

Phase 2 of the Early Years Special Initiative

Year 3 Final Report



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Contact:

Izzy Hampton

Tel: 020 7391 4100

email: ihampton@sqw.co.uk

Approved by:

Sarah Brown

Director

Date: 21/08/2026

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Executive Summary

1. The Early Years Special Initiative Phase 2 is funded by The Charity of Sir Richard Whittington, for which The Mercers' Company is Corporate Trustee. The Initiative provides grants to organisations in London that use evidence-based interventions to increase young children's numeracy, literacy and language skills, and their school readiness.
2. Following the success of Phase 1, Phase 2 of the Initiative was launched in January 2023. In Phase 2, two cohorts of grantees are being funded for four years of delivery each. The first cohort (comprising six organisations) received funding in July 2023; the second cohort (initially comprising seven organisations, now six) received funding in July 2024.
3. SQW, a public policy and economic research consultancy, was commissioned by The Mercers' Company in August 2023 as Learning Partner for Phase 2 of the Initiative to help the grantees to reflect on and develop their work. SQW's approach combines knowledge generation activities (such as Special Projects – 'deep dives' into themes identified by grantees, Action Learning Sets, and light touch data collection) and knowledge sharing activities (Learning Seminars).
4. The Initiative continues to demonstrate good reach and impact. As of June 2026, 5,573 children had directly benefited from funded activities, including 1,037 children from disadvantaged backgrounds (which may be an undercount given data gaps), as well as 1,334 Early Years practitioners, 1,686 parents and carers, 208 volunteers, and 382 Early Years settings. Alongside extending their reach, grantees have continued to strengthen their evaluation processes, using feedback to refine programme delivery, respond to emerging needs, and build a stronger understanding of what works in supporting young children and their families.
5. It is important to highlight that these achievements have been delivered against a backdrop of persistent sector-wide pressures. While grantees have generally navigated these challenges effectively, they have at times unavoidably affected the pace and consistency of implementation.
6. Learning Partner activities remain fit for purpose and continue to be valued by grantees. The Action Learning Sets have created valuable opportunities for personal and professional development, enabling participants to connect with peers, draw on the collective expertise of the cohorts, and step back from day-to-day pressures to reflect on their work. As relationships and trust have deepened, the cohorts have fostered an increasingly supportive and collaborative learning environment. The successful transition from facilitated to self-facilitated sessions also suggests that grantees are taking increasing ownership of shared learning processes.

7. Grantees particularly welcomed this year's increased focus on practical outputs from the Special Project, *'Understanding and Sharing the Impact of Early Years Programmes'*. The project explored effective approaches to engaging families and practitioners in evaluation and disseminating findings. Drawing on insights from an evidence review alongside examples of effective practice from grantees, SQW developed a practical toolkit to help grantees strengthen stakeholder engagement and tailor communications for different audiences, which has been shared with grantee partner organisations. This focus on producing practical, evidence-informed resources will continue to be a key feature of Learning Partner activities.
8. As Cohort 1 enters its final year of the Initiative, consideration is being given to how Learning Partner activities can best support grantees to maximise their impact and make the most of the opportunities this phase presents. Informed by discussions with Mercers' and grantees, this may involve a greater focus on legacy and sustainability planning, alongside more systematic capture of the benefits generated through participation in the learning community, including peer support, knowledge sharing, and collaboration between grantees.

1. Introduction

Overview of the Early Years Special Initiative

- 1.1** The Early Years Special Initiative Phase 2 (henceforth referred to as ‘the Initiative’) is funded by The Charity of Sir Richard Whittington for which The Mercers’ Company is Corporate Trustee. The Initiative provides grants to organisations in London that use evidence-based interventions to increase young children’s numeracy, literacy and language skills, and their school readiness (namely their personal, social and emotional development).
- 1.2** Phase 1 of the Initiative was launched by The Mercers’ Company in 2019. During this first phase, ten organisations were supported for three years to deliver programmes aiming to improve the educational attainment of children and families facing socio-economic disadvantage. The funded organisations formed three cohorts who came together to share approaches and learning. In addition to their internal evaluation activities, all grantees participated in an evaluation of the Initiative as a whole, led by the Education Policy Institute (EPI), assessing grantees’ impact on participating children and practitioners.¹
- 1.3** Following the success of Phase 1, Phase 2 of the Initiative was launched in January 2023. In Phase 2, two cohorts of grantees are being funded for four years of delivery each. The first cohort (comprising six organisations) received funding in July 2023; the second cohort (initially comprising seven organisations) received funding in July 2024.
- 1.4** Phase 2 is being delivered in a challenging operating environment for the voluntary sector. Many charities are facing significant pressures, including rising operating costs, declining levels of public giving, and growing demand for the vital services they provide. These sector-wide challenges have affected organisations participating in the Initiative. In Q2 2026, The Caxton Trust, which traded as Catch Up® and was funded during Phase 1, ceased operations and formally closed while Auditory Verbal UK (AVUK), a Phase 2 grantee, entered liquidation (meaning Phase 2 of the Special Initiative now only has twelve grantee organisations). This report includes findings and insights from AVUK that were collected as part of the Special Project research prior to the organisation entering liquidation.

Cohort 1 grantees

- 1.5** A summary of the Cohort 1 projects is provided in Table 1-1.

Table 1-1: Cohort 1 Early Years Special Initiative projects

Grantee	Description of Early Years Special Initiative project
Campaign for Learning	<i>‘Early Years Maths Through Storytelling’</i>

¹ <https://www.mercers.co.uk/young-people-education-evaluating-our-special-initiatives>

Grantee	Description of Early Years Special Initiative project
	This family numeracy programme designed with families, maths experts and Early Years providers seeks to teach parents how to build maths concepts (e.g., numbers, patterns, spatial reasoning) into story telling activities with their children.
Coram Family and Childcare	<i>'Increasing Parental Confidence to Develop Emergent Literacy Skills in the Home Environment'</i> Working with parents to co-design, co-market and co-deliver a series of fun courses for parents and their children in community settings, the programme seeks to spark a love of reading so that it becomes a habitual activity in the home.
Early Education	<i>'Supporting Pedagogy, Arts and Creativity Everywhere (SPACE) to Flourish'</i> Early Education provides bespoke coaching and mentoring for Early Years practitioners, inspiring practitioners to incorporate arts-based approaches and creativity into learning and teaching. The programme uses 'Thinking Spaces' to develop a sustained reflective community, alongside the creation of new resources.
Fatherhood Institute	<i>'FRED: Fathers Reading Every Day'</i> FRED will equip Early Years practitioners with evidence-based techniques for successful father-engagement in their child's development, supported by resources and the training of a 'Dad Squad' of local male volunteers to support settings' promotion, outreach and evaluation activities.
National Day Nurseries Association	<i>'Early Years Maths and Language & Communication Champions'</i> This online training for Early Years Practitioners will help them embed maths and literacy learning into play-based activities and use auditing tools to assess learning. Champions will then use audits to evaluate current practice and the competence levels of staff in their setting. Audit results will be used to create an action plan, which is implemented by Champions with online support.
Youth Sport Trust	<i>'Healthy Movers'</i> This programme seeks to train Early Years practitioners to integrate play-based learning through the delivery of physical activity sessions. In addition, parents will be engaged through 'Stay and Play Clubs' and Healthy Movers Ambassadors (practitioners and local authority staff) will be recruited and trained. Mentoring for practitioners will be delivered in settings to establish and sustain programmes. Virtual networking for practitioners will support cross-setting engagement and identify support requirements.

Source: SQW analysis of programme documentation

Cohort 2 grantees

1.6 A summary of the Cohort 2 projects is provided in Table 1-2:

Table 1-2: Cohort 2 Early Years Special Initiative projects

Grantee	Description of Early Years Special Initiative project
*Auditory Verbal UK	<i>'Sound Futures - Transforming Outcomes for Deaf Children Aged 2-5 in London'</i> Auditory Verbal Therapy (AVT) is an early intervention approach for deaf children under five, globally renowned for enabling them to acquire spoken language on a par with hearing children. Sound Futures will help increase the literacy, language and communication skills and school readiness of deaf children living in London by delivering: outreach to families who are not currently able to access AVT; AVT for deaf children aged 2-5; and training for London-based professionals.
Chickenshed	<i>'New Botanics - Urban Natural Teaching Initiative'</i> Chickenshed will run a series of workshops that have been co-designed with nursery staff, the Canal Trust and the National Children's Bureau's programme, Natural Thinkers. The workshops will combine the arts with outdoor learning, using music, movement, sign and puppetry to support learning and improve school readiness. The workshops will be delivered in 30 nursery settings per year, each over the course of five weeks. Nursery staff will be upskilled to be able to embed creative and outdoor learning into their settings.
Discover Children's Story Centre	<i>'Sensory Storytelling: Reading Engagement Activities Plus Training For Early Years Practitioners and Parents/Carers'</i> Discover will co-create a sensory storytelling session for 2-5 year olds, working in partnership with the staff, parents and children of a Newham based London Early Years Foundation Nursery. This will involve running Story Builds, inviting children, families and staff to suggest ideas for stories. The programme will then embed Discover's Story Builders as resident storytellers in 12 settings across East London to deliver the co-created session. The programme will also provide practical training sessions for parents and Early Years staff in Discover's play and storytelling methodology.
Home-Start London	<i>'Big Hopes, Big Future'</i> Big Hopes, Big Future is a tailored school readiness programme that will deliver enhanced training to staff and volunteers covering the key Early Years Foundation Stage framework areas. Trained staff will assess each referred family to identify children whose development is behind expected milestones. They will then work with the family to agree an individual package of support, such as practical support, weekly home visits, digital and physical resources, weekly groups and outings.
National Literacy Trust	<i>'Early Words with Childminders'</i>

Grantee	Description of Early Years Special Initiative project
	The Early Words with Childminders programme aims to improve children's early language and literacy skills through improving the practice of childminders. The programme will achieve this by providing high quality training for childminders to embed language supporting strategies in their daily practice and strengthen their relationships with parents/carers to support language and literacy development at home. It will also facilitate networking opportunities for childminders as well as provide free resources and support.
Peeples	<i>'Exploring Together - The Foundations of STEM; From Pilot to Practice'</i> The Exploring Together programme will support parents to encourage early STEM learning at home and to upskill Early Years practitioners with the confidence, skills and knowledge to support STEM in their settings. The programme was successfully piloted during Phase 1 of the Early Years Special Initiative. After building in learning from the evaluation findings in Phase 1, the programme in Phase 2 intends to scale delivery to work with more families and practitioners across London and to explore and use digital platforms and online training.
The Children's Literacy Charity	<i>'Story Lab'</i> Story Lab is a language and communication intervention. The programme uses storytelling to support children's literacy and social development, with a focus on school referrals of children with SEND, EAL and/or other barriers to learning, including families experiencing socio-economic disadvantage. Specialist tutors will deliver fun, engaging, twice-weekly storytelling sessions for groups of five children. The storytelling sessions will involve modelling strategies and a diverse range of picture books to support children's engagement and therefore a range of literacy outcomes relating to listening, attention, understanding and speaking.

Source: SQW analysis of programme documentation. *Note that AVUK closed in 2026 and is no longer a grantee (see 1.4).

Learning Partner for Phase 2

- 1.7** SQW, a public policy and economic research consultancy, was commissioned by The Mercers' Company in August 2023 to be Learning Partner for Phase 2 of the Initiative. We will work with Mercers' and the two cohorts of grantees for the duration of Phase 2 (until Autumn 2028), helping the grantees to reflect on and develop their work.

Purpose and structure of this report

- 1.8** This report summarises the headline findings from our work as Learning Partner in Year 3 of the Initiative. The report is structured as follows:
- Chapter 2: Our approach
 - Chapter 3: Findings from the Special Project

- Chapter 4: Impact of the Initiative (so far)
- Chapter 5: Insights from the Action Learning Sets
- Chapter 6: Insights from the Learning Seminar
- Chapter 7: Feedback from grantees on SQW's Learning Partner activities
- Chapter 8: Reflections and recommendations
- Annex A: Detailed description of Learning Partner activities
- Annex B: Logic model for Phase 2 of the Early Years Special Initiative

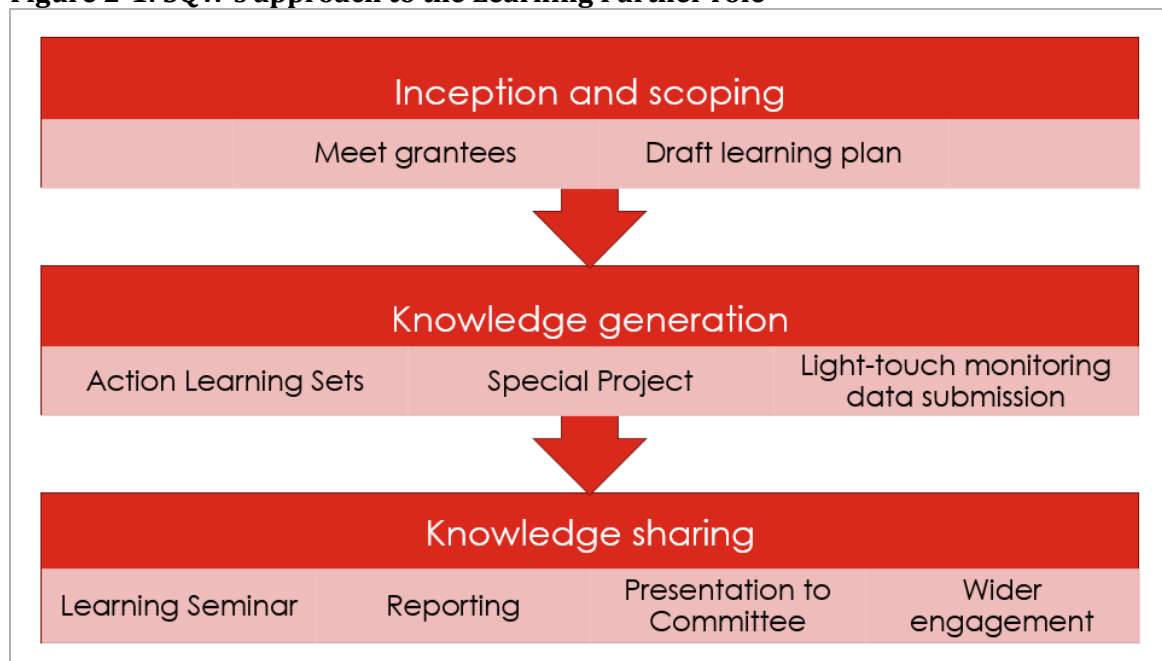
2. Our approach

Summary

- SQW's approach to the Learning Partner role in Year 3 involved three stages:
 - Inception and scoping: Catch ups with Cohort 1 and 2 grantees; draft Learning Plan
 - Knowledge generation: Action Learning Sets; Special Project on understanding and sharing the impact of Early Years programmes; collection and analysis of light touch monitoring data
 - Knowledge sharing: Learning Seminar with live illustrator
- Grantees were asked to provide feedback on their experience of SQW's Learning Partner activities in Year 3 to inform planning for Year 4.

2.1 Our approach to the Learning Partner role is summarised in Figure 2-1. Each year comprises three stages: inception and scoping, knowledge generation, and knowledge sharing. This chapter provides a brief overview of the activities undertaken in Year 3. A more detailed description is located in Annex A.

Figure 2-1: SQW's approach to the Learning Partner role



Source: SQW

Inception and scoping

2.2 As part of the scoping phase in Year 3, we held one-hour catch up calls with each of the grantees to find out how their projects were progressing and to discuss their plans for the

year ahead. These conversations provided insights into upcoming delivery and evaluation activities, the extent of sustainability planning, and any concerns the grantees had. We also invited grantees to share suggestions for the focus of the Year 3 Special Project. Following the catch up calls, we drafted the Learning Plan for Year 3.

Knowledge generation

2.3 The knowledge generation phase comprised three activities:

- **Action Learning:** Action Learning is an effective way to help people solve real problems with support from their peers. Each grantee organisation nominated one individual (or two in the case of Early Education) to take part in their Cohort's Action Learning Sets throughout Year 3 of the Initiative. The Sets were self-facilitated by grantees for the first time - following external facilitation in previous years - and followed a set structure.
- **Special Project:** The Special Projects are 'deep dives' into themes or topics of interest and relevance to the grantees. The theme selected for the Special Project in Year 3 was '*Understanding and sharing the impact of Early Years programmes*'. Two overarching research questions, along with a series of sub-questions, were explored through a rapid review of existing evidence and interviews with Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 grantees, their external evaluators (where relevant), Mercers' and representatives from the Department for Education. Following completion of the fieldwork, an emerging findings workshop was held online in April 2026 to give grantees the opportunity to explore the findings and implications for their work in advance of the Year 3 report. After the workshop, a toolkit for understanding and sharing the impact of Early Years programmes was shared with grantees.
- **Light touch monitoring data:** in order to identify the collective impact of the Initiative, light touch monitoring data was collected from the grantees via a short online survey in June 2026.

Knowledge sharing

2.4 We hosted an internal Year 3 Learning Seminar² at Mercers' on 15th June 2026 to celebrate the grantees' work on the Initiative and share learning across the cohorts. A live illustrator attended the event to capture the key messages from SQW and the grantees' presentations and discussions in an engaging resource, presented in Chapter 6.

² In Year 1, we called the same event a Learning Symposium. We changed the name to Learning Seminar from Year 2 onwards to differentiate the internal learning event for grantees from external learning events for a wider audience.

Additional activities

- 2.5** We asked grantees to provide feedback on their experience of SQW's Learning Partner activities in Year 3 to inform planning for Year 4. The feedback was collected via a short online survey in July 2026 and is presented in Chapter 7.

3. Findings from the Special Project

Summary

- The theme for the Special Project in Year 3 was *'Understanding and sharing the impact of Early Years programmes'*. The project had two core strands: how families and practitioners can be meaningfully engaged in evaluation; and how evaluation findings can be effectively disseminated to different audiences.
- Meaningful engagement in evaluation
 - Effective engagement of families and practitioners in evaluation is shaped by two considerations: research quality (ensuring robust evaluation methods) and participant experience (ensuring a positive and meaningful experience for those involved). While these two aspects may appear to be in tension, they are actually complementary and mutually reinforcing.
 - Families and practitioners can be involved in evaluation in three key ways; co-design, co-delivery, and participation. Across the Initiative, six grantees used co-design, six used co-delivery, and all involved families and practitioners as participants.
 - Findings on effective family engagement highlight the importance of making evaluation activities accessible and manageable, while fostering safe, relationship-based environments that encourage participation.
 - For practitioners, effective engagement depends on clear communication and evaluation activities that align with existing workloads and professional contexts. The findings also emphasise the value of learning-focused approaches that provide tangible benefits to practitioners.
- Effective dissemination of evaluation findings
 - General principles for dissemination include ensuring communication is accessible, providing the right evidence for its intended use, making evidence practical for audiences to engage with, and tailoring evidence to different audiences and purposes.
 - To support this, SQW developed a practical framework for sharing evaluation evidence. The framework starts by considering *who* the audience is and *why* evidence is being shared, before guiding decisions about *what* evidence to share, *how* to present it, and *where* and *when* it is most likely to have impact. The framework was applied to four key audiences: families, practitioners, funders, and policymakers.
- SQW translated the Special Project findings into a practical toolkit to support grantees meaningfully engage families and practitioners in evaluation, and to plan, tailor, and strengthen the dissemination of findings to different audiences.

Introduction

- 3.1** As is explained briefly in chapter 2 (and in greater detail in Annex A), Special Projects are ‘deep dives’ into themes or topics of interest and relevance to the grantees. The Year 3 theme *‘Understanding and sharing the impact of Early Years programmes’* was selected following a consultation process with both Cohorts in the Autumn.
- 3.2** Under the theme of *‘Understanding and sharing the impact of Early Years programmes’*, the project had two core strands: first, how families and practitioners can be meaningfully engaged in evaluation, and second, how evaluation findings can be effectively disseminated to different audiences. The project explored the following questions:
- How can families and practitioners be meaningfully involved in evaluations of Early Years programmes to help improve the lives of young children and families?
 - In what ways can families and practitioners authentically shape the way evaluations are designed and delivered, to ensure charities and their services are responding/made appropriately to meet community needs?
 - What works best to get families and practitioners to participate in evaluation activities?
 - How can evaluation findings be communicated effectively to families, settings, funders, and policymakers?
 - What are the expected outcomes of sharing evaluation findings and does this differ among different stakeholder groups?
 - For policymakers, how can charities’ evaluation findings help contribute/influence future policy and strategy?
- 3.3** These research questions were explored through a review of existing evidence, interviews with all Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 grantees, the Mercers’ Company and policymakers, and a focus group with SQW researchers who work on Early Years projects.
- 3.4** Note that all quotes included in this chapter have been extracted from the interviews with grantees during the Special Project research period.

Engaging families and practitioners in evaluation

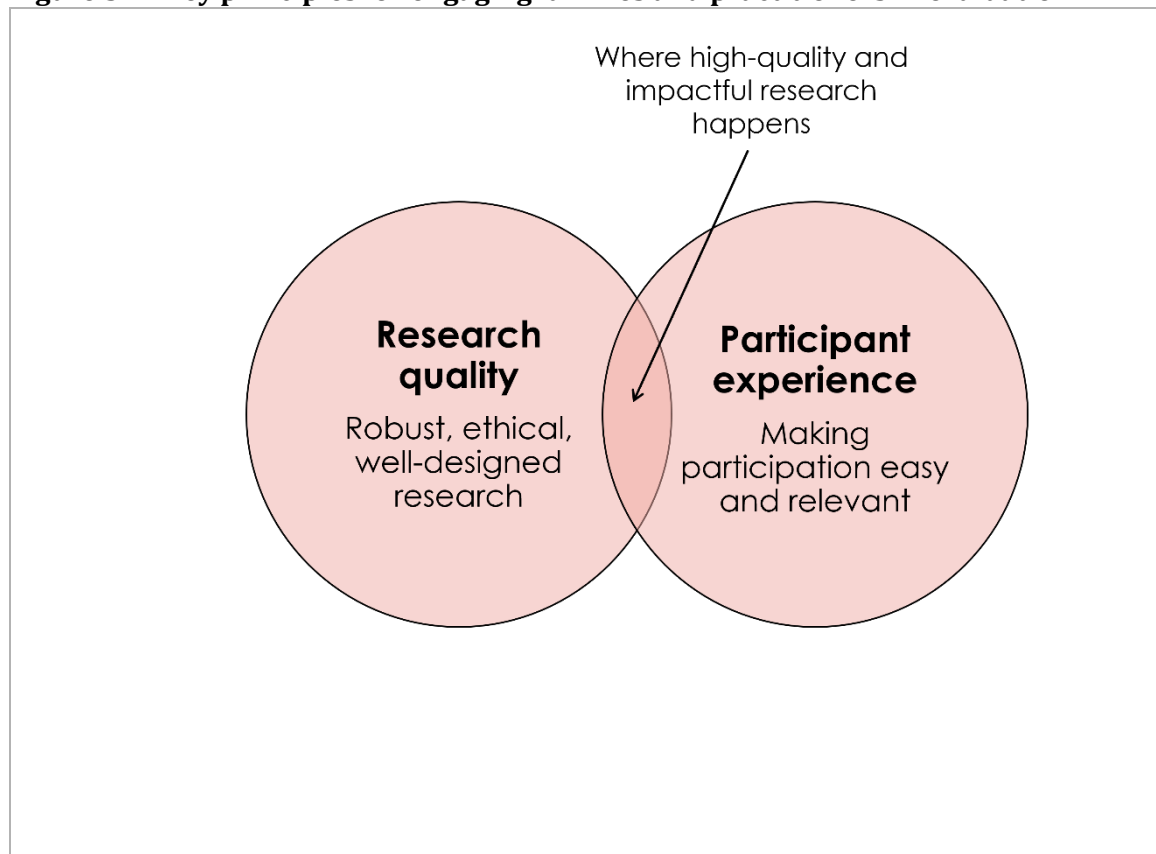
- 3.5** This chapter explores the research question, *“How can families and practitioners be meaningfully engaged in evaluation?”* It outlines key principles, different types of engagement, and what works most effectively to ensure engagement is meaningful.

Key principles for engaging families and practitioners in evaluation

- 3.6** When engaging families and practitioners in evaluation, there are two key elements that shape effective practice. First is **research quality**, doing research and evaluation well by working in an ethical and safe way and using methods that robustly answer the research questions. Second is **participant experience**, namely how people feel about taking part in an evaluation, and is shaped by how those undertaking evaluation build trust and make sure participation feels comfortable, appropriate and relevant for families and practitioners.
- 3.7** Grantees conducting evaluation research can perceive research quality and participant experience as being in tension, for example, balancing the need for clear, accessible communication (to improve experience) with requirements such as detailed consent processes (to ensure research quality). However, these considerations should not be seen as opposing, but as complementary and mutually reinforcing. Positive participant experiences are not separate from research quality; they are essential to it. Participants who feel comfortable are more likely to provide meaningful and robust evidence. That said, the two aspects need to be considered at the same time to ensure that delivery of one does not undermine the other.
- 3.8** In practice, research quality and participant experience need to be considered in ways that are responsive to context. Effective evaluation involves making informed, context-specific decisions that maximise learning and insight,³ while remaining proportionate, respectful, and feasible within real-world Early Years settings.

³ Lloyd-Evans, S. *et al.* (2023) *Participatory Action Research: A Toolkit*. University of Reading. Available at: <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/113719/>

Figure 3-1: Key principles for engaging families and practitioners in evaluation



Source: SQW

Types of engagement in evaluation

3.9 There are three main ways to engage families and practitioners in evaluation:

- **Co-design**, when families and practitioners are involved in the development and refinement of evaluation approaches and tools
- **Co-delivery**, when families and practitioners support the delivery of evaluation activities
- **Participation**, when families and practitioners take part in evaluation activities such as interviews, surveys and focus groups.

3.10 The following sub-sections outline how grantees supported by the Initiative engage families and practitioners in evaluation in these different ways.

Co-design

3.11 Co-design was used by six grantees on the Initiative to help make evaluation activities accessible and relevant for participants (i.e. families and/or practitioners), while still meeting research requirements. In practice, co-design most often took place through focus groups and workshops. Co-design was often concentrated at the start of the evaluation, where tools and approaches were piloted with parents and practitioners, as one Cohort 1 grantee described:

"Practitioners support the development of evaluation processes by helping to shape the desired impact questions, participating in focus groups, and testing early versions of evaluation design."

Generally, parents and practitioners were involved in shaping specific evaluation tools (e.g. survey and interview questions) and delivery approaches (i.e. where and when evaluation activities take place), but were less involved in shaping the overall evaluation design (e.g. research questions and methodology). This reflected grantees' efforts to balance meaningful involvement with the need to avoid placing undue demands on participants' time.

3.12 Families and practitioners were involved in shaping what questions were asked through evaluation. When working with parents, co-design focused on making sure questions reflected parents' experiences and how parents notice changes in their child. With practitioners, the emphasis was on making sure questions linked clearly to everyday practice and programme delivery.⁴ In both cases, co-design often led to fewer questions being asked, reducing burden and overwhelm, and prioritising questions that were most important to understand impact. As one Cohort 1 grantee explained:

"There is a balance between what we need to know and how we intend to ask it... we [the grantee organisation] broker between practitioners and the research team, questioning what is essential. Practitioners are asked about roughly half of the original detail that the researchers propose."

3.13 Families and practitioners also helped shape the language used in evaluation tools. Co-design helped ensure language was clear, simple and free from inappropriate jargon.⁵ This was particularly important when working with parents, with grantees finding that co-design helped ensure questions were non-judgemental and reflected parents' experiences. This was seen as important for creating a safe and accessible environment for participation in evaluation activities. For practitioners, co-design helped ensure language felt relevant to their role without being overly technical or difficult to engage with. As one Cohort 2 grantee noted:

"We place a strong emphasis on making evaluation tools accessible and easy to understand ... By working closely with delivery teams, we ensure that surveys avoid unnecessary jargon and focus instead on questions that resonate with parents' experiences and reflect what matters most to them."

3.14 Co-design also helped make evaluation activities easier to take part in. Parental feedback helped ensure the timing and location of activities fitted around families' routines,⁶

⁴ Preskill, H., & Jones, N. Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, (2009). *A practical guide for engaging stakeholders in developing evaluation questions*. Retrieved from website: [~AEA Public Library - American Evaluation Association](https://www.aea-public-library.org/American-Evaluation-Association)

⁵ Evaluation Support Scotland (2020) Involving people in evaluation. Edinburgh: Evaluation Support Scotland. Available at: https://evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/involving_people_in_evaluation.pdf

⁶ Hepworth, J. (2024) Four co-design steps to improve your evaluations. Kaleidoscope Health & Care. Available at: <https://www.kscopehealth.org.uk/blog/4-ways-to-improve-your-evaluations/>

whilst working with practitioners helped ensure evaluation aligned to existing ways of working and time constraints within settings, rather than being an additional task.

- 3.15** Grantees emphasised that co-design was not a one-off activity. Evaluation tools and approaches were refined over time in response to feedback, helping ensure evaluation remained relevant and appropriate as programmes were delivered.⁷ As one Cohort 2 grantee described, this often involved seeking regular feedback from practitioners and families who were directly involved in evaluation activities:

“Regular communication with families is maintained to identify additional topics to include in the survey... These discussions also offer opportunities for families to contribute ideas for improving survey content.”

Co-delivery

- 3.16** Six grantees described co-delivering evaluation activities with families and/or practitioners.
- 3.17 When co-delivering evaluation activities with families, grantees involved parent volunteers, such as parent champions.** As parents themselves, these volunteers shared similar lived experiences to many programme participants. Parent volunteers supported parents to complete surveys and, in some cases, acted as peer researchers by interviewing parents involved in programmes. Grantees reported that involving someone who could relate to participants’ experiences helped create a trusted environment for participation in evaluation activities. As a result, parents felt more comfortable participating in evaluation and were more likely to give open and honest responses. As one Cohort 1 grantee described, this approach was particularly valuable where English was an additional language, as parent volunteers were able to help explain questions and support translation:

“The communities we work with are very diverse. In some areas this can be narrowed down to a few languages, but in others it cannot. Having co-delivery volunteers present has mitigated many of these challenges.”

- 3.18** Co-delivery with practitioners entailed practitioners supporting evaluation activity as part of their role. This arrangement was common where grantees were not working directly with families in their programmes. Without this practitioner support for evaluation, it would have been challenging to collect evidence on impacts for children and parents. Practitioners administered surveys with families, gathered feedback during sessions, and kept reflective logs to capture key observations or changes about children’s outcomes over time.⁸ As

⁷ Sorgenfrei, M. et al. (2024) Family Hubs planning framework: engagement with children and families. London: Foundations – What Works Centre for Children & Families. Available at: <https://foundations.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/family-hubs-planning-framework-engagement-with-children-and-families.pdf>

⁸ Lloyd-Evans, S. et al. (2023) *Participatory Action Research: A Toolkit*. University of Reading. Available at: <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/113719/>

practitioners had established relationships with families, they were well-placed to support evidence collection.

Participation in evaluation activities

- 3.19** Given all funded projects involved families and/or practitioners as beneficiaries, all grantees involved families and/or practitioners in evaluation activities. Participation most commonly involved completion of surveys, interviews and focus groups. Some grantees also used more informal or creative approaches⁹ such as asking parents to share photographs of activities completed during sessions or practitioners to contribute to reflective logs. For parents, participation in evaluation was usually built into programme sessions, helping to support engagement and reduce the burden on families. For practitioners, participation in evaluation was built in as an expectation of their involvement in the programme.

What works to engage families in evaluation

- 3.20 Families can face a range of barriers to taking part in evaluation.**¹⁰ Many families are time-poor and managing competing pressures, making it difficult to engage in activities outside programme sessions. Language and literacy barriers, including English as an additional language, can limit confidence in completing written tools without support. Some parents may also feel anxious about being judged or worry that questions imply their child is behind, which can limit honest responses.
- 3.21** This section outlines what works in overcoming these barriers and how to meaningfully engage families in evaluation. It highlights how approaches can be designed to support participation and ensure that engagement feels accessible and appropriate. The findings emphasise the importance of designing evaluation activities in ways that are accessible and less burdensome, while creating safe environments with relational activities so that families feel comfortable participating.

Use accessible, simple methods

- 3.22 Evaluation methods were considered most effective when activities were kept short and focused,** concentrating on essential questions only.¹¹ This helped minimise the burden on parents and meant evaluation tasks were not overwhelming to complete. The **use of simple, clear and non-judgemental language** supported the accessibility of evaluation

⁹ Goldsworthy, K. (2023) Involving children in evaluation. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies. Available at:

https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-05/2305_Involving-children-in-evaluation-PG.pdf

¹⁰ Evaluation Support Scotland (2020) Involving people in evaluation. Edinburgh: Evaluation Support Scotland. Available at: https://evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/involving_people_in_evaluation.pdf

¹¹ Guijt, I. (2014). Participatory Approaches, Methodological Briefs: Impact Evaluation 5, UNICEF Office of Research, Florence. Available at:

https://www.betterevaluation.org/sites/default/files/Participatory_Approaches_ENG.pdf

activities. In particular, avoiding deficit-focused framing helped parents feel more comfortable taking part, minimising the feeling that their child was behind or that their parenting was poor. Co-designing evaluation tools with parents was also reported to be an enabler of accessibility and simplicity because parents would point out overly complex language or jargon, unnecessary questions and so forth.

3.23 Grantees also highlighted the value of low-burden approaches that fitted more easily into families' routines. For example, one grantee replaced online surveys with a feedback postcard included alongside books distributed to families at pick-up and drop-off. The postcard could be returned through the same process, providing a simple and accessible way for parents to share their views and helping to increase participation. This approach was subsequently adopted by another grantee.

Embed evaluation into programme delivery

3.24 Evaluation worked best when it was **built into programme sessions** rather than treated as a separate activity. Completing surveys or sharing feedback during sessions **reduced the burden on families**, as parents were able to complete evaluation activities *“there and then”*, rather than as an additional activity. Embedding evaluation in this way **ensured that practical support was available**, including from practitioners and parent volunteers. This support included helping parents complete surveys, translating questions (where English was an additional language), and providing reassurance about how their responses would be used.

3.25 The **face-to-face** nature of evaluation activities being embedded into sessions also made the process more relational, helping to build trust. Grantees reported that parents were more comfortable when evaluation activities were completed alongside others, as seeing other parents participate helped reduce concerns about being singled out.

3.26 The importance of careful planning was highlighted when delivering evaluation activities face-to-face with parents. This included:

- Considering the timing of evaluation activities within sessions, for example, avoiding evaluation as the first activity to prevent parents feeling overwhelmed;
- Accommodating the presence of children by ensuring spaces were welcoming and child-friendly; and
- Positioning evaluation activities in informal ways, such as seating arrangements that avoided a formal or interview-style set-up.

Create safe environments with relational activities

3.27 Engagement was stronger where evaluation was supported by people families already knew and trusted, such as practitioners or parent volunteers. As one Cohort 1 grantee noted:

“Where [nursery] managers express strong support... substantially higher levels of parental consent have been observed.” Familiar relationships also helped parents feel more comfortable taking part and encouraged more open and honest responses. As one Cohort 2 grantee explained: *“Where delivery teams are consistently present and build relationships with families over a series of sessions, parents are more willing to engage and provide meaningful feedback”*.

- 3.28** Creating a safe environment also depended on how evaluation was framed. Grantees emphasised the importance of using non-judgemental language and avoiding a focus on deficits, as mentioned earlier. Instead, evaluation focused on children’s development and progress, helping parents feel more comfortable sharing their experiences.
- 3.29** Offering a range of ways to participate also supported engagement. This included more creative or flexible approaches, which helped accommodate different confidence levels and literacy needs, as well as offering online formats to increase accessibility and convenience.¹²
- 3.30** Grantees reported that narrative or storytelling approaches were particularly meaningful. These methods allowed parents to describe their experiences in their own words, which encouraged more open reflection.
- 3.31** Finally, engagement was strengthened where parents could see that their feedback led to change. Demonstrating how insights were used helped reinforce that parents’ voices mattered, building trust and encouraging ongoing participation. As one Cohort 1 grantee explained, seeing feedback translated into action was important for sustaining engagement: *“It’s making their opinions feel valued and showing that things change as a result... it undermines the process if nothing happens with [the evidence].”*

What works to engage practitioners in evaluation

- 3.32 Practitioners can also face a range of barriers when taking part in evaluation.** Time and capacity are key challenges, particularly in settings where staffing is stretched or leadership support is limited. Engagement may also be reduced where expectations are unclear or where practitioners do not see the relevance of evaluation to their day-to-day work and in outcomes for children and families. In addition, confidence and experience with evaluation can vary widely across the workforce, influencing the extent to which practitioners feel able and willing to engage.
- 3.33** This section outlines what works in overcoming these barriers and how to meaningfully engage practitioners in evaluation. It highlights how evaluation approaches can be designed to support participation and ensure engagement feels accessible and proportionate. The findings emphasise the importance of clear communication and designing evaluation

¹² Evaluation Support Scotland (2020) Involving people in evaluation. Edinburgh: Evaluation Support Scotland. Available at: https://evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/involving_people_in_evaluation.pdf

activities that fit within existing workloads and professional contexts as well as the value of learning-focused approaches in ensuring activities are beneficial to practitioners.

Clarify expectations from the outset

- 3.34** Grantees reported that practitioners are more likely to engage when expectations, time commitments and roles are clearly explained, and when the purpose of the evaluation is well understood. As one Cohort 1 grantee described:

“There is a workforce shortage, which makes evaluation participation harder. However, if you clearly articulate the rationale at the outset, there are not usually many challenges.”

- 3.35** The same grantee had formalised this approach through a Memorandum of Understanding with settings, setting out expectations for evaluation participation, and described working through a simplified Theory of Change with practitioners to illustrate the purpose of evaluation and how it links to outcomes:

“Clarity is important. Within our programme, we have a clear theory of change. Although we do not share the theory of change in full, we talk through the steps, why they matter and how they connect to impact.”

Ensure there is capacity to participate

- 3.36** Grantees highlighted that settings with strong leadership support and sufficient capacity are better able to engage in evaluation alongside delivery. Where staffing is stretched or turnover is high, engagement is harder to sustain, particularly over longer periods and during follow-up evaluation activity. One Cohort 1 grantee had factored this into the recruitment phase of programme delivery:

“We have built this thinking into the recruitment phase. There is a paradox: we want the project to reach the settings most in need but, if practitioners do not have the basics in place, we cannot deliver the programme as intended, [including evaluation]. When working out which settings to work with, we look for leadership support, involvement of two staff members and capacity to benefit rather than settings that are struggling so much that they cannot engage [in evaluation].”

- 3.37** Ensuring there is capacity for participation therefore requires deliberate planning at the programme design stage. This includes allocating sufficient time, resource and budget for evaluation, and recognising it as an integral component of delivery rather than an optional add-on. As one Cohort 2 grantee described:

“Frontline practitioners have additional time built into the project budget for them to work alongside the researcher, who observes sessions, discusses them afterwards, and facilitates a debrief.”

Make evaluation requirements proportionate

- 3.38** Alongside establishing expectations and ensuring capacity for participation, it is important to ensure that evaluation requirements are realistic and proportionate to practitioners' time, capacity and day-to-day responsibilities.¹³ Again, streamlined approaches (focusing on a small number of clearly defined, essential questions) were reported to be most effective in enabling practitioners to participate in evaluation. Co-designing evaluation tools and approaches with practitioners can help ensure that requirements are realistic within day-to-day practice. One Cohort 1 grantee described how they had achieved this:

"There is a balance between what we need to know and how we intend to ask it. Being a researcher is a specific skill, so we broker between practitioners and the research team, questioning what is essential. Practitioners are asked about roughly half of the original detail that researchers propose."

- 3.39** Engaging practitioners in co-design is thus one way to balance research quality and participants' experience: practitioners are asked fewer but more relevant questions.

- 3.40** When asking settings to collect data on children and families, it is important that monitoring processes align closely with data that settings already collect as part of their existing systems. This helps to minimise the additional administrative burden and increases the likelihood of consistent data collection.

- 3.41** It is also important to be mindful of differences in practitioners' roles and levels of experience. Tailoring engagement approaches can help practitioners feel more confident and comfortable participating. For example, one grantee reported using separate practitioner focus groups for different levels of experience. As one Cohort 1 grantee described, this approach supported more open and honest discussion, and helped participants feel at ease speaking within the group:

"When talking to practitioners, we try to group them by level, such as qualification level or whether they are room leaders, so they feel comfortable contributing and do not feel overshadowed."

Build in learning-focused approaches

- 3.42** Evaluations should consider what practitioners can gain from participating in evaluation. As one Cohort 1 grantee noted, *"time poverty is a major challenge. If [practitioners] do not see the benefit [of evaluation], they understandably may not engage"*.

¹³ Guijt, I. (2014). Participatory Approaches, Methodological Briefs: Impact Evaluation 5, UNICEF Office of Research, Florence. Available at: https://www.betterevaluation.org/sites/default/files/Participatory_Approaches_ENG.pdf

3.43 Grantees reported that embedding learning-focused activities within evaluation helped to position it as a benefit rather than a burden. These activities included reflective sessions, learning workshops, and practitioner journals, which supported professional development by encouraging practitioners to reflect on their practice, identify areas for improvement and recognise progress over time. These reflective activities also mean that practitioners are already thinking about their involvement in the programme, meaning that when they are later asked to take part in evaluation activities, their insights are at the front of their minds. As one Cohort 1 grantee explained:

"Getting people to respond has been difficult in the past, but we have improved this recently. We introduced a reflective journal as part of the programme, which encourages reflective thinking and analytical practice. Practitioners are already thinking about many of these topics - the journal helps structure that thinking so they are not starting from scratch."

3.44 Evaluation evidence was also framed as a practical tool for supporting settings. Practitioners were more engaged when they understood how findings could be used, for example, to demonstrate impact to parents, funders or inspection bodies such as Ofsted. Furthermore, grantees reported that linking evaluation back to outcomes for children's development and practitioners' everyday practice helped practitioners to see evaluation as directly relevant.

Disseminating evaluation evidence

3.45 This section describes findings on how to effectively disseminate evaluation findings to different audiences, exploring the research question 'How can evaluation findings be communicated effectively to families, settings, funders, and policymakers?'.

3.46 The literature and consultees, including Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 grantees, representatives from the Mercers' Company and policy stakeholders, highlighted that engagement with evaluation evidence depends not only on the quality of the evidence itself but on how it is shared. General principles for dissemination include ensuring communication is accessible, providing the right evidence for its intended use, and making evidence practical for audiences to engage with.¹⁴

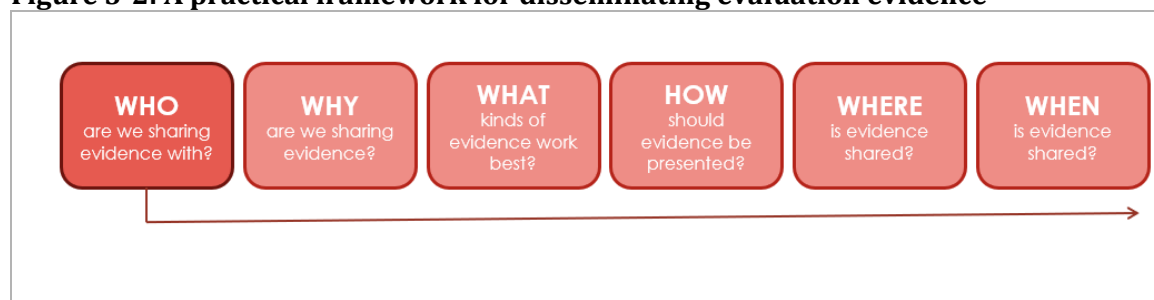
3.47 However, **effective dissemination requires tailoring evidence to different audiences and purposes.** Different audiences value different types of evidence, have varying levels of time and attention, and hold different expectations about data, detail and format.¹⁵ As noted by one Cohort 2 grantee: *"People engage with evidence differently...some want a simple visual summary or reassurance that a programme works, while others are interested in reading the full research report."* It is therefore important to think carefully about who evidence is being shared with and why in order to maximise its relevance and impact.

¹⁴ Colorado State University, *Dissemination: Communicating Evaluation Results*

¹⁵ Colorado State University, *Dissemination: Communicating Evaluation Results*

- 3.48** A range of formats can be used to share findings and selecting the most appropriate one for the audience is key. Formats may include executive summaries, full reports, policy briefings, infographics, videos, presentations, best practice guidance, or social media posts and blogs.¹⁶
- 3.49** Evaluation guidance, such as the Magenta Book, emphasises **the importance of having a clear dissemination plan**. This helps ensure that all intended users are identified and that outputs are designed in ways that maximise their usefulness and impact.¹⁷ It is recommended that dissemination plans are developed from the outset so that data and outputs are tailored to the intended audience from the start.¹⁸
- 3.50** In response to these findings, SQW developed a **simple and practical framework** to understand and support effective sharing of evaluation evidence. The framework begins by asking two core questions on **who** the audience is and **why** evidence is being shared with them. It then guides users through decisions about **what** evidence to share, **how** to present it, and **where** and **when** it is likely to have the greatest impact.

Figure 3-2: A practical framework for disseminating evaluation evidence



Source: SQW

- 3.51** The framework was applied to structure findings for four key audiences: families, practitioners, funders and policymakers. The framework can be used by grantees as a practical toolkit to help plan and improve how evidence is shared, helping to strengthen engagement with evaluation findings across different audiences. Table 3-1 summarises the key considerations for each audience.

Table 3-1: Key considerations for sharing evidence with different groups

	Why	What	How, where, when?
Families	Encourage engagement with programmes	Evidence of impact on their child; simple statistics and relatable stories	Share in person during engagement activities and through short, visual content

¹⁶ Centre to Improve Program and Project Performance, *Effectively Communicating Evaluation Findings*

¹⁷ HM Treasury, *Magenta Book*

¹⁸ Centre to Improve Program and Project Performance, *Effectively Communicating Evaluation Findings*

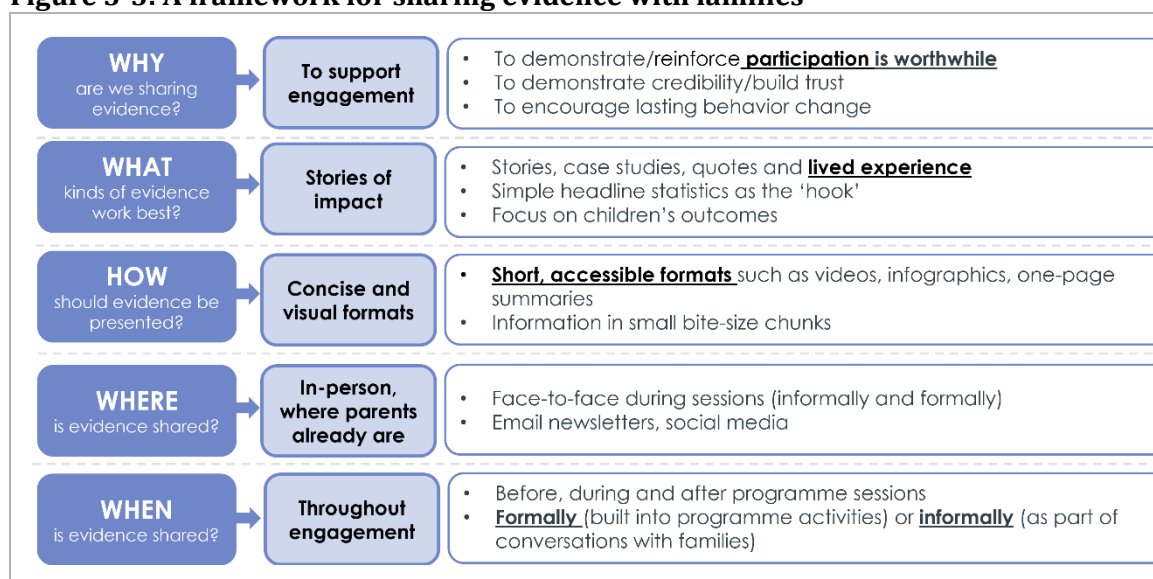
	Why	What	How, where, when?
Practitioners	Build buy-in and support practice improvement	A mix of quantitative findings and participant stories, with clear implications for practice	Use training sessions, team meetings and supervision; provide concise, practical resources
Funders	Demonstrate impact and support future investment decisions	A balanced picture of outcomes, impact and learning	Present through reports, executive summaries, site visits and learning events
Policymakers	Inform decision-making and influence policy development	Robust quantitative evidence supported by case studies and insights for implementation, with clear links to current priorities	Share through briefings and summaries aligned with policy cycles, alongside ongoing engagement

Source: SQW

Sharing evidence with families

3.52 This section sets out a simple framework for sharing evaluation evidence with families in ways that support engagement and understanding.

3.53 In the context of the Initiative, families means parents and carers of children taking part in funded programmes. Parents and carers care deeply about their children's development and want to know how they can support it. However, they often have little time and are unlikely to engage with formal evaluation reports, especially if they are long or use technical language. Evidence is therefore most effective for parents when it is easy to understand, quick to read or watch, and clearly linked to their child's development.

Figure 3-3: A framework for sharing evidence with families

Source: SQW

Why share evidence with families

3.54 For families, **sharing evaluation evidence is primarily about encouraging engagement in Early Years programmes**. Evidence can be used to reassure parents and carers that their time is well spent, that the programme will make a difference to their child, and that continuing to attend sessions and apply learning matters. As one Cohort 1 grantee described:

“There are benefits to sharing evidence with families. It reinforces that what they are doing is worthwhile. Families have learnt a lot on the programme, and this motivates people to keep going and implementing. It reinforces the value of what they do.”

3.55 Sharing evidence also helps close the feedback loop. It shows families how their participation, feedback and experiences contribute to wider learning and programme improvement.

What evidence to share

3.56 Families are most interested in **evidence about the impact on children and families**. Parents and carers respond strongly to seeing people like themselves benefiting from a programme. As one Cohort 1 grantee said:

“The biggest ‘light bulb moment’ for fathers comes when they understand the unique effect their behaviour can have on their child.”

3.57 **Qualitative evidence is particularly powerful** for this audience. Short stories, quotes from other parents and simple case studies help bring evidence to life, reflecting the experiences of other families. As one Cohort 1 grantee commented:

“Qualitative evidence is often very powerful. A really impactful case study is meaningful to a lot of people because they can visualise themselves in it and relate it to their own experience in a way that a dataset would not.”

- 3.58** Headline statistics can also support credibility, but these should be kept simple and used sparingly. For example, a single clear figure can act as a hook to build confidence, before leading into stories of impact. Detailed data or technical findings are generally less relevant for families.

How to present evidence

- 3.59** Evidence works best for families when it is simple and visual. Short videos, infographics, newsletters and one-page summaries are effective formats. Videos that show what a session looks like are particularly valuable. They help families understand what to expect, reduce uncertainty and build trust, especially for those considering participation. Several grantees referenced Media Trust films, produced as part of Mercers’ capacity building support to grantees of the Initiative, as strong examples. Furthermore, sharing evidence in small, bite-sized pieces, rather than all at once, makes it easier for families to engage. As one Cohort 1 grantee noted:

“For families, we are good at translating complex findings into small, digestible nuggets. What is formally published is often too much for families, who want something that looks appealing, is accessible, and summarises the information clearly.”

- 3.60** Evidence can also be shared effectively through conversation, especially when communicated via trusted intermediaries such as practitioners or other parents. As one Cohort 1 grantee reflected:

“Hearing directly from families and volunteers provides an authenticity and impact that written summaries alone cannot achieve.”

Good practice: Using a “hook” to engage families

Evaluation evidence can capture families’ attention when it starts with a clear and relatable “hook”. Two approaches were highlighted in conversations with grantees.

Using a headline statistic as a hook. One grantee described using simple, headline statistics as a hook to quickly capture attention and demonstrate credibility. For example, sharing a finding such as *“8 out of 10 parents said they felt more confident supporting their child”*. This worked best when followed by a short story of impact or quotes from other parents.

Using an emotional hook. Another grantee highlighted the value of leading with an emotional hook, such as a short quote or story from a parent. For example, *“I now feel much more confident reading with my child at home.”* Starting with a relatable experience helped families immediately connect with the evidence and see its relevance to them.

Across both examples, the key was to **focus on one clear and engaging hook**. Using too many statistics or too many quotes at once can reduce impact.

Source: SQW

Where and when to share evidence

3.61 In-person sharing is particularly effective when engaging families with evaluation evidence. Grantees highlighted that evidence has the greatest impact when it is shared through trusted relationships, for example via practitioners families already know or through other parents. This particularly works well in places **when families are already present**, such as during programme sessions. This can be done **formally, for example through a short, planned activity** at the start of a session, or **informally through conversations** before, during or after activities. Informal sharing can feel more natural and less overwhelming for families, while still reinforcing key messages. As one Cohort 2 grantee described:

“Sharing [evidence] takes place through natural touchpoints such as supervisions and regular check-ins with families, where key insights and reflections are discussed informally on a case-by-case basis.”

3.62 Digital channels, such as email newsletters and social media, can be used to reinforce and repeat key messages. However, these channels work best when used alongside personal interaction, rather than as a substitute for it.

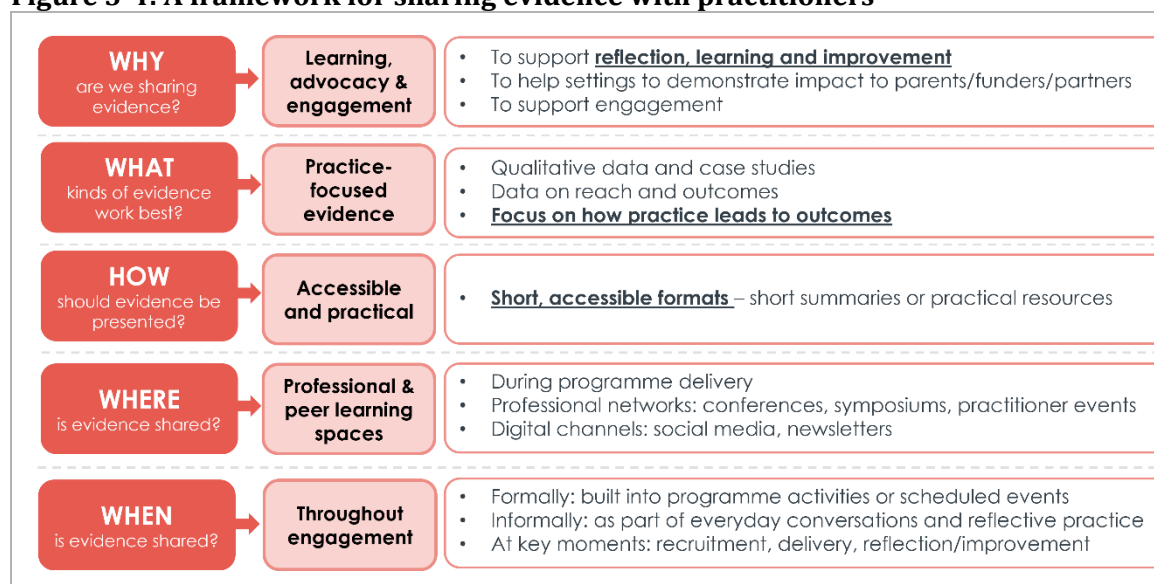
3.63 Timing also matters. Sharing evidence throughout engagement, rather than only at the end of a programme, helps families connect evaluation findings directly to their own behaviour and experience. Early sharing can support continued engagement and reinforce the value of ongoing participation.

Sharing evidence with practitioners

3.64 This section sets out a simple approach to sharing evaluation evidence with practitioners in ways that support engagement and learning.

3.65 Practitioners are the people working directly with children and families in Early Years settings. They are often busy, work in a wide range of settings, and have different levels of experience. Practitioners are strongly motivated by making a real difference for children and families. Evidence is most effective when it is practical, easy to engage with, and clearly linked to everyday practice and outcomes for children.

Figure 3-4: A framework for sharing evidence with practitioners



Source: SQW

Why share evidence with practitioners

3.66 There are three main reasons to share evaluation evidence with practitioners. **First, evidence can support engagement and buy-in.** Seeing positive outcomes for children helps motivate practitioners and increases their investment in programmes. Evidence helps practitioners feel part of something larger than their individual setting and reinforces the value of their contribution. **Second, evidence can support practitioners' own learning and improvement.** Sharing findings can help practitioners reflect on their own practice, understanding what is working well and what could be strengthened. Evidence can prompt reflection and improvement at both individual practitioners and settings. **Third, evidence can support external accountability.** Evaluation findings help settings and practitioners

explain the impact of their work to parents and carers, and as well as other important stakeholders such as Ofsted and Local Authorities.

What evidence to share

- 3.67 A mix of quantitative and qualitative evidence works well for practitioners.** Quantitative evidence can demonstrate reach, engagement and outcomes, while qualitative evidence helps explain how and why change happens. As one Cohort 1 grantee explained:

"Numbers are easy to access and help show the bigger picture, but qualitative stories are used to bring findings to life, as statistics alone are not enough. There is always an attempt to balance the two."

- 3.68** Crucially, evidence should focus on implications for practice. Practitioners want to understand what findings mean for their day-to-day work and how evidence can help them do their job better. Evidence that links clearly to children's outcomes and practical delivery resonates most strongly. Quotes from parents and practitioners are particularly effective in bringing findings to life, alongside clear evidence of impact on children, which aligns closely with practitioners' professional values.

How to present evidence

- 3.69** Practitioners value evidence that is clear and practical. One-page summaries, short PDFs, and bite-sized resources help practitioners engage with evidence, particularly when their time is constrained. Practical tools, prompts or checklists, and clear "what this means in practice" messages are especially effective because they show practitioners what the evidence means for them in their day-to-day work.
- 3.70** Grantees reported that embedding evaluation findings within training sessions, reflective discussions or learning activities helps evidence feel immediately relevant, adding weight to learning topics. A couple of grantees also reported sharing evidence via wider channels such as magazine or journal articles and podcasts, which enables practitioners not directly involved in the Initiative to engage with findings.

Good practice: Embedding evidence sharing

Several grantees highlighted the value of embedding evidence sharing into in-person engagement with practitioners.

Grantees reported sharing evidence through team meetings, supervision sessions and reflective discussions. This created space for practitioners to explore findings together and discuss what they meant for practice, making evidence feel useful and practical rather than an additional task to engage with independently. As one Cohort 1 grantee commented:

“Practitioners responded positively when findings were discussed collectively, with an emphasis on shared responsibility for outcomes rather than individual accountability. This approach reduced anxiety, encouraged honest discussion, and supported service development.”

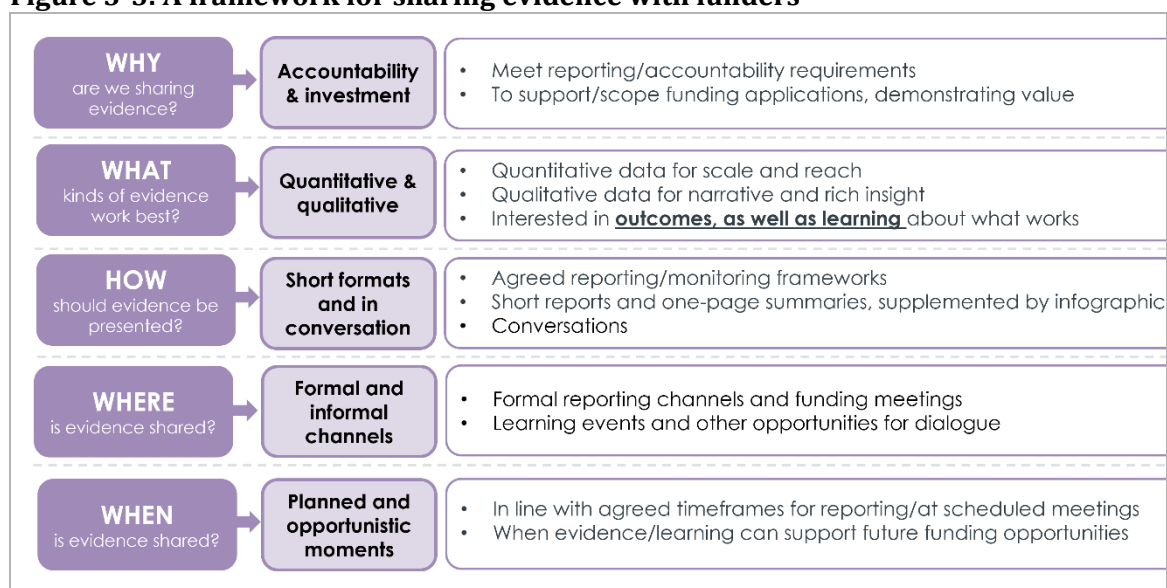
Some organisations used **annual celebratory or stakeholder learning events** to bring practitioners and partners together. These events were used to share evidence of impact, celebrate successes and recognise contributions, helping to motivate practitioners and help them feel part of something bigger.

Where and when to share evidence

- 3.71** As highlighted above, evidence can be shared at different points throughout practitioners’ engagement with a programme. This includes during delivery, within training sessions or team meetings and through reflective discussions. It can also take place informally during conversations with practitioners throughout engagement. Findings may also be shared more widely through conferences, learning events, professional networks or peer-learning spaces. Grantees emphasised that evidence is most effective when it is shared in the spaces where practitioners already are, rather than expecting them to seek it out independently. Embedding evidence within existing activities and interactions helps practitioners engage with it more easily and apply it in practice.

Sharing evidence with funders

- 3.72** Funders use evaluation evidence to understand how funding is being used, what difference it is making, and what can be learned to inform future investment. They typically expect a combination of quantitative and qualitative evidence, although the emphasis placed on each can vary depending on their priorities. Evidence is most effective when it is clear and concise, and when it combines data with explanation and reflection on what has been learned.

Figure 3-5: A framework for sharing evidence with funders

Source: SQW

Why share evidence with funders

3.73 Evaluation evidence is shared with funders to meet reporting requirements and demonstrate accountability for how funding has been used. Evidence also plays an important role in supporting future funding opportunities, including funding applications, grant renewals and discussions about further investment. Sharing evaluation findings helps demonstrate a programme's impact and provides funders with a clearer understanding of the problem being addressed, why the approach works, and the value the programme adds. As one Cohort 1 grantee commented:

"[Evidence is used] when responding to invitations for funding bids, particularly around understanding the problem and why the solution works."

3.74 From a funder perspective, Mercers' reported using evaluation evidence as a tool for learning and reflection rather than performance management. While evidence supports accountability and funding decisions, it also plays an important role in helping Mercers' understand what is working, why change happens, and how context affects delivery, which in turn influences their grant-funding approach in the future.

What evidence to share

3.75 Funders usually expect a mix of quantitative and qualitative evidence, but what they value most can vary. Different funders have different priorities and the same evidence may be used in different ways, as one Cohort 2 grantee explained: *"Each funder requires its own report and prioritises different outcomes...each funder frames their requirements differently and the organisation must respond accordingly."* Quantitative evidence can help show scale and

reach while qualitative evidence helps explain what is happening on the ground and why the work matters.

3.76 Mercers' described placing a **growing emphasis on qualitative and narrative evidence**. Stories and case studies are strongly valued by committees and decision-makers. This type of evidence helps build understanding and human connection. Mercers' also acknowledged that quantitative data does not always provide the full picture on its own. Mercers' highlighted the **importance of being realistic about quantitative reporting** as a funder. They are mindful of grantee capacity and recognise that more intensive programmes may work with smaller numbers but achieve deep impact. In these cases, numbers alone do not provide a full picture without explanation and context.

3.77 Reflective and learning-based evidence is increasingly valued by Mercers'. Evidence that explains what happened, why outcomes were or were not achieved, and what was learned along the way supports more meaningful conversations and better decision-making than a narrow focus on targets or outputs alone.

How to present evidence

3.78 When sharing evidence as part of a funding arrangement, this is **typically done through formal reporting channels** alongside funding meetings and opportunities to visit programmes in action. At Mercers', annual monitoring reports provide a structured but flexible format, balancing consistency with space for narrative reflection.

3.79 More broadly, **funders increasingly prefer concise formats** that allow them to engage with evidence quickly and easily. Short reports and one-page summaries are often more effective than long evaluation reports, while infographics and visual summaries help funders quickly grasp key messages. One Cohort 2 grantee explained what a short report has looked like for another funder:

"For [other] funders, we've produced a quarterly impact report, typically two to three pages long. One page presented high-level quantitative data through an infographic, while another summarised notable stories from the [school] term, key learning, and any national policy engagement."

3.80 Sharing evidence in conversation with funders is also highly effective. Roundtables, webinars and learning events provide opportunities to discuss findings. One Cohort 1 grantee described the importance of always having key evidence *"in the back of your head"* when attending these events, so that learning can be shared naturally within discussion.

Good practice: Layering evidence

One grantee highlighted the value of sharing evaluation evidence in multiple layers to give funders flexibility in how deeply they engage depending on time and interest. For example, a short one-page summary was used to communicate key messages quickly, while a full evaluation report was available for funders who wanted more detail. This approach helped ensure evidence was accessible while still meeting funders' requirements and avoiding oversimplification of findings.

Where and when to share evidence

- 3.81** When sharing evidence as part of a funding arrangement, evaluation evidence should be shared in line with agreed reporting timeframes and through established reporting channels. Mercers' described managing timing flexibly, with a strong emphasis on relationships and context. Monitoring reports are required annually and linked to grant payments, but deadlines are designed not to disrupt delivery. Grantees are encouraged to communicate early if reporting timelines will be a challenge.
- 3.82** Roundtables, learning events and webinars provide valuable opportunities to discuss evidence with funders, share learning, and bring written findings to life. These wider opportunities can support learning across programmes and strengthen relationships with funders. They can also play an important role in shaping conversations about future funding.
- 3.83** Mercers' reported that they explore evidence through a mix of written reports and more interactive formats, such as committee discussions, site visits and learning events. These opportunities for sharing evidence were seen as valuable, with discussions during site visits and learning events sometimes being as influential as written reports in shaping understanding and decision-making.

Sharing evidence with policymakers

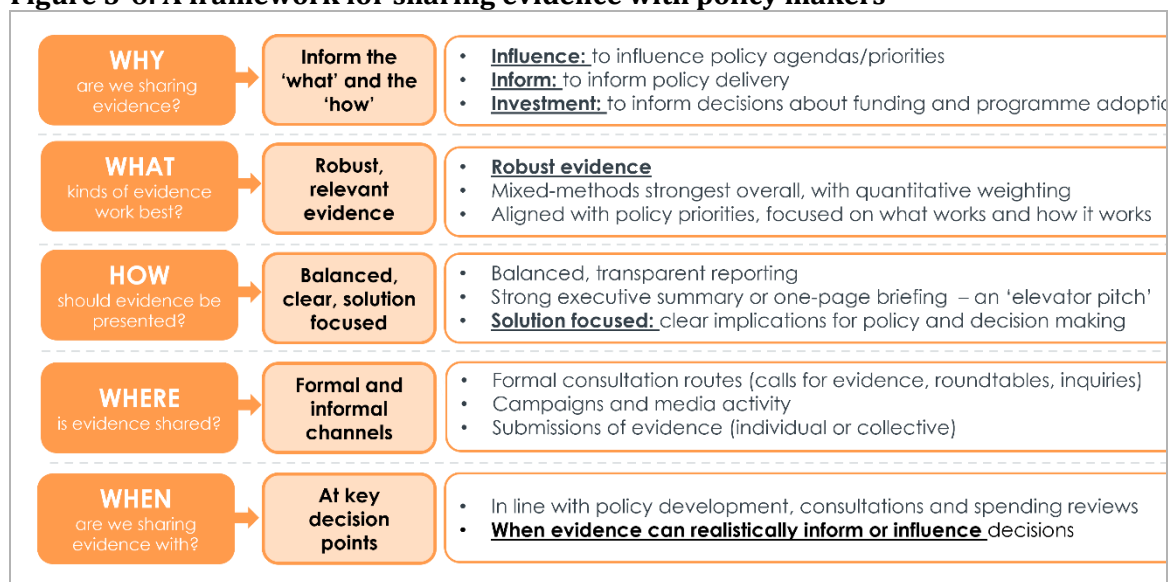
- 3.84** Several barriers faced by policymakers in using evidence effectively were highlighted by interviews with policymakers and in the literature.^{19,20} Policymakers are typically time-poor and work in a complex environment shaped by political priorities, budgets and delivery constraints. They need to review large amounts of information quickly, and evidence can be spread across different sources. Even when they find relevant reports, key insights can be

¹⁹ Verian Group (2025), *Evidence-Informed Policymaking: Practical Tips and Inspiring Case Studies*.

²⁰ Miller, B., Thurston, A., & Hancock, R. (2025). *Designing policy with complex evidence*. URL: <https://publicpolicydesign.blog.gov.uk/2025/05/08/designing-policy-with-complex-evidence/>

hard to pull out from long documents. These challenges mean that evaluation findings need to be carefully disseminated. This section sets out a practical approach to sharing evaluation evidence with policymakers at national and local levels. In summary, evidence should be concise, easy to navigate and clearly linked to current policy priorities, enabling policymakers to quickly identify the most relevant insights and apply them in decision-making.

Figure 3-6: A framework for sharing evidence with policy makers



Source: SQW

Why share evidence with policymakers

3.85 Evaluation evidence is shared with policymakers to inform both **what policy decisions are made** and **how policy is designed and delivered**.²¹ Evidence is used to influence policy agendas and priorities by demonstrating the scale of an issue and the case for action. This is often referred to as evidence for the **"what"**. Evidence is also used to inform the design and delivery of policy, helping policymakers to understand how a problem should be addressed. Evidence for the **"how"** helps policymakers understand what works in practice and what is realistic to deliver. This type of evidence helps to inform investment decisions, including whether to fund or scale a programme.

What evidence to share

3.86 Policymakers typically rely on mixed-methods evidence. Quantitative evidence often carries the greatest weight as it demonstrates the scale and reach of programmes and provides reassurance that findings are robust and representative. However, **qualitative evidence remains essential**. It helps bring findings to life, illustrates how programmes work in practice, and shows impact for children and families in ways that numbers alone cannot. In many cases, it is the qualitative narrative that policymakers engage with most. To be

²¹ Scottish Government (2018), *Evaluation for Policy Makers: A Straightforward Guide*. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/evaluation-policy-makers-straightforward-guide/>

influential, this qualitative evidence needs to be paired with robust quantitative data to demonstrate wider relevance. As one Cohort 1 grantee explained:

“Case studies are powerful for engaging hearts and minds... however, policymakers often say, ‘this is nice, but it’s anecdotal.’ These stories are valuable, but they need to be paired with robust evidence [that] demonstrates that what you are describing is applicable elsewhere.”

3.87 Grantees and policymakers emphasised that evidence is most influential when it is clearly aligned with current policy priorities, for example the Best Start in Life strategy, SEND reforms and child poverty. Grantees described tailoring messages to government priorities to increase relevance and traction. As one Cohort 1 grantee explained:

“We try to tailor our messages to what we know they are trying to achieve and make sure anything we propose is well grounded [in evidence].... [As charities], we focus on creating visions, but if your vision is too far removed from what is realistic, you won’t get traction.”

3.88 Policymakers also look for evidence that speaks directly to policy-relevant metrics and indicators, such as Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) outcomes, Good Level of Development (GLD), Early Learning Goals (ELGs), children’s attainment and school readiness. Explaining what evaluation findings mean in these terms can make evidence easier for policymakers to interpret and use.

3.89 Evidence can also be more compelling when it is positioned within a wider national evidence base. Policymakers are influenced by a range of sources, including commissioned research, What Works Centres, universities and sector-wide submissions. In this context, individual programme-level findings are strongest when they are presented as contributing to a broader body of evidence rather than as standalone results. This is particularly important for evaluations with smaller datasets, as linking findings to national evidence can enhance credibility and influence.

How to present evidence

3.90 Policymakers strongly prefer concise formats. As one Cohort 2 grantee said, *“They like evidence and data, but they are also incredibly busy... They need shortform communications.”* One-page briefings and short policy summaries are particularly effective. These should clearly set out the key findings, why they matter, and the implications for policy and delivery. Where possible, they should also include costs and clear recommendations. Policymakers noted that a strong executive summary is the key to evidence being engaged with. As one Cohort 1 grantee noted:

“[Policymakers] do not have the capacity to read a fifty-page report. They need something that spoon-feeds the essentials: ‘We did this, these are the benefits, these are the cost savings, and here is an example of excellent practice to replicate.’”

Good practice: Have a strong executive summary

Policymakers described how a strong effective summary was the main entry point for policymakers engaging with evaluation evidence. Rather than reading a full report, policymakers relied on a short summary to quickly understand what was done, what difference it made, and why it mattered.

The most effective executive summaries clearly set out:

- the problem being addressed
- the key findings and outcomes
- why the findings are relevant to current policy priorities
- what this means for policy or delivery in practice

Executive summaries should be treated as a standalone output rather than a shortened version of a longer report.

3.91 Campaigns and media activity can amplify evaluation findings and increase visibility, but they must be underpinned by credible evidence and communicated in a way that encourages constructive and balanced engagement. Evidence-led messaging is more likely to build trust and support productive engagement with policymakers. Mercers' and grantees highlighted that **coordinating evidence sharing with peer organisations** can significantly increase visibility and influence.

Good practice: Collective submissions of evidence

Joint submissions or shared messages can help evidence stand out in a crowded policy environment and strengthen the case for change.

In one example, a grantee coordinated a set of shared “five asks” for government with seven other organisations, which helped present a clear and compelling collective message. These “five asks” were communicated by a dedicated webpage that succinctly outlined the priorities, alongside a summary report and full report for further detail on the evidence behind the five asks. This also illustrates an effective approach to layering evidence (as described above).

Mercers’ also emphasised the value of consulting with other organisations to identify relevant evaluation evidence that could be shared together, particularly where there are timely opportunities to influence policy, such as calls for evidence, spending reviews or policy announcements.

- 3.92** Policymakers highlighted the importance of **presenting evidence in a transparent and balanced way**. This includes being clear about the strengths and limitations of the evidence. Policymakers are cautious of evidence that appears agenda-driven or designed to support a predetermined position, and a measured, non-combative tone is more likely to encourage engagement.

Where and when to share evidence

- 3.93** **Timing is critical when sharing evidence with policymakers.** Evidence is most influential when it **aligns with key decision-making moments**, such as spending reviews, business case development, or live policy design phases. At these points, evidence is genuinely usable and relevant for policymakers. **Interim or early findings can often be more valuable** than waiting for final reports, provided they are shared transparently and with appropriate caveats.
- 3.94** **Calls for evidence, roundtables, consultations and conferences provide important opportunities to share evidence.** These moments create ‘open windows’ where evidence can be clearly aligned with policy priorities. In-person engagement, in particular, offers valuable opportunities to build relationships and support future evidence sharing. As in other contexts, sharing early findings and at the right time can be more influential than presenting a full evaluation report at a later stage.
- 3.95** Outside formal windows for evidence sharing, Mercers’ recommended **sharing evidence on a semi-regular basis (e.g. every 12–18 months)** to maintain visibility and strengthen

relationships with policymakers. Policymakers also noted that they are generally receptive to receiving evidence and to organisations proactively engaging to build and sustain these relationships.

Good practice: Five 'R's for sharing evidence with policy makers

- **Robust evidence.** Evidence should be credible and methodologically sound. Quantitative evidence is particularly important, especially where it demonstrates scale or value for money. This type of evidence can also help establish causality, particularly when generated via large experimental or quasi-experimental methods. However, smaller or more qualitative studies can also be influential when they are grounded in a clear Theory of Change and situated within a wider evidence base. Transparency about methods and limitations is essential.
- **Relevant evidence.** Evidence needs to be clearly linked to current policy priorities and recognised policy metrics. Framing findings in ways that reflect what policymakers are already working towards increases relevance. Timing also matters - evidence is most influential when it is shared at key moments, such as during spending reviews, business case development or live policy design phases.
- **Real-world evidence.** Policymakers value evidence that shows how programmes work in practice. This includes implications for delivery, costs, feasibility, and how approaches can be applied across different contexts.
- **Readable evidence.** Evidence should be clear and easy to understand. One-page briefings, short summaries and plain language help policymakers quickly grasp key messages. A strong executive summary is particularly important.
- **Relational evidence.** Evidence sharing can be done through relationships, not just reports. Conversations, briefings and roundtables help build trust and understanding. Collective submissions or joint messages with other organisations can also increase credibility and influence.

4. Impact of the Initiative (so far)

Summary

- Light touch monitoring data was collected to provide an indication of the impact of the Initiative so far, focusing on progress against targets and six overarching categories: Early Years practitioners; families, parents and carers; volunteers; children; settings; the Initiative; and resources.
- At the end of June 2026:
 - i) An estimated 5,573 children had benefited from the Initiative, including 1,037 from disadvantaged backgrounds.
 - ii) 1,334 Early Years practitioners, 1,686 parents and carers, 208 volunteers and 382 Early Years settings had been engaged in Initiative activities.

4.1 This chapter presents the headline findings from the analysis of the light touch monitoring data, which provides an indication of the impact of the Initiative so far. The data is presented in line with the overarching categories in the data collection framework (Table A-1) and summarised in an Initiative-level infographic at the end of the chapter. It is important to note that the figures presented below reflect 12 organisations rather than 13, owing to the liquidation of AVUK prior to the data collection period.

4.2 The purpose of this exercise is to capture the Initiative's high-level impact; it is not to compare the grantees or 'judge' performance. We acknowledge that the grantees' work is very different, and that more is not necessarily better. Rather, the measures are designed to capture cumulative and aggregated impact across the board.

Progress against targets

4.3 The targets set by grantees this year reflected the different stages, priorities and delivery models of their projects, so there was variation in what organisations were aiming to achieve. However, **a clear theme across many of the targets was building on and expanding successful work developed in earlier phases of the grant.**

4.4 For some, this meant increasing delivery by working with additional settings or boroughs (for example, expanding into new nurseries, recruiting additional schools, or extending programmes into new geographical areas), while others were looking to reach more children, families, practitioners or volunteers through existing programmes. Alongside growth, a key aim for many grantees was to **review and refine their offer on an ongoing basis**, drawing on feedback from participants and delivery staff to refresh programme content, develop new resources, expand digital materials, or adapt home-learning activities.

- 4.5 Workforce development** was another common theme, with targets around training practitioners, recruiting tutors or volunteers, and increasing the confidence and skills of those delivering programmes. Many grantees also placed greater emphasis on **evaluation and learning**, including by strengthening feedback processes, improving assessment approaches, and developing more consistent ways of evidencing impact.
- 4.6** Grantees reported strong progress overall, with many meeting or exceeding their targets. Several projects successfully expanded their reach, including one programme that worked with 1,030 children across 33 venues. Recruitment was particularly strong in a few projects, with one organisation exceeding its targets for childminder recruitment, training 80 childminders over two years, and others successfully recruiting new schools, nurseries and Early Years settings. Alongside strong progress towards delivery targets, grantees continued to develop and refine their programmes, creating new resources, strengthening workforce skills, expanding partnerships, and improving evaluation and feedback processes.
- 4.7** While progress was largely positive, some grantees faced challenges which affected delivery against certain targets. These included partner capacity constraints, settings withdrawing before delivery, difficulties scheduling activities and variable engagement across locations. As a result, some training courses were postponed and parent engagement activities disrupted, and a small number of recruitment and participation targets had yet to be fully achieved. Despite these challenges, grantees generally remained on track, adapting delivery where needed and continuing to engage substantial numbers of children, families, practitioners and settings.

Early Years Practitioners

- 4.8** As of June 2026, grantees had delivered **530 practitioner training, networking, mentoring and support sessions**, engaging **1,334 practitioners**. Activity ranged from formal training courses, webinars and CPD (continuous professional development) sessions to coaching, mentoring, implementation support meetings, setting visits and networking events. Many grantees used a blend of online and face-to-face delivery to maximise accessibility and accommodate practitioners' working patterns.
- 4.9** Sessions often went beyond training alone, providing opportunities for practitioners to observe programmes in action, share learning with peers, receive tailored support and strengthen links with schools, nurseries, local authorities and other partners.

Families, parents and carers

- 4.10** As of June 2026, grantees had delivered **750 family, parent and carer training, support and guidance sessions**, engaging **1,686 parents and carers**. Activities included parent workshops, home-visiting support, drop-in sessions, family-centre activities, structured parenting programmes and celebration events. Delivery approaches varied across the

grantees, reflecting the different models used, with some working directly with families and others supporting parents through practitioners and Early Years settings.

- 4.11** Feedback from parents about their experience of these sessions indicated that participation helped increase their confidence and involvement in their children's learning and development. Several grantees reported positive outcomes around shared reading, communication and language development, while others highlighted the value of working through family hubs and community settings to reach families who may be less likely to engage with formal services. Many programmes also adapted delivery to improve accessibility, combining in-person and online sessions and tailoring support to local needs.

Volunteers

- 4.12** Volunteer engagement was less common across the grantees as not all programmes use volunteers in their delivery model. Overall, grantees engaged **208 volunteers**, including parents supporting programme delivery and community volunteers. Several organisations also invested in volunteer training and ongoing support to strengthen their knowledge, skills and confidence, particularly in supporting children with SEND and families with additional needs.

Children

- 4.13** As of June 2026, grantees reported that **5,573 children** had directly benefited from funded activities, including **1,037 children from disadvantaged backgrounds**. Incomplete demographic data means that the number of children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefitting is likely to be higher than this figure, especially given that many of the grantees operate in some of the most deprived areas of London.

Settings

- 4.14** As of June 2026, grantees had engaged with **382 Early Years settings and 66 community settings**. Early Years settings included nurseries, schools, children's centres, family hubs and childminding providers. Community settings included local attractions (such as museums, a city farm and ZSL London Zoo), libraries (including The British Library), cafés, community centres and voluntary sector organisations. Grantees also reported collaborating with other organisations funded through both Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the Initiative, supporting knowledge-sharing and partnership working across the programme.

Initiative

- 4.15** Around **30 people**, from across both cohorts, attended the Learning Seminar that was held in-person at Mercers' Hall on 15th June 2026. **Fourteen individuals** took part in the Action Learning Sets.

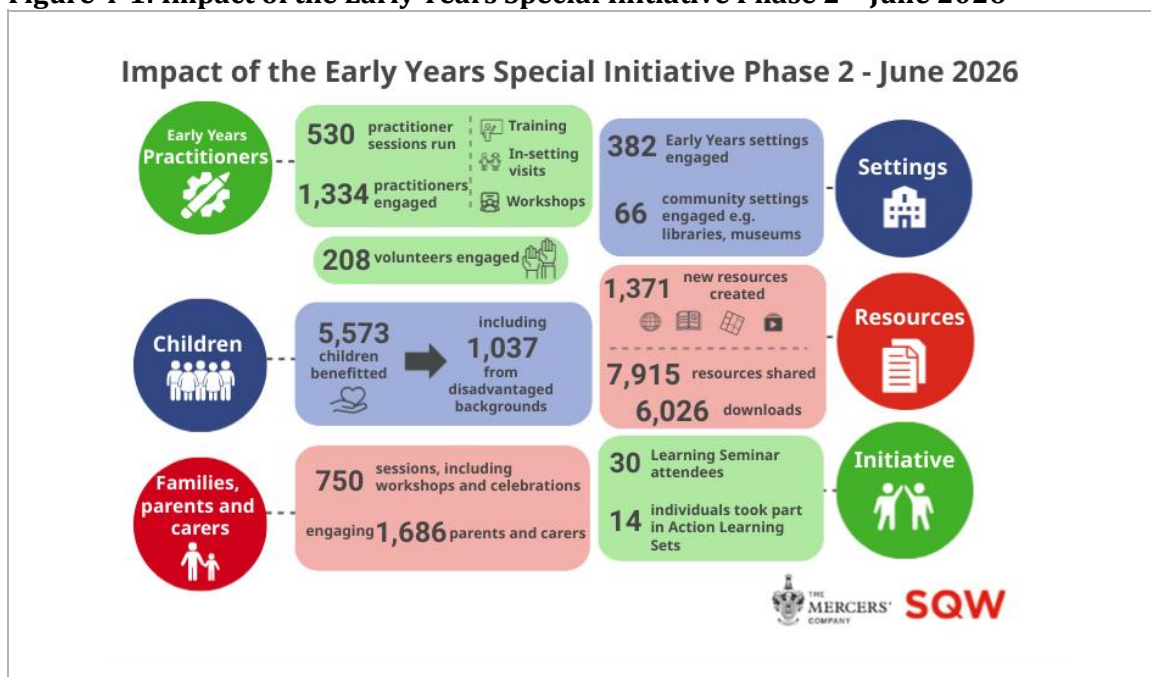
Resources

- 4.16** As of June 2026, grantees had **created or adapted 1,371 resources**, including training materials, teaching packs, facilitator guides, videos, websites, newsletters, resource bags, home-learning materials and practitioner toolkits. Many organisations continued to refine and expand their resources based on participant feedback, with a particular focus on improving digital content and supporting learning beyond direct programme delivery.
- 4.17** Grantees also reported **distributing 7,915 resources** to parents, practitioners, volunteers and settings. These included books, home-learning packs, activity sheets, toolkits, postcards, certificates, teaching materials and digital resources. In addition, online resources were **accessed 6,026 times**, with grantees reporting growing engagement with webpages, videos and other digital content, highlighting the increasing role of online resources in extending programme reach and supporting learning outside of sessions.

Infographic

- 4.18** An infographic summarising the analysis of the light touch monitoring data is shown in Figure 4-1.

Figure 4-1: Impact of the Early Years Special Initiative Phase 2 – June 2026



Source: SQW graphic created using analysis of light-touch monitoring data

5. Insights from the Action Learning Sets

Summary

- Over the course of the year, three Action Learning Sets were convened for Cohort 1 and Cohort 2. Participants discussed a range of challenges and received peer support to identify solutions.
- Participants viewed the Sets as a valuable opportunity for personal and professional development, providing space to connect with other grantees, learn from the expertise within the group, and step back from day-to-day pressures to reflect on their work. Relationships and trust between group members have continued to strengthen, enhancing the supportive learning environment.
- This was the first year that the Action Learning Sets were self-facilitated. While the transition required some adjustment, Cohort 1 reported growing confidence in self-facilitation over time, and Cohort 2 ultimately expressed a preference for the approach.

5.1 This chapter presents the insights from the Action Learning Sets. The dates and format of the Action Learning Sets in Year 3 are presented in Table 5-1, below.

Table 5-1: Dates and format of Action Learning Sets in Year 3

Cohort 1	Cohort 2
• Monday 20th October 2025, 10am-1pm (online) • Wednesday 28th January 2026, 10am-1pm (online) • Wednesday 20th May 2026, 2-5pm (online²²)	• Monday 13th October 2025, 2-5pm (in-person) • Wednesday 21st January 2026, 2-5pm (in-person) • Wednesday 13th May 2026, 2-5pm (in-person)

5.2 The Action Learning Sets themselves are confidential but participants provided feedback on the process for this report, which is shared below. All quotes are from Action Learning Set participants.

Topics discussed

5.3 As explained in Chapter 2, Action Learning is an effective way to help people and organisations develop and solve real problems with support from their peers. At each Action

²² This Action Learning Set was originally scheduled to take place in person but was moved online due to planned Tube strikes.

Learning Set, one or two participants presented on a situation or challenge of their choosing. Examples of topics discussed included:

- **Strategic thinking and influence**
 - How can we carve out time for strategic thinking while managing the day-to-day demands of project management?
 - How can we create further opportunities and sustain or expand our impact?
 - How can we strengthen our influence with primary schools to improve the quality of Early Years pedagogy?
 - What is needed to effectively communicate our offer to others in the Early Years sector?
- **Engagement and participation**
 - How can we encourage greater participation in parent training sessions?
 - How can we engage schools more effectively and ensure follow-through on their initial commitment to the project?
- **Funding and sustainability** – How can we diversify our programme to better reflect the current funding landscape in schools?
- **Workforce pressures** - How can we best mitigate workforce pressures when delivering our projects?
- **Professional development** – How can we, as professionals, ensure access to ongoing development opportunities when working within organisations with limited resources?
- **Safeguarding** – How can we support teams to maintain compassionate engagement with families while also upholding boundaries and safeguarding requirements?

Reflections on the process

- 5.4** Participants were invited to share feedback on their experience of the Action Learning Sets during the final sessions in May and through a follow-up survey. This feedback will be used to inform the design and delivery of Action Learning in Year 4.

In what ways did participants find the Action Learning Sets beneficial?

- 5.5** During the final Action Learning Set in May, Cohort 1 participants reflected that, despite delivering very different programmes, they share a strong sense of common purpose that brings the group together. This alignment and collective energy, fostered through the Action Learning process, was seen as both important and motivating. Participants also valued having dedicated discussion time at the end of each Set. As their work draws to a close, they

emphasised the importance of having space for reflection and forward thinking, which the format enables.

5.6 In their final set, Cohort 2 participants said that they found the Action Learning Sets highly beneficial. They described the Sets as welcoming and supportive spaces and highlighted the value of meeting in person, which provided a comfortable environment for discussion. The Sets were seen as a valuable opportunity to seek advice and share learning. They also appreciated the diversity of roles and seniority within the group – including CEOs, frontline project managers and fundraisers – which brought a wide range of perspectives and enriched the discussions.

5.7 In the feedback survey (discussed in more detail in Chapter 7), grantees who had participated in the Action Learning Sets echoed many of the points raised during the final sessions. They described the Sets as a valuable opportunity for personal development, providing space to connect with other grantees, learn from the expertise within the group, and step back from day-to-day pressures to reflect on their work. Participants also highlighted the benefit of developing their facilitation skills.

How, if at all, have the Action Learning Sets influenced participants' work?

5.8 Participants gave a few specific examples of how the Action Learning Sets had influenced their work, including:

- Identifying actions to strengthen parental engagement;
- Establishing a senior management forum, directly inspired by a conversation within a Set;
- Adopting a more questioning approach when supporting colleagues; and
- Creating space for deeper reflection on projects and how their organisation communicates and promotes its work.

5.9 Participants also reflected more broadly on the value of the Action Learning Sets:

"I have taken away so many things from the Sets – it is hard to pin down specifics!"

"The Action Learning Sets have been a genuine privilege to attend, and I will take my learnings with me, wherever life takes me next!"

Was there anything that participants did not like about the process? How did they find the transition to self-facilitating?

5.10 Participants were asked if there was anything they did not like about the process or found challenging. One participant reflected that they had left a session feeling they may have overshared, highlighting the difficulty of striking the right balance between personal and

professional boundaries. Another noted that they were not always able to share certain work-related challenges, as these were not appropriate for the group setting and would typically only be discussed with their chair of trustees. Despite this, they emphasised that they still valued the process and enjoyed supporting others who presented.

5.11 Some participants found the shift to self-facilitating challenging, with one noting that they did not feel particularly comfortable facilitating and another describing the process as *“a bit awkward at times”*. Despite these initial challenges, Cohort 1 participants reported growing confidence in their ability to self-facilitate over the course of the year. They highlighted that the group’s strength now lies within its members, who have developed a strong sense of ownership over how it operates. Participants noted that they feel able to sustain the group independently, which felt to them like an important shift. In their feedback, Cohort 2 participants expressed a preference for self-facilitation, noting that it felt more relaxed and warmer. One participant suggested that a simpler resource setting out the steps involved in self-facilitation would be helpful.

Looking ahead to Year 4

5.12 In July 2026, SQW diarised the Sets for Cohorts 1 and 2 in Year 4 and coordinated with Mercers’ to book space for in-person sessions. Confirming dates as early as possible will help participants protect time in their diaries and minimise non-attendance.

5.13 Cohort 1 will continue to meet three times annually: twice online during the Autumn and Spring terms, and once in person during the Summer. Cohort 2 will also continue to meet three times annually: once per term, in person at Mercers’. The dates and format of the Action Learning Sets in Year 4 are presented in Table 5-2.

Table 5-2: Dates and format of Action Learning Sets in Year 4

Cohort 1	Cohort 2
- Wednesday 7th October 2026 (online) - Wednesday 24th February 2027 (online) - Tuesday 29th June 2027 (in-person)	- Wednesday 28th October 2026 (in-person) - Tuesday 23rd February 2026 (in-person) - Tuesday 18th May (in-person)

6. Insights from the Learning Seminar

Summary

- The Learning Seminar was held at Mercers' on 15th June 2026, serving as both a celebratory and knowledge-sharing event. The theme for the day was *"Inclusive practice and co-design"*.
- The event opened with a short presentation by SQW on the evolution and principles of inclusive practice, followed by cross-cohort small group discussions where grantees reflected on how they embed inclusive practice in their work and the challenges they have encountered.
- The second half of the morning focused on co-design, with two grantees sharing different approaches, leading into a Q&A and whole-group discussion.
- The seminar concluded with a session on the October Learning Symposium to support grantees to start planning their contributions.
- A live illustrator captured the key messages from the sessions in two engaging visual resources.

- 6.1** The Learning Seminar serves three purposes: it is a mechanism for knowledge generation and knowledge sharing between grantees, and it is also a celebration event. This chapter presents the insights from the Year 3 Learning Seminar, which was held at Mercers' Hall on 15th June 2026.

Theme

- 6.2** The theme for the Year 3 Learning Seminar was *"Inclusive practice and co-design"*. Three questions were explored during the event:
- What are the key principles of inclusive practice in respect of Early Year programmes?
 - How can inclusive practice be embedded into the design and delivery of Early Years programmes?
 - What models of co-design exist across the Initiative?

Format of the day

- 6.3** The Learning Seminar began with a brief welcome from Mercers', followed by a presentation from SQW on inclusive practice, which covered its evolution, importance, key principles, and what this can look like in action. Attendees then took part in cross-cohort, small group discussions to reflect on how inclusive practice is embedded within the design and delivery of their Early Years programmes.

- 6.4** The second half of the morning focused on co-design, beginning with inputs from two grantees – Coram Family & Childcare and Chickenshed. This was followed by a Q&A session with the presenters, alongside a wider group discussion on co-design.
- 6.5** The Learning Seminar concluded with a segment on the October Learning Symposium, outlining the aims and format of the event to grantees and supporting them to begin thinking through how they would like to contribute to the day.

Insights

Inclusive practice

- 6.6** During the small group, cross-cohort discussions, grantees reflected on how they embed inclusive practice in their work, as well as the challenges they have encountered. Grantees emphasised that a layered approach to inclusion is essential, extending beyond a focus on children to encompass the wider ecosystem of families, practitioners and settings. **Inclusion must be responsive, flexible and empowering, underpinned by a relationship-first approach grounded in trust and a strong understanding of context.** Organisations also agreed that inclusion is an ongoing vision – one they all work towards – which requires continuous reflection, evaluation, and development.

Examples of how grantees embed inclusive practice

- **Home-Start London's** approach is inherently inclusive, grounded in meeting families where they are and responding to their individual needs. Their peer-to-peer model, which matches volunteers with families who share similar experiences or backgrounds, helps to build trust quickly and fosters more meaningful connections. Volunteers are supported through ongoing supervision to reflect on and strengthen their practice. In addition, Home-Start London actively engages a group of parents with lived experience to inform service delivery and ensure that children's voices are heard and amplified.
- **Early Education** practitioners working in schools embed inclusive practice from the outset, guided by the 'ABCD' framework: A – anti-bias, B – belonging and building, C – creative, and D – demonstrating. Reflection is also built in, giving practitioners dedicated time to consider how to apply creativity and further strengthen their practice.
- **Youth Sport Trust** works closely with practitioners to ensure that delivery approaches can be easily replicated and adapted. For example, in their Health Movers programme, activities are intentionally non-sequential, allowing educators to integrate them flexibly within existing structures and tailor delivery to their context.
- The **National Day Nurseries Association's** online training courses are a key mechanism for promoting inclusivity for practitioners, particularly by removing geographical barriers. NDNA highlighted the importance of testing digital resources and gathering

continuous feedback, especially from neurodiverse users, with ongoing user experience (UX) research being central to ensuring resources are as inclusive and accessible as possible.

- **Discover Children Story Centre** embeds inclusive practice by working closely with nursery staff to understand children's needs. Delivery is shaped by ongoing feedback, creating a two-way learning process between staff and Story Builders, grounded in listening and collaboration.
- **Coram Family & Childcare** noted that their co-delivery with volunteers creates a more welcoming environment for parents, helping to reduce barriers to engagement and achieve more inclusive delivery.
- **Chickenshed** emphasised that inclusive practice should be rooted in kindness and compassion. They noted that current language can feel overly elitist, often framing inclusion as supporting "*the needy*" rather than ensuring everyone belongs. They highlighted that preconceived assumptions about children's abilities can be limiting, and that practice should instead start from what every child *can* do. At Chickenshed, this ethos is made explicit: it is ok not to achieve everything.
- The **Fatherhood Institute** also emphasised that inclusive practice must be reflected in language and terminology. For example, they use the term "*male caregivers*" to include as many people as possible in their messaging about their work.
- **Peeples** has developed videos showcasing its activities to help families across London understand what sessions involve. Recognising the importance of representation, the videos feature diverse families and participants speaking in their own languages. Related discussions also highlighted that, for families with special educational needs (SEN) or neurodiverse children, videos demonstrating what a session looks like can be particularly valuable. These help parents feel more prepared and confident about attending, reducing barriers to participation.

Challenges of embedding inclusive practice

- 6.7** Grantees' experiences highlighted that embedding inclusive practice brings a range of challenges, spanning sector-level constraints, workforce capacity and confidence, risks of stigmatisation, and sustaining practice over time.
- **Resource constraints:** Widespread sector pressures – including limited funding, staffing shortages, and constraints on time, materials and physical space – mean that inclusive practice can place additional strain on already stretched services.

- **Workforce development:** Continuing professional development (CPD) is essential for embedding inclusive practice but it is often difficult to prioritise due to the resource constraints outlined above.
- **Skills, experience, and confidence:** A lack of organisational experience in inclusive approaches can make *“inclusion by design”* more challenging. In addition, fear of getting things wrong can discourage organisations and practitioners from fully engaging with inclusive practice.
- **Workforce dynamics:** Variation in perspectives across the workforce – including generational differences, particularly among volunteers – can make it challenging to maintain a shared understanding of inclusive practice. Ongoing communities of practice and engagement are important to support alignment across senior leaders and delivery staff, and paid and volunteer practitioners.
- **Variation across settings:** Working across a range of settings, with differing organisational cultures, resources, and approaches to engaging children and families, adds further complexity to embedding inclusive practice. Practitioners must consider and respond to differences in language, culture, ability, and family circumstances, and adapt their approaches to ensure all participants feel welcome, and able to engage fully.
- **Parental engagement:** While central to inclusive practice, engaging parents in programme activities can be challenging, as highlighted by the Year 2 Special Project.
- **Level of need:** High levels of need, combined with under-resourced staffing, can make inclusive delivery more challenging. When staff attention is stretched across larger groups, this may affect the experience of children with low levels of need and the ability to maintain safe, inclusive environments – underscoring the importance of sufficient numbers of skilled and experienced staff.
- **Risk of stigmatisation:** While designed to support inclusion, some approaches - such as assigning one-to-one adult support in the classroom - can unintentionally single children out and make their peers see them as different.
- **Tokenistic approaches to representation:** Efforts to improve representation risk becoming superficial or *“tick-box”* exercises if not embedded meaningfully in practice. This requires moving beyond symbolic inclusion to ensure that diverse voices actively inform decision-making, influence programme design and delivery (including resources and materials) and are reflected in ongoing engagement and feedback processes.
- **Sustaining practice over time:** Maintaining momentum and consistency can be difficult, especially when grantee programmes involve training practitioners to deliver in their own settings. Ongoing support is important to sustaining good practice, especially where

practitioners are working within resource-constrained environments, managing competing priorities, or facing other implementation challenges.

Co-design

- 6.8** Coram Family & Childcare (Coram) presented on their use of co-design within the Books Together programme, which supports parents and carers to find enjoyment in sharing books with their children. Insights from the presentation included that involving parents early in the design process leads to a programme that better meets their needs. Parents' inputs shaped key elements - including timing, location, session delivery, resources, and approaches to monitoring and evaluation - resulting in sessions that are: friendly and non-judgemental, avoiding a *"teacher-led"* feel; inclusive and child-friendly, encouraging movement and exploration; promoted using real photos from sessions, rather than overly polished or *"perfect"* images, which parents found off-putting.
- 6.9** Coram also emphasised the importance of ongoing collaboration, with parents involved in their work as both co-delivery and co-research volunteers. Co-delivery volunteers support facilitators in delivering sessions and help create a reassuring, supportive environment for parents, while co-research volunteers work alongside Coram's impact and evaluation team to gather feedback through surveys and conversations. This approach enables continuous learning and refinement, ensuring the programme remains relevant and responsive over time.
- 6.10** In their session, Chickenshed led a paper-based interactive activity to demonstrate their *"soft collaboration"* approach to co-design with families and practitioners within their New Botanics programme. A key insight from the session was how simple, low-resource and creative methods can effectively engage participants, encourage meaningful contribution and create space for different forms of engagement and thinking. All learning seminar attendees took part in the activity, with strong and sustained engagement.
- 6.11** In the whole group discussion, Home-Start London talked about their annual research, which is typically themed (for example, on the cost of living) and is intended to help the organisation better understand and respond to the needs of families and volunteers. A key insight from this work was the value of involving parents throughout the research process. Home-Start London's Parent Champions group contributes to designing the research, shaping its focus, and interpreting findings to ensure they reflect lived experience. Home-Start London shared learning from this approach, including the need to allow sufficient time to build relationships with parents, offer both in-person and online engagement options, and create regular opportunities for feedback. They also emphasised the importance of embedding parent voice beyond research, including inviting parents to sit on recruitment panels to help shape hiring decisions. This reflects their view that staff and volunteers should represent the communities they serve.

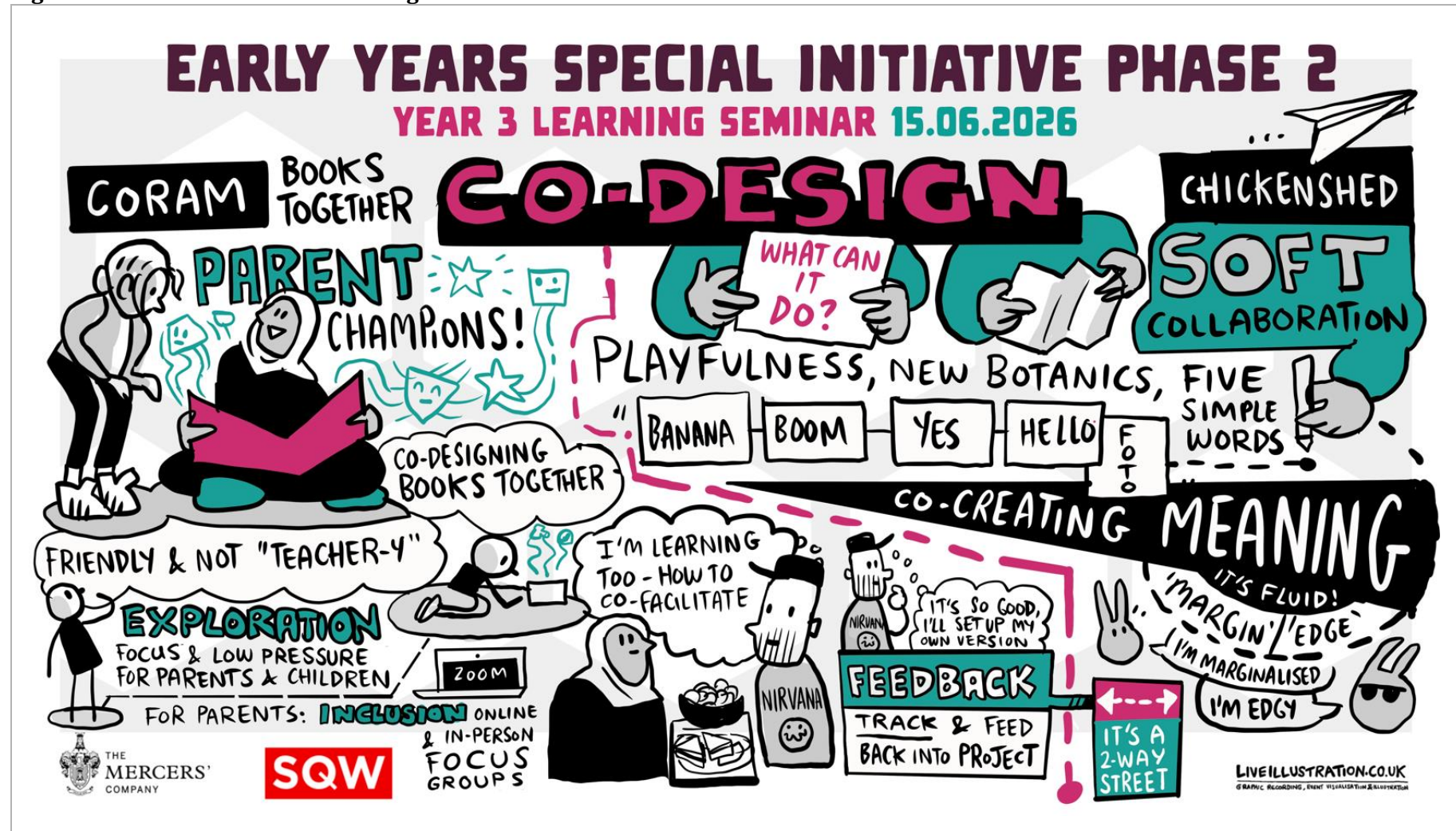
Live illustration

- 6.12** Our live illustrator, Pete Morey, joined the Learning Seminar to capture the sessions in two engaging visual resources. The illustrations reflect the seminar's two overarching themes, **inclusive practice** and **co-design**, highlighting key insights and discussions from across the day.

Figure 6-1: Live illustration – Inclusive practice



Figure 6-2: Live illustration – Co-design



7. Feedback from the grantees on SQW's Learning Partner activities

Summary

- **Special Project:** Grantees valued the discussions with SQW, the synthesis of learning and practice across organisations, and the practical toolkit developed to support meaningful engagement in evaluation and the sharing of evaluation findings.
- **Learning Seminar:** Grantees appreciated the opportunity to step away from day-to-day delivery, come together in person, reconnect with others funded through the Initiative, and share ideas and experiences. Suggestions for future events included providing greater clarity on expectations in advance, increasing opportunities for cross-cohort learning, making greater use of the expertise within the room, and focusing sessions around specific themes to enable more in-depth discussion and practical knowledge exchange.
- **Light touch data collection:** Grantees liked that the process was consistent with previous years, and found it straightforward and proportionate. They also appreciated receiving a Word version of the survey, and suggested that receiving a copy of their completed submission would be useful for record-keeping and future reporting.

- 7.1** This chapter presents the feedback from grantees on SQW's Learning Partner activities in Year 3. This includes the Special Project, Learning Seminar and light touch data collection. Feedback on the Action Learning Sets is included in Chapter 5.

Feedback on the Special Project

- 7.2** Grantees who commented on the Special Project described their conversations with SQW during the fieldwork as interesting and felt that the project provided a useful synthesis of different approaches and practices to understanding and sharing the impact of early years programmes across grantee organisations. The emerging findings workshop was an opportunity for grantees to engage with the findings collectively, contribute their own insights, and share learning and experiences with one another. Grantees also highlighted the resulting toolkit, a practical and visual guide to support them to apply the Special Project's findings in their work, as a particularly helpful resource. One grantee said they had shared the toolkit with their partner organisations. Themes from the Special Project about engaging and communicating with children, families and practitioners, and sharing good practice, have informed a Learning Symposium to be held in October 2026 so SQW will seek to capture further reflections on the value of the Special Project as delivery continues into the fourth year of the Initiative.

Feedback on the Learning Seminar

- 7.3** Grantees who responded to the survey spoke positively about the Learning Seminar as an opportunity to step away from day-to-day delivery, come together in person, reconnect with others funded through the Initiative, and share ideas and experiences. The event was seen as providing valuable time for reflection, networking and building relationships with other organisations.

"I think the conversation between people and the networking is always very useful and being in person is far better than online. It often feels a treat and so often the work in Early Years is hard, demanding and constant – so a pause to think and talk is welcomed in a wonderful surrounding".

Grantee

- 7.4** The presentations from SQW and fellow grantees were mostly seen as useful and informative, providing relevant insights and learning. The group discussions were similarly well received, with attendees appreciating the mix of participants and perspectives. The presence of notetakers helped create an environment where conversations could flow naturally while ensuring key points were captured.

"I particularly liked that the groups were a broad mix of people bringing a variety of contextual experiences. Having SQW colleagues capture the key points was really helpful as it allowed the discussion to flow naturally rather than having to stop and consider how comments should be worded for presentation."

Grantee

- 7.5** The live illustrator was highlighted as a particularly engaging feature of the event, helping to bring key themes and discussions to life. Feedback also reflected appreciation for the SQW team, who were seen as friendly, supportive and committed to the work.
- 7.6** Alongside the positive feedback, attendees also identified a small number of areas that could be considered when planning future events. While the content was generally well received, a couple of attendees found the presentation on inclusive practice less relevant to their learning needs.
- 7.7** Looking ahead to future Learning Seminars, attendees suggested creating more opportunities for cross-cohort interaction, including smaller group discussions with time to share back key insights with the wider group. There was also interest in making greater use of the expertise within the room and creating more opportunities for organisations to share practical learning and approaches.
- 7.8** Suggestions for future events included focusing the agenda on a single topic or dedicating the event to one specific area – for example, sharing experiences, exploring common challenges, or identifying solutions - to allow for more in-depth discussion and learning. Another idea

was to introduce an 'offers shop', where each organisation could showcase examples of practice, approaches and resources that may be useful to others across the sector.

Feedback on the light touch data collection

- 7.9** Grantees liked that the light touch data collection process was consistent with previous years, and found the process straightforward, proportionate and not repetitive. They also valued receiving a Word version of the survey alongside the submission link, which made it easier to review and prepare responses.
- 7.10** Looking ahead to next year, one suggestion was for SQW to provide organisations with a copy of their completed submission after it has been submitted, enabling them to retain it for their own records and future reference.

8. Reflections and recommendations

- 8.1** This chapter presents reflections on the third year of the Special Initiative plus recommendations for Mercers', SQW and the grantees in Year 4.

Reflections

- 8.2** The Initiative encompasses a diverse range of delivery models, from direct support for children and families to programmes that build the skills and capacity of practitioners and volunteers. This provides valuable learning about different approaches to improving young children's numeracy, literacy and language skills, and supporting school readiness.
- 8.3** Across the Initiative, grantees are continuing to make good progress, expanding delivery to new settings and geographical areas and reaching more children, families, practitioners, and volunteers. Alongside this, grantees are also continuing to develop and refine their programmes and their evaluation and feedback processes.
- 8.4** At the same time, a number of delivery challenges remain. These include capacity constraints among partner organisations, difficulties scheduling activities, variable levels of engagement across locations, and, in some cases, settings withdrawing before delivery begins. While these issues have generally been managed well, they can affect the pace and consistency of delivery.
- 8.5** Many of the delivery challenges experienced by grantees are symptomatic of wider pressures across the Early Years sector. Funding constraints, rising operating costs and workforce capacity issues continue to affect many organisations, creating an increasingly challenging environment for delivery. The liquidation of AVUK illustrates the possible consequences of these wider pressures and highlights the importance of understanding how sector conditions may affect the sustainability of grantee organisations and their work.
- 8.6** In this context, Learning Partner activities remain fit for purpose and continue to be valued by grantees. The practical focus of the Special Project, particularly the development of a toolkit to support meaningful engagement in evaluation and the dissemination of evaluation findings, has been well received. The successful transition from facilitated to self-facilitated Action Learning Sets also suggests that grantees are taking increasing ownership of shared learning processes. Grantees continue to value opportunities to meet in person, exchange experiences, and learn from one another through activities such as the Learning Seminar.
- 8.7** As Cohort 1 approaches the final year of funding, there is a need to consider how Learning Partner activities can best support grantees to maximise the opportunities and impact of their final year. This may involve placing greater emphasis on legacy and sustainability and more explicitly capturing the benefits of participation in the learning community, including peer support, knowledge sharing, and collaboration between grantees.

Recommendations for SQW and Mercers'

- With Cohort 1 entering its final year of funding, discuss priorities for Year 4 and how Learning Partner activities can best support grantees to maximise impact, capture learning, and strengthen legacy.
- Explore options for maintaining the learning community beyond the Initiative, for example through an alumni network, online community, or other ongoing mechanisms for engagement.

Recommendations for SQW

- Plan Learning Partner activities in line with the priorities agreed with Mercers'.
- Retain a practical focus for the Special Project, including the development of tools, resources, and outputs that support grantees' work.
- Incorporate grantee feedback into future Learning Seminars, including increased opportunities for cross-cohort interaction, smaller group discussions with plenary feedback, greater use of expertise within the group, and more focused agendas centred on a single theme or topic.
- Simplify the Action Learning resource to support sustained engagement with, and confidence in, self-facilitation.
- Continue to provide a Word version of the light-touch data collection survey alongside the online survey link to support completion.
- Provide grantees with a copy of their completed submission to support record-keeping and future reporting.

Recommendations for grantees

- Consider the Special Project findings regarding what works to meaningfully engage families and practitioners in evaluation.
- Use the SQW tool kit as a practical resource for planning, tailoring, and strengthening the dissemination of evaluation findings across different audiences.
- Consider priorities for the Year 4 Special Project, including whether the focus should be on exploring a specific theme (as in previous years), providing practical support to grantees' programmes, or capturing and sharing learning more widely across the sector.

- [For Action Learning Set participants] Commit to the Year 4 Action Learning Set schedule and continue to actively engage with the self-facilitation process to support collaborative learning.
- Maintain a focus on ensuring the quality and consistency of monitoring data returns.

Annex A: Detailed description of Learning Partner activities

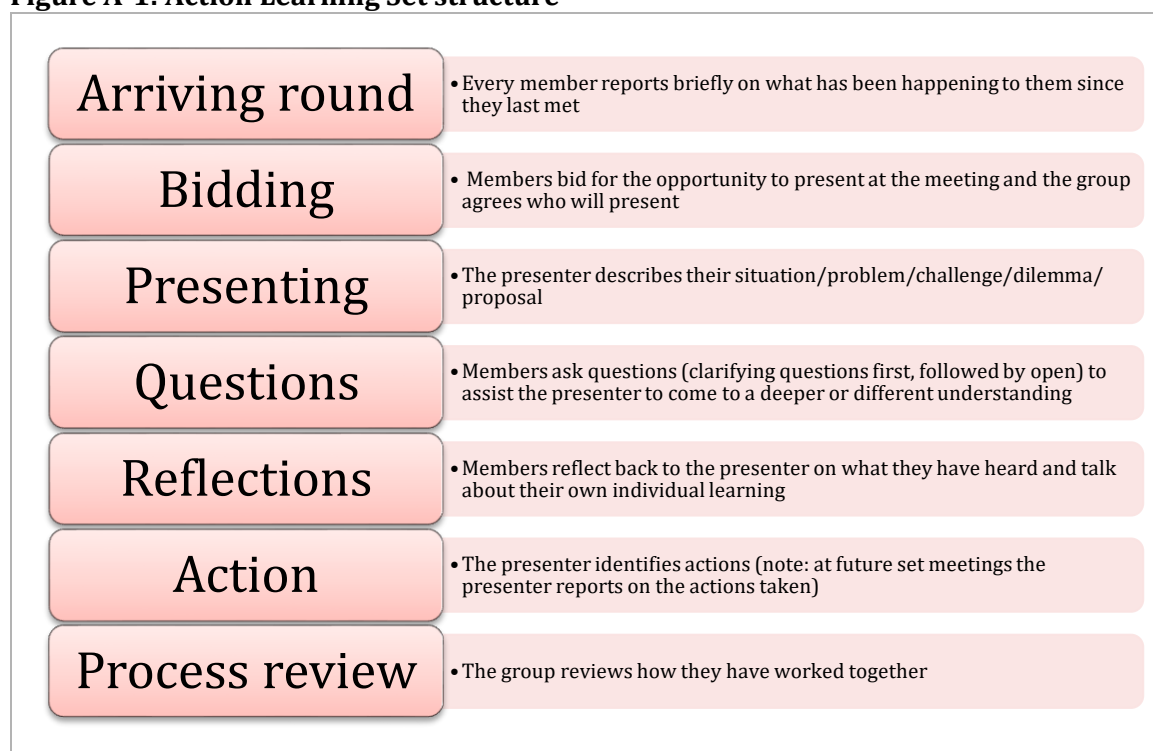
Inception and scoping

- A.1** As part of the scoping phase in Year 3, we held one-hour catch up calls with each of the grantees to find out how their projects were progressing and to discuss their plans for the year ahead. These conversations provided insights into upcoming delivery and evaluation activities, the extent of sustainability planning, and any concerns the grantees had. We also invited grantees to share suggestions for the focus of the Year 3 Special Project.
- A.2** The main output of the scoping phase was a proposed learning plan for Year 3, which was shared with, and signed off by, Almaz Zainal at Mercers' in December 2025.

Knowledge generation

Action Learning Sets

- A.3** Action Learning is an effective way to help people and organisations develop and solve real problems with support from their peers.
- A.4** Each grantee organisation nominated one individual (or two in the case of Early Education) to take part their Cohort's Action Learning Sets throughout Year 3 of the Initiative.
- A.5** We liaised with the participants in July 2025 to diarise the Sets and coordinated with Mercers' to book rooms for the in-person sessions.
- A.6** The Sets were self-facilitated by grantees for the first time - following external facilitation in previous years - and followed a set structure, as outlined in Figure A-1.

Figure A-1: Action Learning Set structure

Source: Action Learning Associates

A.7 All participants had the opportunity to present on a situation or challenge of their choosing.

A.8 In the first meeting of each group, participants were asked what they wanted to get out of the Action Learning Sets in Year 3; in the final meeting participants reflected upon this, and shared feedback about their experience of the Sets to help inform delivery in Year 4.

Special Projects

A.9 The Special Projects are 'deep dives' into themes or topics of interest and relevance to the grantees. One Special Project is conducted in each year of the Initiative, in the Spring.

A.10 During the Autumn catch up calls, we asked grantees if they had any suggestions for the focus of the Special Project in Year 3. They mentioned a range of themes, including:

- Impact evaluation
- Co-production and inclusive practice
- Sustainability
- Partnership working
- Parental engagement (building on the Year 2 Special Project)
- Practitioner engagement and support

- Physical development in the Early Years
- Managing growth
- Fatherhood.

A.11 In the absence of a unanimous view, we endeavoured to identify a 'best fit' theme that would apply to all the grantees in different ways. This was agreed following discussions with Mercers'.

A.12 The agreed theme for the Special Project in Year 3 was "Understanding and sharing the impact of Early Years programmes."

A.13 The Special Project was structured around the following research questions:

- How can families and practitioners be meaningfully involved in evaluations of Early Years programmes, to strengthen their impact on young children and families?
 - In what ways can families and practitioners authentically shape the way evaluations are designed and delivered, ensuring that charities and their services are appropriately tailored to meet community needs?
 - What works best to get families and practitioners to participate in evaluation activities?
- How can evaluation findings be communicated effectively to families, settings, funders, and policymakers?
 - What are the expected outcomes of sharing evaluation findings? Does this differ among different stakeholder groups?
 - For policymakers, how can charities' evaluation findings be used to inform and shape future policy and strategy?

A.14 These research questions were explored through a rapid review of existing evidence and interviews with Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 grantees, and, where relevant, their external evaluators. Following completion of the fieldwork, an emerging findings workshop was held online in April 2026 to give grantees the opportunity to explore the findings and implications for their work in advance of the Year 3 report. After the workshop, a toolkit for understanding and sharing the impact of Early Years programmes was shared with grantees.

Light touch monitoring data

A.15 We collected light touch monitoring data from grantees to identify the collective impact of Initiative. The metrics map onto the outputs listed in the logic model. The data collection framework is presented in Table A-1.

Table A-1: Framework for light touch data collection

Categories	Metrics
Progress against targets	• What were your targets for this year? • What progress have you made towards these?
Early Years Practitioners	• Number of practitioner training/networking/mentoring/support sessions run • Number of practitioners who have attended training/networking/mentoring/support sessions
Families, parents and carers	• Number of family/parent/carers training/support/guidance sessions run • Overall number of people (parents/carers) who have attended the training/support/guidance sessions • If you are able to tell us, of those who have attended the training/support/guidance sessions, what was the number of: ➤ Mothers ➤ Fathers ➤ Carers ➤ Family units
Volunteers	• Number of volunteers engaged in the programme
Children	• Number of children benefiting from the programme • Number of children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefiting from the programme
Settings	• Number of Early Years settings engaged • Number of community settings engaged (e.g. libraries)
Initiative	• Number of (and attendance at) Learning Seminar • Number of (and attendance at) Action Learning Sets
Resources	• Number of new resources created • Number of resources disseminated • Number of resources accessed (e.g. page views, downloads etc)

Source: SQW

A.16 The data were collected via a short online survey that was live for just over four weeks between 1st and 30th June 2026. Where grantees did not have data or a metric was not relevant to their work, they were not expected to submit data. Following each question there was an open text box for grantees to provide additional information or context for their data entry, if they so wished. The data were analysed in Excel.

Knowledge sharing

- A.17** We hosted the Year 3 Learning Seminar at Mercers' on 15th June 2026. Around 30 people attended the event, which ran from 10am to 1pm, followed by a networking lunch.
- A.18** The Learning Seminar began with a brief welcome from Mercers', followed by a presentation from SQW on inclusive practice, which covered its evolution, importance, key principles, and what this can look like in action. Attendees then took part in cross-cohort, small group discussions to reflect on how inclusive practice is embedded within the design and delivery of their Early Years programmes.
- A.19** The second half of the morning focused on co-design, beginning with inputs from two grantees – Coram and Chickenshed. This was followed by a Q&A session with the presenters, alongside a wider group discussion on co-design.
- A.20** The Learning Seminar concluded with a segment on the October Learning Symposium, outlining the aims and format of the event to grantees and supporting them to begin thinking through how they would like to contribute to the day.
- A.21** A live illustrator attended the event to capture the key messages from the learning sessions in an engaging resource, which is presented in Chapter 6.

Additional activities

- A.22** We asked grantees to provide feedback on their experience of SQW's Learning Partner activities in Year 3 to inform planning for Year 4. The feedback was collected via a short online survey that was live between 6th and 10th July 2026. The survey included specific questions for individuals who had taken part in the Action Learning Sets.

Annex B: Logic model for Phase 2 of the Early Years Special Initiative

Context: The Mercers' Company's Early Years Special Initiative provides grants to organisations in London that use evidence-based interventions to increase young children's numeracy, literacy and language skills, and their school readiness (personal, social and emotional development). Phase 2 of the Initiative was launched in 2023 and will run until 2028. During this time two cohorts of grantees will receive funding for four years of delivery.

Inputs	Activities	
The Mercers' Company Grant funding (up to £300,000 per organisation) Learning Partner support provided by SQW (includes the delivery of Action Learning Sets and Special Projects) Access to (optional) capacity building support through trusted partners (e.g. Media Trust, Cranfield Trust) Free hire of Mercers' Hall to all grantees Mercers' staff time Mercers' Committee time Grantee organisations Staff time Equipment and resources Other partners involved in delivery (not directly receiving Mercers' grant funding) (includes organisations delivering or supporting the delivery of the intervention, local evaluators, Early Years settings, etc.) Staff time Equipment and resources Other 'In-kind' support (including volunteer time and Early Years provider time)	Cohort 1 organisations Coram Family and Childcare <i>'Increasing parental confidence to develop emergent literacy skills in the home environment'</i> Working with parents to co-design, co-market and co-deliver a series of fun courses for parents and their children in community settings, to spark a love of reading so that it becomes a habitual activity in the home. Campaign for Learning <i>'Early Years Maths Through Storytelling'</i> Family numeracy programme designed with families, maths experts and Early Years providers that seeks to teach parents to build maths concepts (e.g. numbers, patterns, spatial reasoning) into story telling activities with their children. Early Education <i>'Supporting Pedagogy, Arts and Creativity Everywhere (SPACE) to Flourish'</i> Bespoke coaching and mentoring for early years practitioners, inspiring practitioners to incorporate arts-based approaches and creativity into learning and teaching. Uses 'Thinking Spaces' to develop a sustained reflective community, alongside the creation of new resources. Fatherhood Institute <i>'FRED: Fathers Reading Every Day'</i> Equipping Early Years practitioners with evidence-based techniques for successful father-engagement in their child's development, through the creation of resources to support annual implementation of FRED, and the training of a 'Dad Squad' of local male volunteers to support settings' promotion, outreach and evaluation activities. National Day Nurseries Association <i>'Early Years Maths and Language & Communication Champions'</i> Online training for Early Years Practitioners on embedding maths and literacy learning into play-based activities and using auditing tools to assess learning. Champions then use audits to evaluate current practice and the competence levels of staff in their setting. Audit results are used to create an action plan, which is implemented by Champions with online support. Youth Sport Trust <i>'Healthy Movers'</i> Training Early Years practitioners to integrate play-based learning through the delivery of physical activity sessions. In addition, parents will be engaged through 'Stay and Play Clubs', and Healthy Movers Ambassadors (practitioners and local authority staff) will be recruited and trained. Mentoring for practitioners will be delivered in settings to establish/sustain programmes. Virtual networking for practitioners will support cross-setting engagement and identify support requirements.	Cohort 2 organisations Auditory Verbal UK <i>'Sound Futures - transforming outcomes for deaf children aged 2-5 in London'</i> Providing highly specialised training for professionals coaching parents with deaf children to develop auditory techniques and strategies that are implemented into daily home life in order to develop children's hearing and spoken language. Chickenshed <i>'New Botanics - Urban natural teaching Initiative'</i> Running a series of co-designed workshops for children in nursery settings over the course of 5 weeks. Workshops combine the arts with outdoor learning, using music, movement, sign and puppetry to support learning and improve school readiness. Nursery staff will also be upskilled to be able to embed creative and outdoor learning into their settings. Discover Children's Story Centre <i>'Sensory Storytelling: reading engagement activities plus training for Early Years practitioners and parents/carers'</i> Co-creation of a sensory storytelling session for 2-5 year olds, working in partnership with the staff, parents and children of a nursery in Newham. The programme will then embed Discover's Story Builders as resident storytellers in 12 settings across East London, to deliver the co-created session. Practical training for parents and Early Years staff in Discover's play and storytelling methodology will also be provided. Home-Start London <i>'Big Hopes, Big Future'</i> Tailored school readiness programme that will deliver enhanced training to staff and volunteers covering the key Early Years Foundation Stage framework areas. Trained staff will assess each referred family to identify children whose development is behind expected milestones, and then work with the family to agree an individual package of support, such as practical support, weekly home visits, digital and physical resources, weekly groups and outings. National Literacy Trust <i>'Early Words with Childminders'</i> Providing high quality training for childminders to embed language supporting strategies in their daily practice and strengthen their relationships with parents/carers. Also involves facilitating networking opportunities for childminders, as well as providing free resources and support. People <i>'Exploring Together - The Foundations of STEM: from pilot to practice'</i> Delivery of a training programme for Early Years teachers and parents in STEM that builds on a successful pilot, funded by Phase 1 of the Early Years Special Initiative. Children will be supported in settings and at home via everyday activities that are linked to early STEM skills to improve literacy, language, curiosity and confidence. The Children's Literacy Charity <i>'Story Lab'</i> Language and communication intervention that uses storytelling to support children's literacy and social development. Specialist tutors deliver fun, engaging, twice-weekly storytelling sessions for groups of five children. The storytelling sessions involve modelling strategies and a diverse range of picture books to support children's engagement and therefore a range of literacy outcomes.

Outputs

Early Years Practitioners

Number of practitioner training/networking/mentoring/support sessions run
Number of practitioners who have attended training/networking/mentoring/support sessions

Parents and carers

Number of parent/carer training/support/guidance sessions run
Overall number of people (parents/carers) who have attended the training/support/guidance sessions
Number of mothers, fathers, carers and family units who have attended the training/support/guidance sessions

Volunteers

Number of volunteers engaged in the programme

Children

Number of children benefiting from the programme
Number of children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefiting from the programme

Settings

Number of Early Years settings engaged
Number of community settings engaged (e.g. libraries)

Initiative

Number of (and attendance at) Learning Symposia
Number of (and attendance at) Action Learning Sets

Resources

Number of new resources created
Number of resources disseminated
Number of resources accessed (e.g. page views, downloads etc)

Outcomes

For Early Years Practitioners

Improve practitioner understanding of Early Years pedagogy
Improve practitioners' motivation to deliver effective pedagogy
Improve practitioners' confidence in delivering effective pedagogy
Improve practitioners' ability to reflect/evaluate own work
Improve relationships with parents

For parents and carers

Increase parental/carer understanding of the role they can play in children's learning
Increase parents'/carers' confidence in supporting their children's learning
Increase parental/carer engagement in children's learning
Improve relationships with EY settings

For volunteers

Improve volunteers' skills in supporting children and families

For children

Increase children's engagement in learning
Increase children's engagement in learning in community settings
Increase children's access to quality arts-based learning
Increase children's access to quality play-based learning
Improve children's health and wellbeing

For settings

Increase breadth of pedagogy in Early Years setting
Improve quality of teaching in Early Years settings
Improve cross-organisational partnerships

For grantee organisations

Increase the resilience of grantee's programmes
Increase the scale of grantee's programmes
Increase grantee's ability to identify and incorporate ongoing improvements to delivery

For the wider Early Years sector

Increase awareness of effective models for supporting children's literacy and numeracy
Increase understanding of how the strategies in the Initiative can influence outcomes of children's development and practitioners in Early Years settings

Assumptions:

- Children and families are able to engage in the programme
- The individual programmes have strong theoretical grounding and can reasonably be expected to lead to impact
- The individual programmes will broadly be delivered as planned throughout the Initiative, acknowledging adjustments in light of feedback and experience
- The programmes require initial buy-in from target beneficiaries and then ongoing, sustained engagement by these groups

Impacts

For children

Increase in children's numeracy skills

Increase in children's literacy and language skills

Improvements in children's school readiness (personal, social and emotional development)

For grantee organisations

Organisations in receipt of Mercers' funding are better able through improved knowledge and capacity to deliver high impact work



Contact

For more information:

Sarah Brown

Director, SQW

T: 0161 475 2105

E: sbrown@sqw.co.uk

1WR

1Wellington Road North

Stockport

SK4 1AF

www.sqw.co.uk

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