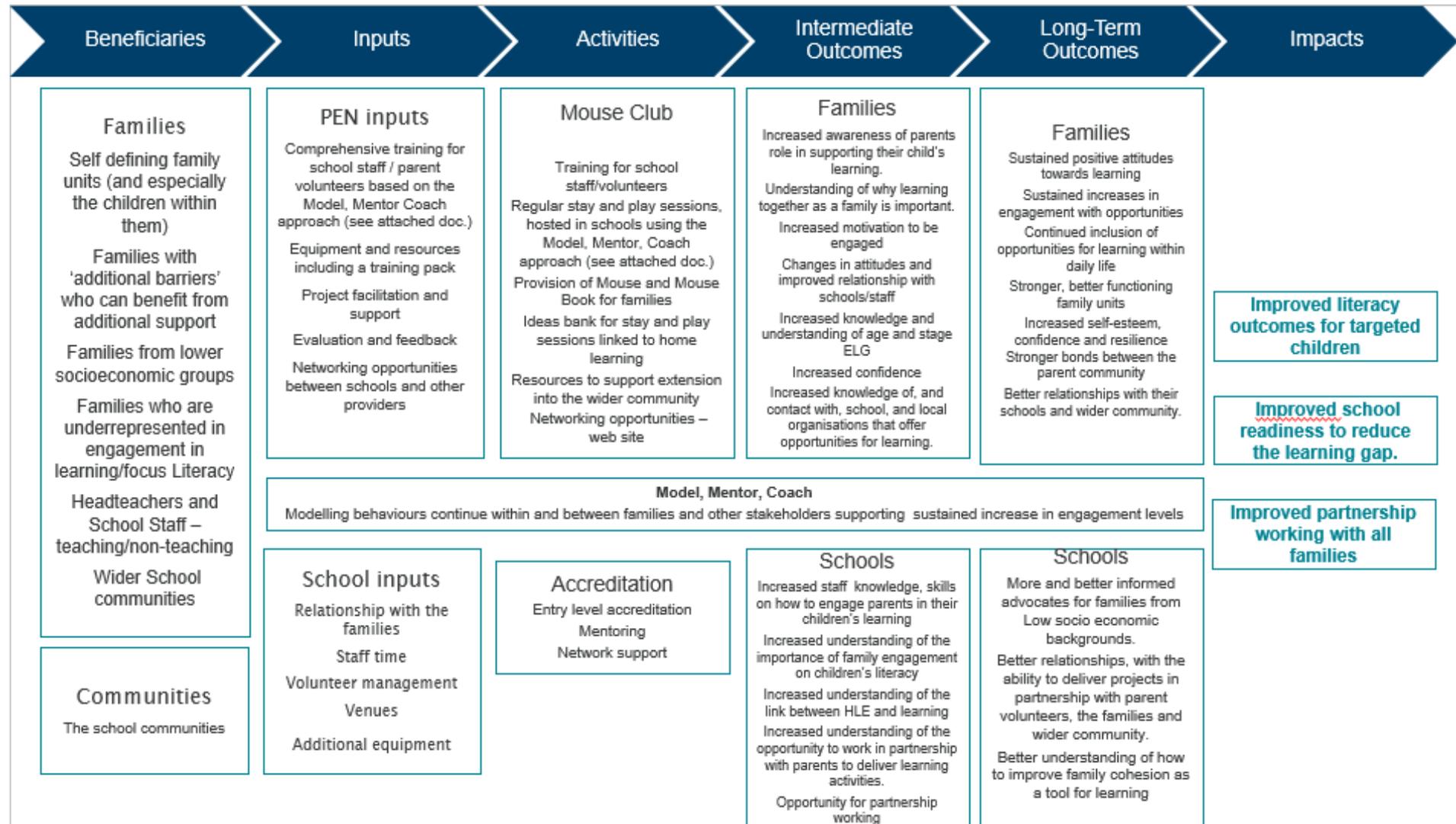


## 2.2 Parental Engagement Network (PEN)

PEN had worked to develop a TOC during the Parental Engagement Fund project with The Sutton Trust and the University of Oxford (Barbour et al 2018, Jelley & Sylva, 2017) and had an established model to start with when commencing this project and a linked Model Mentor Coach model (for a description of this see section 1.2.2) which was used as the basis of the work that practitioners do with the families (see Figures 4 and 5). This model sees practitioners demonstrate the activities to families, then supports the parents to do it themselves in the stay and play sessions and then coaches them to continue the activities in their home environment. The IDEA workshop took place on 13/02/2020 and went into more detail about the inputs and activities which were incorporated into an updated model a couple of months later. There was little information in the original TOC formulating the rationale for the project and the theory behind how they believed change was happening, so these sections needed to be added. Finally, we also discussed how we could try and incorporate the essence of the Model Mentor Coaching model within the TOC so it was simpler and by the end of this process it was further incorporated within the TOC.

Further discussions across the year found it was also important for PEN to add in some targets for the outputs which had also been used in monitoring information for funders but had not been incorporated into their model before. This included targets for numbers of settings, practitioners, children and parents/ carers included and an 80% attendance target for the stay and play sessions which the delivery team felt was enough to make families 'compliant' with the project and to make a difference on their outcomes. There were also some small changes due to updates they made during COVID-19- 19 including using Microsoft Teams for practitioners and PEN to interact, online resources for families and online training/ networking opportunities for practitioners. PEN decided not to update the model to include having family doorstep visits and virtual stay and play sessions as they felt they would not continue that way for their core work in future given the choice, but some of the other changes may continue as they had worked well and could complement the face-to-face model. The TOC went through a series of iterations using the feedback loop before being finalised in July 2020 and can be seen in Figure 6.

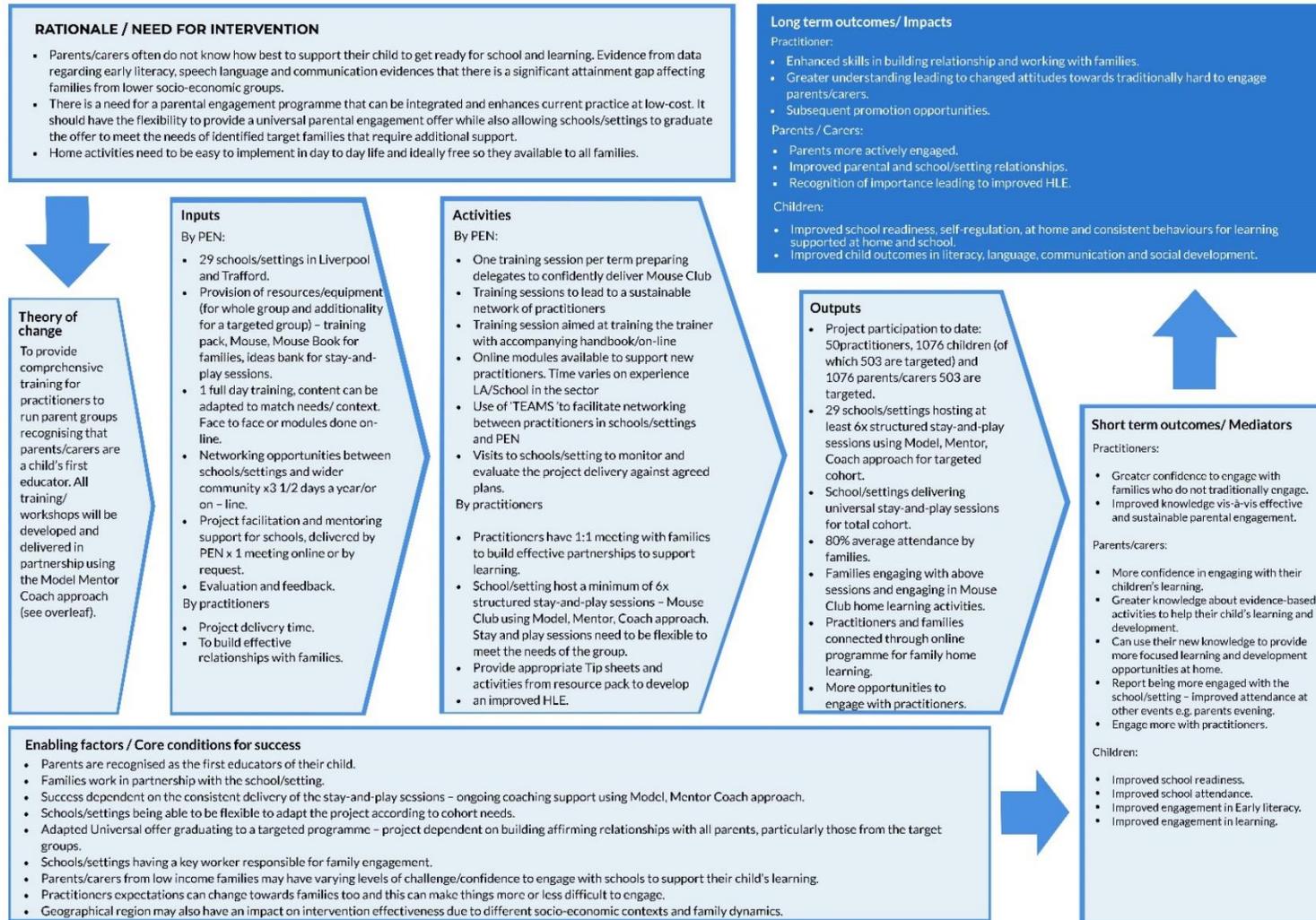
Figure 4- PEN initial TOC 09/12/19



**Figure 5- Accompanying Model, Mentor, Coach description**

<b>Model</b>	<b>Mentor</b>	<b>Coach</b>
<p>Introduce the activities and show parents how to do them. Clearly explain the benefits of the activity.</p>	<p>Support and encourage the parents to do the activity with their family. Let the parents practice the activity first to build confidence before trying it with their child.</p>	<p>The family then take the activities home. Keep the lines of communication open; check how things are going and whether any support is needed.</p>
<p><b>Show : Explain : Inform</b></p>	<p><b>Support : Encourage : Praise</b></p>	<p><b>Ask : Listen : Suggest</b></p>

Figure 6 - PEN TOC model 14/07/2020 (after feedback loop revisions from both IES, Sutton Trust and PEN)



## 2.3 Tales Toolkit

Tales Toolkit had previously received funding from Teach First to develop their TOC and so had quite a detailed model of their standard practice for practitioners before starting the project (see Figure 7) which they had updated to include the parent sessions. They also had a separate TOC for the parental training (see Figure 8) which included a lot of additional detail but had not brought the two together before. The IDEA workshop took place on 20/11/2019 and helped draw together both practitioner and parent elements in a logical way with the different aspects of the training brought together in the input and activities sections so that it can be seen clearly as one model. The assumptions from both models were able to be defined as enabling factors and conditions. These updates resulted in Figure 9.

During further telephone and virtual meetings from February 2019 to the summer of 2020 and a feedback loop, the model went through further revisions before being finalised in October 2020 with Figure 10. The main differences between Figures 9 and 10 are the inclusion of far more detail in the Theory of change, inputs and activities sections as well as background research for the rationale. One of the most important changes in this was the addition of the parent website materials which were something that the delivery team were keen to develop when we discussed it in the initial IDEA workshop, but became a top priority when the COVID-19- 19 pandemic hit in March 2020. In addition, some targets were set for the outputs including that at least one teacher per setting needed to take part, that families should attend all three online training sessions and watch the videos and that parents should be aiming to tell one story a week with their children. One of the longer-term impacts is increased interactions between families and their children, and the delivery team are still developing a shared understanding of what they consider to be 'quality interactions'. They are working with Kathy Brodie who wrote the book 'Sustained Shared Thinking' to further develop this work which may mean the TOC needs a slight update to this area in the future.

Figure 7- Tales Toolkit TOC for practitioners and parents 11/09/19

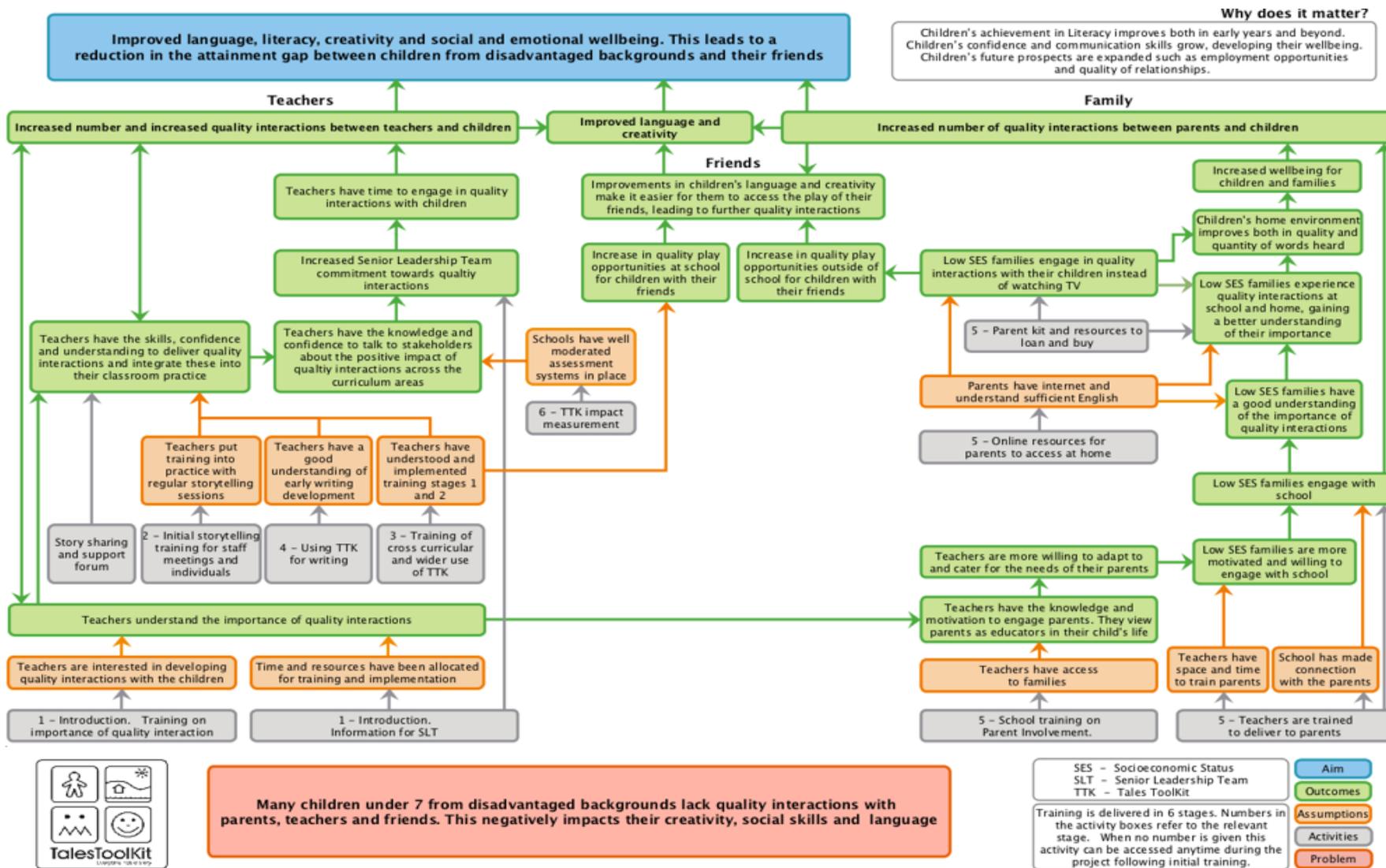


Figure 8- Tales Toolkit TOC for parents only 11/09/19

<p><b>Assumptions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Schools have access to the internet</li> <li>-Schools have access to the training films (past firewalls)</li> <li>-Schools have the funding available to purchase some items to loan parents</li> <li>- Teachers have access to families</li> <li>- School have access to resources to include in kits for loan library. (ways around this)</li> </ul>	<p><b>Assumptions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Trained Early Years practitioners who've completed the first 5 TTK sessions will deliver the training.</li> <li>-Teachers are currently using TTK correctly.</li> <li>- Parents attending the training will have children in a school using TTK. These children will have regular access to TTK in school.</li> <li>- Teachers have space and time to train parents</li> <li>- Parents understand sufficient English</li> <li>- School has made a connection with parents</li> </ul>	<p><b>Assumptions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Parents bring the loaned TTK resources back</li> <li>- Parents interact with the sessions and put the training into action at home.</li> <li>- Parents attend all of the sessions provided</li> <li>- schools choose a capable practitioner to deliver the training.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Assumptions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-There are no changes in the home environment /situation for the family</li> <li>- Parents continue to use TTK</li> </ul>	<p><b>Assumptions</b></p>
<p><b>Resources/Input</b></p> <p><u>Training for teachers</u> – 50xmin online film to train teachers why important to engage with parents, how to engage parents and how to use TTK with parents.</p> <p><u>Training for parents</u> - 3 or 4 short sessions for schools to run with parents along with resources to support modelled teacher story session and support/discussion and loan library of resources</p> <p><u>Needed</u>                  TTK membership (this includes a set of physical resources)                  Access to the internet and firewall access to TTK for training                  Loan library of resources for the parents to use - ideally one small kit for each parent but could use paper kits? Small kit £20, apron £15 could use either - recommend training for up to 10 parents.                  some resources for parents to borrow - existing items from school, parents can help with collection of items for school.</p>	<p><b>Activities</b></p> <p>Training film 50min long for all teachers using TTK to access. 30mins information and 20 mins of activities run as a staff meeting - lots of research included looking at the importance of interacting with parents.</p> <p>3 short training films for parents to watch in a group teacher led session (activities included). Films to be followed by TTK story modelled by teacher, time for discussion and loan library of kit and props for parents to take home.</p> <p>Additional guidance notes for school practitioner delivering training to parents - instructions, list of resources needed, etc                  1 teacher needed to deliver the training. Up to 10 parents in a session.</p>	<p><b>Outputs</b></p> <p>All school staff using TTK take part in the training film for staff.</p> <p>After the staff training one of the practitioners is chosen to deliver the parent training. School to decide this.</p> <p>Practitioner leads session for parents</p> <p>Parents attend the session, watch the videos and participate in the storytelling.</p> <p>Parents use the kit between session                  Parents tell at least a weekly story with their child at home.</p> <p>Parents return for subsequent weeks training and contribute to sessions discussing what they've been doing at home.</p>	<p><b>Outcomes</b></p> <p>Following the 50min staff meeting training</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Teachers have the knowledge and motivation to engage parents. They view parents as educators in their child's life</li> <li>- Teachers are more willing to adapt to and cater for the needs of parents.</li> </ul> <p>Following all training</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Families are more motivated and willing to engage with schools</li> <li>- Families engage with school</li> <li>- Families develop a good understanding of the importance of quality interactions</li> <li>- Families experience quality interactions at school and at home, gaining a better understanding of their importance</li> <li>- Families engage in quality interactions with their children at home instead of watching TV</li> </ul>	<p><b>Impact</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Children's home environment improves both in quality and quantity of words heard</li> <li>- Increased wellbeing for children and families</li> <li>- Increased number of quality interactions between children and their families</li> <li>- Improved language, literacy, creativity and social and emotional wellbeing for children.</li> </ul>

**Figure 9- Tales Toolkit TOC after IDEA workshop**

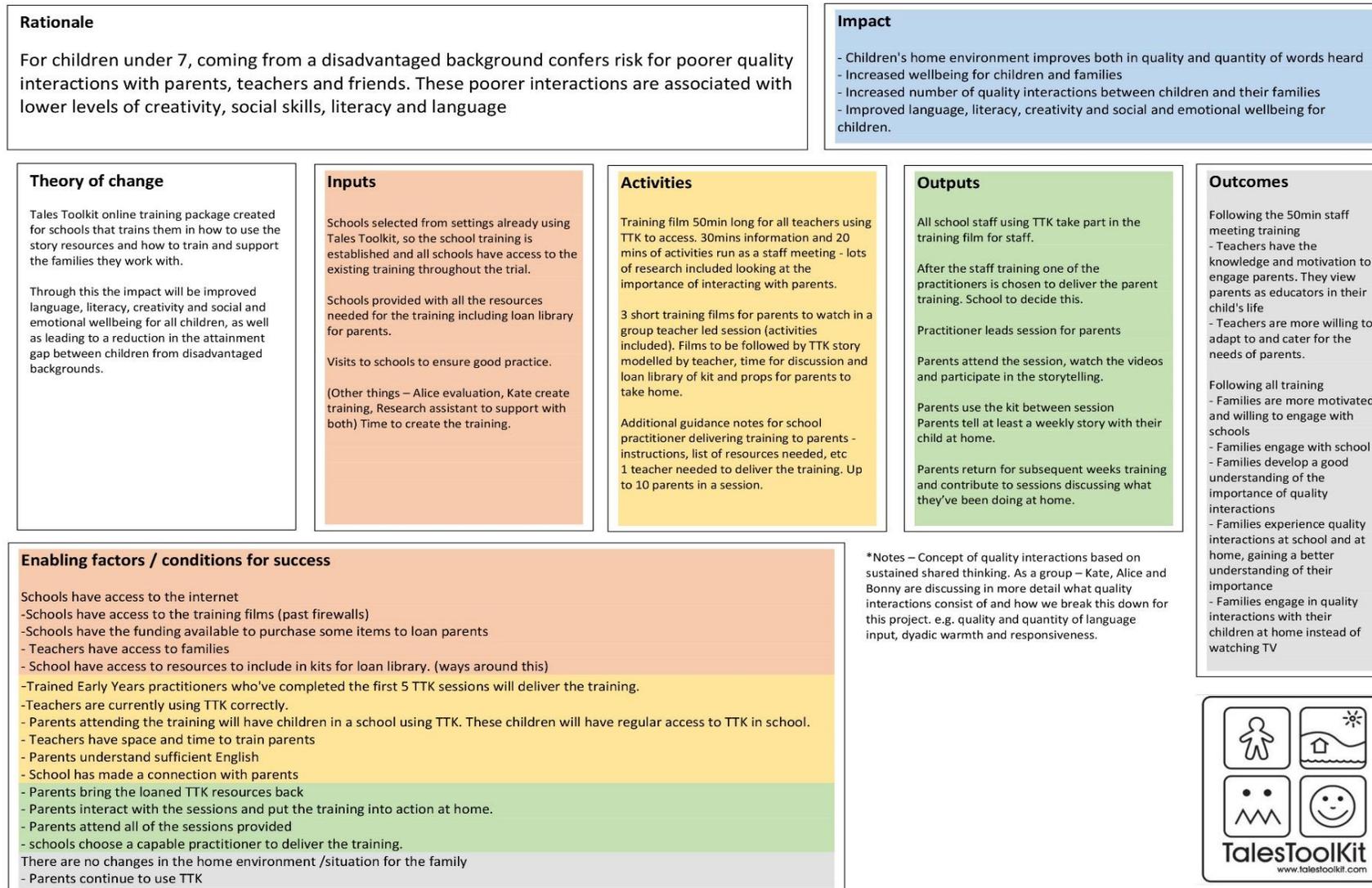
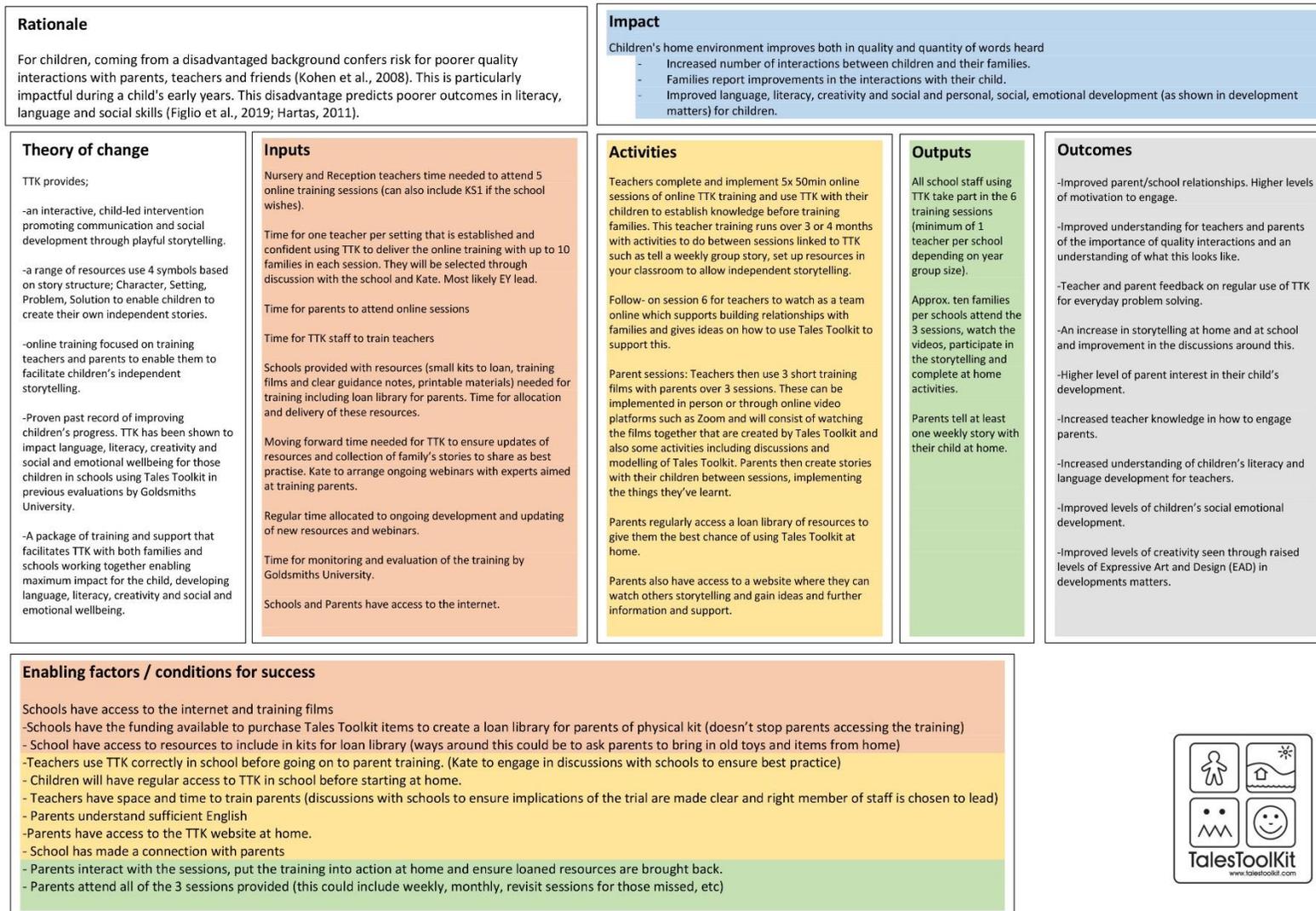


Figure 10- Tales Toolkit TOC model 05/10/2020 (after feedback loop revisions from both IES, Sutton Trust and Tales Toolkit)



## 3 Covid-19 changes

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### 3.1 Introduction

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK and the subsequent closure of educational settings such as schools and nurseries to the majority of children meant practitioners could no longer operate in the usual way. Faced with these unprecedented circumstances, the delivery teams quickly realised that they needed to adapt their approaches and, if they were not doing so already, provide resources directly to homes. The evaluation team decided to adapt their methods to monitor and support the changed approach.

Projects that worked directly with schools (PEN and Tales Toolkit) recognised the urgency for schools to engage more with parents and check-in on families. Research in Summer 2020 estimated that children were three months behind in their learning and that over 60% of teachers felt that the disadvantage gap has increased this year (Sharp et al, 2020). In respect to the work delivery teams have been able to do because of Covid-19, there were two different phases for these projects from March 2020 onwards. The first was when lockdown started on March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2020 and the second was when a greater number of children started going back to school (from June 2020 onwards) to the time of writing this report in November-December 2020.<sup>5</sup> During these phases, different combinations of learning were happening with some children entirely at home or having blended learning, while others were primarily school based.

For Doorstep Library, with their distinctive model of working directly with families in their homes, the phases were different. During lockdown in March 2020, they were unable to offer their core services as their volunteers were unable to visit families, so they instead offered telephone support, sessions online via a video-call, as volunteers recorded videos of themselves reading stories and Doorstep Library staff produced a video giving tips on how to read to your baby. Once this lockdown was relaxed, Doorstep Library were able to offer an adapted service of a blended model with some online and some face-to-face support.

The delivery teams' responsiveness and flexibility meant they were able to adapt their offer to families and schools. Crucially, the resources and support the projects offered

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<sup>5</sup> Many schools remained open throughout to vulnerable children and those of key workers, Nursery, Reception, Year 1 and Year 6 age children were then prioritised by the DfE to return to primary schools first from June 1<sup>st</sup> 2020 with other year groups being added when schools could accommodate them before the end of summer term or from September 2020 if this was not possible, see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-educational-and-childcare-settings-to-prepare-for-wider-opening-from-1-june-2020/actions-for-education-and-childcare-settings-to-prepare-for-wider-opening-from-1-june-2020>.

provided some consistency and continuity in a time of flux and variability. The evaluation team had to move in an agile way to support the new developments.

## 3.2 Doorstep Library

### 3.2.1 Resources prior to lockdown

The main part of the Doorstep Library delivery model is home visits, with volunteers modelling to parents how to read for pleasure with their children, and lending books of choice to children. Face-to-face interaction with families in their own homes is a crucial aspect of Doorstep Library's work and enables the volunteers to build strong, trusting relationships with families. Prior to lockdown, many of the Doorstep Library volunteers had received the aforementioned NSPCC Early years training and had begun working with children in the early years in their homes and Doorstep Library had produced the new resource pack specifically designed for this age group, including an alphabet chart, resources, and activities for 0-5s and providing information on other local services including the Lambeth Early Action Partnership<sup>6</sup>. These resources are ready to go out to families once face-to-face delivery begins again.

From March 2020, due to the lockdown, Doorstep Library had to stop operating as face-to-face work with families was not allowed. During the early stages of this lockdown, they adopted a more targeted approach with families, particularly those who were harder to reach. As the lockdown eased, they moved to a blended learning approach.

### 3.2.2 Virtual resources

Since the start of lockdown in March 2020 Doorstep Library put their on-the-ground service on hold but, as time went on, they realised that they could not return to offering this type of service in the short-term future. Therefore, they have worked incredibly hard over the last few months to adapt their service, to ensure they are supporting families and children in their area. In a short space of time, Doorstep Library were able to offer families a mix of services which provided crucial support at a very difficult time through a combination of elements:

- Online interactive story sessions with volunteers and existing families, both group and individual sessions (open offer to all families but with a focus on the hardest to reach including those with children aged 0-3 who are not engaging with other services).
- Sending out books to children so every child had two books to keep.
- Providing pre-recorded video stories (while also finding ways to improve these and uploading to the resources section on the new website).

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<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.leaplambeth.org.uk/> for more information.

- Offering book-swaps on an ad hoc basis to keep books in the homes (where possible and to existing families only).
- Weekly Newsletters to parents to keep in touch and to offer important sign-posting information (previously sent twice a term but during lockdown these were sent weekly as an important means of keeping in touch).

Doorstep Library also provided some more targeted support by emailing and calling all parents. This included sign-posting parents to specific services appropriate to their situation and needs.

They are now working towards a blended service delivery model utilising these same services listed above while also testing out linking with schools in new areas (initially Camden) to offer online story sessions. As part of a wider push on numbers, they are also expanding numbers by working in partnership with other service providers, such as West London Zone or the National Children's Bureau (NCB).

### 3.2.3 Outcomes

The support provided by Doorstep Library is aiming to improve school-readiness for children and families. Results from a wider impact study by Future Proof Impact Ltd <sup>7</sup> found that seven out of ten parents (70%) thought that Doorstep Library prepares children for school or pre-school (this question was asked of parents with children aged from birth to five).

Findings from the impact study showed that parents and carers thought that the provision of books during lockdown had led to an enthusiasm for exploring books and reading among their children:



*I just wanted to say thank you for remembering us. When she saw the book we got through the post, E said 'Mum, I can't believe it, they remembered us!' She was so happy as she loves books. You helped her develop a love of reading.*

Mum

*Thank you to all the readers from the Doorstep Library. My Grandchildren and I have loved the variety of stories, read with such enthusiasm. You have provided an amazing service during this difficult lockdown period. Thank you and well done!*

Grandparent

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<sup>7</sup> Doorstep commissioned [Future Proof Impact Ltd](#) to carry out an impact study of their wider provision which reported in 2020 and has not yet been published.

The impact study found that Doorstep Library has also had an impact on the social and emotional development of children. Parents and volunteers report that children are becoming more confident as a result of the interactions they are having (while also supporting the well-being of parents/carers) as this Case Study from the impact report shows:

### Case Study 1



Doorstep Library had been visiting this family for about a year before lockdown. The visits were mostly swaps on the doorstep. They seemed happy to take books, but the volunteers didn't get to know them very well. After lockdown, the volunteers asked if they would like to have online visits. Mum was a bit hesitant, but arranged for visits with her youngest child, X (aged 4). Mum and X share the phone screen, with one earbud each, while they read with the volunteers, and sing songs. X is happy to chat with the volunteers on the screen, showing them her new school uniform. Doorstep Library sent X a book in the post, and Mum says that she is reading it every day. *"She can't get enough of Peppa Pig!"*

Recently, Mum said *"When the volunteer's first came to the door, X was so shy and scared of them. And now she is reading the books with you and singing songs - she really likes it".*

Mum also didn't want to end the session, she wanted to chat some more. X was ready for her tea, but Mum said *"Maybe you want to go, but I don't. It's nice for me."*

The volunteer wonders if having the screen makes X less shy, and more willing to interact with them. Either way, they feel they are getting to know the family in a way that wouldn't have been possible without the online sessions.

Volunteers have also fed back through the impact report research that the new blending learning is a successful way of keeping in contact with families while also involving children (and the wider family) in an exploration of books:

*Doorstep Library online sessions have provided an amazing way to keep in touch with families during lockdown. Reading over the computer has worked surprisingly well and we've really enjoyed exploring different books and getting other family members involved in the sessions.*

Volunteer

### 3.2.4 Moving forward- Autumn 2020 onwards

Doorstep Library have a number of plans in place, including the launch of a new website (due in early 2021 as they have prioritised getting the online sessions running for families and training the volunteers):

- A new Doorstep Library Website with enhanced design and functionality
- A volunteer portal on the new website with resources
- A family resource area on the new website.
- Games to encourage interactive family reading time.
- Improved video stories – with better formatting.
- Plans to read online with all existing families and to extend the online sessions to a larger number of new families with referrals from nurseries, children's centres, schools and third sector organisations
- Tips for parents for different age groups (0-11 years old).
- Book club for older children.
- A writer in residence – linking with authors to engage the children in writing and reading.

They were also looking to link with publishers to see if they can get regular free books to the children (on their expanded beneficiary cohort) and enquiring about providing free tuition through the national tutoring programme.

Doorstep Library reported facing significant barriers around access to IT equipment as many families do not have any at home and, while libraries are closed, cannot access public provision. The delivery team are trying to find a company that will sponsor them and support them with sourcing equipment for their families to be able to access the online provision they are developing.

Unfortunately, the interview with the delivery team took place just as London was going back into a lockdown so Doorstep Library were having to think again about how they could provide the offer under the re-imposed restrictions. This was incredibly frustrating for the staff who had worked over the summer to make sure the service was running.

It was not envisaged that Doorstep Library would start back with their full face-to-face service until September 2021, but they will continue to support families through a combination of their more targeted approaches.

## **3.3 Parental Engagement Network (PEN)**

### **3.3.1 Resources prior to lockdown**

Prior to March 2020, the schools involved in PEN for this project were at various stages of the intervention, with some having signed up in the Autumn term (2019) while others only recently becoming involved (in the Spring term of 2020).

Practitioners who had been running the Stay and Play/Stay and Learn sessions with parents and children reported that these had been successful at engaging some hard-to-reach families. Practitioners had been having informal chats with parents about ways they can provide support with their child's language and literacy and also distributing the Home Learning packs to take away and use, including a Mouse for each child. The delivery team and practitioners noted that the degree of parental engagement with schools varied and it remained more difficult to engage some parents/carers.

### **3.3.2 Virtual provision**

There were noticeable differences between the schools forming part of the PEN network during the initial stages of the pandemic. While some were classed as 'coronavirus hub schools' and open to the children of key workers and those classed as at-risk, other schools were closed completely (schools in Liverpool were more likely to be closed).

Once schools started opening up again or opening to more pupils, in the Summer term 2020, there was still quite a lot of variation between schools in the two cities which made it considerably harder for the delivery team to engage with some schools. It was apparent to the delivery team that in some schools the management team were still committed to PEN while in others, the engagement dropped off as they focused on their response to Covid-19.

Where possible, the PEN lead has carried out online meetings with practitioners and is working hard to establish and maintain networks for sharing problems and best practise across the programme.

Due to the disadvantage experienced by many families in the communities PEN supports, it was vital that contact was maintained between schools and families. As face-to-face sessions were no longer possible, school practitioners worked hard on alternative ways of reaching children and their parents to provide support and resources while also keeping in touch during such difficult times, including online (Zoom) meetings with parents and phone calls to parent (in some cases weekly) and they were also able to incorporate the PEN resources in the remote learning in the following ways:

- Dropping resources to children's houses including a brand new Mouse, a Mouse Club book, newsletter and bag plus information and resource sheets directly.
- Creating videos to show parents how they can use Mouse and the resources at home.
- Providing information on education websites the schools uses for communicating with parents (examples given included DB Primary<sup>8</sup> and Tapestry<sup>9</sup>), including pages on Mouse Club for children and parents.

During school closures, Mouse was even more important than normal. Practitioners reported in the interviews that they used the class Mouse as a conduit to connect with parents and children. They set activities up for families at home incorporating Mouse. Often this was based around a story the practitioners created around what Mouse had been doing. Since all the children have their own Mouse at home, they can follow what the practitioners are suggesting and also make their own activities and stories up.

Some parents fed back to practitioners about the ways they had been using Mouse (eg online via Tapestry) although there was no requirement for parents to upload anything.

### 3.3.3 Outcomes

Parents we spoke to were very positive about Mouse and Mouse Club activities and provided ways to make stronger links between the activities going on in schools and what parents are doing to support learning at home:

*One parent told us that the school were "really great" with providing ideas and activities to do outside of school. Her son "really took to Mouse", giving him the name of 'Mehow'. He made a superhero costume at home during a Mouse club activity and he happily engages in weekend activities provided by the school with Mouse. They used the suggested activity of going on an autumnal walk and picked up specific leaves of different shapes and colours and taking pictures as they went.*

Parent 2

*Another parent told us that Mouse made a connection between home and school, which was very useful. Her daughter engaged in many activities with Mouse including obstacle courses, tea parties, pizza parties and making clothes for Mouse.*

*She had also been receiving a monthly Mouse newsletter with ideas for activities and advice for parents on how to use Mouse.*

Parent 1

<sup>8</sup> See the following link for further information on DP Primary <https://secure.dbprimary.com/service/util/login>

<sup>9</sup> See the following link for further information on Tapestry <https://tapestryjournal.com/>

## School transitions

Parents and practitioners told us how useful Mouse had been around the transition to school by preparing children and encouraging things like eating independently and potty training. All the children had their own individual Mouse, either before lockdown or over the summer term in preparation for September. Mouse also helped with children's social-emotional development. Practitioners had learnt the names of all the mice so they can talk to the children about them, and what they had been doing. Parents told us how much Mouse supported their children and helped with their concerns over transitions.



*Mouse has helped my son in the transition into school. Mouse was always in his bag and acted as a source of comfort.*

Parent 2

*PEN is a "brilliant, fantastic idea" and it is great to be able to tackle concerns and issues indirectly through Mouse. My daughter would often appear anxious and worried about starting school, but she was able to use Mouse to communicate her feelings indirectly. I was able to ask her questions such as 'How does Mouse feel about starting school?' and she would say 'Mouse is very scared about starting school', indirectly communicating her fears to me.*

Parent 1

Practitioners and parents told us how helpful Mouse had been around developing 'softer skills' such as communication, confidence, and reasoning. Practitioners would communicate through Mouse when they phoned families, telling them what the class Mouse had been doing and this encouraged children to talk 'through' their Mouse, which gave them confidence to communicate.

Practitioners also said that children had been using Mouse to support them around conflict issues that had arisen in the classroom such as arguing over taking turns with a toy when children would ask themselves questions such as *How does Mouse feel?* And *What would Mouse do?* Parents reflected that they used Mouse in similar ways too and said that Mouse also helped them to think through problems.

### Case studies 2 and 3



For parent 1, the most significant changes have been in her daughter's confidence, reasoning, thinking skills and imagination. She already enjoyed stories and reading and has always been well-behaved. Home learning has become more like play without her daughter realising. Her confidence has also helped her in the transition to Reception year.

For parent 2, his son now always wants Mouse next to him when they are reading. Having Mouse has also helped him to make friends at school because other children had a Mouse too. This enabled her son to play with others and have an initial similar interest from the start. She was worried about her son's 'boisterous-ness' but Mouse seems to calm him at home and at school, and he has been much more relaxed going to school. She felt it "has been lovely to see his caring side".

### 3.3.4 Challenges

Very few problems were raised by practitioners or parents. From the delivery team's perspective, the success of PEN depends on parental engagement with the project:

*"If schools had established good relationships with parents before lockdown, the relationships remained good".*

There were a few issues around resources in terms of children not being able to take their Mouse into schools with a 'no soft-toy' rule (due to Covid-19). Practitioners in this situation would use the class Mouse in school, and the children would all have their own Mouse at home.

Many of the families in the PEN cohort are disadvantaged and do not necessarily have access to IT equipment such as laptops/iPads. Practitioners realised that not all children have access to a mobile phone so are unable to access resources online, either direct from Mouse Club or from school. As discussed above, practitioners tried to mitigate this as much as they could by providing the materials directly. The delivery team were also aware of some practitioners not having access to IT in school (eg Teaching Assistants), making it difficult for them to access resources.

### 3.3.5 Moving forward- Autumn Term 2020 onwards

Communication with parents that was normally in person was anticipated to be difficult ie drop-offs and pick-ups, parents' evenings, and meetings after school so practitioners were looking at alternatives, especially with new parents. Stay and Play in- person sessions would also not be possible and because in most schools children could not take their Mouse into school (because of the restrictions on cuddly toy items due to Covid-19), practitioners planned to carry on using the class Mouse in school and encourage children to do things at home with their own mice

For the new term (children starting Nursery or Reception in September 2020), some practitioners took a Mouse and Mouse Club bag around to the child's house together with resources such as the new Getting Ready for School checklist for parents to complete. Unfortunately, the costs of the packs were starting to become unsustainable for some schools that were interviewed.

The delivery team created new resources for transitions into Nursery and Reception including "*Getting safely back to primary school during Covid19*" which was available on the PEN website and provides information on what school or nursery was going to be like when they returned. PEN were also looking at alternative ways to deliver training to new practitioners including online (either 1-2-1 or in groups), creating videos for practitioners about the project and setting up the sharing of good practice between practitioners, and parents.

Parents wanted Mouse Club to carry on and hoped the schools would find the resources to do this. As their children got older, they did suggest they could possibly progress to something other than a soft toy as this could be seen as babyish.

The only improvement suggested was for a Mouse Diary<sup>10</sup>:

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<sup>10</sup> Please note a Mouse Diary is available through PEN, but some schools choose not to use it as they already have home/ school communication methods they use.

*One parent suggested that a 'Mouse Diary' would have been well received as her son could have attached pictures and written into it describing activities. The parent suggested the diary could have a picture of Mouse on the front and incorporated throughout the diary.*

Parent 2

## 3.4 Tales Toolkit

### 3.4.1 Resources prior to lockdown

Prior to lockdown the parent training resources were starting to be developed so they had not been used with any families yet. The practitioners we spoke to had all had Tales Toolkit training (the five x 50 minute videos) prior to lockdown. Tales Toolkit reported that one practitioner working in an international school first heard about them at an international conference and subsequently received the training remotely which is one of the benefits to the videos being available online. Practitioners were unanimously positive about Tales Toolkit and found the resources invaluable:

*The resources are brilliant. Prior to lockdown, the EY team and Year 1 had 'used everything available to them' from Tales Toolkit.*

Practitioner 1

*Tales Toolkit has reinvigorated my love for the job. The children love the resources. They love sharing what they have done with their parents. Their parents are very proud and excited and impressed.*

Practitioner 3

Parents reported that their children were very positive about using Tales Toolkit in school. One parent told us their child had come home one day, very excited about using the framework in class. They also said that this prior understanding really helped during lockdown as they were already familiar with the resources and excited to be using them at home.

### 3.4.2 Virtual provision

#### Parents

During lockdown and school closures in 2020, Tales Toolkit very quickly created a website to share information and resources with parents who were already involved through schools (requiring a login) for free. This way, parents had direct access and could download what they wanted. The website was designed to appeal to parents and children

alike.<sup>11</sup> Tales Toolkit also produced videos for parents, to explain the resources and how they can be used with children. The videos were designed to be a more creative way of connecting with parents, and the format enables parents to watch them whenever is convenient. The resources were designed to give parents the knowledge necessary to support their children, at a time when so many were unable to go to nursery or school. In addition, Tales Toolkit started allowing parents to join their free webinars (which had previously just been for practitioners) and there have been two by the end of 2020; ‘Can you really learn through play?’ By Alistair Bryce Clegg in September 2020 and ‘Childhood anxiety and trauma’ by Jane Evans in November 2020.

Parents feedback about the resources was also overwhelmingly positive:

*I feel Incredibly grateful to have had the opportunities to use the resources TT have created and shared.*

Parent 1



*My son would run off and find four objects, for example a Batman figure, and would tell stories with these objects. For example, in one story Batman was the character, the problem consisted of a dinosaur attempting to eat another superhero stuck in the water (a blue shirt as the setting). Batman came and asked the dinosaur calmly to leave the superhero alone, and as a result the dinosaur went away.*

*I also encourage him to sound out the words in his story. Sometimes I will scribe the story, and other times he will write the words down phonetically.*

Parent 3

*We used the resources with our daughter multiple times per week and found them very helpful. For example, my daughter was given some story pieces, including a hedgehog as a character, a front door as the setting, a robot as the problem and potions as the solution. She then came up with a story using these aspects to create a whole story around the hedgehog.*

Parent 2

Tales Toolkit also created new Covid-19 focused resources with illustrations specific to the pandemic such as medical staff and home delivery vans, being inside, not being at school and not seeing family and friends. These resources, mirroring what was happening in real life, were designed to enable children to express how they were feeling through storytelling and provided emotional support at a crucial time. Parents found these resources very useful:

<sup>11</sup> The project lead said it had been based on the work of children’s illustrator and author [Oliver Jeffers](#).

### Case study 4

This parent found the resources to be very helpful, as they allowed her daughter to talk about what was happening during the pandemic, specifically with washing hands, being inside, not being at school, not seeing family and friends, and what Doctors and Nurses were doing. She described how the resources had helped her daughter to express how she was feeling through storytelling, which helped during times of anxiousness:

*The Covid-19 resources were brilliant as we could talk about there being a bug which meant there was no nurses, doctors, and washing hands, but through stories which meant she wasn't anxious.*

Parent 1

### Practitioners

During lockdown, practitioners found the Tales Toolkit resources invaluable and used them in a variety of ways either stand-alone or in combination with other activities:

*The teachers focused on a different fairy-tale or story every week. Once they had uploaded the story onto the school website, they sent out a Tales Toolkit framework and, thinking about the four main parts, children were asked to 'write' their own stories.*

Practitioner 1 and 2

*The childminder took photos of their garden and then asked the children to write a story using the four key elements. In addition, they ran Zoom meetings with children in groups of four and holding up symbols, would ask them questions about the character and setting and together, they would create a story. The stories could also lead onto other aspects of the EYFS curriculum including maths problems, art and design or social and emotional development.*

Practitioner 6

However, due to the circumstances, practitioners told us because they had less control over what was happening at home during lockdown, there was no pressure or expectation on parents to do any of the things suggested or provided. However, the feedback they got from parents was that the resources were being used by families and they were very pleased to have them to use at home.

The resources were really useful once schools started opening up to more pupils (from June) and more children started going back (in 'classroom bubbles'). Since the children could not access a lot of the class resources (due to Covid-19 the children could only access things that could be cleaned easily) they loved Tales Toolkit and just used what they could find around them.

*The children love the Tales Toolkit resources and when we came back (after lockdown) we probably got more Tales Toolkit stories written in those last 7 weeks than ever before!*

Practitioner 1

*Children love the strips with the four elements on them, plus the booklet. I cut out pictures for the children to choose from and print out their own pictures to add to the stock. I also use the Big Bag to develop stories with the children pulling out pictures. I stick a big piece of card under the table and the children add in their own elements. The children love using the Big Pockets to put cards from the different elements into, to build up a story.*

Practitioner 3

### 3.4.3 Outcomes

#### Literacy and language

Practitioners described in interviews that they found that by the end of Reception, children were choosing their own stories and vocabulary to write and draw their own stories. Nursery staff and childminders reported that prior to starting school, Tales Toolkit is supporting children to meet their targets. Children of all ages are building a strong understanding of the central tenets of storytelling, both oral and in writing, skills which are increasingly useful as they move up the Key Stages.

Parents also fed back on improvements in their children's literacy and language development:

*My son has always enjoyed stories, but since using Tales Toolkit he is now recognising characters, settings and the structures of stories. He will point out and identify elements of the story as 'character' or 'setting'. Tales Toolkit has also significantly impacted his imagination, he would often 'disappear' in the house looking for characters, settings and problems – on one occasion he spent 40 minutes looking for story elements.*

*His speech and vocabulary has improved, and that he feels able to use lots of different words. In addition, he is 'more than ready' for school and feels confident he will be able to create great stories when he starts.*

Parent 4

#### **Children with EAL, SEND and reluctant writers**

Practitioners and parents also said that Tales Toolkit has strong outcomes for children with EAL, speech and language issues and also reluctant writers. In one school with a very high EAL population (75%), practitioners said that Tales Toolkit has been really helpful for working with many of their pupils, some with multiple barriers to learning.

It was noted that, through engaging with the Tales Toolkit resources, significant progress is made by children who would not normally engage in literacy activities:

*A Reception teacher fed-back about one boy that has EAL, is autistic and is a reluctant writer. Using Tales Toolkit with him 1-2-1, he was engaged so much, he was able to retell a story by drawing a picture and talking about it.*

Practitioner 1

*In another case, the teacher reported about a girl with selective mutism who would not normally talk **at all** in class. Through Tales Toolkit, the girl drew a picture with a character and setting and talked about the story to the staff.*

Practitioner 5

*A childminder told us about a little boy (aged 3), who does not normally like to write. One day, they went for a walk and he came back and wanted to write a Tales Toolkit story about the Miner Bees they had seen on the walk. They discussed how writers create books, then he wrote his own book, writing the words phonetically and drawing the pictures.*

Practitioner 3

Parents concurred with practitioners on these outcomes:

*With regard to speech and language, I am currently waiting for a referral, but I feel that he did improve in lockdown and began speaking to us more (his parents and brother).*

Parent 3

*Tales Toolkit has helped my daughter with letters, sounds and vocabulary, specifically with reading and decoding phonics. Tales Toolkit has definitely helped with her speech as all of the stories are oral and have gently helped her with some sounds she finds difficult, such as the 'sh' and 'th' sounds.*

Parent 1

### **All age groups**

Practitioners and parents told us that they had also used the framework of Tales Toolkit with older children. One practitioner told us that a Year 5 class (9 and 10 year olds) has used setting-character-problem and solution to write a story around the Arabian Nights:



*“Tales Toolkit is brilliant because you can use the framework to hang everything on...Any opportunity for the children to talk is invaluable and Tales Toolkit has been absolutely amazing for this”.*

Practitioner 5

Practitioners also had plans to use the resources in younger and older age groups. While staff in one nursery were planning on using them with their two- and three- year- olds, an international school were planning on including children up to Year 13 (17 and 18 years old). It was noted that some of the concepts might be adapted slightly, to suit the age group for example, for younger children they might say, 'where are we today' as 'setting' can be a difficult concept to understand.

It was also noted that Tales Toolkit supports peer to peer learning, especially in settings with mixed age groups (eg nurseries, childminders and mixed year groups). Through the process of storytelling, the younger children are seeing the older children talking about their stories and writing about them. Not only was this seen as good for progression, it is also good for transitions. A childminder told us that Reception teachers in their feeder schools have commented that they can always tell when children have been doing Tales Toolkit.

### Wider outcomes

Practitioners and parents told us about some wider outcomes, particularly around children's social-emotional development. Practitioners in all settings found children were using Tales Toolkit for conflict resolution in the classroom. Thinking about what the problem is (perhaps with one of their friends or taking turns), they can work out some possible solutions:

*Tales Toolkit can constantly extend into other areas of life - children ask themselves "What's the problem, how can we solve it?" This way, they are learning things like how to take turns, how to deal with conflict, and how to respect each other."*

Practitioner 3

One nursery practitioner told us that all practitioners now have lanyards with the four symbols on them and these are used across the age groups, to support in communication and social-emotional development.

Practitioners told us about children who had gained a lot of confidence from using Tales Toolkit, through encouraging them to talk and share stories. They have noticed children becoming braver and developing pride in what they have.

Parents also noticed wider improvements, particularly around self-regulation and behaviour:

*Behaviour wise, my son can get frustrated easily, but Tales Toolkit has helped him to focus his mind on problems and solutions, easing his frustration.*

Parent 3

*Tales Toolkit has made a huge difference to us during lockdown. My son became very shy and worried about going outside, but Tales Toolkit made him feel more normal, almost as if he was attending nursery because Tales Toolkit reminds him of nursery.*

Parent 4

In addition, wider outcomes were noted by practitioners, including improvements in the home learning environment and more positive relationships between families. It was also reported by a childminder that Reception teachers thought school readiness was enhanced.

Tales Toolkit also has outcomes around statutory regulations for the EYFS. A childminder reported using Tales Toolkit in their latest OFSTED inspection. In a session planned around the well-known EY story Handa's Surprise, the children painted and used Play-doh to create their own stories which were based around the main character having seven pieces of fruit which are taken by different animals along a journey. She said the inspector was very impressed with what the children were doing and how the Tales Toolkit resources also feed into other aspects of the EYFS such as number and art and design. It was clear from the OFSTED report that Tales Toolkit had been used, although it cannot be named specifically (as they cannot be seen to promote any programme).

### 3.4.4 Challenges

No difficulties were raised about the Tales Toolkit resources or support. However, during lockdown, some families had difficulties accessing resources including not being able to print materials off (as not all have printers or the internet). In some cases, families did not have access to basic resources such as pencils or paper (resources that would normally be available in settings). In these circumstances, the lead suggested that families use everyday objects they may have around the home and from the area around them when they can go on walks.

Some practitioners reported that there could be issues using the resources in outdoor learning. Staff in one school requested some new resources, applicable to the outdoor learning area and tough enough to withstand a lot of wear and tear outside. They had recently made a big investment in the outdoor play area because of Covid-19, creating a stage, outside kitchen etc and it would be good for them to have some additional Tales Toolkit resources for this.

In terms of improvements, one parent suggested a tutorial video for parents, explaining how to use the resources at home while another parent suggested an interactive storyboard may be useful, in which stages of the story can be moved around. Another parent suggested there could be more 'symbols' and resources, especially around solutions and problems as parents are not always able to create more.

### 3.4.5 Moving forward - Autumn 2020 onwards

Development of the parental training was put on hold during the summer as the home resources took priority, but they are now being finalised and will be tested with schools in 2021. In the meantime, the plan is for Tales Toolkit to carry on with the webinars open to practitioners and parents approximately once a month and for these to be recorded and stored for future use. The next planned webinar is in February 2021 with Sue Palmer called 'Hitting the target and missing the point' about communication and language in the EYFS and there are sessions planned in March and April on risky play and diversity in storytelling. There were also plans for designing something for practitioners to use online (probably through Zoom) and some training videos based on the original Tales Toolkit training with background/theory/practice etc. The model includes a practitioner taking the lead on the training with parents (via Zoom) and will include opportunities to pause, so

parents can ask questions and do activities. It was argued by practitioners that Tales Toolkit is even more important now when so many children have missed a lot of time at Nursery.

There is also a plan to build up a bank of resources for parents to watch at home, or for practitioners to use with parents (this way providing a limitless resource for parents who can watch the videos as many times as they like).

Practitioners also noted that normal methods of communication with parents will be difficult as the number of face-to-face encounters will be limited. Practitioners are looking at other ways to communicate, especially with new parents. In one school, for the transition to Reception, they have created a Transitions book with practitioners dressed up - one as character, one as setting (the school), one as problem (Covid-19) and one as solution. They were also planning on using Tales Toolkit in the transition from Reception to Year 1 as so many children had missed this crucial stage during lockdown and school closures.

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## 4 Recommendations

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### 4.1 Recommendations for the projects

2020 brought extreme challenges to all three delivery teams and they were all able to take nimble action enabling them to continue to provide resources, services and support to the families likely to be the most affected by the crisis. While the pandemic continues to cause disruption to face-to-face services, virtual training, stay and play/ reading/ storytelling sessions will engage families and children with a love of reading in the short term before the services can return to normal. Many of the developments online can be taken forward in the future though such as Tales Toolkit's family resources on the website which were a longer term plan which may not have come to fruition nearly as quickly without the events of 2020, using virtual resources for networking for families in PEN might mean that families that would have been unlikely in-person to attend all the sessions will now continue and Doorstep Libraries virtual training of volunteers may enable those who would not be willing/ able to volunteer in person to put themselves forward. Because of the changes necessitated by the pandemic's restrictions, all three projects will go forward under less-restricted circumstances with new online resources and skills that will strengthen them in the future. Although the pandemic has been catastrophic in many ways, it has forced all three projects to embrace online engagement in ways that will enhance their offer in the future and be more cost effective.

One of the challenges for all three projects, particularly with the extra strain of the pandemic, will be finding future funding to help continue their hard work. Future funding was brought up by some delivery team leads and there were questions over whether local authorities who had previously funded the projects, would be able to find the money to continue to fund the projects as there is a lot of pressure on their budgets in the current climate. Without this support, schools, nurseries and childminders would find it difficult to purchase the resources with the extra burdens on their budgets. One suggestion for future funding is to apply for support to embed the new online resources into a permanent offer of blended intervention in place of face-to-face. The addition of online resources/activities may lead to some cost-savings and may also increase levels of engagement. This new online blended work may be attractive to funders if it could lead to reduced costs in the future.

**Recommendation 1: Making partnerships with Local Authorities may enable the project teams to continue or extend their work to a larger number of families.**

Tales Toolkit and PEN use a school- based delivery model for most of their work already and Doorstep Library enabling some of their work to be delivered or linked through schools may also extend the possible reach.

**Recommendation 2: Forming links with schools and groups of schools such as teaching alliances or academy chains could help project teams to expand take-up and reach.**

All projects should make as much available online as possible so that they can reach as many families as possible whilst being aware of the digital divide (see section 4.2) and having paper resources available where needed. It is also important where possible to ensure resources are accessible to parents with EAL and children with SEND.

**Recommendation 3: All projects should be looking at ways to extend their services to be accessible for all families including children with EAL and children with SEND as two of the most vulnerable groups. Online provision is one way of achieving this.**

The project delivery teams working directly with schools could also be looking at extending their reach further into nurseries and childminders, but often budgets are even more stretched than at schools and will require different packages of support to allow for different needs within different settings.

**Recommendation 4: Tailored packages for nurseries, childminders and smaller schools would enable these groups to take part for a lower cost and perhaps developing adapted resources for the needs of those leading in these organisations who may not have the same level of CPD/ training as other practitioners may help extend reach.**

There are important outcomes around school transitions for all projects, preparing children and parents for school. Improvements in social-emotional development, resilience and confidence in addition to the literacy and language development all aid school readiness. Doorstep Library, PEN and Tales Toolkit are all conduits to improve connections between education and home which are even more important than ever now given school disruptions and the predicted long-term impact of the pandemic on children from disadvantaged families.

**Recommendation 5: School readiness and preparation for the transition to school is of key importance for child and family outcomes and anything projects can do to continue or extend this support will help schools justify the time/ membership costs of taking part and can be used in Ofsted reports.**

It is important to think about a range of ways to advertise and promote what the charities are doing without opening themselves up for their approaches to be directly copied so perhaps time limited logins for Tales Toolkit and PEN could help with this.

**Recommendation 6: The delivery teams need to keep shouting about what they are doing and promote to a range of local charities, children's groups and businesses.**

**Finally, Recommendation 7: Future evaluations of the Doorstep Library, PEN and Tales Toolkit projects will need to consider:**

- Taking into account flexible delivery models which may adapt over time depending on need and pandemic restrictions. The learnings each project made during COVID-19

were painful but have led to new skills for blending of online approaches with face-to-face, which will be vital in the future.

- A comparison of blended and face-to-face models to consider the pros and cons of accessing the most hard-to-reach groups (this will be weighing up the harm of the digital divide vs the ability of families to balance childcare, travel and other responsibilities to attend in-person sessions).
- Robust evaluation of child outcomes including considering the sector led work on Birth to five that is currently underway to replace the updated (2020) Development Matters documentation where possible.
- Qualitative research is crucial to continued understanding of the sector and changes as they transpire over the next 12- 18 months as society adjusts to the next stages.

## 4.2 Recommendations for the early years sector

One of the main challenges or issues raised across all the projects was families not having access to IT equipment such as laptops or smartphones or only having one shared device in a household and this was regularly mentioned by parents, practitioners and delivery teams across all three projects as a major barrier to access for online resources, training and support. Research by the Sutton Trust found that only 2% of practitioners from the poorest state schools thought their students would have adequate access to an electronic device for learning and 12% of practitioners thought that more than a third of their class would not have adequate internet access (Cullinane & Montacute, 2020). This compares to 42% of private school practitioners thinking that their students would have access to an electronic device for learning and 38% of private school practitioners thinking that all of their class would have adequate internet access.

The recent APPG on the 'Impact of the digital divide on social mobility' covered this topic and Javed Khan stated:

*'There is no doubt that digital poverty is widening the gap at school, and there is now a generation of vulnerable young people who are now less likely to do well in school, go on to university or get on the career ladder. 'Levelling up' appears harder to achieve than ever'*

Javed made suggestions for the government around working to identify which children are in digital poverty, preparing a plan to close the gap and investing in digital innovation, all of which he said would need to happen in collaboration with local charities (such as the project teams covered in this report), businesses and local government.

Our research also found that other home learning resources such as the basic needs around paper and pencils were not being met in some of the households supported by the project delivery teams. Doorstep Library have been looking for sponsorship support from local business and this might be a model other projects could consider.

**Recommendation 8: The government need to urgently action calls from the early years and schools sectors to combat the digital divide and support all families to have access to an electronic device per child for learning, internet access should be treated as a basic human need in this crisis and in the same way as heating allowances are provided to those in need should be given to families without access and local businesses should be encouraged to support provision of basic resources such as paper, pens and pencil to enable children and families to write and draw stories.**

**Recommendation 9: Organisations delivering services to support families could also approach local businesses to help make some of these connections themselves to speed up this process.**

The projects also highlight the additional outcomes linked to the mental health and well-being of parents, especially lone parents, disadvantaged parents, isolated parents, parents with EAL, and parents of children with SEND. This is in addition to the benefits to children's own mental health and catch-up following the missed learning during the pandemic.

**Recommendation 10: The early years sector should take note of ways that these projects are helping support the most vulnerable families and find ways to enhance and extend that support where possible. In addition, the early years sector should lobby/support government, the charitable sector and philanthropists to fund this kind of innovative work carried out by grassroots organisations with the aim of more rigorous evaluation in the future.**

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## 6 Appendix 1- PEN Ready for School Checklist

Please circle the appropriate number where  
1 is not ready and 3 is nursery ready

Your child can colour in the tick when they are ready in each area.

**Toilet Training**  
1 2 3  
Action

**Using a knife and fork**  
1 2 3  
Action

**Dressing independently**  
1 2 3  
Action

**Not using a pushchair**  
1 2 3  
Action

**Not using a dummy**  
1 2 3  
Action

**Sleep routines**  
1 2 3  
Action

**Getting Ready for School**

## 7 Appendix 2 - Delivery team topic guide

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### OVO Foundation Early Years – Leads

#### Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to talk to me today.

As you know, we have been asked by the OVO Foundation to speak to staff and parents about the resources and support provided to families following lockdown.

The interview will last around 45 minutes. Everything we talk about will be confidential and we will not name any individuals, organisations or settings in our report.

If it is ok with you, we would like to record the interview. This is just for our purpose and the recording will be deleted at the end of the project.

#### The 'new' virtual resources

1. Please start by describing how the project resources and support have been adapted for lockdown? (prompt for new resources/ materials/ as well as updates to existing resources/ materials). Have you changed the approach over the period since schools closed in March to today?
2. How do the resources fit alongside the other work teachers are doing/ sending home?
3. How many families are using the resources? Has the reach of the intervention changed? (prompt for families contacting directly/ international work/ childminders or nurseries being in touch)
4. What has worked well and why?

5. Is there anything that hasn't worked so well? Have you done anything to change practice when this has happened (if not covered in question 1)?
6. What have been the outcomes for teachers? *Ask for any examples of feedback.*
7. What have been the outcomes for parents? And children? *Ask for any examples of feedback.*

### **Moving forwards**

8. What is planned for the summer holidays?
9. What are the plans for the next academic year?
10. In the longer-term, what elements would you like to keep?
11. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us?

Thank and close.

## 8 Appendix 3 - Practitioner topic guide

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The logo for the Institute for Employment Studies (ies) features the lowercase letters 'ies' in a bold, blue, sans-serif font. A small yellow dot is positioned above the 'i'. A blue line starts below the 'i', curves around the bottom left, and then extends horizontally to the right, ending in a blue arrowhead pointing towards the right side of the page.

### OVO Foundation Early Years – Staff

#### Introduction

As you know, PEN/Tales Toolkit [*specify as necessary*] have been funded by the OVO Foundation to provide support to families with pre-school children. Since lockdown, PEN/Tales Toolkit have been adapting their resources to make them accessible to families online. We have been asked by the OVO Foundation to speak to staff and families about the resources and support provided to families during these difficult times.

The interview will last around 30 minutes. Everything we talk about will be confidential and we will not name any individuals or settings in our report. We are not part of the OVO Foundation or PEN/Tales Toolkit so they will not know what you have told us.

If it is ok with you, we would like to record the interview. This is just for our purpose and the recording will be deleted at the end of the project.

#### The ‘original’ resources

1. (Briefly) Thinking of the resources/support provided by PEN/Tales Toolkit before lockdown - how long had you been using them? In what way had you been using them, and how often? (NB: Not for PEN Sept 2020 cohort)

#### The ‘new’ virtual resources

2. How have the new virtual resources been used during lockdown?
3. How do the resources complement what else you have been doing?
4. How many families are using the resources? How has this changed?
5. What has worked well and why?
6. Is there anything that hasn't worked so well?

7. What have been the outcomes for parents? *Ask for any examples of feedback.*
8. What have been the outcomes for children? *Ask for any examples of feedback.*

**Additional support**

9. How else have you supported parents with home learning?
10. What is planned for the summer holidays? And for next term?
11. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about PEN/Tales Toolkit?

Thank and close.

## 9 Appendix 4 - Parent topic guide

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# OVO Foundation Early Years – Parents and carers

## Introduction

As you may know, PEN/Tales Toolkit [*specify as necessary*] have been funded by the OVO Foundation to provide support to families with pre-school children. Since lockdown, PEN/Tales Toolkit have been adapting their resources to make them accessible to families online. We have been asked by OVO Foundation to speak to staff and families about the resources and support provided to families during these difficult times.

The interview will last around 20 minutes. Everything we talk about will be confidential and we will not name any individuals in our report. We are not part of the OVO Foundation or PEN/Tales Toolkit so they will not know what you have told us.

If it is ok with you, we would like to record the interview. This is just for our purpose and the recording will be deleted at the end of the project.

1. Briefly, what were your views on the resources/training/support provided by PEN/Tales Toolkit before lockdown? (*NB: Not for PEN Sept 2020 cohort*)
2. What have you received in the way of resources and/or support (from PEN/Tales Toolkit) during lockdown?
3. How useful have the resources been and how often has you used them? Could you give me an example of what you have done?
4. What has worked well and why?

5. Is there anything that could be improved?
6. Have you noticed any differences in your child/ren? *Probe for changes in: enjoyment of stories and books, reading, imagination, vocabulary, speech, attitudes towards home-learning, ability to control behaviour, school-readiness.* Anything else?
7. How else could PEN/Tales Toolkit support you and your family moving forward?
8. What have PEN/Tales Toolkit got planned for next term?
9. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about PEN/Tales Toolkit?

Thank and close.