



THE
MERCERS'
COMPANY

Report on Year 3 of the Early Years Special Initiative

An evaluation report by The
Education Policy Institute.



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Executive Summary

About the Early Years Special Initiative

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 in London. It includes 10 programmes across three cohorts, each funded for three years.

The role of the Education Policy Institute (EPI) is to act as a 'critical friend', supporting each organisation to evaluate the implementation of their programme, to highlight common lessons learnt across all programmes and to help disseminate these findings to the wider early years community.

The end of the first three years is a good opportunity to take stock of the key themes that are relevant across programmes. At this point the first cohort have completed their full three years of funding, the second cohort are heading into their final year and the third cohort have completed the first year of setting up their programmes.

Common challenges in the first three years

All programmes in all cohorts have been affected by the many challenges the Covid-19 pandemic continues to present. There have been four key areas in which the pandemic has impacted programmes.

- Staffing problems – Staffing problems in both early years settings and schools have made it more challenging to engage schools and settings. It has also made it difficult to deliver training as staff are not always able to attend, as well as impacting capacity to deliver the programmes as planned.
- Measuring impact – it is extremely important to evaluate the impact of the programmes throughout the three year period, however, data collection has become a burden for staff at schools/settings who are already stretched by the amount they need to do.
- Engaging parents and the home environment – engaging parents directly and carrying out home visits has been severely restricted during multiple periods of lockdown and some parents continue to be wary of allowing home visits due to risks of catching Covid.
- Lack of face-to-face interaction – relatedly there have been many periods where face to face interaction has not been possible, and whilst programmes have made the most of digital platforms (as discussed below) for some programmes the face to face delivery is key to achieving some of the programme aims.

Ingredients for success and recommendations

1. *Resilience of programmes* – All programmes have demonstrated impressive resilience as they quickly adapted to the many challenges described above. Many programmes swiftly adapted their activities to work around covid restrictions,

provided additional support to schools and settings delivering the programmes and adjusted timelines to allow for maximum participation. Their ability to nimbly adjust their approach in-line with serious challenges has been key to their success in reaching children with their activities, at a time when such activities are particularly needed.

✓ *Recommendation: For programmes to build in the capacity for flexibility and adaptation into the delivery model.*

2. *Importance of building good relationships* – a key theme across all programmes' experiences has been the significance of building good relationships at many levels for the programmes to succeed in their aims. This has enabled programmes to maximise their reach and deliver their activities more effectively.

✓ *Recommendation: For programmes to invest necessary time and effort to build strong relationships with local authorities, schools and settings, communities and parents.*

3. *The significance of good training and potential to trickle down learning* – all programmes have an important training component, whether training practitioners, volunteers, their own staff or parents. Feedback has highlighted the positive difference training has made to participants' skills, understanding and confidence to deliver programme activities and goals. In some cases, the training delivered has impacted a wider group than the original participants whereby practitioners have shared their learnings and resources with colleagues, and where parents have been trained with the understanding that they will pass this training onto at least one other family. Additionally, programmes have facilitated participants in sharing the training with others by recording online training and providing digital resources. This has promoted sustainability within the programmes as well as scaling up.

✓ *Recommendation: For programmes to facilitate and encourage the sharing of their training.*

4. *The positive role of digital platforms and resources* – many programmes developed new online platforms where families and practitioners could go for support and resources, as well as modifying training and activities for children to be delivered online. Developing digital content has enabled programmes to increase their reach so that many more children than originally planned have been able to benefit from their activities and educational resources, with the potential to also influence the home learning environment. There are two important caveats to the benefits of digital content: first there are still inequalities in digital access, so whilst increasing

the reach of programmes to some children, others will miss out if the offer is only digital. A number of programmes addressed this by producing physical packs of books, activities and educational resources delivered to families' homes. Second, in person interaction is still hugely important.

✓ *Recommendation: For programmes to be prepared to exploit the benefits of digital platforms whilst ensuring there are still ways to reach children who lack access.*

5. *Collaboration between programmes* – cohort 1 programmes in particular, who were able to meet in person before the pandemic, have demonstrated the potential gains of working collaboratively across programmes. Programmes have benefited from participating in each other's training and even developed new programmes together, building on the experience and expertise of each programmes' areas.

✓ *Recommendation: To encourage more collaboration between programmes in future cohorts.*

Next steps for the initiative

The initiative is currently at the halfway point as the first cohort has completed their three years of funding. Cohort 2 have now moved into their final year and cohort 3 will complete their final year in 2024. EPI will continue to support programmes, facilitate meetings between the programmes to work through common issues and encourage collaboration, track progress across all remaining programmes and draw out further lessons. In 2024 a final report on the full six years of the Early Years Special Initiative will be published and a final event will take place to share these findings with other relevant individuals and organisations in the early years sector.

Introduction

Background and context

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 in London.

The Initiative, funded by The Charity of Sir Richard Whittington of which the Mercers' Company is Corporate Trustee, provides funding for up to £350,000 per charity partner over three years across three cohorts of programmes.

Cohort 1 organisations: Chickenshed, National Literacy Trust (NLT) and the Scouts began in Autumn 2019.

Cohort 2 organisations: Ark Start, Catch Up® and the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE) began in Autumn 2020.

Cohort 3 organisations: Speech and Language UK (formerly ICAN), the National Children's Bureau (NCB), Peeple and Tales Toolkit began in Autumn 2021.

EPI's role as a research partner is 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 examples 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 organised a workshop halfway through the grant period of cohort 1 (Spring 2021) and public events, such as the learning symposium planned for January 2023. The events are 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.

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.

Which London boroughs are programmes operating in?

As outlined above, the Early Years Special Initiative grant is designed to support programmes operating within London. Here we briefly explore which London boroughs programmes are operating in, highlighting where multiple programmes are working in the same borough. We also briefly explore the context and characteristics of these boroughs and reflect on what this tells us about how well programmes are matched up with areas of particular need.

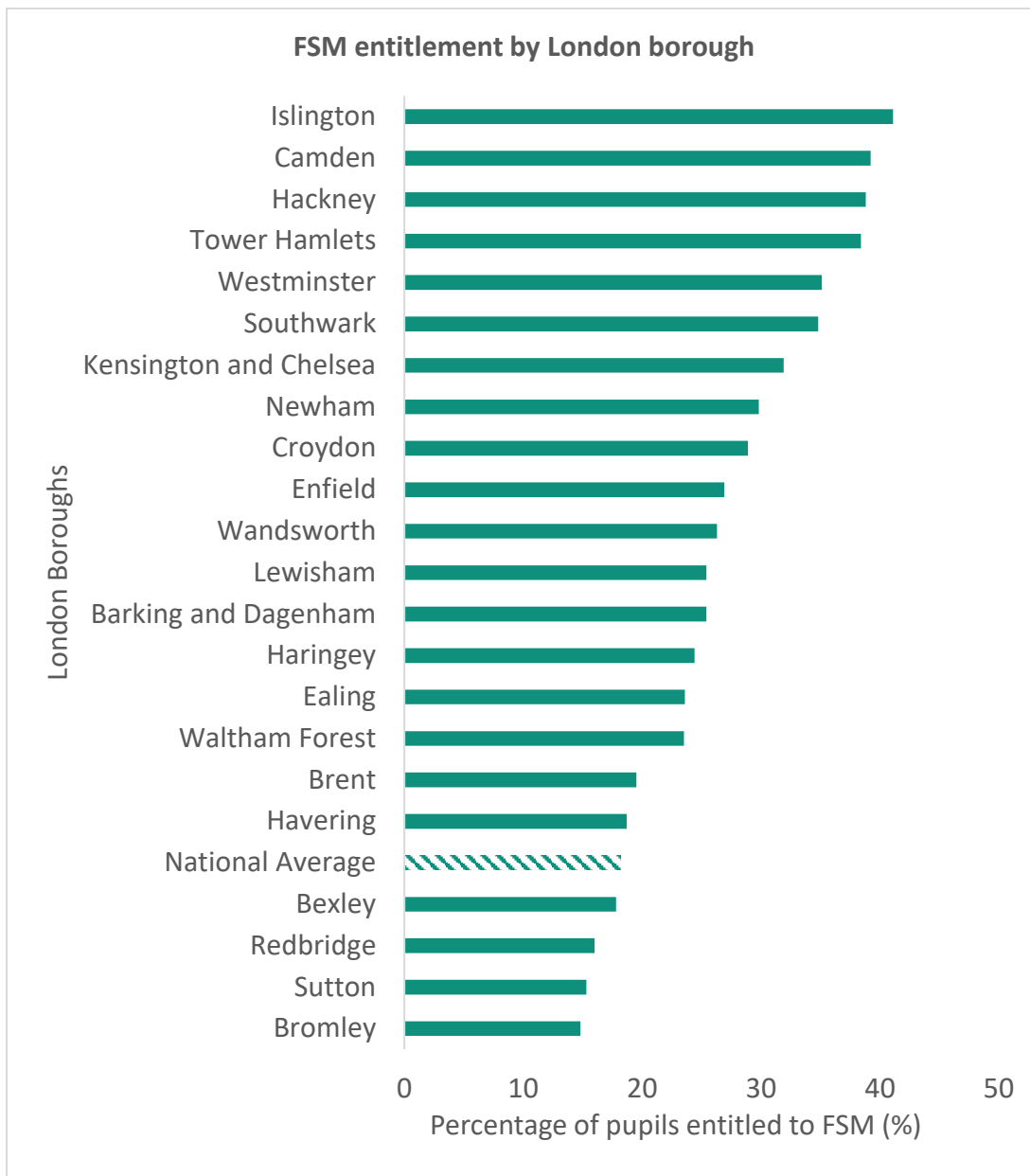
Figure 1 Map showing number of programmes operating in each borough



As can be seen from the map above, the programmes cover a wide number of London boroughs, but are particularly concentrated in Tower Hamlets (four programmes), and Haringey, Newham and Southwark (three programmes) (see Appendix C for full list of programmes by borough).

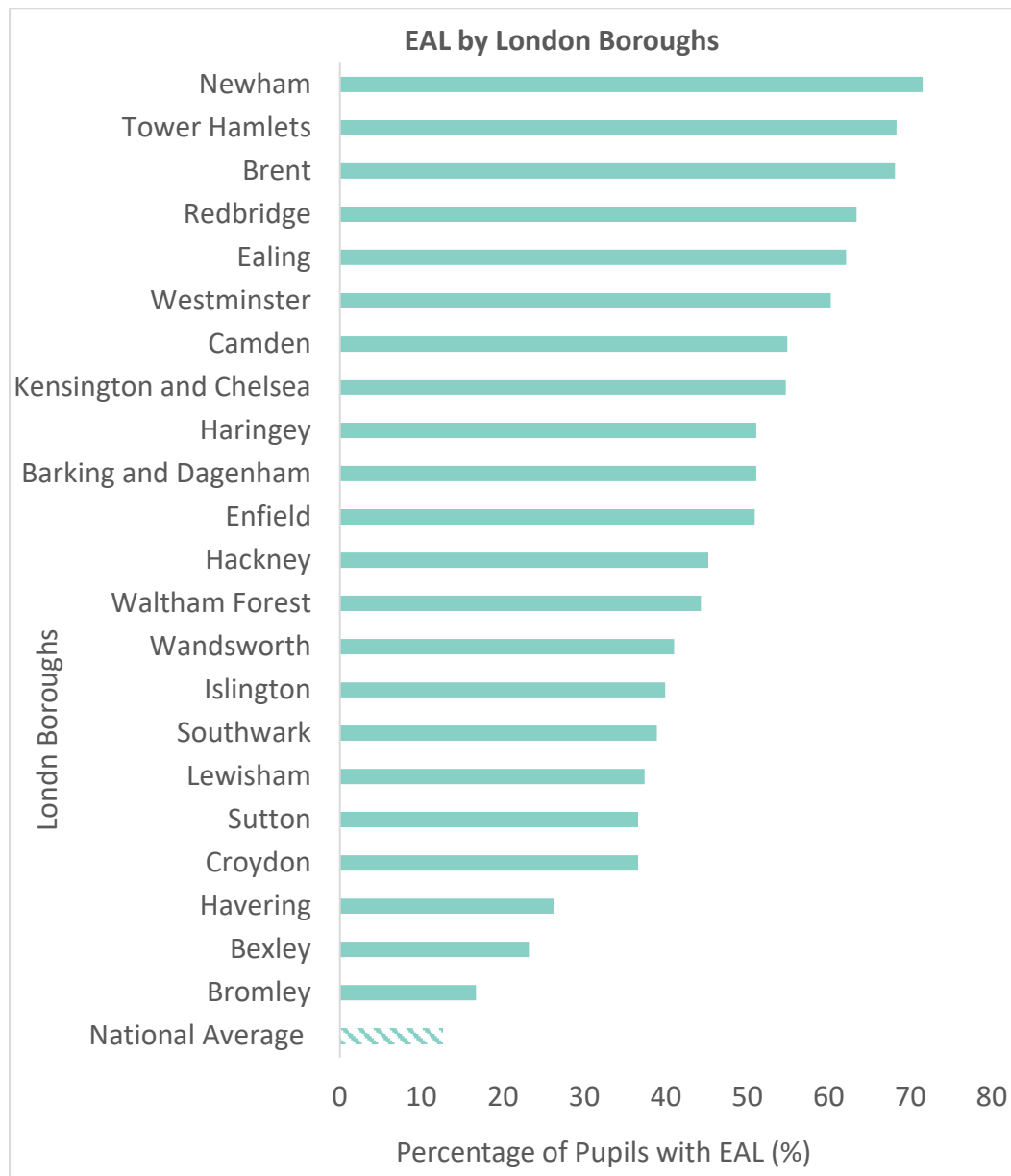
If we consider a few key indicators of disadvantage for all the boroughs the programmes are operating in, this gives us a good idea of the context of the areas and the levels of need for programmes' activities. Figure 2 illustrates that almost all of the boroughs have greater proportions of children entitled to free school meals (FSM) compared to the national average. Tower Hamlets and Southwark, where programmes are more concentrated, have particularly large proportions of children entitled to FSM, 38% and 35% respectively compared to a national average of just 18%. Additional needs are clear within these boroughs, as Figure 3 demonstrates: all London boroughs have higher proportions of children with English as an additional language (EAL) compared to the national average (13%), with most boroughs having upwards of 20% of children with EAL. As shown in Figure 4, around half of the boroughs, including most of those with multiple programmes operating, have higher than national average proportions of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). We have not made comparisons with other boroughs which programmes are not currently working in, and so cannot comment on whether one borough is more in need of programmes than another. However, it is clear that by focusing the Early Years Special Initiative within London, many areas of economic disadvantage and areas with particular language and other educational needs are being targeted.

Figure 2 Chart showing proportion of children eligible for free school meals (FSM) in 2021/22 for each of the boroughs in which the programmes operate



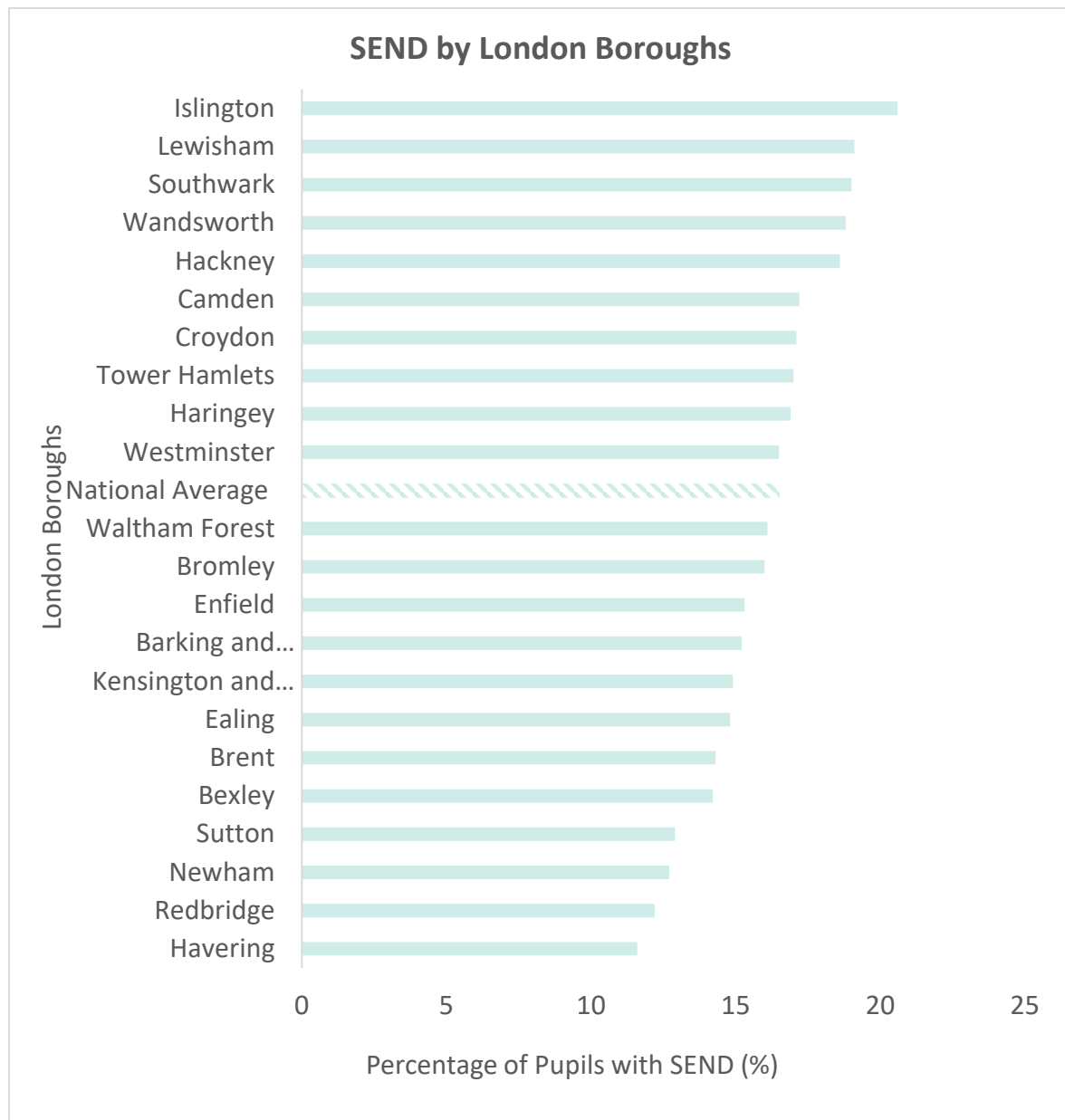
Source: Department for Education, Pupil characteristics-free school meals (2021/2022)-
<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/b301b176-279b-4755-8140-93343dfa2189>

Figure 3 Proportion of children with English as an additional language (EAL) in 2021/2022 for boroughs in which the programmes operate



Source: English as an additional language 2021/2022 - Percent for 'Pupil characteristics - Ethnicity and Language' for Known or believed to be other than English. This data is extracted from pupils who attend a state funded primary school <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics#subjectTabs-createTable>

Figure 4 Percentage of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in 2021/2022 for the boroughs in which the programmes operate



Source: Special Educational Needs and Disabilities 2021/2022 - The data shows the combination of pupils from all schools with an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan and pupils with SEN support. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/fast-track/e02b018b-dff7-4ff7-16eb-08da47b0392d>

The importance of the early years

Early years education has the capacity to support various areas of child development and has been found to have one of the highest returns on investment. From identifying early signs of SEND, so that a more timely response can be made, to supporting vulnerable groups of children who have EAL, early years can play a vital role in supporting children who are at risk of underperforming.

In England, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) refers to the stage of education when the child is between birth to 5 years old, representing a more significant proportion of a child's time in education than commonly considered. It is an important part of the child's development, as many areas of learning and broader developmental goals are established at this time.

Research by EPI has found that the attainment gap starts in the early years, continuing throughout the rest of the education system. Indeed, disadvantaged pupils (eligible for free school meals at any point in the previous six months) start primary school 4.5 months behind non-disadvantaged children, a gap which extends to 18.1 months by the time the child reaches age 16.¹

Given the crucial role of the early years of a child's life for their future development, it is vital that any intervention is backed by a strong evidence base. Each of the programmes are already supported by existing evidence. For example, a number of programmes focus on literacy development and the home learning environment (NLT, CLPE, Catch Up® and NCB). We have good evidence from the UK on the importance of a stimulating home learning environment, with recent research finding that, in early years, a strong home learning environment is linked to children performing better in all Key Stage 1 outcomes.² There is also evidence highlighting the importance of early literacy development for future education outcomes as literacy provides a strong foundation for learning across all subjects.³ In addition to the importance of literacy there is evidence that story-telling (the focus of Tales Toolkit) has specific benefits for children, who develop their own story-telling skills and are able to draw more on their imagination in creating the visuals for a story.⁴

There is also evidence in support of the approach taken by Ark Start nurseries, for example previous research has found that the presence of highly qualified staff in settings, with

¹ Education Policy Institute (2016) 'Education in England: Annual Report 2016': <https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/disadvantage-report.pdf>

² Gardiner, J. & Melhuish, E. (2021). 'Study of Early Education and Development (SEED): Impact study on early education use and child outcomes up to age seven years', *Department for Education* <https://www.seed.natcen.ac.uk/findings/longitudinal-study/early-education-use-and-child-outcomes-up-to-age-7.aspx>

³ Ali, A. (2022). 'What is the importance of early literacy in early childhood?', *Literacy Times* <https://literacytimes.com/what-is-the-importance-of-early-literacy-in-early-childhood/>

⁴ Isbell, R., Sobol, J., Lindauer, L., & Lowrance, A. (2004). 'The effects of storytelling and story reading on the oral language complexity and story comprehension of young children', *Early childhood education journal*, 32(3), 157-163 <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1023/B:ECEJ.0000048967.94189.a3>

access to good training and CPD⁵, and which actively involves parents in supporting their children's learning and development⁶, is positively associated with children's outcomes. Many of the programmes have already conducted their own independent trials and evaluations testing the efficacy of their approach. For a more detailed summary of the evidence base for each of the programmes see Appendix A.

Importantly, through this Initiative programmes will further contribute new evidence in the areas they are working within and close important gaps in the early years evidence. This is particularly the case for Chickenshed (who use theatre-based activities), Peeple (who focus on developing young children's interest and skills in science, technology and maths (STEM)), the Scouts Association (who have developed an early years programme of scouting) and Speech and Language UK (who focus on young children with English as an additional language (EAL)). Whilst there is relevant evidence for the importance of their respective activities, the evidence in relation to early years specifically is sparse and so the findings from this programme are a welcome addition.

EPI's role is to provide an overarching framework to bring together lessons learnt from all ten programmes. We developed an overarching monitoring and evaluation framework, informed by the Government's guidance on evaluation as set out in The Magenta Book.⁷

Through programme monitoring we aimed to show:

- how well the programme is working;
- the extent to which the programme is being implemented as designed;
- whether the programme is accessible and acceptable to its target population.

Monitoring is useful for many reasons: it provides an early warning for any problems that may occur, and an understanding of both successes and obstacles that could inform changes in implementation strategies and directions. All activities undertaken through this work were underpinned by the following goals:

⁵ Melhuish, E., Ereky-Stevens, K., Petrogiannis, K., Ariescu, A., Penderi, E., Rentzou, K., Tawell, A., Slot, P.L., Broekhuizen, M., & Leseman, P. (2015). 'A review of research on the effects of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) upon child development', *Curriculum Quality Analysis and Impact Review of European ECEC (CARE)* https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:bb919f6f-cd43-42d8-89ff-da525dc63554/download_file?file_format=pdf&safe_filename=Melhuish_et_al_2015_Review_of_research.pdf&type_of_work=Report; Melhuish, E. & Gardiner, J. (2018) 'Study of Early Education and Development (SEED): Study of Quality of Early Years Provision in England (Revised)', Department for Education [Department for Education \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/department-for-education-publishing.service.gov.uk)

⁶ Axford, N., Beryy, V., Llyod, J., Moore, D., Rogers, M., Hurts, A., Blcockley, K., Durkin, H., & Minton, J. (2019). 'How can schools support parents' engagement in their children's learning? Evidence from research and practice', *Education Endowment Foundation Parental Engagement - Evidence from Research and Practice.pdf* ([exeter.ac.uk](https://www.exeter.ac.uk))

⁷ HM Treasury, (2020) 'Magenta Book March 2020 Central Government guidance on evaluation' <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-magenta-book>

- To provide evaluation support to the organisations receiving funds through the Early Years Special Initiative including, but not limited to, ways to make their evaluations more robust or meaningful.
- To identify lessons with wider application potential, and specifically to bring together lessons learned, identify recommendations, and produce reports on the Special Initiative.
- To assist with the dissemination of the results across the education sector through reports, events and social media.
- To contribute to the wider evidence base on what works in the early years, and the importance of context.

The overarching framework

Five themes were identified for this overarching framework, drawing from existing literature and practical guides on monitoring and evaluation. These are listed below, along with the key question(s) they address. The full framework, with the complete list of questions, approaches and indicators can be found in Appendix B.

1. Strategy and direction
 - Is each project progressing towards its aims?
 - Are plans leading to the desired goals?
 - Do strategies need to be revisited or adapted to changed external contexts?
2. Management and governance (implementation)
 - Is the programme being implemented as effectively as possible?
 - Are deliverables being completed within planned timetables and budget?
 - Have there been changes in the organisation's staffing?
3. Outputs
 - Is the programme meeting the targeted output in terms of quantity and quality?
 - Are outputs different depending on context?
4. Uptake and feedback
 - What outputs have been used by the target population?
 - What differences are there in uptake and impact depending on context?
5. Sustainability and scaling up
 - Is the programme (or specific components of it) sustainable? Is it scalable?
 - What is the impact of context on sustainability and scalability potential?

Report structure

In the following sections, for each of the ten programmes we describe what the aims and activities of the programme are, and summarise findings so far, highlighting programme achievements.

Following on from this, in the final section we draw out the broader lessons learnt from looking at the findings across all ten programmes, distilling from these a set of recommendations.

Programmes description and findings

Cohort 1 programmes: 3 years of the Early Years Special Initiative

Chickenshed

About the programme

[Chickenshed](#) is an inclusive theatre company which runs children and youth theatres, offers training in accredited qualifications and provides outreach programmes. Chickenshed's project for the Early Years Special Initiative aimed to improve disadvantaged children's access to weekly interactive theatre sessions designed to promote language, numeracy and literacy, with a focus on reducing the attainment gap.

In addition to directly providing this access through early years settings-based weekly interactive performances and theatre-based activities, the initiative also sought to develop and test a series of products and a Creative Toolkit, which allow these activities to be continued in home and nursery environments. An additional aim was to upskill Chickenshed staff and provide professional support to other early years professionals (including schools' senior leadership) to use performance-based activities.

The project's proposed outcomes were to:

- Increase opportunities for disadvantaged children to access proven inclusive arts-based methods of developing early years language, numeracy and literacy skills;
- Improve the capacity of school and families in disadvantaged communities to include interactive theatre activities as effective tools to close the attainment gap before transitioning to primary school;
- Increase the potential impact of Chickenshed's early years intervention programmes through the testing and evidencing of techniques and approaches with a view to informing, refining and disseminating Chickenshed's early years practice to the wider sector.

Programme findings and achievements

Over the three years of the Initiative, Chickenshed have delivered 144 weekly workshops, 27 theatre events, produced over 50 YouTube episodes, and created new educational materials – bespoke puppets and educational playing cards – to support young children's educational development whilst empowering children to learn through play.

Whilst the pandemic brought many challenges to Chickenshed's original delivery model, with lockdowns and other restrictions forcing in-person sessions to be paused for a period, the pandemic also reinforced the need for Chickenshed's work. Schools and families were

appreciative that Chickenshed were quick to adapt and create regular online content in the form of Tales TV, enabling them to continue to stimulate children's imaginations and support their development, whilst also influencing the home learning environment. Chickenshed's successful creation of online materials also increased their overall reach, and was popularly taken up by children and families, with the YouTube channel reaching over 40,000 views.

A key factor in Chickenshed's success has been the strong relationships they developed with the schools they worked with and in particular the strong buy-in from senior leadership teams. Chickenshed worked collaboratively with the schools and both Chickenshed and staff at the schools benefited from sharing their knowledge and expertise with each other. This allowed Chickenshed to tailor their activities to the early years in terms of key areas of development and enabled practitioners to use the creative techniques in their own teaching and interactions with the children. The impact of the programme therefore went beyond Chickenshed's own activities, also influencing the classroom as well as the home environment.

Another important factor has been to work collaboratively more broadly. The cohort design of the Early Years Special Initiative promotes collaboration across programmes, and Chickenshed worked with both other programmes in cohort 1 – Scouts and the National Literacy Trust to receive and deliver training, as well as working with National Literacy Trust to develop a joint project (see below).

Evaluating the impact of their work has been a particular challenge also in the context of Covid-related restrictions. The independent evaluation was carried out by the Open University Children's Research Centre, who continued to face a travel ban in the second year of the programme which prevented them from conducting the planned research. This meant that a particularly intense period of data collection in the final term of the third year was necessary. The evaluation found that Chickenshed's activities successfully supported children's literacy and numeracy, in an inclusive way that ensures each child was able to choose their level of participation: 'Alongside all of the storytelling, songs and music, children are taught the sign language for each word. Therefore, children who are pre-verbal or lack confidence in speaking can be included in the workshops through the actions and signing. The Chickenshed performers add exaggerated facial expressions to emphasise and engage with individual children who might be on the periphery of the group'.⁸

As a result of the research Chickenshed now has four new projects starting in January 2023 in the most deprived areas of Enfield. As a result of their work for the Initiative, Chickenshed is now developing First Beats – an umbrella programme, through which they plan to work with multiple partners to deliver a range of activities, with early years still at the centre. They are exploring a partnership with National Literacy Trust as part of this programme.

⁸ Canning, N and Gomez, C (2022) 'When two worlds come together: Young children's language, literacy and numeracy development through creative, inclusive, theatre methods', The Open University, <http://oro.open.ac.uk/85039/1/Chickenshed%20Report.pdf>



Chickenshed in action: Yellow week brought the sunshine to Alma Primary School as the children went on adventures high and low with their beloved yellow blurgh, yellow bear and much more



Chickenshed in action: The children had so much fun on green week as Funky Monkey welcomed them to the dancing jungle for an adventure to find all things green.

National Literacy Trust

About the programme

[The National Literacy Trust \(NLT\)](#) is a charity which delivers programmes, as well as research and campaigning, aimed at giving children the literacy skills to succeed in life. NLT's Early Words Together (EWT) for London is the expansion of its pre-existing Early Words Together programme into three different London boroughs. The programme provided training for early years practitioners to deliver parents workshops locally. The workshops were focused on equipping parents and carers with the skills and confidence needed to support their child's early literacy, communication and language. Digital tools were also developed to significantly expand access for those who struggle to access in-person training, therefore aiming to enhance the home learning environment of a much wider group of children.

The project's expected outcomes were to:

- Improve school readiness of disadvantaged children, developing their communication, language and early literacy skills;
- Enrich the home learning environment of children from low-income families, improving the confidence of parents and carers in supporting their child's learning;
- Increase the expertise and confidence of early years practitioners to support children's early communication and literacy development.

Programme findings and achievements

The National Literacy Trust worked with a different borough in each of the three years, delivering their programme to different priority groups of children. Over the three years they have:

- Trained 237 practitioners from 153 settings across three London boroughs
- Reached 2,549 families through Early Words Together programme delivery
- Reached 40,033 families through digital resources and 12,502 families through Facebook Live sessions

NLT quickly adapted during the pandemic to continue to support practitioners, parents and children. They moved to deliver Early Words Together in online and outdoor sessions. Their Facebook Live sessions were based around a storybook with linked activity sessions that support early language development. Additionally, settings delivered storybooks and craft packs to families to be used alongside the online sessions. For families who did not have digital access NLT created and distributed 'Time Together' booklets, including translated copies for the most commonly used languages in the borough. In the first year NLT provided an Early Words Together for London Family Fun Day in Emslie Horniman's Pleasance Park, where they gifted 200 books and goody bags to local families.

A key challenge has been evaluating their impact based on children's assessment data, due to inconsistencies in how and whether the information has been collected across settings, which is largely due to difficulties with staffing.

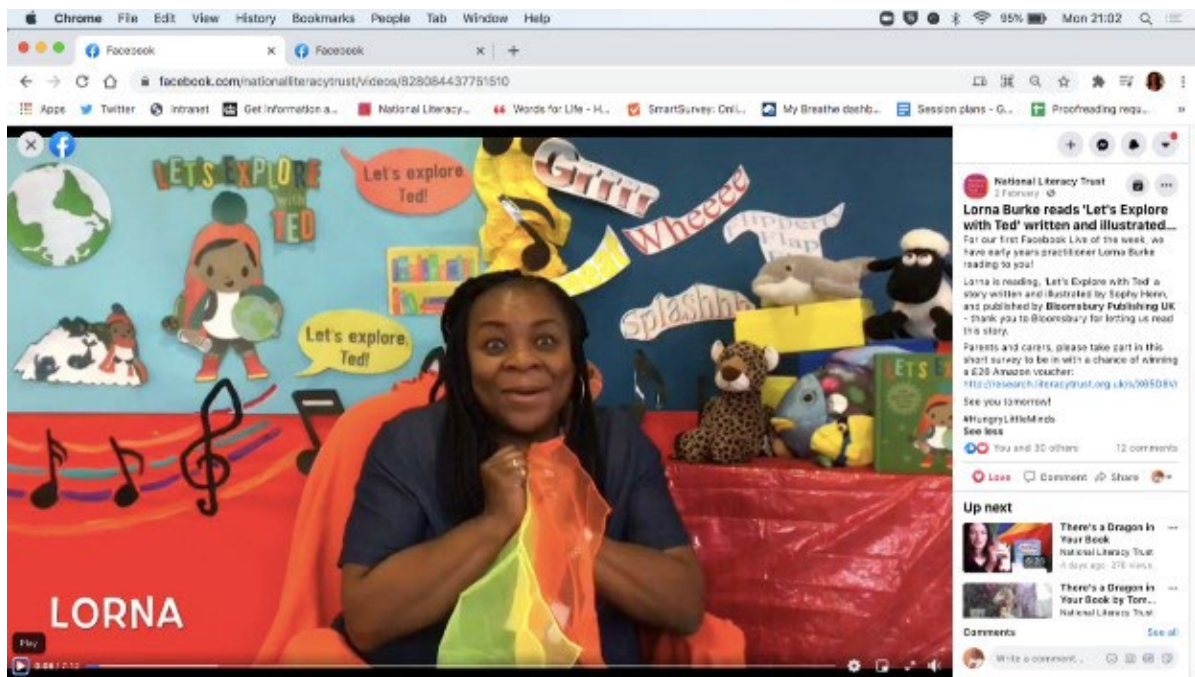
In addition to successfully developing their digital resources to have maximum reach, another new area for NLT and one of their key achievements has been their training for childminders which has been very well received and has resulted in the bi-borough of Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster, developing their own network support system for childminders.

The benefits of the Early Words Together programme will be sustained after the three years of the programme as practitioners who received the training continue to incorporate the strategies they have learned in their own practice and work in partnership with parents. As the Southwark Early Years Lead said in an interview: “You started us off. And we now want to go and bloom and create this pathway that comes on the back of National Literacy Trust and all the things you equipped us with. You’ve inspired us now to create our own pathway around speech, language and communication.” NLT also received positive feedback from parents, who reported noticing a difference in how they approach talking and other activities with their child since taking part in the workshops.

The collaborative working with local authorities throughout the three years has fed into the development of NLT’s new programme First Words Together, for families with children under two, in collaboration with Birmingham City Council. This will be funded by the Department of Health and Social Care, in partnership with Birmingham Forward Steps, who provide health and wellbeing services for babies and children up to five years old at their children’s centres across Birmingham.



National Literacy Trust in action. Left: Early Words Together Summer Event; Right: Early Words Together take home packs



National Literacy Trust in action: Early Words Together Online

The Scouts Association

About the programme

[The Scouts Association](#) is a youth movement based around a network of volunteers running skill-based youth groups which seek to promote a positive sense of community and identity. The Squirrels, is an early years (ages 4 to 6) adaptation of the regular programme, using three different models: Scout-led (original model), Family Scouting (led by parents), and Partnership Delivery (in early years settings). Scout-led sessions are focused on promoting communication skills, executive functions, independence and school-readiness, and family sessions have the additional aim of developing a high-quality home learning environment through parents' involvement. Partnership delivery places the intervention in more conventional early years settings (such as nurseries, pre-schools, community centres and faith buildings) and is aimed at vulnerable learners.

The Theory of Change of the organisation as a whole is based around using skill-based activities with reward structures to provide experience of teamwork and decision-making, and to instil the organisational values of the Scout Law. The outcome is higher levels of activity, skill, citizenship and resilience among children, who can therefore positively contribute to society and develop their own well-being and leadership.

The project's stated outcomes were to:

- Increase communication and language skills;
- Improve executive functions including self-control, problem solving and focus;

- Increase independence and readiness for school.

Programme findings and achievements

At the time the grant started, the Scouts had already been setting up and delivering the Early Years Programme throughout England with funding from the Department for Education. The grant from the Early Years Special Initiative allowed for extra resources to be focused within London boroughs, which present different demographic characteristics compared to England as a whole, and to be used to reach the most disadvantaged families. By the end of the third year of the grant, the Squirrels reached around 262 children, 59 adult leaders and 30 young leaders. The Squirrel Dreys have opened in a wide range of areas in Greater London, successfully opening 20 pilots in the 30% most deprived areas.

As a fundamental part of Scouting is about building community and bringing people together, face to face interaction is a key part of this. Therefore, when meet ups had to be paused during the pandemic, switching to online delivery was a challenge for a number of reasons, including digital access, and there was not high take up of online sessions. However, the Scouts also created activity packs which were sent out to all families, to ensure children were supported in continuing Scouting activities at home, regardless of their digital access.

An additional challenge was engaging new communities who had no previous interaction with Scouting. This required time to gain trust from communities who had been disappointed by pilot programmes before which had started in their areas and then not continued.

Despite this difficulty, a key achievement of the Scouts has been their success in engaging children from disadvantaged communities, as well as engaging children from different ethnic groups, with a diversity of languages and religions. This has been very much down to the efforts of Scouts leaders as well as listening and adapting to what families need. As the [evaluation report](#) by CREC highlights, the Scouts changed their family-led model to accommodate siblings – this made it possible for families to join that otherwise wouldn't have been able to.

A key success was gaining support from the trustees to continue the roll out of this programme from a pilot to a full section of the scouts. During their three year grant the Scouts have launched their Squirrels programme nationally which has been met with keen interest, and they now have waiting lists of families keen to be involved in early years Scouting and are in need of more volunteers. The Scouts have secured a number of donations and grants through various foundations to support their work, including the IWill fund who agreed to match fund up to £1.25 million to support the scale up of Squirrels. Through developing their family-led and partner-led models they will continue to engage with families not previously connected to Scouting and particularly those in disadvantaged areas, providing a start-up grant for groups opening in areas that fall within the 30% most deprived.



The Scouts in action: creative activities based on stories – left: making jelly worms and right: making hedgehogs out of dough



The Scouts in action: Scouts joint parent and child activity time in a family-led group.

Cohort 2 programmes: 2 years of the Early Years Special Initiative

Ark Start Nurseries

About the programme

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 close 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. They are delivering this programme through two early years settings operating in Croydon and Wandsworth.

The project's stated outcomes are:

- Improved language and communication skills for children, including better vocabulary, providing a strong foundation for the start of school;
- Improved children's health, resilience, independence and confidence, also contributing to school readiness;
- To provide high quality training for early years professional staff that enables staff to have the confidence, skills and tools to deliver effective early years education in an improved learning environment;
- To engage parents in their children's early years education and contribute to an improved home learning environment.

Programme findings and achievements

The pandemic has forced the Ark team to change their strategy since the beginning of their first year of operation. Rather than open a third setting, as originally planned, Ark concentrated on increasing the number of children attending the two settings in Clapham and Croydon. 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, with some parental engagement activities temporarily moved online, and off-site enrichment visits on hold. Home visits were carried out virtually rather than in-person, parent workshops and the peer parenting programme operated remotely and the positive parenting programme was delayed. During this time Ark took the opportunity to focus on the delivery of high-quality training opportunities to staff. Enrichment activities have since resumed and parental engagement activities are now increasingly in person. Over 80% of

parents have engaged with some part of the parent programme, which includes Stay and Plays, parent workshops and home visits.

In their second year Ark delivered their curriculum to 104 children across both settings. 32 of these children were entitled to the early years pupil premium, entitled to funded two-year-old places or in receipt of deprivation funding and seven children have identified special educational needs. Though this is short of their original target of 200 children, it represents an increase from their first year when 72 children attended. Now heading into their third year, in 2022/23, the percentage of children defined as disadvantaged has increased to 40%. The number of children Ark can take on is limited by the number of staff they have – this has been a key challenge as staff absences have been high, due to Covid and other illnesses, and recruiting new staff has been difficult. Nevertheless, Ark are heading into their final year of the initiative with more staff than in previous years.

A key achievement of Ark Start has been the accelerated progress children have made in nursery. Of the first cohort (those children who started nursery in October 2020), 87% achieved a Good Level of Development at the end of their Reception year in July 2022. For comparison, in the two Ark Primary schools combined, 73% of children who did not attend Ark Start Nurseries achieved a Good Level of Development.

Additionally, Ark's investment in staff development has been successful with 72% reporting that they feel increasingly skilled working with parents. Ark have adapted their CPD programme to reflect the starting points of recruits and are planning to replace single inset days with more regular CPD opportunities throughout the year. Ark's investment in staff CPD not only promotes the high-quality delivery of their curriculum, enrichment programme and parenting programme, but also means the majority of their staff expect to stay with them for at least the next two years, ensuring continuity.



Ark Start in action: Children playing at an Ark Start nursery



Drawing at an Ark Start nursery

Catch Up®

About the programme

[Catch Up®](#) is a charity which aims to reduce literacy and numeracy difficulties among children via the development and delivery of an intervention which provides one-to-one support to children in 15-minute twice-weekly sessions. Catch Up® offers two structured interventions which are aimed at improving literacy and numeracy skills respectively. At participating schools, children who are identified by a teacher as falling behind in their literacy or numeracy will be invited to take part in one-to-one sessions with a teaching assistant, teacher or mentor who has been trained to deliver the relevant intervention.

Catch Up® Literacy and Catch Up® Numeracy had previously been used extensively with children aged 6 to 14 years. The aim of the work funded by Mercers is to develop and test a version of the intervention that is suitable for children aged five and attending reception year at a primary school.

The project's stated outcomes are to:

- Increase staff skills, knowledge and expertise to identify and provide effective intervention support for reception pupils who are showing evidence of dropping behind in literacy or numeracy;
- Increase family support strategies and thereby also increase attainment for pupils falling behind in literacy and numeracy;

- To develop and trial 'EYFS specific Catch Up® Literacy and Catch Up® Numeracy' interventions to provide school staff with effective, evidence-based intervention support that is appropriate for reception age children, along with support resources for their families.

Programme findings and achievements

As a one-to-one intervention Catch Up® necessarily has a more concentrated reach. In their first two years Catch Up® have delivered training to 56 practitioners, and 46 reception-age pupils have received either Catch Up® Literacy or Catch Up® Numeracy sessions.

Due largely to the ongoing impact of Covid on school staffing levels, a key challenge has been both recruiting schools and also keeping schools engaged in the programme, and in the second year attrition levels have been high. Reduced school capacity has meant schools were reluctant to engage with a trial when they needed to use proven approaches to 'close the gap' with reception-age pupils being behind age-expected levels of progress. In order to improve chances of recruiting and keeping schools on the programme in the third year, a wide-reaching recruitment strategy has been put in place early, contacting London Local Authorities and individual schools well in advance of the start of the third year.

Another challenge, also related to the pandemic, has been the inability to deliver support for parents and carers in face-to-face events. Catch Up® have researched other potential delivery models and have been developing materials to share with parents/carers online.

Feedback from the Catch Up® programme's first two years has been promising among reception pupils, with evidence that the Catch Up® sessions are making a positive difference to children's learning outcomes. Because of their action research approach, Catch Up® have made adjustments to materials and the timings of the programme in response to ongoing feedback. All findings from the first two years are being used to hone the programme for the final year which will provide an efficacy trial.



Catch Up® in action: Catch Up® Numeracy



Catch Up® in action: Catch Up® Literacy

The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education

About the programme

[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 CLPE 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.

For each year of the programme CLPE plans to train 30 early years teachers from 30 schools in Camden, Hackney and Tower Hamlets. Additionally, they will provide children with a new book each month for a year, improving the home learning environment by increasing children's access to quality texts at home.

The project's stated outcomes are:

- To improve attainment in literacy for children;
- To narrow the gap in literacy achievement between advantaged and disadvantaged children;
- To improve the subject knowledge and pedagogical knowledge of early years teachers;

- To improve the knowledge base about effective early years practice in the teaching of literacy and the importance of access to books for children.

Programme findings and achievements

Over the first two years CLPE have successfully delivered training to 60 teachers from 30 schools in Camden, Hackney and Tower Hamlets. CLPE have received positive feedback about how the training has influenced teachers' approaches to teaching literacy and have shared their learnings with colleagues. CLPE have also provided additional support through access to their school membership website with teaching resources, as well as class book packs with 16 high quality texts to support literacy teaching. Through partnership with the Dollywood Foundation UK, CLPE have also increased children's access to quality texts in the home, with all children in both years receiving a new book every month.

Whilst CLPE's training model has previously relied on face-to-face training sessions, they nimbly adapted to deliver training online when in-person training was not possible due to pandemic restrictions. They have provided additional support to schools where there have been changes in staff or where some staff members have been unable to attend the training, to ensure the programme is still delivered as planned.

This move to online training potentially presents an opportunity for CLPE to extend their reach beyond the original targets of the programme as they move into the third year.

So far results from the class data, based on 518 pupils, are encouraging, suggesting the programme has had a significant influence on children's engagement with reading, and their language and communication more broadly:

- 70% of project classes increased the number of pupils reaching expected or above attainment in communication and language (combined) with 50% demonstrating a significant⁹ rise;
- 75% of project classes increased the number of pupils reaching expected or above attainment in reading (combined) with 55% demonstrating a significant rise;
- 75% of project classes increased the number of pupils reaching expected or above attainment in writing with 50% demonstrating a significant rise.

⁹ 'significant' is measured as increase of 33%+ on baseline figure.



CLPE in action: active engagement in teaching approaches



*CLPE in action:
collaboration – building a
canon of rhyme and song*

Cohort 3 programmes: 1 year of the Early Years Special Initiative

Cohort 3 have completed the first year of the initiative. For some of the programmes the first year has been for product testing and development before moving to implementation in year 2.

Speech and Language UK (formerly I CAN)

About the programme

[Speech and Language UK](#) has a clear vision that every child who is facing challenges with talking and understanding words can look to the future with confidence. Their mission is to give children and young people the skills they need so they aren't left behind, waiting to be understood. They fulfil this mission by creating tools for schools and nurseries, giving advice and guidance to families and lobbying for better designed policy.

This 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. As such, the project will centre on developing and extending the existing *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.

Early Talk Boost is a language intervention aimed at 3-4 year old children with language difficulties (their communication is behind their peers based on developmental milestones). The programme starts with Speech and Language UK's training for Early Years practitioners, who go on to deliver a nine-week intervention of three sessions per week, to a selected group of children in their setting. These sessions include activities and games supported by story books, purposely designed to boost the children's language skills, helping them catch up with their peers. The intervention also engages parents/carers, with accompanying books for them to use at home.

The project's stated outcomes are:

- To evaluate the *Early Talk Boost* programme and whether it meets the needs of children and families with EAL;
- To improve practitioners' understanding of how to support children with EAL;
- For practitioners to be able to identify children who may be struggling with language acquisition.

Programme findings and achievements

The first year of Speech and Language UK's programme has focused on the co-production of a review of existing Speech and Language UK materials with the help of a user group of parents of children with EAL and practitioners who have previous experience of *Early Talk Boost*. 26 parents and 6 practitioners took part in the focus groups in Tower Hamlets and 18 parents and 6 practitioners took part in the focus groups in Newham. Focus group participants had a variety of languages including: Bengali, Urdu, Gujarati, Arabic, Spanish, Luo, Lingala, Malayalam, Hindu, Russian, Tamil, Pashto, and Turkish.

As a result of the feedback from both parents and practitioners a number of changes have been made to the programme. These have included the creation of a website for parents to access information and resources, as well as creating revised guidance for parents, which focuses on explicitly supporting (all) languages to ensure that parents don't feel they need to use English, and reviewing training materials to ensure they are accessible to practitioners with English as an additional language.

Training and implementation of the programme also began in the first year. By April 2022 the project team had trained and worked with seven settings across Newham and Tower Hamlets, who have now all delivered the *Early Talk Boost* (ETB) intervention. Nine settings have been confirmed for the second year.

As with other programmes, a key challenge has been reduced staff capacity due to the pandemic. This resulted in one primary school being unable to complete the training and intervention and also led to delay in some other settings completing the intervention.

Results seen so far on Speech and Language UK's online tracker show positive changes to the children who have been involved in this project (based on complete data from 60 children):

- 37% closed the gap with their peers based on their overall scores for all four areas of development being tracked (attention and listening, understanding, talking and social communication);
- 29% narrowed the gap by 50% or more;
- 56% of children were at expected levels in attention and listening (compared to 17% before);
- 49% of children were at expected levels in understanding language (compared to 9% before).



Speech and Language UK in action: a practitioner reading to children



Speech and Language UK in action: a mother reading with her son

National Children's Bureau

About the programme

[The National Children's Bureau \(NCB\)](#) brings people and organisations together to drive change in society and deliver a better childhood for the UK. Their project is a literacy-based home learning environment programme Making it REAL (Raising Early Attainment in Literacy), delivered through a borough-wide approach in partnership with Lewisham local authority. Making it REAL is based upon the original REAL project¹⁰ led by Professors Cathy Nutbrown and Peter Hannon at the University of Sheffield, which raised and sustained literacy achievement for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Making it REAL helps practitioners to build parents' knowledge and confidence so that they can help their children's early language and literacy development and create a positive early home learning environment.

The programme in Lewisham includes three strands. The first strand will involve structured home visits, where trained early years practitioners will work with parents to help them support their children's communication, language and early literacy development. The second strand will share the REAL approach with parents through a series of workshops. The third strand will provide training in the REAL approach for early years practitioners and teachers for every early education setting in Lewisham.

The project's stated outcomes are:

- To achieve a 2% Increase in children in Lewisham achieving a Good Level of Development at the end of reception;

¹⁰ <https://sheffield-real-project.sites.sheffield.ac.uk/>

- To achieve a 3% Increase in disadvantaged children in Lewisham achieving a Good Level of Development at the end of reception leading to a 1.5% reduction in the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers;
- A 2% increase in disadvantaged children accessing an early education place;
- 85% of 660 members of Lewisham's early years workforce to report that their support for children's early literacy development has improved as a result of the training and development they received;
- 85% of 570 Lewisham parents benefitting from the programme to report that they are more confident in supporting their child early literacy development.

Programme findings and achievements

In their first year NCB have made good progress across all three strands of the Making it REAL programme. For the home learning programme 31 practitioners from 21 settings were trained to work with individual families through a series of home visits and literacy events. 61 families were enrolled for home visits and at the end of the first year, 38 families have completed the programme with full dosage of 4 home visits, and 9 families engaged in the programme with a lower number of visits achieved. Feedback on the programme has been very positive, with emerging data showing improvement in children's confidence, and communication, language and early literacy skills, as well as increased skills, knowledge and confidence reported by the parents and practitioners taking part.

For the second strand, three rounds of Sharing REAL with Parents have been delivered during the first year, involving a total of 12 workshops. 20 families attended during the first year, reaching 31 children. Working closely with Lewisham local authority, a revised recruitment strategy is being developed to increase the number of parents participating as well as reaching certain groups, for example fathers.

For the final strand, training was delivered to 93 early years practitioners to deliver Making it REAL within settings, reaching 21% of early years settings in Lewisham. Practitioners who attend the training are encouraged to cascade the learning to other staff in their setting. At the end of the first year, 12 settings completed the programme with full dosage of four home visits, five settings completed the programme with a lower dosage and three settings decided to pause delivery of the programme, with the intention to restart afresh in Year 2 (2022-23).

Covid has had an impact on all three strands of the programme because of reduced staffing capacity. This has affected settings' ability to release staff for training and adaptations have been made to the training to make it more accessible despite staffing problems, for example offering online and in-person training. Home visits have also been affected because of staff absence and families being unwell themselves. To accommodate this the timescale for completing the home visits was pushed back and NCB provided additional guidance to enable home visits to take place outdoors.

Working with Lewisham local authority early years team, NCB have recruited a Lewisham Engagement Coordinator. This key appointment brings together the Making it REAL programme, Bookstart, and libraries in Lewisham and ensures the programme has an embedded approach to support literacy throughout the borough.



NCB in action: Left: Singing songs and rhymes with children, parents, practitioners and the Bookstart Bear at the Year 1 Making it REAL Celebration event ; Right: Making it REAL Celebration event for families and practitioners - Interacting and modelling the importance of developing physical skills and strength as part of early mark making.



NCB in action: Linking with libraries – visiting the library for stories and songs as part of making it REAL

Peeples

About the programme

[Peeples](#) 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 their project is to develop, pilot and evaluate an innovative intervention (Exploring Together) to train practitioners and parents to support STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) skills development in very young children.

The project's stated outcomes are:

- For practitioners to have increased confidence, knowledge and skills to support the foundations of early STEM skills in the classroom - and to work with parents to encourage them to support early STEM skills at home;
- For parents to have greater confidence, knowledge and skills to encourage early STEM skills at home through play and everyday activities/routines with their children;
- For children to have better early executive functioning, early maths skills, early language skills and increased confidence and curiosity.

Programme findings and achievements

Most of the implementation work planned by Peeples is due to take place in the second and third year of the grant cycle, with the first year being focused on content creation for the programme, which will be completely new content. The goal is for the Exploring Together programme to provide practitioners and parents with:

- Underpinning knowledge to enable them to draw out STEM potential within each activity;
- STEM vocabulary;
- Skills to ask 'I wonder...' questions which stimulate scientific thinking;
- Confidence to transfer knowledge and ideas into the everyday activities which comprise the home learning environment.

For this first year the focus has been on the development of an eight-week intervention (Exploring Together) to help early years practitioners to gain the confidence, knowledge & skills to support STEM skills in their setting, and to help parents encourage the foundations of STEM through everyday activities at home, as well as on piloting the programme with practitioners and parents.

In preparation for the practitioner training (due to start in January 2023), the team has come to the realisation that staffing in early years settings is variable - some have low staffing meaning that releasing them for training is challenging. Therefore, they are now developing blended training and implementation support sessions to address this.

Reflection on the impact of the pandemic has also led the team to give careful consideration to the programme delivery mechanisms and opportunities for offering support to families remotely. In-line with other considerations, such as the need to have sessions with parents without their children, so that parents can focus more fully on the session, they have developed the following approach to delivery: On a weekly basis there will be 1) a face-to-face parent only session (in later sessions the children join for a related activity); 2) a home-play activity pack for families to do at home (based on the face-to-face session); 3) 'nudges' between sessions via a WhatsApp group to capture feedback and share information and ideas about the topic. This approach has a number of other benefits, for example, activity packs encourage attendance; it allows the team to share key messages in different ways; there are fewer logistical challenges for settings.

Tales Toolkit

About the programme

[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 as well as easy-to-use open-ended resources to aid storytelling. Additionally, teachers will be given access to supplementary resources, including expert webinars, downloadable resources, membership of the Tales Toolkit social media community and links to further research. With this project they aim to reach and make a difference to more children, with a focus on disadvantaged areas of London. They plan to work with 72 schools across 6 local authorities, giving roughly 8,500 children access to Tales Toolkit.

The project's stated outcomes are:

- Improvements in levels of children's personal, social and emotional development (PSED), including in making relationships, self-confidence and managing feelings;
- Improvements in children's communication and language, including listening skills, attention and focus, oral storytelling skills, discussions around story (such as asking and answering questions), vocabulary, connecting and adapting ideas, use of language in role play, ability to make connections, development of own narratives and expression of ideas and feelings;
- Increased attainment in literacy, leading to a closing of the attainment gap for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (children eligible for Early Years Pupil Premium).

Programme findings and achievements

By April 2022, the programme had six boroughs on board (Haringey, Southwark, Tower Hamlets, Waltham Forest, Sutton, Newham); 32 schools were already signed up for training (94 staff - staff data is collected from online registration, so will be a low estimate of the

staff involved with delivering Tales Toolkit). Tales Toolkit are also in the process of finding next year's cohort of 45 more schools from all six boroughs.

There has been some staff turnover. This has meant that some schools have been delayed in starting, and therefore may not have baseline data yet. Some schools may be included in the year 2 cohort rather than year 1 because of this delay. Therefore, they will have more schools in the second year than planned and data gathering will be heavily weighted to year 2 and 3. However, once Tales Toolkit is embedded, as the training is all online, they do not foresee further issues with staff turnover.

There were minor difficulties signing up schools in the first year. This was down to the time taken to establish relationships and to have sufficient opportunity to talk to busy early years practitioners. Their relationships are now in place with all six boroughs.

Baseline data has been received already from 14 schools, with over 800 children reached (more data is expected to arrive from schools that experienced delays). However, the team has encountered lots of inconsistencies in attainment data. These will be addressed going forward by creating templates to be clear on the format they would like to receive.

Tales Toolkit have also received written baseline stories from 15 schools (minimum of 60 children). Case studies will be asked for in 2022-23 academic year.



Tales Toolkit in action: Storytelling with Tales Toolkit



Tales Toolkit in action: story telling with Tales Toolkit

Lessons learned and key recommendations

In this section we take account of findings and achievements across the ten programmes, to draw out some common themes and lessons learned. Where appropriate, following on from these we highlight some key recommendations for future work by early years programmes in this space.

Common challenges

There are a number of common challenges which affect all programmes, including resulting factors of the pandemic and ongoing 'fallout'.

- Staffing problems - One of the main challenges programmes face, which has been exacerbated by the pandemic, is staffing problems due to staff absences and staff turnover in both schools and early years settings. This has made it more difficult to engage schools and settings and affected their willingness to sign up to new programmes. Staffing capacity has also affected whether schools/settings are able to release staff to participate in programmes' training, as well as their capacity to then deliver the programmes as planned.
- Measuring impact - Difficulties with staffing have also affected the programmes' ability to measure their impact as data collection has become a burden for staff at schools/settings who are already stretched by the amount they need to do. This has been a challenge as programmes need to balance the importance of being able to evaluate the effectiveness of their approach for future learning, with minimising the amount of pressure that staff are under.
- Parents and the home environment – where programmes have sought to engage directly with parents and/or carry out home visits in order to influence the home learning environment, this has been severely restricted during multiple periods of lockdown and some parents continued to be wary of allowing home visits for a long time after the lock downs due to risks of catching Covid.
- Lack of face-to-face interaction – Relatedly, programmes have dealt with many periods where face to face interaction has not been possible, and whilst programmes have made the most of digital platforms (as discussed below) for some programmes the face-to-face delivery is key to achieving some of the programme aims.

Ingredients for success and recommendations

1. *Resilience of programmes* – All programmes have demonstrated impressive resilience as they quickly adapted to the many challenges described above. Many programmes swiftly created materials to deliver training and programme sessions online, whilst developing other online resources for practitioners, families and children. Programmes have provided additional support and repeated training to help effectively deliver their activities despite staffing capacity issues. They have adapted timelines to allow for maximum participation and delivering their programme at the most beneficial time. Their ability to nimbly adjust their approach

in line with serious challenges has been key to their achievement of reaching children with their activities, at a time when such activities are particularly needed.

✓ *Recommendation: For programmes to build in the capacity for flexibility and adaptation into the delivery model.*

2. *Importance of building good relationships* – a key theme across all programmes' experiences has been the significance of building good relationships at many levels for the programmes to succeed in their aims. This has included:

- *Building good relationships with local authorities* - Local authorities are well placed to know what is needed in their local areas, with clear oversight of where programmes might provide the most benefit and can provide vital connections with schools and settings. Building relationships with local authorities has been key in helping programmes recruit schools and settings, reach different parts of the sector, for example childminders, and also play a vital role in the scaling up and sustainability of programmes, with the capacity to enable and support the expansion of programmes.
- *Building good relationships with senior leadership teams in schools and settings* - When programmes have secured buy-in from senior leadership teams this has enabled collaborative working between the programmes and the settings and ultimately led to activities that have been further tailored to produce the best results for children. Programmes have been able to modify their activities to match the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum. Settings have also benefited from learning new approaches to teaching and play activities from programmes. Overall, this has led to children having a more elevated educational experience both during programmes' activities and in the classroom/nursery.
- *Building good relationships with communities* – Investing in relationships with communities has also been key to ensuring that children from disadvantaged backgrounds have access to the programmes and their educational benefits. This can be particularly challenging in areas that are distrusting of new schemes and that lack experience of participating in such activities, requiring effort and patience as well as listening to and adapting to communities' needs to gain trust and bring communities together. Managing to work with communities that have not previously been engaged has huge benefits in terms of managing to reach children who will likely benefit most from programmes' activities.
- *Building good relationships with parents* – Engaging parents is vital, both to ensure children can participate but also to extend the benefits of the

programmes to the home learning environment. A number of the programmes have a specific component aimed at parental engagement, parent training and/or the home learning environment. This has been made more difficult during periods where face-to-face interaction with parents has been restricted, as communication with parents is key. Training practitioners and volunteers has been found to improve their confidence and skills to engage parents effectively. Empowering parents to support their children's learning will have powerful long-term benefits for children's outcomes.

✓ *Recommendation: For programmes to invest necessary time and effort to build strong relationships with local authorities, schools and settings, communities and parents.*

3. *The significance of good training and potential to trickle down learning* – All programmes have an important training component, whether training practitioners, volunteers, their own staff or parents. Feedback from those who have taken part in programmes' training has highlighted how positively it has been received and what a difference it has made to participants' skills, understanding and confidence to deliver programme activities and goals. There have been a number of examples of how the training delivered has impacted a wider group than the original participants, this is the case where practitioners have shared their learnings and resources from the training with colleagues and where parents/carers have been trained with the understanding that they will pass this training onto at least one other family. Additionally, programmes have made recordings of online training sessions and provided additional digital resources which has facilitated participants in sharing the training with others. This has promoted sustainability within the programmes, particularly in terms of dealing with staffing issues – both with reduced capacity to be able to release staff for training, but also with staff leaving having attended the training, ensuring that schools and settings have the resources to quickly train someone new. Facilitating the sharing of training has also helped with scaling up as the sharing of training more widely amplifies the impact of the programmes beyond those originally intended.

✓ *Recommendation: For programmes to facilitate and encourage the sharing of their training.*

4. *The positive role of digital platforms and resources* – Whilst adapting to the challenges of the pandemic many programmes developed new online platforms where families and practitioners could go for support and resources, as well as modifying training and activities for children, to be delivered online. Developing

digital content has enabled programmes to increase their reach so that many more children than originally planned have been able to benefit from their activities and educational resources, with the potential to also influence the home learning environment. There are two important caveats to the benefits of digital content: first there are still inequalities in digital access, so whilst increasing the reach of programmes to some children, others will miss out if the offer is only digital. A number of programmes addressed this by producing physical packs of books, activities and educational resources delivered to families' homes so that children without digital access did not miss out. Second, in person interaction is still hugely important.

- ✓ *Recommendation: For programmes to be prepared to exploit the benefits of digital platforms whilst ensuring there are still ways to reach children who lack access.*

5. *Collaboration between programmes* – Cohort 1 programmes in particular, who were able to meet in person before the pandemic, have demonstrated the potential gains of working collaboratively across programmes. Programmes have benefited from participating in each other's training and even developed new programmes together, building on the experience and expertise of each programmes' areas.

- ✓ *Recommendation: To encourage more collaboration between programmes in future cohorts.*

Appendix A: Evidence base for programmes

Cohort 1

Chickenshed

More broadly, arts-based techniques have been linked to several areas of child development. Some skills come directly from the programme itself. These include psychomotor skills alongside creative, imaginative and decision-making skills. Others come indirectly from the nature of the initiative, such as communication, cooperation and social skills, which group-based activities instil.

Integrating visual and performing arts into the early years environment for at-risk young people has been linked to improvements in emergent literacy as measured by targeted and standardised measures.¹¹ Further evidence suggests the personal, social, and emotional development of children can be aided by expressive arts and design¹².

The variety of teaching techniques that can be accessed in drama-based teaching means that subject-specific content can be taught alongside a variety of broader skills. A case study looking at science teaching in early years was able to use techniques such as hot-seating (where one participant pretends to be a particular character and is questioned by other participants in the group), miming, and teach-in-role (where the teacher takes on a role as part of a story whilst teaching) as part of their programme, finding that different elements supported the early years professional in different areas of teaching.¹³ The same study found that the teaching had improved the children's understanding of the subject, with a particularly notable effect on vocabulary. It also suggested that hot-seating may have a broader positive impact in developing children's empathetic skills.

Finally, there is evidence of arts-based intervention or therapy in the early years for children with emotional or behavioural difficulties.¹⁴ Whilst evidence specific to theatre-based activities and children's outcomes in early years is sparse, Chickenshed's own independent evaluation conducted by the Open University's Children's Research Centre following their three years as part of the Special Initiative has contributed to this, finding that Chickenshed's early years programme was beneficial for children's language, literacy and

¹¹ Phillips, R. D., Gorton, R. L., Pinciotti, P., & Sachdev, A. (2010). 'Promising findings on preschoolers' emergent literacy and school readiness in arts-integrated early childhood settings', *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 38(2), 111-122. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10643-010-0397-x>

¹² Pascal, C., Bertram, T. & Rouse, L. (no date). 'Getting it right in the Early Years Foundation Stage: a review of the evidence', *The British Association for Early Childhood Education* <https://early-education.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Getting-it-right-in-the-EYFS-Literature-Review.pdf>

¹³ Kambouri, M. and Michaelides, A. (2014). 'Using drama techniques for the teaching of early years science: a case study', *Journal of Emergent Science*, 7, 7-14. http://centaur.reading.ac.uk/38110/3/JES0705reviewed_final%20%281%29.pdf

¹⁴ Cortina, M. A., & Fazel, M. (2015). 'The Art Room: An evaluation of a targeted school-based group intervention for students with emotional and behavioural difficulties', *The arts in psychotherapy*, 42, 35-40. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0197455614001282>

numeracy development and, as a result, recommend theatre-based methods to promote learning.¹⁵

National Literacy Trust

A rich home learning environment (HLE) is a key element for every strategy aimed at improving children's development and increasing performance throughout the schooling years. Parental reading is a particularly significant factor in a high-quality HLE and has been found to be one of the factors that links migration status and socio-economic background, to literacy precursors.¹⁶ HLE quality is a strong predictor of attainment rates in maths, for example, with the early years component of HLE being particularly important. Finally, the HLE is associated with broader factors such as self-regulation and pro-social behaviour.¹⁷

The Early Words Together programme (EWT) is already a well-evidenced programme. Previous evaluation has found it has improved children's verbal skills, alongside broader improvements in approaches and attitudes to literacy.¹⁸ For example, children were catching up to national norms in standardised vocabulary tests, and there were reported increases in the majority of households in levels of parent-child talk, parental confidence in book-sharing and children's enjoyment of reading.

The Scouts

Outside of the early years setting, Scouting is very popular, with around 450,000 children involved within the UK.¹⁹ An independent review from 2011 has found that very high proportions of young people involved in the scheme started improving key skills and relationship building (88% and 92% respectively).²⁰

Focusing on younger children, there are already similar programmes in operation elsewhere, run by the relevant scouting organisations. Scouts Northern Ireland, for example, runs the Northern Ireland Squirrel Association, which is targeted at four and five-year olds.

¹⁵ Canning, N. & Gomez, C. (2022) 'When two worlds come together: Young children's language, literacy and numeracy development through creative, inclusive, theatre methods', *The Open University, Milton Keynes* <http://oro.open.ac.uk/85039/1/Chickenshed%20Report.pdf>

¹⁶ Siraj-Blatchford, I. (2010). 'Learning in the home and at school: how working class children "succeed against the odds"', *British Educational Research Journal*, 36(3), 463-482
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/01411920902989201>

¹⁷ Taggart, B., Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P. & Siraj, I. (2015). 'Effective pre-school, primary and secondary education project (EPPSE 3-16+)', *Research Brief, Department for Education* https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/455670/RB455_Effective_pre-school_primary_and_secondary_education_project.pdf.pdf

¹⁸ Wood, C., Vardy, E., & Tarczynski-Bowles, L. (2015). 'Final Report: Early Words Together: Impact on Families and Children March 2015', *Centre for Research in Psychology, Behaviour and Achievement Coventry University* <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED560649.pdf>

¹⁹ Scouts (2020) 'Annual Report 2019-20', <scouts-annual-report-2019-20.pdf>

²⁰ <https://members.scouts.org.uk/documents/supportandresources/leadershipandmanagement/ImpactStudy/Impact%20Study%20Executive%20Summary%20-%20web.pdf>

Similarly, the Boy Scouts of America run the Lions programme, which targets kindergarten-aged children.

The Scout Association has already trialled an expansion into early years, with the intervention being financed by a Department for Education grant for early years programmes focused on improving language and literacy levels among disadvantaged children. This intervention has been developed in association with the charity Action for Children and has been evaluated by the Centre for Research in Early Childhood (CREC).²¹

Through the Early Years Special Initiative, the Scouts have contributed further to the evidence base on the benefits of Scouting for learning and development of younger children, through an independent evaluation of the programme carried out by CREC.²²

Cohort 2

Ark Start

Previous research has found that attendance at settings which provide fully integrated education and care²³ and actively involves parents in supporting their children's learning and development²⁴ is positively associated with children's outcomes.

There is also strong evidence that the presence of highly qualified staff, with access to good training and CPD, are associated with better outcomes for children²⁵.

²¹ DfE Early Years Social Mobility Programme: Summary <https://foundationyears.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Early-Years-Social-Mobility-Programme-Summary-final.pdf>
<http://www.crec.co.uk/announcements/scouts-early-years-project>

²² Pascal, C. & Bertram, T. (2020). 'The Scouts Early Years Programme Evaluation', *Centre for Research in Early Childhood* <https://cms.scouts.org.uk/media/6402/scouts-early-years-programme-evaluation-executive-summary-crec.pdf>

²³ Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I., & Taggart, B. (2004). 'The effective provision of pre-school education (EPPE) project technical paper 12: The final report-effective pre-school education', *Institute of Education, University of London*
<https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10005308/1/EPPE12Sylva2004Effective.pdf>

²⁴ Axford, N., Beryy, V., Llyod, J., Moore, D., Rogers, M., Hurts, A., Blcokley, K., Durkin, H., & Minton, J. (2019). 'How can schools support parents' engagement in their children's learning? Evidence from research and practice', *Education Endowment Foundation Parental Engagement - Evidence from Research and Practice.pdf* (exeter.ac.uk)

²⁵ Melhuish, E., Ereky-Stevens, K., Petrogiannis, K., Ariescu, A., Penderi, E., Rentzou, K., Tawell, A., Slot, P.L., Broekhuizen, M., & Leseman, P. (2015). 'A review of research on the effects of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) upon child development', *Curriculum Quality Analysis and Impact Review of European ECEC (CARE)*
https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:bb919f6f-cd43-42d8-89ff-da525dc63554/download_file?file_format=pdf&safe_filename=Melhuish_et_al_2015_Review_of_research.pdf&type_of_work=Report; Melhuish, E. & Gardiner, J. (2018) 'Study of Early Education and Development (SEED): Study of Quality of Early Years Provision in England (Revised)', Department for Education [Department for Education](http://publishing.service.gov.uk) (publishing.service.gov.uk)

Ark will develop a curriculum that prioritises communication, vocabulary and language – based on evidence that communication and language approaches to early education are associated with a high impact on children's outcomes²⁶.

Although there is substantial evidence for many of the aspects of Ark Start's model, very little evidence is available on the impact of high-quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) provision that is funded at a higher rate than what is currently provided through government entitlements. This makes Ark Start's programme a significant opportunity to grow the evidence base.

Catch Up®

There is a range of evidence on the effectiveness of the Catch Up® intervention. Earlier studies have found evidence of a positive impact of the intervention on children's outcomes. For instance, one study followed over 3,000 children who received Catch Up® Literacy support and measured their 'reading age' before and after the intervention – it found that after 7.33 months, children who had taken part had experienced a gain in their reading age of 18.5 months. Further, it found that these gains appeared to have lasted after a period of ten years among a subsample of those in the original study²⁷.

An independent evaluation of Catch Up® Literacy as delivered to children at the transition from primary to secondary school conducted by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) tested whether the intervention could work under the best possible circumstances. It found that pupils that received Catch Up® Literacy made more progress (equivalent to two months) than pupils that did not, though we cannot be sure if this difference is due to chance as it was not statistically significant.²⁸ Catch Up® Literacy did have a statistically significant impact on pupils' attitudes to school, self-assessed ability in reading, and their confidence in and enjoyment of writing.

Following these results, a larger evaluation also conducted by EEF tested whether Catch Up® Literacy, delivered to slightly younger children in Year 4 and 5, could work in schools under everyday conditions. It found no evidence that Catch Up® Literacy had an impact on pupils' reading comprehension outcomes when compared to 'business as usual' teaching practice. The study did find that pupils who have ever been eligible for free school meals made an additional two months of progress compared to similar children in schools who did not receive the programme, though these results did not reach statistical significance which

²⁶ Wright, H., Carr, D., Wiese, J., Stokes, L., Runge, J., Dorsett, R., Heal, J. & Anders, J. (2020). 'Using Research Tools to Improve Language in the Early Years: Evaluation report and executive summary', *Education Endowment Foundation* https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10092530/7/Anders_Using%20Research%20Tools%20to%20Improve%20Language%20in%20the%20Early%20Years.pdf

²⁷ Holmes, W. (2012). 'Early intervention to prevent long-term literacy difficulties', *Procedia: Social and Behavioural* <https://www.catchup.org/about/research-bibliography.php>

²⁸ Rutt, S. (2015). 'Catch Up® Literacy Evaluation Report and Executive Summary', *Education Endowment Foundation* <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/catch-up-literacy/>

means again we cannot be confident that the difference is due to the programme itself. However, the lack of significant results may be due to the programme not always being delivered as intended, because some schools struggled to resource the two sessions per week and some teaching assistants also adapted how they delivered the sessions compared to the training they received.²⁹

This programme being developed and tested for reception children will provide the first evidence on the impact of Catch Up® programmes for younger children. Catch Up® are taking an action research approach and are refining the programme throughout the three years based on their findings.

Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE)

There is evidence supporting the importance of teacher training as well as access to books when it comes to a child's literacy development. On the former, CLPE carried out their own research on the influence of children's reading of literature on their writing focussing on Year 5 students. It highlighted the types of teaching that made a significant difference to children's writing, as well as the importance of teachers being trained to deliver these techniques³⁰.

An independent evaluation of CLPE's work by Leeds Trinity College found that in schools participating in CLPE's Power of Reading training, children made an additional six months progress in reading and writing. They also found that the achievement gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils and between boys and girls narrowed³¹.

Improving access to books also improves the home learning environment. The importance of the home learning environment is well-evidenced, with recent research finding higher cognitive scores and fewer socio-emotional problems for children aged 3 where they have a better home learning environment.³²

²⁹ Roy, P., Rutt, S., Buchanan, E., Rennie, C., Martin, K., & Walker, F. (2019). 'Catch Up® Literacy Evaluation report and executive summary', *Education Endowment Foundation*
<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/catch-up-literacy-effectiveness-trial/>

³⁰ Barrs, M. (2000). 'The Reader in the Writer', *Reading*, 43(2), 54-60
https://www.academia.edu/32362310/The_Reader_in_the_Writer

³¹ Doherty, J. (2019). 'Diminishing the gap for disadvantaged pupils in Key Stage 2 Reading: Project evaluation', *Leeds Trinity University* https://clpe.org.uk/system/files/BRADFORD%20SSIF-Final-report-April-2019-v3-FINAL_0.pdf

³² Melhuish, E., Gardiner, J., & Morris, S. (2021). 'Study of Early Education and Development (SEED): Impact Study on Early Education Use and Child Outcomes up to Age Three: Research report', *Department for Education*
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1034423/SEED-Age_3_RESEARCH_REPORT.pdf

CLPE found in their own recent research that the biggest barrier to children reading during the recent lockdowns was having access to books.³³ There is good evidence that young people will read books if given access to comprehensible, interesting texts, and there is overwhelming evidence that those who read more have a better literacy development. Studies also show the superiority of reading over direct instruction approaches³⁴.

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (DPIL) provides one book a month to children under five. Evidence from the US found a significantly higher percentage of those consistently participating in DPIL were considered as ready for kindergarten³⁵. DPIL has led to parents reading aloud more to their children and children owning more books, creating a richer home literacy environment. Parents also believe their children were more interested in reading, with some studies finding DPIL had promise with respect to developing literacy skills³⁶.

Cohort 3

Speech and Language UK (formerly I CAN)

Research, based predominantly in the US, has been carried out to investigate what interventions are needed to support children with EAL. It has been found that some interventions focussing on vocabulary knowledge and literacy (such as listening comprehension and lower-level reading skills) have merit and it has been recommended to examine the effectiveness of these in the UK. The research also highlights the critical role that teachers have when supporting children with EAL. A structured set of parent-child activities to help parents in supporting their child's literacy development outside of school was found to be more effective for children with EAL than other children. More broadly, there is a lack of intervention studies carried out in the UK on literacy development for children with EAL, even though there are a lot of children in the UK with EAL. It is important to develop the evidence base for UK EAL interventions, which this project will help to do³⁷.

An evaluation of *Early Talk Boost* has found that, on average, children make six months progress after the nine-week intervention. This is twice the rate of those who didn't receive the intervention. 95% of parents felt the intervention had made a difference to their child's

³³Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE). (2021). 'Reading for Pleasure in 2020: Learning about literacy teaching during the pandemic',

https://clpe.org.uk/system/files/CLPE%20Reading%20for%20Pleasure%202021_0.pdf

³⁴ Krashen, S. (2013). 'Access to Books and Time to Read versus the Common Core State Standards and Tests', *English Journal*, 21-29

http://www.sdkrashen.com/content/articles/access_to_books_and_times_to_read_versus_the_common_core.pdf

³⁵ Ridzi, F., Slyvia, M., Qiao, X., & Craig, J. (2017). 'The imagination library program and kindergarten readiness: Evaluating the impact of monthly book distribution', *Journal of Applied Social Science*, 11(1)

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1936724416678023>

³⁶ Imagination Library, <https://imaginationlibrary.com/news-resources/research/>

³⁷ Murphy, V. & Unthiah, A. (2015). 'A systematic review of intervention research examining English language and literacy development in children with English as an Additional Language (EAL)', *London: Education Endowment Foundation* <https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/app/uploads/2017/05/EALachievementMurphy-1.pdf>

language and communication and would change how they talked to their child. Children were happier telling stories after the intervention and used longer and more complex sentences. The training that *Early Talk Boost* provided was also well received, as “all early years practitioners surveyed felt more confident in supporting children’s language”, and 94% said they would change how they worked after undergoing training³⁸.

National Children’s Bureau (NCB)

The home learning environment has a significant effect on a child’s outcomes. Research using the Study of Early Education and Development found that, in early years, a strong home learning environment was linked to children performing better in all Key Stage 1 outcomes.³⁹

There is a lot of evidence highlighting the importance of early literacy development for future education outcomes. Early literacy is linked to social success in the classroom, as well as later school success as literacy provides a strong foundation for learning across all subjects⁴⁰. Children tend to have fewer literacy opportunities if they are from a financially disadvantaged family, and those who fall behind academically struggle to then catch up. US studies have shown that those who struggle with reading at the end of first grade are more likely to continue to face challenges at the end of fourth grade⁴¹.

An evaluation of the Making it REAL programme (2013-16) has shown promising results, finding increases in how often children read and engaged in creative activities following the programme. The research also found that “parents were more confident and knowledgeable in how they could support their child’s literacy”. Leads at local authorities were trained so that they could co-deliver the course to practitioners, meaning that the course can still be delivered in the future when Making it REAL’s support is reduced⁴².

People

Increasing evidence indicates that the early childhood years are essential for laying the foundation for future learning in STEM through teachers engaging children in STEM activities that take advantage of children’s own experiences and interests. These experiences have been found to enhance children’s self-belief in their ability to learn

³⁸ ICAN. (2015). Early Talk Boost Evaluation Report, <https://ican.org.uk/media/2949/early-talk-boost-evaluation2015.pdf>

³⁹ Gardiner, J. & Melhuish, E. (2021). ‘Study of Early Education and Development (SEED): Impact study on early education use and child outcomes up to age seven years’, *Department for Education* <https://www.seed.natcen.ac.uk/findings/longitudinal-study/early-education-use-and-child-outcomes-up-to-age-7.aspx>

⁴⁰ Ali, A. (2022). ‘What is the importance of early literacy in early childhood?’, *Literacy Times* <https://literacytimes.com/what-is-the-importance-of-early-literacy-in-early-childhood/>

⁴¹ Little by little. ‘The Importance of Early Literacy’, <https://lblreaders.org/why-early-literacy-matters/>

⁴² Rix, K., Lea, J., & Graham, B. (2016). ‘Year 3 Evaluation of Making it REAL’, *National Children’s Bureau* <https://www.ncb.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/attachments/Making%20it%20REAL%20Year%20Three%20Evaluation%20Report.pdf>

science and to promote greater interest in science⁴³ even beyond the classroom walls⁴⁴. Unfortunately, research also shows that the limited time devoted to STEM in early childhood is likely to restrict potential positive impacts on educational outcomes⁴⁵.

Engaging students in STEM is a key challenge for educators: the number of children who say they enjoy STEM subjects has declined since 2015, with children who dislike STEM subjects describing it as 'boring' and 'too hard'⁴⁶. There are also important gender differences in engagement with STEM subjects at school, with a need to provide more encouragement, as well as role models for girls. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to pass, or achieve high grades, at science GCSEs⁴⁷. As outlined above it is learning in early childhood that is influential for later success with STEM subjects.

Whilst there is a growing interest in how to increase and improve STEM learning in order to address skills shortages, there is still limited research into STEM skills in the early years. This programme will contribute to filling this evidence gap, building on their existing evaluation evidence. Queen's University Belfast carried out research into People's Learning Together Programme. The study found the initiative to be successful in its aim to improve the home learning environment for those in early years and observed two months of additional progress for early literacy development for those taking part in the initiative⁴⁸.

Tales Toolkit

As mentioned above there is strong evidence on the importance of early literacy development for future literacy development, and future education outcomes. There is also evidence for the importance of storytelling: a study comparing storytelling and story reading found that both techniques helped young children develop their oral language complexity

⁴³ Patrick, H., Mantzicopoulos, P., & Samarapungavan, A. (2009). 'Motivation for learning science in kindergarten: Is there a gender gap and does integrated inquiry and literacy instruction make a difference', *Journal of Research in Science Teaching: The Official Journal of the National Association for Research in Science Teaching*, 46(2), 166-191 <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/tea.20276>

⁴⁴ Fleer, M. & March, S. (2009). 'Engagement in science, engineering and technology in the early years: A cultural-historical reading', *Review of Science, Mathematics and ICT Education*, 3(1), 23-47. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Marilyn-Fleer/publication/45118619_Engagement_in_science_engineering_and_technology_in_the_early_years_A_cultural-historical_reading/links/0a85e52eaefcc84fd7000000/Engagement-in-science-engineering-and-technology-in-the-early-years-A-cultural-historical-reading.pdf

⁴⁵ Saçkes, M., Trundle, K.C., Bell, R.L., & O'Connell, A.A. (2011). 'The influence of early science experience in kindergarten on children's immediate and later science achievement: Evidence from the early childhood longitudinal study', *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 48(2), 217-235 <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/tea.20395>

⁴⁶ The Institute of Engineering and Technology. (2019). 'Inspiring the next generation of engineers: Understanding the perceptions of engineering that parents and young people have today and how we can change them' <https://www.engineer-a-better-world.org/media/2887/inspire-report-lr.pdf>

⁴⁷ STEM Learning. (2022). 'Science Education in England: Gender, Disadvantage and Ethnicity' <https://www.stem.org.uk/sites/default/files/pages/downloads/Science%20Education%20in%20England%20Gender%2C%20Disadvantage%20and%20Ethnicity.pdf>

⁴⁸ Miller, S., Dunne, L., Smith, A., & Laishley, A. (2020). 'Peep Learning Together Programme: Evaluation Report', *Education Endowment Foundation* <https://www.peeple.org.uk/sites/www.peeple.org.uk/files/Learning%20Together%20Study%20-%20final%20evaluation%20report%20-%28Queens%20Belfast%202.20%29.pdf>

and story comprehension skills. It also found that children in the storytelling group were better at retelling a story, and created their own illustrations as opposed to relying on the visuals provided to the story reading group⁴⁹.

Goldsmiths University of London carried out research into early years use of Tales Toolkit, with positive findings. For each of the seven areas of learning of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) children using Tales Toolkit appear to have made greater progress, showing 'increased levels of literacy, communication and language, creativity and improved social-emotional skills typically around three months ahead' compared to those not on the programme. Children were reportedly more motivated to tell stories and improved the detail of their descriptions quickly.

The gender gap for literacy was also reduced for those using Takes Toolkit. Boys on the programme narrowed the gap by 62%, whereas the gap increased by 22% for those not on the programme. Teachers were positive about Tales Toolkit, both in terms of teacher training and observing the impact it had on children. Teachers could train together, and they saw an improvement in children's class contribution, confidence, and social problem-solving⁵⁰.

⁴⁹ Isbell, R., Sobol, J., Lindauer, L., & Lowrance, A. (2004). 'The effects of storytelling and story reading on the oral language complexity and story comprehension of young children', *Early childhood education journal*, 32(3), 157-163 <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1023/B:ECEJ.0000048967.94189.a3>

⁵⁰ Bartoli, A. (2018) 'Using storytelling to promote literacy, communication and socio-emotional development in the early years', *Goldsmiths, University of London* <https://talestoolkit.com/goldsmiths-report/>

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

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

Appendix C: List of Programmes by London Borough

London boroughs	Chickenshed	NLT	Scouts	Ark	Catch Up	CLPE	ICAN	NCB	Peeples	Tales Toolkit	Total programmes
Barking & Dagenham		1	1								2
Barnet											0
Bexley			1								1
Brent			1								1
Bromley			1								1
Camden						1					1
City of London Corporation											0
Croydon				1							1
Ealing			1								1
Enfield	1										1
Greenwich											0
Hackney					1	1					2
Hammersmith & Fulham											0
Haringey	1		1							1	3
Harrow											0
Havering			1								1
Hillingdon											0
Hounslow											0
Islington					1						1
Kensington & Chelsea		1									1
Kingston Upon Thames											0
Lambeth											0
Lewisham			1					1			2
Merton											0

Newham							1		1	1	3
Redbridge			1								1
Richmond Upon Thames											0
Southwark		1	1							1	3
Sutton										1	1
Tower Hamlets					1	1	1			1	4
Waltham Forest										1	1
Wandsworth				1							1
City of Westminster		1			1						2