



THE
MERCERS'
COMPANY

Report on Year 2 of the Early Years Special Initiative

An evaluation report by The
Education Policy Institute.



Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Executive summary | 3 |
| Key findings in the second year | 3 |
| Cohort 1’s achievements | 4 |
| Cohort 2’s achievements | 6 |
| Next steps | 7 |
| What we have done | 12 |
| Individual meetings with programmes | 12 |
| Cohort meetings | 12 |
| Interim findings symposium | 13 |
| Supporting organisations with their data collection processes..... | 14 |
| What we have found..... | 15 |
| 1. Strategy and direction..... | 16 |
| 2. Implementation | 17 |
| 3. Outputs | 20 |
| 4. Uptake and feedback..... | 24 |
| 5. Sustainability and scaling up..... | 28 |
| Annex 1: Overarching framework..... | 31 |
| Annex 2: List of programmes by borough of operation..... | 36 |

Executive summary

The purpose of EPI's work is to provide a bird's eye view of the work carried out by the programmes involved in the Early Years Special Initiative. We do this through a monitoring and evaluation framework that helps us to understand the processes involved in the delivery of each programme and, ultimately, identify important lessons across all programmes. The data we gather complement the data collected by each programme, and together by the end of the Initiative will make a significant contribution to the evidence base of what works in the delivery of interventions to support children's outcomes in the early years.

We are working with programmes to collect information across a range of areas, including hosting meetings with programmes within each cohort and across cohorts to facilitate collaboration and joined up working and learning.

The first cohort of programmes, composed of Chickenshed, the National Literacy Trust (NLT), and the Scouts, started their grant period in April 2019. Cohort 2, composed of Ark, Catch Up and the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE), started their grant period in April 2020. Cohort 3, composed of ICAN, National Children's Bureau (NCB), Peeple and Tales Toolkit, started their grant period in April 2021. In this report we summarise findings from the second year of the Initiative, with a focus on Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 since programmes in Cohort 3 are in the early stages of their grant.

Key findings in the second year

The programmes in the Early Years Initiative vary considerably in their approach to improving outcomes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, their experiences so far provide some early lessons of how programmes seeking to improve children's outcomes through provision of early learning opportunities can get the best results. Inevitably, the Covid-19 pandemic has had a strong impact on the programmes and their ability to reach the target population. But there are important lessons to learn also from how they have adjusted their plans to cope with lockdowns and social distancing rules.

Some key lessons we have learned are:

1. **Engagement with families:** Resources that families can access from home are of increased importance since the beginning of the pandemic and there are many ways to deliver them. However, it is important to understand the communities served by the project to make sure strategies are adapted to reach the most disadvantaged families. Lockdown and social distancing rules have put a strain on education settings' capacity to reach out to families. In particular, it can be hard to reach some of the most disadvantaged families through online provision. At the same time, families seem to have been more receptive to programmes and opportunities to engage. So while, the reach of many of the programmes has been lower than their original target, families seem to be "in" for the long run.
2. **Data collection:** Data collection has been increasingly difficult during the pandemic. Usual data collection methods that require meeting face-to-face, such as classroom/children observations or in person interviews, have not been possible for many months. Programmes have adjusted their plans and strategies, for example moving to phone interviews and online/paper surveys. However, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Continuous monitoring and adjusting is important as different groups might face different issues. Schools are more easily reached via online surveys but the best method to gather parental

feedback is not as clear-cut. Some parents are very comfortable with online surveys. Others might not have the technology skills or equipment to respond online. Each programme had to put a lot of effort into knowing their community and understanding their circumstances. In some cases, programmes also had to forgo the idea of collecting high-quality data. In fact, as education settings have been extremely busy during the pandemic, the programmes had to balance getting the data with not overburdening settings (and possibly losing participants).

3. **The need to be flexible:** Despite the difficulties initially created by the move to online provision of resources and activities, many programmes have adjusted very quickly. In some cases they have found that online provision has actually given the opportunity to families that would have not normally participated to do so more confidently. As a consequence, many programmes are planning to continue with a blended approach in the future, giving the recipients of their project the opportunity to choose how to participate.

We have collected information about each programme along a range of domains, from their strategy and direction through outputs and uptake, and to their sustainability and potential for scaling up. The achievements of each programme should be considered in light of the significant impact that the Covid-19 pandemic has continued to have on the programmes. This is particularly the case for Cohort 2 programmes, which started their implementation amid rising infections rates, lockdown and extended social distancing rules. For a fuller description of each programme's progress, please see the section titled 'What we have found'.

Cohort 1's achievements

Chickenshed

Chickenshed has been unable to carry out any of their planned activities face-to-face, as schools have not allowed guests on the premises. Therefore, the targets set in the original project plan are not relevant for this second year of operations. They had quickly switched to online activities during the last quarter of the first year of operation. During the second year they have refined their delivery and expanded their work to a third school. Some key achievements include:

- **950:** the number of families Tales TV episodes were sent to;
- **11,000:** the number of views of Tales TV episodes;
- **62-70:** the number of children who participated in each of the 8 live online sessions that took place with two schools in the spring Term 2021;
- **9:** the days of Festival activities planned for the summer 2021.

Importantly, Chickenshed's activities have been extremely well supported by the schools' leadership teams. Their buy in has been crucial to help the project enter year 3 of operations with everything well planned.

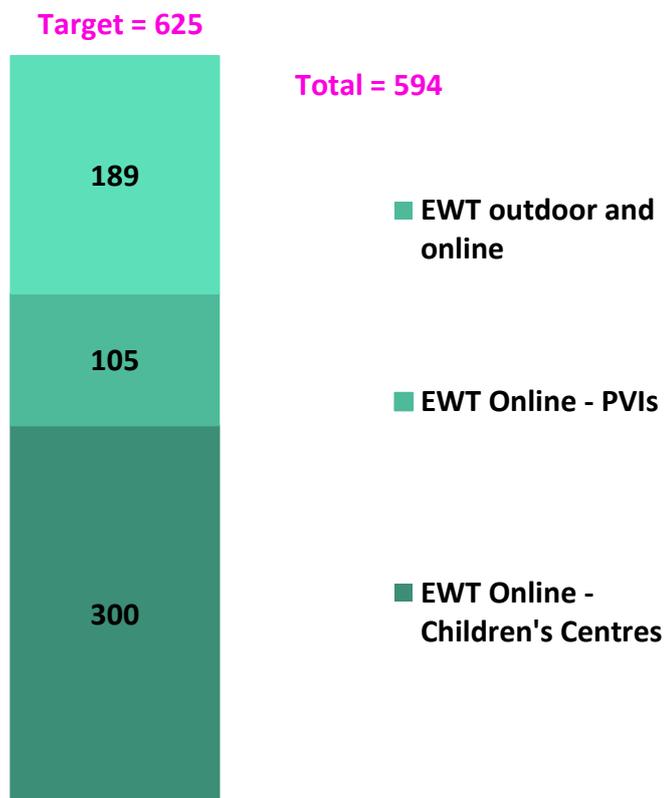
The National Literacy Trust

NLT's work for the second year of the Initiative moved to the borough of Southwark as planned. The Southwark early years team reported that not all the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) settings targeted had capacity to attend the training in January 2021 and the target of training 50 practitioners across 25 PVI settings was not reached (only 38 were trained directly). Therefore, they offered NLT membership to the settings that still had to be trained, so they could access resources and support in their own time.

The training was successful in terms of meeting its aims. For the September 2020 training, all practitioners felt that the training improved their understanding of the programme significantly or very significantly, and thought the resources provided will be useful. 95% felt confident about putting what they learned into practice. Overall, all participants thought training was good or excellent.

Lockdown and social distancing have put a strain on the capacity of settings to reach out to families, but the targeted number of families was almost reached through the different programme's adaptation.

Figure 1: Number of families, reached v targeted in year 2

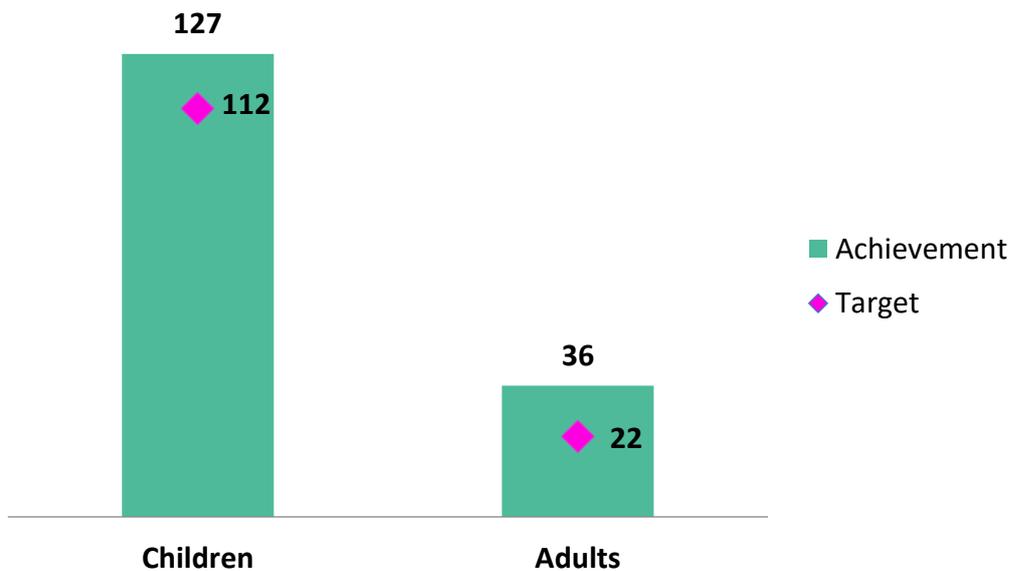


The Scouts

Figure 2 shows the number of children and adults who were members of the London pilots run by the Scouts in May 2021, which shows the target was not only reached, but surpassed.

Participants are all from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds and religious beliefs, as well as with additional needs, from autism to hearing impairment. Families are diverse in culture and countries of origin. They have five more groups waiting to be launched with training all complete and are just waiting on timings with all preparation completed to start running.

Figure 2: Number of children and adults attending Scouts' Early Years Project pilots



The increase in the number of families reached - compared to the number achieved in year 1 - was possible thanks to the relaxation of social distancing rules. On the other hand, during the year the number of families attending the monthly virtual events has been considerably smaller than anticipated, with five families taking part on average in events held between December 2020 and February 2021. The Scouts attribute this to a range of factors, including the fact that they were offering a variety of means of engagement at the same time. Despite low take-up of these monthly events, feedback from parents who did attend suggests that they have found the sessions valuable.

Cohort 2's achievements

Ark

Ark was able to open the Clapham nursery in September 2020, according to plans, but had to delay the opening of the Croydon site until January 2021. This, alongside lockdown and social distancing measures, has led to 68 children in total attending the two settings, versus the planned 150. Some key components of the delivery, such as parental engagement and enrichment activities, also had to be modified.

Catch Up

Practitioners training in Catch Up Literacy and Catch Up Numeracy interventions and support for school staff was delivered in six schools in Tower Hamlets, thereby reaching the targeted number of schools and teachers trained. All training has been delivered online, which has worked well for all except for one school. A downside of the delayed recruitment process is that it has not been possible to establish the schools as a 'project group' with the schools being recruited on a one-by-one basis.

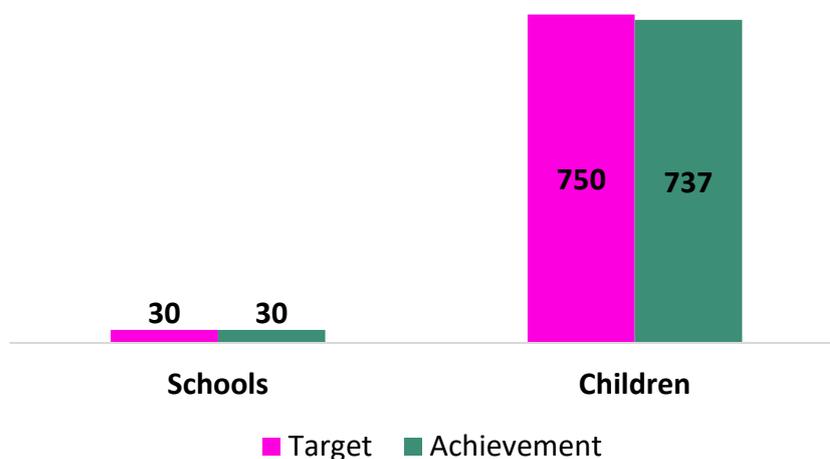
The extended school lockdown also meant that schools were not always able to work with the target pupils. Weekly Catch Up Literacy and Catch Up Numeracy one-to-one intervention sessions have continued to be delayed. The two Review and Refresh Sessions - one for Catch Up Literacy and one for Catch Up Numeracy - were delayed as well but finally delivered online in the summer term. The verbal feedback from coordinators was very positive and useful for planning next year.

In fact, the planning process for recruiting six schools in Tower Hamlets and six schools in Islington for year 2 has already been completed and outreach started in May 2021, with five schools having already signed the Memorandum of Understanding in July 2021. At present, they are anticipating that year 2 operations will be implemented according to the original schedule.

CLPE

The Pandemic caused major disruption to CLPE’s working practices. As an organisation whose model is founded on face-to-face training, the team had to pivot significantly, take on new technologies and ways of working to enable the programme to happen. The team adjusted very quickly and thought carefully about how to deliver the programme in a way that would be accessible to schools in the midst of managing their own ongoing challenges in relation to the pandemic. The four training sessions were swiftly moved to remote sessions, with adjustments made from the second session on the basis of lessons learned during the first one. This enabled every school to attend the training. Every teacher has been given access to CLPE’s Power of Reading website and CLPE is monitoring access. All 30 schools have received a class book pack at the start of each project year and were able to use it to support practical teaching activities with the associated CLPE planning resources and used the knowledge gained to support remote learning during periods of lockdown. The targeted 750 children have been receiving a book once a month at home since October, through CLPE’s partnership with The Dollywood Foundation UK. This made significant impact on the children’s ability to access quality texts at a time when [CLPE’s own research](#) showed that the biggest barrier to reading over Lockdown was access to books. Only 13 parents out of 750 number of families opted out of their child being part of the evaluation. This did not affect their children’s participation in the programme or their ability to receive books from The Dollywood Foundation UK.

Figure 4. Number of schools and children targeted v reached



Next steps

By the end of this evaluation, we will have gathered evidence on a range of domains that describe what the programmes in the Initiative have achieved. We will also have documented important lessons from the experience of the programmes about successful implementation, sustainability and scalability and we will communicate these findings clearly to inform The Mercers’ Company’s future planning and the wider community. As we enter the third year of the Initiative, our focus will shift more heavily into the production of the September 2022 report and the organisation of the

symposium to be held in November 2022, which will be an opportunity to share the findings with policymakers and the wider community.

Introduction

In October 2018, The Mercers' Company launched the Early Years Special Initiative to support organisations and partnerships working to improve the educational attainment and life chances of children and families facing disadvantage.

The evidence is clear that high quality early years education, which includes a wide variety of activities and experiences, plays a positive role in raising attainment and closing the achievement gap between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their more affluent peers.

Disadvantaged pupils in England are 18.1 months of learning behind their peers by the time they finish their GCSEs – EPI research has found that 40 per cent of this gap is already evident by age 5¹. Investing in children's education in the early years has the potential to improve their outcomes now and in the long term.

The initiative provides funding for up to £350,000 per charity partner over three years and there are three cohorts of programmes. The Mercers' Company needed a research partner that could help maximise and multiply this impact by supporting the chosen programmes through the implementation stage and, possibly, scaling up, while also maintaining a record of processes and progress.

Our role is therefore, to provide the Early Years Special Initiative with support in three key areas throughout the grant period:

Preparatory work: EPI supports the awarded organisations in getting ready for the start of the grant with activities such as: identifying where the programme is situated within existing evidence to understand whether there are similar programmes to use as a benchmark or example of best practice; refining suggested measures for monitoring purposes; helping to collect baseline data.

Programme support: EPI provides ongoing support and advice to each charity, for example acting as critical friend in setting up the evaluation strategy and helping to measure implementation rather than just final outcomes; providing support in understanding what is needed for scalability purposes, for example in terms of staffing, timing and general resources.

Public events and end of grant reporting: EPI organises a workshop halfway through the grant period (Spring 2021) and a public event at the end of the grant period. The events will be an opportunity for the grant holders to showcase their work, to highlight the impact the grants have made and to receive feedback on their activities.

Cohort 1 organisations (Chickenshed, National Literacy Trust and the Scouts) were notified in March 2019 about their successful application and began implementing their projects the following September.

Chickenshed is an inclusive theatre company that runs children and youth theatres, offers training in accredited qualifications and runs outreach programmes. Chickenshed's project for the Early Years Special Initiative aims to increase opportunities for disadvantaged children to access inclusive arts-

¹ Jo Hutchinson, Mary Reader and Avinash Akhal (2020). 'Education in England: Annual report 2020'. The Education Policy Institute, <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/education-in-england-annual-report-2020/>

based methods of delivering early education. They aim to achieve this by delivering weekly activities and termly trips to the theatre, training early years practitioners and developing materials and tools that support the transition of activities from nursery to home.

The **National Literacy Trust (NLT)** is a charity that delivers programmes, and conducts research and campaigning, aiming at combating illiteracy. NLT's Early Words Together for London is the expansion of its pre-existing Early Words Together programme into three different London boroughs. It involves a six-week programme delivered by early years practitioners focusing on developing communication, language and early literacy skills. They aim to achieve this by training early years practitioners, equipping parents and carers with the skills and confidence needed to support their child's early literacy, communication and language skills, and producing digital resources for families.

The Scout Association is a youth movement based around a network of volunteers running skill-based youth groups that seek to promote a positive sense of community and identity. The Scouts' Early Years Programme is an adaptation of the regular programme that aims to deliver a curriculum focused on improving communication skills, executive functions, independence and school-readiness among disadvantaged children aged four to five. They aim to achieve this by delivering activities in weekly sessions via three different models – one led by a volunteer Scout leader, one led by families and supported by a volunteer, and one delivered via a partner organisation such as a nursery – and producing digital resources to reinforce session-based learning and widen access to the programme.

Cohort 2 organisations (Ark Schools, Catch Up and the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education) were notified in March 2020, and implementation started in the autumn 2020.

Ark is an education charity based in the UK that works to improve educational achievement in areas of disadvantage. Their students face a high level of disadvantage - the proportion of students receiving Pupil Premium support is 40%, against a national average of 14%. Despite these challenging contexts, their schools achieve strong results, especially for those students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Ark Start, Ark's early years initiative, aims at developing and delivering an integrated early years education programme to improve early years provision in disadvantaged communities and help closing the attainment gap. The programme integrates several interventions focusing on four areas: 1) literacy improvement; 2) enrichment opportunities; 3) partnership with parents; and 4) training for nursery staff.

Catch Up is a charity with over 20 years of proven impact, with the Catch Up Literacy and Catch Up Numeracy interventions benefiting 500,000 six to fourteen year-old children with difficulties in attaining their expected, age-appropriate levels of literacy and numeracy. There is already considerable evidence of the effectiveness of the Catch Up Literacy and Numeracy interventions in enabling pupils to increase in their numeracy and literacy skills and closing the attainment gap. Anecdotally, the interventions are also effective with five year olds. Their early years initiative proposes to undertake an action research trial to create scalable 'EYFS Catch Up interventions' that build schools' capacity and enable teaching assistants to support reception year pupils who are falling behind in reading and numeracy.

The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE) is a charity working with all those involved in teaching literacy in primary schools. Their work raises the achievement of children by helping schools to teach literacy more effectively and showing teachers how quality children's literature can be placed at the heart of all learning. They provide well evidenced, creative, literacy training and resources to support classroom teaching and learning. This project is a partnership between the

Centre for Literacy in Primary Education and Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. The project aims to improve outcomes for young children in literacy by developing teacher subject and pedagogic knowledge of how texts can support the development of communication, language and literacy in the early years and by ensuring children have access to books in their school and home environment.

Cohort 3 organisations (ICAN, NCB, Peeple, Tales Toolkit) were notified in March 2021, with implementation starting later in the year.

ICAN is the children's communication charity. Their vision is a world where all children have the communication skills they need to fulfil their potential. Their mission is that no child is left out, or left behind, because of difficulties speaking or understanding. They fulfil this mission through a holistic portfolio of activities that span the spectrum from universal to specialist support. The early years project will consist of the revision and evaluation of a resource for children with English as an Additional Language (EAL) and their parents in inner London to support their educational progress. As such, the project will centre on developing and extending the existing evidenced Early Talk Boost intervention, testing it with enhanced evaluation that will evidence more robustly whether it can effectively boost the acquisition of English for children with EAL.

NCB drives change throughout education, health and social care services to make them as effective as possible, to protect children whose welfare is at risk and to help children overcome challenges that hold them back. Their project is a literacy development programme Making it REAL (Raising Early Attainment in Literacy) in Lewisham that will be delivered through structured home education visits, sharing REAL with families and with a borough wide programme of training for all early education professionals in Lewisham.

Peeple exists to help parents improve their children's life chances, particularly in less affluent areas, by making the most of everyday learning opportunities at home and in the community. They aim to narrow the gap in attainment by supporting parents in raising their babies and young children to reach their full potential. They do this by developing interventions that support parents as their children's first educators, by training practitioners to work with families and by supporting the implementation of their programmes. The goal of the early years project is to develop, pilot and evaluate an innovative intervention to train practitioners and parents to support STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) skills development in very young children.

Tales Toolkit aims to close the attainment gap using evidence based, play-centred online storytelling training focusing on developing children's language, socio-emotional skills and levels of engagement with literacy. Tales Toolkit provides interactive, child-led resources aimed at early years and focused on developing quality interactions. The programme consists of extensive training for teachers. It has been trialled across the UK and Goldsmiths University of London found it had a significant impact on children's communication and language skills, social and emotional development, literacy and creativity. In schools using Tales Toolkit, the gender gap in literacy closed. Tales Toolkit can make a difference to children's long-term life chances. With this project they aim to reach and make a difference to more children, with a focus on disadvantaged areas of London.

These grants provide a unique opportunity for The Mercers' Company and the wider community to learn important lessons about implementation, sustainability and scalability. All programmes have an evaluation component built into their timeline. The purpose of EPI's work is to provide a bird's

eye view evaluation framework to help understand and monitor processes and, ultimately, to identify important lessons across all programmes.

What we have done

Individual meetings with programmes

Following the example of what we did with Cohort 1 and 2, in April 2021 we held meetings with key team members of the programmes in Cohort 3. During this initial meeting we discussed each programme's goal and timeline, as well as the evaluation plans. We also clarified EPI's role in the Initiative and set out a plan for working together. This included discussing the data they will collect on outputs, outcomes, uptake and impact, and what data we will require from them. In addition, we have continued to hold individual meetings with Cohort 1 and 2 programmes at least every six months, and on an ad hoc basis. These meetings have been useful for building a relationship with programmes, and for closing any gaps in our understanding of their work.

Cohort meetings

Cohort 1

We held two biannual meetings with Cohort 1 programmes, one in November 2020 and one in April 2021. The November 2020 meeting focused on the immediate impact of the pandemic on the programmes at the end of their first year of implementation and the adjustments programmes had to make. A big part of the discussion was devoted to how programmes changed their plans and strategies for data collection, given that face-to-face interviews or school visits were not allowed. Programmes adapted very nimbly, for example moving to phone interviews, online surveys or paper surveys sent to parents. However, all programmes agreed that it was still very hard to reach some groups, for example the most vulnerable families, or the volunteers in the case of the Scouts. None of the programmes holds contact information to reach parents directly, meaning they have to work with their stakeholders to reach them, usually schools/early years settings. As education settings have been extremely busy during the pandemic, the programmes had to balance getting the data whilst not overburdening settings.

The April 2021 meeting focused on the changes that programmes had to make following the national lockdown in place between January and March 2021, which significantly impacted their operations. A strong focus was on how to re-emerge from lockdown. A common theme across programmes was the recognitions that families' needs have changed over the past year. Programmes agreed that these changes should be met with a greater focus on supporting families, including being aware of a range of factors that are likely to affect individuals' mental health and their sense of inclusion. Some children's social and emotional health has been particularly affected as they have spent a third or half of their life so far living in lockdown conditions. Attendees agreed that focusing on children's wellbeing would be very important to support them in other areas, such as language and communication skills, or social development. Another key theme was the sense of community that families have, with several attendees mentioning either that this had been affected by events of the past year or that they have renewed their focus on it. For instance, many families that one organisation is working with have communicated that their sense of community has faded during lockdown. At the same time, in this difficult period, the services that organisations have provided to families appear to have helped some to rebuild that sense of community.

Cohort 2

We held the first annual meeting with Cohort 2 programmes in September 2020, when the programmes were just starting the implementation of their project. All programmes have faced significant setbacks to their work due to the restrictions imposed by Covid-19. Some considerations were shared across all programmes, such as how to deliver their programme in a way that is compatible with the changed – and changing – circumstances that have arisen out of the pandemic. In other aspects, programmes face different obstacles to implementation. For example, Ark is the only one that involves direct, full-time delivery in education settings. In their case, restrictions imposed by Covid-19, infection rates and government regulations have had a much more direct impact on their ability to reach targets and on delivery.

Another topic discussed at length was how to engage with stakeholders, given that in person interactions have been severely limited. For instance, a distinctive feature of Ark's high quality, holistic approach to early years education and care is a family support programme; elements of this programme which would have involved face-to-face contact with parents had to be rethought. At Catch Up and CLPE, training plays an essential role in delivery, and both organisations had to re-consider how to deliver training in the autumn term of 2020. It was also recognised that it may be more difficult than before the pandemic to reach some families, for instance, those who are facing a range of social and economic challenges, and programmes were in the process of assessing how to best change their practices to reach those families.

The EPI team also discussed some key lessons learned from the work of Cohort 1, such as the importance of building trust, understanding and commitment among families, how to engage with stakeholders in the wake of social distancing restrictions, and strategies on how to tweak data collection and monitoring efforts.

Cohort 3

We held one meeting with Cohort 3 in July 2021. The format was similar to the first meeting we held with Cohort 2, with a strong focus on giving space to each programme to describe their project in detail to each other. We also discussed how to measure the success of the projects and the data reporting requirements.

We have received positive feedback from the programmes about these meetings, which have provided an opportunity for the organisations to learn from one another's successes and challenges, and to contextualise their own strategies. Following government regulations on meeting people face-to-face, these meetings have continued to be held via Zoom but we are discussing with Charlotte Nugent whether we should hold the ones planned for the autumn of 2021 in person.

Interim findings symposium

On the 20th of May 2021 we held the interim findings symposium, a meeting that brought together all ten programmes which are part of the Initiative. The aim of the meeting was for attendees to share their experiences on the work carried out so far, bringing together the collective expertise of all organisations to reflect on the key lessons learned and how to apply these to their work going forward. Attendees were split into small groups for the discussion of the following topics:

- Aspects of the programmes that so far have shown the highest potential of continuation and scale-up after funding ends;

- Key features of ‘high quality’ outputs (e.g. resources, materials, training), and what organisations have learned about producing them;
- Common barriers (beyond Covid-19) to delivering to schedule and to budget;
- Strategies that organisations have used to keep families engaged throughout the project, and in particular during periods of social distancing;
- How organisations have collected and learned from feedback from users of their programmes (i.e. children, parents);
- Approaches to working with schools or other third parties that organisations have found most effective during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Supporting organisations with their data collection processes

Organisations are required to have an evaluation and monitoring plan as part of their grant, and that plan guides their decision of what data to collect. This evaluation is not part of EPI’s work. However, we have continued to support all incoming programmes in the initial stages of the data collection process to make sure it allowed for meaningful monitoring and evaluation, and that it aligned with our overarching framework. For example, we have suggested programmes should collect certain demographic information about children and their families when appropriate (such as age bands, relationship to the child, ethnicity, home postcode, gender, additional learning needs), and/or of the early years practitioners they train or their own staff members (such as age, level of qualifications, number of years with the organisation).

Due to the pandemic, difficulties with data collection has been a recurrent topic in both individual and annual meetings. We have continued to collect data from programmes on a quarterly basis by sharing a spreadsheet with key questions about each element of their programme, in line with the activities presented in the grant application and with the overarching framework. This data has been supplemented by email or telephone follow-ups where gaps in information appeared.

In addition, following the first meeting with Cohort 1, we have identified a Common Outcome Measure - the measurement of one outcome that could be of equal importance to all programmes and to The Mercers’ Company, and that could be comparable across programmes. We decided that the Common Outcome Measure would relate to the topic of staffing development, which would help monitor how successfully programmes are supporting and developing their staff. We have drafted a series of questions for the programme to include in their surveys of staff and volunteers at the end of each training cycle. These include questions for staff and volunteers about the degree of confidence they had about their skills and understanding of the programme following training, and questions about the duration and frequency of training sessions. We also agreed to ask staff to answer some questions about themselves, such as their age, gender and ethnicity and their role, qualifications to identify if any differences appear in how staff experience and review the support available.

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has prevented organisations from effectively collecting data during the first year of the Initiative. However, we have supported all programmes to collect such data during the second year. We will be reporting on the Common Outcome Measure with a separate brief in December 2021.

What we have found

In this section we summarise the progress made by Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 programmes during the second year of our involvement in the Early Years Special Initiative.

Table 1 provides an overview of the key successes achieved, and challenges faced, by each of the programmes in 2020/21. The list is not meant to be exhaustive, but to give an indication of some of the most promising and challenging elements, which will be discussed in more detailed below.

Table 1: Selection of successes and challenges by programme

| Programme | Successes | Challenges |
|--------------------------------|--|---|
| Chickenshed | Strong buy in from schools' leadership team | Pause of all action research activities |
| | Development of new products | Difficulty in monitoring number of children reached |
| National Literacy Trust | Very positive feedback from early years professionals trained | Reaching children and families via PVI settings |
| | Continuous support to settings, including those from year 1 | Settings have little capacity to take on extra activities due to pandemic |
| The Scouts | Supporting families in disadvantaged areas and with no previous connection to Scouting | Low uptake of online material |
| | Number of children and adults beyond target | Delayed evaluation and scaling up |
| Ark | High proportion of children made above typical progress | Parental engagement activities severely impacted |
| | Strong focus on high-quality training for staff | Limited range of enrichment activities provided to children |
| Catch Up | Targeted number of schools reached | Not all schools able to set up one-on-one activities with targeted pupils |
| | Very positive feedback from schools | Lot of staff time goes into liaising with schools |
| CLPE | Targeted number of schools and teachers reached and trained by CLPE | Hard to balance giving schools space to cope with the pandemic while encouraging participation. |
| | 750 children were included in the programme, receiving support in school and books at home every month through The Dollywood Foundation UK | Staff capacity to fully implement project due to other commitments created by the pandemic |
| | Very positive feedback from schools. | |

Findings are discussed in line with the overarching framework's themes. These are:

1. Strategy and direction
2. Management and governance (implementation)
3. Outputs
4. Uptake and impact
5. Sustainability and scaling up

1. Strategy and direction

In this section we focus on the extent to which each programme's strategy in place at the beginning of the grant has changed.

Chickenshed

Since the inception of the grant, the Chickenshed team has had a clear sense of what they were aiming to achieve and the means by which they intended to do so. The Covid-19 pandemic has posed some important challenges to the programme, above all in year 2, but the team has been very responsive. As face-to-face activities have not been possible, instead of weekly engagement with children Chickenshed has focused on producing Tales TV episodes for families to watch and use at home. Theatre-based performances and product testing have also been halted or delayed by the pandemic. Unfortunately, the January-March lockdown has led the team to put the programme on pause for the term. The trainings, the 'Teachers' Big Meet' twilight sessions, the engagement of early years experts, the action research, and the research-sharing & debate events were all put on hold during spring term. The team quite nimbly switched its focus to the provision of recorded sessions to schools and to product development (see below) but was also ready to resume activities from the summer term 2021.

National Literacy Trust (NLT)

The most important change of strategy for NLT was made at the beginning of the pandemic, when the programme was forced to redirect most of its resources towards their digital offer. This has continued during the second year, when their operations moved to the borough of Southwark. The move to a different borough led to a change in the type of settings being targeted, with a mix of private, voluntary and independent (PVI) early education settings and children's centres. While early years settings were not expected to close during the most recent lockdown, it has been clear that children's centres generally had more capacity than PVIs to continue to deliver the intervention during lockdown and NLT has swiftly adjusted their strategy. For example, anecdotal evidence suggests that most of the PVIs were unable to host their own online sessions with parents but they shared those hosted centrally by NLT, which makes the focus on the digital offer even more important.

The Scouts

The Scouts have been severely impacted by the restrictions imposed by the pandemic, given the nature of the project but the team has adjusted their resources very quickly and made the most out of digital engagement and of continuous community engagement. In fact, with social distancing

restrictions being eased in spring 2021, groups quickly got back into the swing of things and resumed their activities.

Covid-19 also forced the team to re-evaluate their consultation plans. This led to a change of method that has, however, been extremely beneficial in moving the programme forwards and has been a key driver in the development of brand and programme (see section 'sustainability and scale up' for more detail).

Ark

The pandemic has forced the Ark team to change their strategy since the beginning of their first year of operation. While the original plan was to open two nurseries in September 2020 – one in Croydon and one in Clapham – the opening of the Croydon site was postponed to January 2021. In addition, because of social distancing measures, fewer children were able to attend, and therefore fewer staff members were employed. From a delivery point of view, the aspects that were most impacted were parental engagement and the enrichment programme. On the other hand, the team took advantage of the situation to focus on the delivery of high-quality training opportunities to staff.

Catch Up

The Covid-19 pandemic, with lockdowns, social distancing rules and the strain on schools' resources has posed continuous challenges to Catch Up's project, to which the team has reacted promptly. For example, one school withdrew after starting the training but the team quickly recruited another one, thereby reaching the targeted number of schools and teachers trained. Nevertheless, this created delays in other aspects of the project. Similarly, one-to-one work with pupils was not possible or delayed to the summer term. The delays also had trickle down effects on the action research plans.

On the other hand, the planning process for recruiting six schools in Tower Hamlets and six schools in Islington for year 2 has already been completed and outreach started in May 2021, with five schools having already signed the Memorandum of Understanding in July 2021. At present, they are anticipating that year 2 operations will be implemented according to the original schedule.

CLPE

The team adjusted very quickly to problems created by the pandemic and thought carefully about how to deliver the programme in a way that would be accessible to schools in the midst of managing their own ongoing challenges in relation to the pandemic, with training sessions swiftly moved to remote sessions and adjustments made on the basis of lessons learned during the first phase. This programme has been prioritised in the charity's workflow and every aspect of the project was carried out more or less as per the schedule. The evaluation has also proceeded to pace as the evaluators have been reaching out to teachers directly.

2. Implementation

In this section we discuss organisations' implementation of their programmes, focusing on whether they are running to schedule and to budget, noting any changes to staffing and any deviations from their original plans.

Chickenshed

The most significant change in the organisation's plans has been the pause of their activities in the Spring 2021 term. That led to fewer staff members working during that term, even though the

number has increased during the summer term 2021, and to a reduction in the budget spent from the foreseen £29,919 to just £3,238 used to cover live online sessions and Tales TV episodes.

Another important consequence has been the halting of data collection. Chickenshed has contracted the [Open University's Child Research Centre \(CRC\)](#) as an external evaluator. The CRC was selected because of its experience working with children and young people, its flexible approach and proven ability to engage with parents and carers and its expertise in providing opportunities to include the voice of the children in the evaluation. However, Open University has not been able to carry out the planned observations, initially because the team was not allowed in schools during lockdowns and then because Open University staff still had a travel ban in place during the spring term 2021. If restrictions remain in place during year 3 the plan is to have at least one group of 10 children with parental consent to be filmed by Chickenshed so that Open University staff can carry out observations through the films.

National Literacy Trust

The work of the team has progressed without any major issues. In the autumn of 2020, there were some turnovers in NLT's digital team, but NLT reported that this had no effect on the sustainability of the programme. A member of staff working on monitoring and evaluation has left NLT and their role has been replaced with existing staff capacity (the new evaluator has attended our meetings).

Training delivery was under budget during the spring term 2021 due to no travel, facilities or catering being included, but this budget has been redistributed to offer more books to families and more resources translated to other languages.

Finally, some data collection tools, such as the survey of practitioners following training, have been amended to reflect changes following the pandemic – in this instance, to reflect that training was for the delivery of EWT outdoors.

The Scouts

Despite the difficult beginning of year 2, the lifting of social distancing restrictions has enabled groups to resume meeting. All groups have started to meet again except for a couple. One group who lost their leader during Covid-19 did not want to resume meeting until the parent and carers were ready. With the learning of the past months the team have been able to support the pilots with digital support and accessing the website.

However, as a whole the Scouts experienced the knock-on effect of the loss of young people and adults; but as young people start to join, it is the adult recruitment that needs support. In response to this a big campaign was launched for adult recruitment and raising the profile of Scouts.

The consultation was completed and conducted to budget (see Sustainability and scaling up).

Ark

In 2021 Ark employed eight members of staff across two Ark Start settings. They had originally planned to employ thirty across both settings once full occupancy was reached, but lockdowns and social distancing rules have kept attendance rates low, as it is the case at national level. They have limited further recruitment until there is greater certainty over future attendance rates to avoid unnecessary staffing costs. The lockdown in January 2021 led the setting to place two members of staff on part-time furlough, which created some capacity issues at senior leadership levels.

Because of these changes in implementation plans, Ark is currently forecasting to spend less than the planned budget in this academic year. Also, a saving against the curriculum development (which was largely completed before opening) has been offset with increased training and support for delivery this year.

Catch Up

With school recruitment delayed by the first lockdown and one school withdrawing after starting the training, the recruitment period had to be extended to the end of January 2021. This in turn led to delayed training for school staff and an overspend on direct training, which has been offset by savings within other budget spend areas, including school visits and carer/parent briefings, which were not possible in the autumn of 2020. The March 31st year-end position for the whole project budget was a carry forward of £38,438.

There is no specific budget for delivering the one-to-one sessions with children as the staff and material costs are part of a school's day-to-day intervention support but these sessions have continued to be delayed by the pandemic.

These delays had a trickle down effect on the action research plans. In particular, research to identify attitudinal assessments was supposed to be carried out by March 2021, with recommendations for discussion/modification produced in April 2021. The attitudinal assessments – one for numeracy and one for literacy – have been produced and circulated to four of the schools, with a request to trial them before the end of term, if possible. These assessments have been developed by [Dr Ann Dowker](#) - University Research Lecturer at the Department of Experimental Psychology, University of Oxford, with a particular interest in language development, mathematical development and cognition - and are based on a number of previous research models, so it is anticipated that any changes will be minor. They will be trialed across all 12 schools as part of year 2 delivery from October/November onwards.

A key challenge for the team has been to keep the schools in the project and to maintain supportive and encouraging contact without schools feeling pressured. The Project Manager and Project Consultant have done this via supportive email and telephone contact with schools. The effort so far has paid off as no other school withdrew during year 1.

CLPE

The project's implementation has proceeded according to plans and within budget during the first year, besides minor modifications (see below). The schedule of training delivery has been extended in consultation with Mercers to allow for a November 2020 start instead of March 2020.

There has been no staff turnover in the CLPE team. At school level, one teacher was ill for the first training (November 2020) but a catch up training session was organised in December 2020. In the spring term 2021, two teachers left the project, but they were replaced by teachers working in the original project class, thus maintaining the integrity of the provision. One of the two new project teachers has attended all training sessions from the beginning as a senior leader, and the CLPE team will monitor the teacher who is picking up from the 3rd session and offer a recording of training to avoid knowledge gaps and maintain sustainability.

While the project has not encountered major difficulties due to CLPE's response and ability to pivot to online training, CLPE reported that the implications of Covid-19 for schools continue to pose a challenge to their engagement. CLPE staff have worked with the teachers involved to exemplify

possible ways of working throughout the pandemic to support individual situations, encouraging participation and providing sufficient support for the successful continuation of the project.

3. Outputs

In this section we will describe the key outputs produced by each programme and how they compare with what was planned.

Chickenshed

As mentioned above, because face-to-face activities have not been possible, instead of weekly engagement with children Chickenshed has focused on producing Tales TV episodes for families to use at home. Episodes were filmed during the Summer 2020 and sent out via email to all parents and families who had taken part in the project so far. Theatre-based performances have also been halted by the pandemic. Chickenshed had offered free tickets to vulnerable families to socially distanced shows in December 2020, but only two families took up some of the 90 available tickets. Product testing has also halted through summer and autumn 2020 because of lack of contact with children – feedback from teachers suggests that families were apprehensive about attending due to the pandemic. Therefore, the team has focused on the production of the bespoke training videos. Originally envisaged as a DVD for each child containing videos produced by Chickenshed, their research with schools identified that many families lacked a DVD player at home and would rather have a link to an online resource. The team have also been developing a product that resembles a pack of playing cards – this has been done in collaboration with London Play that has experience of making similar cards for children of different ages. As of July 2021, the cards have been produced. The team will start introducing them into their activities during the summer and then the schools will do the same from September. This initial use will allow the team to collect feedback and make changes accordingly.

None of the ‘Teachers Big Meet’ was held in person at the planned time due to social distancing rules, but they were delivered online during the summer term.

In September 2020 Chickenshed engaged three early years experts who have provided a range of support to the programme, including knowledge sharing with Chickenshed, provided training and informed the delivery of training that Chickenshed provides. Finally, a headteacher delivered training to 10 Chickenshed staff on maths and creativity.

National Literacy Trust

Practitioner's training

25 practitioners from 15 children's centres were trained over three training days (outdoors) in September 2020. During the 2020/21 school year, staff in the 15 children's centres were redistributed across four hubs (groups of children's centres) while the other 11 centres were temporarily closed. 38 practitioners from 21 PVI's were trained online over two training days in January 2021. The Southwark early years team reported that not all PVI's targeted had capacity to attend training in January; therefore, the team offered NLT membership to the remaining 14 settings that still have to be trained, so they can access resources and support at this time. Six of them have so far taken this up.

Five staff at children's centres who had received training in the autumn term to deliver Early Words Together (EWT) outdoors were offered training to deliver it online. Support was given to all other children's centres staff via email, including a slideshow from the training, session plans, example

videos and discussion/support via email. During this period, not all children's centres were open, but they were working together in five hubs – all of these hubs provided their own online sessions, following the training described above.

EWT

Over 400 families were reached through the two phases of the EWT programme. Southwark Children's Centres offered online sessions and were also gifted weekly books that matched the NLT-led sessions through Facebook Lives in February-March 2021. PVI practitioners also led the sessions online. The PVIs trained in January specifically in delivering EWT online have done very well in reaching families.

Digital/online guides and demonstration videos

There were 2,176 unique users of the 0-4 section of the Words for Life website in the spring 2021 quarter. The Facebook live EWT sessions to families also ran three times a week and had an average of 3,426 unique views per week (NLT is not able to provide data just for London). The numbers for this quarter are higher because NLT put some funding for Facebook advertising behind selected sessions that featured guest presenters (such as Jamel Carly Campbell, prominent EY professional, and Dame Julia Cleverdon, NLT chair of trustees).

The Scouts

Of the six pilots that began operating in 2019-20 and the two that have begun in 2020-21, only the two most recent joiners were able to meet in the autumn of 2020, one was a partner-led pilot operating in a school during the school day while another was meeting virtually. Three of the six from 2019-20 returned to face-to-face scouting for a short period in September-October and almost all returned to meet regularly once social distancing rules were relaxed in the spring 2021.

During lockdown the Scouts team worked quickly towards providing each group with 'Scouting in a bag' activities to send to families. Monthly virtual sessions have been delivered online by external providers to children and families for up to 30 minutes. The sessions have included a talk from a hedgehog rescue centre, creative writing session, yoga and mindfulness, and a virtual zoo. The team also quickly established a new section on the Scouts website for early years exclusively available to early years Scouting groups, which houses content developed to support volunteers to open a new group - including offering age-specific training for volunteers - and resources for parents that volunteers can share via links. There were 129 activities available on the website in the autumn. Activities also continued to be available for parents via the EasyPeasy app.

Consultation

The change in consultation plans led to the development of two online consultations. The first was specifically related to the Early Years branding. 121 out of a total of 1,036 people surveyed were from the London. The responses showed 79% of them thought their child would be interested in joining, compared to 76% nationally. The other questions in the survey ranged from the preferred choice of logo, to the suitability of the colours for both the brand and the uniform, the effectiveness of recruitment posters for both adults and children, and whether their children would be interested in reading a storybook about Squirrels. The second consultation was related to the programme. Using the insights and recommendations gathered from pilot leaders, internal staff on the 'Exploring Scouting for the Early Years' project, current Beaver Scout leaders, the Early Years programme board and the Centre for Research in Early Childhood's (CREC) report, the team created five distinct

curriculum approaches for the scale up. They then conducted internal testing with representatives from the previously mentioned teams to narrow this into two curriculum approaches: one where badges/awards are structured by requirements and align more closely to the curriculum of the other Scout sections, and the other where the entire curriculum is supported by suggestions and leader guidance and aligns more to other non-formal national early years provisions. As part of this consultation, they then conducted targeted testing of these two prototype curricula with parents of children aged from three to five living in London.

Ark

Curriculum delivery

By spring term 2021, 68 children were attending across both settings, versus a target of 150 children. The key issue with implementation has been the January lockdown, which has limited the team's ability to recruit additional children. The lockdown has also meant that they have not been able to set targets for children since targets cannot be considered meaningful under the circumstances. Parent-related elements of the curriculum and elements of the enrichment programme have been put on hold while social distancing measures are in place since these had been planned to involve face-to-face interaction either with parents or with guests to the sites.

Enrichment programme

Ark has reconsidered their enrichment plan to provide activities within the setting and provided by existing staff where possible. They also reprogrammed the summer term's curriculum to expand the programme of enrichment where possible. Other plans were deferred into next year.

Staff training

Ark has employed fewer staff members in response to the lower pupil numbers than planned for. On the other hand, Covid-19 has enabled them to focus on higher levels of staff training as staff have had additional time because of lower attendance than planned. They held three inset days during the Easter holidays focused on pedagogy, curriculum and behaviour.

Parent engagement

Throughout the lockdown the nurseries stayed open, increasing occupancy from around 50% in January to closer to 80% by March. Nevertheless, significant changes were made to this element of the programme: home visits were carried out virtually rather than in person, while the 'positive parenting programme' was delayed twice by the pandemic; 'stay and play' activities were postponed indefinitely; parent workshops and the peer parenting programme were operating remotely. Meanwhile, parents were phoned by key workers at least once a week through the lockdown.

Data collection

Ark has a thorough data collection plan in place, and we have supported them with designing feedback forms for staff and families.

The staff completed the planned baseline assessment for the 28 children who started in October 2020. This data shows that 54% of children were behind where they were expected to be in communication and language and around 80% in speaking.

Catch Up

Practitioner training and support

Practitioners training in Catch Up Literacy and Catch Up Numeracy interventions and support for school staff was delivered in six schools in one London borough as per project plans.

Three staff (one school) withdrew after the start of training due to Covid-19 related staffing pressure, but the school was replaced to meet the target of six schools. All training has been delivered online. This has worked well except for one school, which needed to reschedule the training to January 2021 because of internet access difficulties. A downside of the recruitment process is that it has not been possible to establish the schools as a 'project group' with the schools being recruited on a one-by-one basis.

The two Review and Refresh Sessions - one for Catch Up Literacy and one for Catch Up Numeracy – were developed for online delivery. They were trialled in May 2021 and re-scheduled for delivery to the schools in June 2021, with a project review with school coordinators in early July 2021. On completion of training, all staff have password-protected access to resources within their account, which is being monitored. Remote support for the project by the Project Consultant and Catch Up staff is continuing via telephone, video meetings and email.

Weekly Catch Up sessions

The extended school lockdown meant that schools were not always able to work with the target pupils. Weekly Catch Up Literacy and Catch Up Numeracy one-to-one intervention sessions have continued to be delayed. The Catch Up team has asked schools to choose the targeted six children and to implement the one-to-one sessions as soon as possible in the Summer Term 2021, aiming for a minimum of 18 sessions per pupil by June 2021. Not all schools have been able to do so, but one school has used their intervention to support other pupils so that they maintained their new skills. This approach has been encouraged in all schools. Access to Catch Up resources is online via a trainees login on the Catch Up website. This means all trained staff have the resources available for when the one-to-one sessions start.

Action Research

The delay in the establishment of the one-to-one sessions with pupils had significant implications for the 'activity-based feedback' part of the action research process reflecting staff participation and experiences. All staff are reminded to continue to maintain their action research logs, including reviewing resources where possible. All staff were also asked to provide Action Research log-based feedback during the Review and Refresh sessions in June 2021 and the school coordinator feedback meeting in July 2021. The overall Action Research process continues to be budgeted for in terms of project research staff time to collect data, analyse, review, feedback, inform and support schools. Data collection has continued to include assessing and taking account of the coronavirus context for each school.

Access to, and support with, resources for families

Ongoing access and support in using Catch Up support resources, including online digital games, for families of participating children was planned for January-July 2021. However, most of the schools have been unable to establish the project groups of pupils, so carers/parents have not yet been consulted. Meanwhile, the Catch Up carer/parents' leaflets and the Catch Up digital games are being explored as the key elements within the carer/parental support strand.

CLPE

The schedule of training delivery has been extended in consultation with Mercers to allow for a November 2020 start instead of March 2020. The first training session was delivered in November via Zoom. The aim was to deliver the remaining trainings face-to-face if the government guidance allowed it, but they had to be continued online. The other training sessions were held in January, February and March 2021. To make it more manageable for teachers to handle the online format, the team split each training into two webinars held on different days.

Every teacher has been given access to CLPE's Power of Reading website and CLPE is monitoring access (see next section). All 30 schools have received a class book pack at the start of each project year and were able to use it to support practical teaching activities with the associated CLPE planning resources. All children have been receiving a book once a month at home since October through CLPE's partnership with The Dollywood Foundation UK. The unique experience of every child having a copy of the same book has enabled the schools to provide a continued focus on reading and vocabulary during periods of remote learning, sharing techniques and approaches from the training sessions with parents to use with these books. 7 schools also self-funded the book gifting programme for other cohorts, seeing the value this would have for all children.

Data collection

Relevant team members of CLPE and the evaluators - the Institute for Employment Studies and Sutton Trust - have been involved in creating detailed frameworks for data collection, the Memorandum of Understanding for schools, and associated privacy and information documentation.

The evaluation team has conducted a survey of teachers via Google Forms and at the time of reporting had received responses from 21 of the 30 teachers involved and five headteachers. While schools have been slower than usual to return forms to CLPE (due to the pandemic), all teachers have returned baseline data for the children in their class, 16 have returned their end-of-year pupil data and 24 have returned surveys collecting characteristics of staff.

Only 13 parents have opted out of their children taking part in the evaluation, out of approximately 750 children.

4. Uptake and feedback

In this section we discuss how outputs have been used by the target population, how this compares with what was planned and initial feedback from users.

Chickenshed

Initial anecdotal feedback on Tales TV provided by parents during the Summer 2020 suggested that those who did access it watched it many times and enjoyed the resource, with 276 subscribers to the Tales TV YouTube channel and 20 videos produced with 300-3500 views each. It is difficult to know who these viewers are and how many are from the schools that Chickenshed is currently collaborating with. A parent from one of these schools said "My daughter watched them over and over again and was excited when new ones used to come out. She loved the familiar faces, the characters, learning sign language, and of course the songs. We'd often sing them around the house randomly." On the other hand, during the spring term one school reported that only 15% of children were taking up any online lessons. Given this, it is unlikely that Chickenshed was able to reach many children via additional online content.

More recent figures show that there were over 11,000 views for Tales TV episodes. In the spring term 2021, eight live online sessions took place with two schools, with an average of 62 and 70

children in live zoom sessions per week. Tales TV episodes were sent to 950 families who access their Children's Centre.

Parents and staff surveys will be sent out later this year with the aim of understanding how Chickshed's programme is being received.

National Literacy Trust

25 practitioners from 15 children's centres and 38 practitioners from 21 PVI's were trained in year 2. The training was successful in terms of meeting its aims. For the September 2020 training, all practitioners felt that the training improved their understanding of the programme significantly or very significantly. All of them also thought the resources provided will be useful. 95% felt confident about putting what they learned into practice. Overall, all participants thought the training was good or excellent. Practitioner training videos were viewed 87 times in London during the autumn. There were 73 unique page views of EWT2 Outdoors webpage in London.

For the January 2021 training, 15 participants completed the training feedback survey. 80% of practitioners felt that the training improved their understanding of the programme significantly or very significantly. All but one of them also thought the resources provided will be useful. 87% felt confident about putting what they learned into practice. Overall, all but two participants thought the training was good or excellent and that they would recommend it to other schools and settings. Practitioner training videos were viewed 36 times in London during the spring quarter. There were 162 unique page views of EWT2 Outdoors webpage in London.

The EWT online sessions by Southwark's children centres reached 300 families and the one led by PVI practitioners reached 105 families. The parent surveys indicate that the programme activities offered have been positively perceived by them. All of those who took part in the online family sessions thought these were either excellent or good. All parents who had attended the outdoor sessions would recommend them to other families. There is also some indication of positive changes for the children and their families after taking part. In particular, 10 out of 12 parents indicated that their child enjoys singing songs and rhymes more than before after taking part in the programme activities and 9 out of 12 parents said they sing songs and rhymes together more than before. Eight parents also indicated that they chat more than before with their child and seven said that they paint or draw together more than before. Nine parents said they know how to use the natural environment to support their child's learning more than before. Practitioner training videos were viewed 37 times in London during this quarter.

During November and December, NLT's centrally hosted Facebook Live sessions for families ran twice a week and had an average of 790 unique views per week across England (figures for London not available); In January sessions became more frequent (three times a week) and had an average of 1,776 unique views per week. Some parents provided feedback on the Facebook Live sessions, with one saying, 'It's a great activity, very helpful and inspiring in this tough time.' Further, NLT have received feedback from some parents who attended outdoor sessions at the children's centres that received training in the autumn term, including the comments 'Exploring the natural environment was nice' and 'Very sociable and enjoy[ed] the story time outdoors'.

The Scouts

In their first year, the Scouts supported a total of 73 children across six groups. For their second year, the target was 112 children and 22 adults. As of May 2021, there were 127 children accessing Early Years Scouting, with 36 adults and 12 young leaders. There are five other groups waiting to be

launched, i.e. with training completed but and still waiting on timings and all preparation needed to start running. All are from a variety of backgrounds. Families are diverse in culture and countries of origin.

The number of families attending the monthly virtual events described in the previous section has been considerably smaller than anticipated, with five families taking part on average in events held between December 2020 and February 2021. The Scouts attribute this to a range of factors, including that the Scouts were offering parents a variety of means of engagement at the time including 'Scouting in a bag' and activities available via the EasyPeasy app and the Scouts' own website. Additionally, they have concluded that additional online meetings (e.g. Zoom) might not suit many of the families they work with due to the technology and time required to attend. Despite low take-up of these monthly events, feedback from parents who did attend suggests that they have found the sessions valuable. For instance, one parent said, '[The event] had my hedgehog son totally engaged, the most fun poetry I have been part of'. Another said, 'I really enjoyed the event and would recommend [it] to others.'

There have been approximately 190 unique views across England of the 'how to' videos provided online in conjunction with the 'Scouting in a bag' resource pack, with the vast majority of these occurring in February (data for London alone is not available). Mobile phones have been the most popular method used to access these resources. Data on usage of the content suggests that families are viewing entire videos rather than just the beginning of each.

Ark

There are now 68 children in total attending the two settings.

Strong children's progress indicates that the staff training has been effective, and the staff survey results have been very positive, with 100% of staff responding that they are proud to work at Ark Start and expect to be working with them in two years' time, and 88% agreeing or strongly agreeing that training and coaching is supportive.

All families have been engaged at some level with the family programme. The plans had to change significantly, as mentioned above, and many services were moved online. The challenges of online engagement and the limited offer throughout this year have impacted delivery significantly. There has been lower take up of elements of the programme than they would have hoped. They had close to 100% take up of parent meetings and pre-opening meetings (in place of home visits) but only around 10% take up of online workshops. Therefore, they have amended the delivery of the workshops and will review attendance at the end of the school year.

The parent survey run in December 2020 had a low response rate (13 parents responded out of 34 families registered). A second round of surveys are being sent at the time this report is being written, and the staff are reviewing how best to communicate with parents and, hence, on how to boost responses to future surveys.

Catch Up

Despite one school withdrawing at the beginning of the project due to Covid-related staffing pressure, the team has been able to reach the target of six schools in Tower Hamlets. It was decided that priority should be to maintain the research integrity of the project as much as possible within the Covid-19 health and safety requirements. So school recruitment continued, with six schools recruited by the end of December 2020 (rather than June/July 2020), with two schools agreeing to

participate in both literacy and numeracy. This led to 24 staff being trained, 12 in the literacy intervention and 12 in the numeracy intervention.

Two Review and Refresh Sessions were re-scheduled for delivery to the schools in June 2021 and the team had a very successful meeting with the school coordinators in July. The verbal feedback from coordinators about three numeracy and three literacy groups was very positive, informative and very useful. Schools have also been asked to complete a 'Project Coordinator's Feedback Pro-forma' and return it by the end of term, with several reminders since. This was available as an 'aide-memoire' for the meeting. So far they only had one completed return, which stated: 'After trailing the intervention, I believe the important factors of it are the expectation it is done frequently, with passion, and with compassion (all of which are highlighted in the training!). It has made a real difference to our children – and we will continue to take everything we have learnt from it forward in our practice.'

CLPE

Thirty early years teachers from 30 schools in Camden, Hackney and Tower Hamlets signed the Memorandum of Understanding, received training resources, including class book packs and evaluation documentation to read and complete, and were trained by March 2021.

Every school registered at least 25 children to The Dollywood Foundation UK book gifting programme for 2020-21 and seven of the schools have also paid to fund the delivery of books to at least one other class in each school. Children in these classes have been receiving a new book on a monthly basis. This is significant at a time when [CLPE's research](#) shows that the biggest barrier to reading in lockdown is access to books. All schools reported on the positive impact of this part of the programme throughout the training sessions and the benefits it had brought to their children and families, in terms of engagement and attitude to reading and promotion of talk and creative activities around books.

Teachers' access to the Power of Reading website is being monitored. All teachers accessed the CLPE Power of Reading website and resources; final CLPE evaluations showed that 95% had used at least two training sequences, 94% had read children's books new to them and all had shared new books with their children during lockdown. In addition, 90% of teachers have supported parents to share The Dollywood Foundation UK books at home. This included reading the books aloud over the remote sessions and re-reading them, especially the poetry anthology which lots of teachers reported as being particularly engaging as children were sharing their favourite poems with classmates as part of their daily routines. Teachers reported that the barriers to implementing the programme were mainly around the limitations caused by the third lockdown, such as varied engagement by families in remote education, and trying out new kinds of planning and approaches during remote learning.

The evaluation team has also conducted 10 depth interviews with reception teacher in May/June 2021. A full independent report been produced detailing these findings, with just a few key points highlighted here. All teachers interviewed expressed positive views about the training delivered for the programme: several teachers described how this gave them new ideas and strategies for presenting texts in class. Teachers also appreciated that the training was tailored to reception teaching, which is rare in Continuing Professional Development. Some of the benefits of the programme highlighted by teachers include introducing greater variety in their teaching practice and supporting them to deliver more fun, engaging and informative lessons. For example, several teachers reported greater use of poetry in class with some acknowledging the training had

challenged their preconceptions about possibility of engaging four and five year olds in reciting poetry. Teachers were very positive about the book gifting element of the programme delivered by The Dollywood Foundation UK, describing pupils as visibly excited when they chose to read the books they recognised from their copy at home. In relation to the success of the scheme in encouraging children to have an increased interest in books, one teacher described how at least five of the children who has been previously characterised as ‘can’t and don’t read’ at the start of the project were now bringing their books into school to be read during story time.

5. Sustainability and scaling up

In this section we discuss how sustainable the activities funded by the Initiative appear to be at this stage, as well as the impact of context, particularly of the pandemic, on the potential for sustainability and scalability.

Chickenshed

Despite the challenges, Chickenshed have expanded their work and in their second year of operations have worked with three schools (the plans are still to phase one school out for year 3 of operations). They have also created a lot of content, which will be useful in the future even in the case of no restrictions to face-to-face activities. Most importantly, Chickenshed has strong relationships with the schools in which they operate. The buy in of the headteachers and teachers they trained has been crucial to reach children and families and, is a clear strength of the programmes. For example, schools have already asked if they can have some of best-known puppets that Chickenshed use as teaching tools to be made for them so that teachers can use them beyond the time scheduled with the Chickenshed team. This shows the schools find them useful and want to keep engaging with some of these forms of teaching and engaging with children well beyond the duration of the project.

National Literacy Trust

The NLT team continues to support settings engaged in the first year in Barking and Dagenham by providing resources to send home with children. The PVIs engaged in the first year remain open for business, but due to the pandemic they appeared to be slightly understaffed, meaning that the impact of this continued engagement may have been less than initially hoped. NLT staff have also delivered Facebook live events to families and continue to offer a range of resources for families online via their website. For example, 46 settings have had NLT membership renewed for a further year so they can continue to access EWT Online resources to deliver the programme.

The team has everything lined up for the next academic year, when they will be working with the Borough of Kensington & Chelsea and Westminster. Training dates are booked in for September, and they are in discussions about using WellComm to inform the evaluation of the impact of the project on children, which is something they originally proposed but due to the circumstances of the pandemic had not yet managed to carry out.

The Scouts

The Scouts will be scaling up Early Years Scouting (Squirrels) from September 2021 (while originally planned for September 2020) and will be taking a cohort approach in order to support and guide the groups as much as possible. The cohorts will be made up of 10 Squirrel units. They will be prioritising areas of deprivation and diverse ethnic communities. They are currently recruiting cohort coaches

from their existing volunteer pool, who will support each cohort and gather them together once a term to discuss successes and challenges. They will also encourage groups to share best practices and link back into the staff team. They are still treading softly with the movement as across the organisation membership has taken a hit due to Covid-19. Scale up was pushed back but the team reflected that in hindsight it has allowed them to be better prepared.

The Early Years section on the Scout's website has also been successfully completed and is continually being updated with resources to help groups. There are resources related to opening a unit, recruiting volunteers and much more. They are currently in the midst of creating cohort coach training to ensure coaches have a good understanding of the programme and the requirements moving forward. Training events are being planned in order to support London with the scale up.

Ark, Catch Up and CLPE

Cohort 2 programmes have been affected by Covid-19 since the very inception of their projects. We have not been able to observe how the programmes would work outside of the context of a pandemic and this makes it very difficult to assess how sustainable and scalable the programmes could be. Nevertheless, their plans for year 2 are well established for all three programmes.

Ark has already started forest school provision during the summer term and has a whole set of trips planned for the children who are attending through the summer. They have also already planned the next inset training for staff, which will be held on the 2nd and 3rd of September 2021.

The Catch Up team also has all the work for year 2 well lined up. The recruitment of schools for year 2 is on track with 5 schools having completed a Memorandum of Understanding to date and a further 10 schools having expressed interest in being in the project.

CLPE is continuing the work as planned, hoping for face-to-face delivery next year without disruption. Schools are already providing them with the name of their project teacher and project class so that the staff can begin the process of enrolling them on the Closing the Vocabulary Gap training and the Imagination Library respectively. The team held an information sharing meeting with the schools' project leads to ensure a smooth transition for the ongoing evaluation of the current project class (Cohort 1) from the Early Years Foundation Stage into key stage 1. Any leaders who were not able to attend due to other commitments in school were provided with a video recording of the meeting, all relevant materials and a chance to follow up with CLPE staff.

What we plan to do next

Over the next year, we will continue to act as critical friend to all programmes and we will start more concrete planning for the September 2022 report and November 2022 symposium.

We will plan annual meeting(s) as per schedule and we will continue to meet with every programme as frequently as is useful for both parties. Particular attention will be given to three aspects:

1. Supporting Cohort 1 programmes in their last year of implementation under the Early Years Initiative;
2. Supporting Cohort 3 programmes in their initial stages of implementation;
3. Drafting the September 2022 report and planning for the symposium that will take place in November 2022.

Collecting data from organisations for our own monitoring

We will continue our schedule of quarterly updates for the programmes in Cohort 1 and 2, and start to request them from Cohort 3. We plan to send our first quarterly update request to Cohort 3 in November 2021. We recognise that some programmes will have yet to begin the bulk of their delivery by that time, but we believe an update would be useful for understanding the progress they will have made and for helping the programme to get familiar with the format.

In the next few months we will also continue to receive and analyse data collected by each programme as part of the Common Outcome Measures. We are due to report on that in December 2021.

Annex 1: Overarching framework

1. Strategy and direction

| Key questions | Approaches and tools | Indicators |
|---|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Is the theory of change / programme theory appropriate, logical and credible? How is it being developed? Has it changed? Are assumptions in the ToC still relevant? ▪ Are strategies in place at the beginning? Are strategies being implemented? Do strategies need changing or adapting (for example to external context?) ▪ What differences are there in strategies across different contexts (e.g. partners, schools, local authorities)? What has produced these differences? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Discussions during the biannual meetings with all programmes ▪ Reviewing annual reports, other key documents ▪ Reviewing programme theories and/or ToC and how it has been developed/adapted over time | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Description of changes and gaps in annual reports and key documents ▪ The extent to which strategy is responsive to the observed changes in context ▪ Consistency of progress across components and/or partners (when appropriate) |

2. Management and governance (implementation)

| Key questions | Approaches and tools | Indicators |
|--|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Is the programme running to schedule? ▪ Is the programme running to budget? ▪ Have there been changes in the organisation's structure or staffing? ▪ Fidelity: was the programme delivered as planned? ▪ Dose: did participants receive the "right" amount of intervention? ▪ Reach: did the programme reach its target group? ▪ What could be done differently? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reviewing progress reports against plans and, when appropriate, of organisation records and financial statements ▪ Reviewing internal strategies, procedures and processes ▪ Discussions during the semi-annual meeting with all programmes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The extent to which plans are met and budget is used ▪ The degree to which plans are changed based on results and findings ▪ Changes in capacity ▪ Staff turnover |

3. Outputs

| Key questions | Approaches and tools | Indicators |
|---|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ What outputs have been produced?▪ What has been their quality and relevance?▪ How does this compare to what was planned? Were outputs delivered according to schedule and budget?▪ What differences are there in outputs in different contexts? What has produced these differences?▪ What could be done differently? | <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Review of progress reports against plans▪ Review of surveys or other data collection's results▪ Discussions during the biannual meetings with all programmes | <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Type, number, quality and relevance of outputs produced▪ The extent to which outputs vary by context▪ The degree to which outputs delivery has changed based on experience |

4. Uptake and feedback

| Key questions | Approaches and tools | Indicators |
|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What outputs have been used by the target population? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Review of uptake against targeted population set in original plans | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Number of participants/users and their characteristics |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How does this compare to what was planned? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Feedback and user surveys | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Number of outputs used (e.g. for online material) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What is the initial feedback from users/target audience? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Attendance lists and feedback from events and workshops | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The extent to which uptake and feedback varied by context and by population characteristics |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What differences are there in outputs in different contexts? What has produced these differences? | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The degree to which uptake and feedback has changed because of changes in the strategic direction or implementation |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How are different groups (e.g. by demographic characteristics of child and/or family) using outputs? | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How can uptake be improved and strengthened? | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What is the feedback from: children, families, communities and programme staff | | |

5. Sustainability and scaling up

| Key questions | Approaches and tools | Indicators |
|---|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How sustainable are the activities funded? ▪ Was the programme successful in leveraging additional funding (either from Mercers' or from other funders)? ▪ Was the programme successful in leveraging additional resources (e.g. publicity, volunteers, operational space)? ▪ Which interventions (e.g. specific activities, components and/or approaches) have the highest potential and likelihood of continuation after the funding ends and of scale-up? ▪ What is the impact of context on sustainability and scalability potential? ▪ What are key factors/aspects that require more attention from the project to increase prospects of sustainability? ▪ Does the programme have transferability potential? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Review of progress reports against plans and, when appropriate, of organisation records and financial statements ▪ Discussions during the biannual meetings with all programmes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Number, amount and type of other funding secured in connection with this programme ▪ Number and type of other resources leveraged, such as: publicity, volunteers, operational space |

Annex 2: List of programmes by borough of operation

| Organisation | Boroughs |
|----------------------------|---|
| Cohort 1 | |
| Chickenshed Theatre | Enfield and Haringey Exploring contacts with Barnet, Hackney and Kensington |
| National Literacy Trust | Barking and Dagenham (year 1), Southwark (year 2), Bi Borough of Kensington & Chelsea and Westminster (year 3) |
| Scouts | Currently working in: Ealing, Brent, Bexley, Bromley, Havering, Redbridge, Tower Hamlets, Haringey & Hackney Will be working in: Lewisham & Lambeth |
| Cohort 2 | |
| ARK | Wandsworth & Croydon |
| Catch Up | Tower Hamlets, Islington, Newham (backup) |
| CLPE | Tower Hamlets, Camden and Hackney |
| Cohort 3 | |
| ICAN | Newham Possibly working with Tower Hamlets and if not then Hackney or Islington |
| National Children's Bureau | Lewisham |
| Peeples | Newham |
| Tales Toolkit | Waltham Forest, Southwark, Haringey Exploring the possibility of working in Sutton |