



## Black Country Early Outcomes project: Final evaluation report

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## Executive summary

The Early Outcomes project was a year-long project from August 2019 funded by the Department for Education. It focused on improving standards and outcomes and addressing weaknesses around speech, language and communication (SLC) and in the four Black Country local authorities (LAs): Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton. The Education Observatory at University of Wolverhampton was commissioned in August 2019 to evaluate the project using a combination of survey and qualitative research methods.

### Key findings

- Improved multi-agency working underpinned and supported the development of all outputs in the project.
- The literacy hubs provided an effective multi-agency approach to support parents and children. The events were planned and delivered by professionals from education, health and speech and language in each LA. This meant that parents could be supported by all these professionals in one location.
- Many parents felt that the literacy hubs offered more opportunities for their children to learn and develop in an environment different to standard stay and play activities.
- The Looking Glass home learning exhibition and consultation day also provided an effective multi-agency approach in supporting children, parents and practitioners across the LAs. This supported the development of a unique exhibition that has a large target audience and content that focuses on the education, health and speech, language and communication needs of children from conception.
- Early Talk Boost and HELLO training benefited practitioners and the training/resources are being used in practice. Parent/carers partnership and support was an important area of development for practitioners who attended these training programmes.
- Developing resources, such as the early outcomes pack, school readiness pathway and activity packs through the project has provided the Black Country LAs with resources that offer a unique multi-agency collaboration of information to support children, parents and practitioners.
- The literacy hub events and multi-agency working were regarded as overall success stories and the literacy hub events and the early outcomes pack were considered the most successful outputs by project team members.
- The project has supported project team member's professional development.
- All project team members are keen to continue multi-agency working after the project ends.

## Recommendations

- Professionals from education, health and speech and language need continuing opportunities to be able to work together to ensure messages delivered to parents are consistent and reflect their areas of specialism. This is evidenced in all of the outputs from the project.
- Professionals from education, health and speech and language are able to design and deliver unique events when they work collaboratively. This was clear from the events organised such as the literacy hubs and Looking Glass exhibition and the resources developed including the early outcomes pack and activity packs. When these professionals work together they are able collectively to consider a broad audience range and a wide developmental range for children from conception onwards. However, it is essential that professionals are afforded time to work collaboratively.
- The findings of this report emphasise the value and importance of continuing to work across LAs, agencies and services. In doing this, project team members were able to explore practice in other LAs, support one another and inform their own practice. Resources, events and training were then able to be developed that considered the needs of families in the Black Country as a whole. There is evidence throughout this report that many of the outputs have reduced siloed working.
- There is positive evidence of impact presented in this report in areas such as practitioners' knowledge and partnership with parents re speech language and communication which suggests that outputs like the literacy hubs, Early Talk Boost training and collaborative online resources should be sustained and extended.

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# 1. The Early Outcomes project

The Early Outcomes project was a year-long project from August 2019 funded by the Department for Education. It focused on improving standards and outcomes and addressing weaknesses around speech, language and communication (SLC) and in the four Black Country local authorities (LAs): Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton. It had three priority objectives:

- Eradicate siloed working by developing a multi-agency Speech, Language, Communication (SLC) vision, strategy and pathways underpinned by individual authority improvement plans.
- Upskill the wider early years workforce to improve early identification in order to ensure that children access quality universal services and relevant interventions.
- Improve school readiness and GLD outcomes through engagement, empowerment and building resilience of skilled and motivated parents and maximising the impact of community and voluntary sector services.



Table 1 lists the outputs which were put in place to address these objectives.

Table 1. *Priority objectives and associated outputs*

Priority objectives	Outputs
Eradicate siloed working in SLC	Scoping and mapping services and advice across the LAs Health and SALT pathway of services School Readiness concept Black Country Early Outcomes (BCEO) microsite Termly strategic board meetings
Upskill the wider early years workforce.	Literacy hubs Health and SALT pathway of services NLT HELLO training Early talk boost training Early outcomes pack
Improve school readiness and GLD outcomes	School readiness pathway Online activity packs Early outcomes pack BCEO microsite

The project also adopted an interdisciplinary approach unprecedented for these four LAs in which 12 education professionals, health visitors and speech and language therapists (SaLTs) were seconded from all the LAs to work collectively on the project. A strong partnership was also established with the National

Literacy Trust. The Education Observatory at University of Wolverhampton was commissioned in August 2019 to evaluate the project. Our approach to evaluating these outputs is outlined in the second section of this report.

### **Impact of COVID-19**

Prior to the Covid-19 lockdown in March 2020, the project team was in the process of organising more of the activities described and new activities that included:

- Sharing good practice and resources across the LAs.
- Organising four more literacy hubs, one in each LA.
- The completion of a speech, language and communication exhibition for practitioners in Dudley's Looking Glass exhibition focusing on the home learning environment. The exhibition had been designed and there was a consultation day with project team members in March. This was due to open after Easter 2020 to a range of professionals, early years practitioners and parents across the LAs.
- A parent-facing app for the ages and stages of language of speech and language development was not pursued as several already exist and it was replaced by a setting-based 'Early Outcomes' pack.

At the beginning of the lockdown, the project team established regular online meetings to determine what could be done to continue to address the project's objectives online. How we approached this evolving situation is also outlined in the next section of this report.

## 2. Research methods

We were asked to evaluate as many of the outputs of the project as possible and provide case studies of outputs that would evidence the extent to which the DfE's three priority objectives had been met. As already indicated, the COVID-19 lockdown both changed the shape and outputs of the project and reduced our access to participants. Early in the project, we agreed with the project team that case studies would be developed of the literacy hubs (in section 3.1) and the Looking Glass home learning exhibition (in 3.2). These case studies have been included into this report. We have also focused extensively (in 3.1) on multi-agency working among project team members and LAs. This was originally planned to be focused on the Early Talk Boost training but extended to include other outputs involving multi-agency working. These included the online resources, such as the early outcomes pack and activity packs. Data collection included surveys and interviews in a variety of formats to maximise access, and minimise disruption, to participants. The HELLO training survey was designed by the research team and the other surveys were put together by the project team. Data analysis of the surveys included descriptive analysis and qualitative thematic analysis. Surveys were conducted in relation to the following outputs.

- HELLO training post-training survey
- Early Talk Boost training survey focusing on impact in practice
- Online resource evaluations for the activity packs.

Interviews were carried out face to face before March 2020 and involved research team members attending the literacy hub events. However, after the COVID-19 lockdown interviews were carried out online or by phone. Some of the early years advisers for the Looking Glass exhibition and project team interviews were also sent written responses to the interview questions by email and one focus group interview was completed with three members of the early years advisory team. The range of methods used was necessary in order to maximise both access to participants and the data collected. All interview schedules were designed by the research team. These focused on the following outputs:

- Literacy hub evaluation including interviews with children, parents and practitioners
- Looking Glass home learning exhibition interviews
- 11 project team interviews (carried out in June and July 2020 towards the end of the project)

The research team ensured that ethical considerations were of paramount importance throughout the project and were guided by the British Education Research Association (2018) guidelines. Ethical approval was obtained by the university's Institute of Education's ethics committee. Participants for almost all of the data collection, including the project team interviews were provided with informed consent forms to sign and return to the research team. The only exception was the Early talk Boost post-training surveys and practitioner book pack evaluations that included an opt-in tick box. Parents were asked in telephone interviews (carried out by members of the project team) to verbally consent to have their perspectives

included in the online activity packs evaluation. All participants except the project team were also offered information sheets about the project and its evaluation. Disclaimers were also signed from parents who gave consent for their children to be photographed for this report and presentation of these findings. The research team ensured that only children with consent were photographed and included in the report. These disclaimers were also completed by all those photographed in the Looking Glass home learning exhibition photos. Children at the literacy hub events were also asked if they wanted to answer a few questions with the research team. Only those who consented were asked questions and included in this report.

Anonymity and confidentiality of participants was also considered throughout. There is no identifiable demographic information included in this report. Participants are referred to as 'parent' or 'practitioner' throughout except for project team members who are referred to by their profession and/or role in the team. This had to be really considered as there are a few roles where only one member is from that profession or has that role in the team. However, it was deemed important to include this demographic information to understand fully their perspectives on the project's outputs and permission was sought from the project team to include this information. LAs are generally not identified throughout the report further to ensure the confidentiality of all of the participants. It was also deemed appropriate that outputs were considered across the Black Country in its entirety, rather than in each LA to consider the LAs collaboratively in this report.



Table 2. *Project outputs and evaluation approach*

Planned outputs since March 2020	Evaluation details
<p>The development of a series of activity packs, supported by the National Literacy Trust, to replace the literacy hubs. The packs include links to the books online, home-based fun activities linked to the books and tips for the parents about supporting their child's language development. These packs have gone to go out to schools and settings electronically for them to forward to parents. Hard copies are also to be distributed to families without internet or who do not access schools or settings via the health visitor/speech and language therapy services.</p>	<p>Parents were able to opt in to offer feedback on this online resource. We received evaluations from parents of 42 children and 3 practitioners.</p> <p>This was also reviewed with 11 project team members during interviews held at the end of the project.</p>
<p>I CAN is exploring offering Early Talk and Early Talk Boost training online to settings.</p>	<p>Data from the training that took place between December 2019 and March 2020 already held.</p>
<p>Considering alternative ways to share the health and school readiness pathways in the absence of opportunities to gather people together to launch these. The results of the school readiness consultation across the Black Country have been analysed by NLT and are informing the creation of a storybook with guidance to help parents prepare their children for school.</p>	<p>This is being evaluated by the National Literacy Trust. However, the project team comments on the pathways in their end of project interviews.</p>
<p>An 'Early Outcomes' Pack has been created that includes information on health visitors, SALT, attachment and bonding, social and emotional development, ideas for activities for children 0-5, communication-friendly environments and supporting communication development. This pack is intended to be a reference document for practitioners with ideas to share with parents. It can also be used by settings as an evaluation tool to evaluate and develop practice together.</p>	<p>The pack was not disseminated at the time of this report and therefore an evaluation from practitioners is not included.</p> <p>This was reviewed in the 11 end of project interviews with members of the project team.</p>
<p>An information pack for parent volunteers that includes information on the ages and stages of language development and tips for supporting language development in the home, which is being distributed via voluntary groups.</p>	<p>We established an opt in system to gain feedback from parent volunteers on this online resource. In total we received... evaluations from parent volunteers.</p> <p>This was also reviewed in 11 end of project interviews with members of the project team.</p>

Table 3 details the online approaches devised by the project team and our involvement in evaluating these forthcoming outputs:

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### 3. Findings

#### 3.1. Multi-agency working and sharing practice

All of the project team members identified benefits in sharing practice with other professionals and across LAs. One of the early years advisers said:

“I think the success stories have been the multi-agency working. [...] I’ve been able to work alongside speech and language therapists and look at what similarities we have in our work. We are all here for the children and I’ve noticed we’re all working hard, but the project has allowed us to work smarter. “



The project coordinator commended the team, stating that they all came with a positive commitment to work together and share good practice. One of the key aims for the project team (and of DfE) was establishing a stronger “partnership between boroughs” (SaLT) and eradicating siloed working. Time was spent at the beginning of the project exploring practice across LAs and departments before developing a strategic plan for the project. Part of the initial conversations involved scoping and mapping services across the LAs to determine each area’s existing level of provision, resources and advice in relation to SLC: “We all had different starting points and we’re all at different points in our journey when it comes to communication and language” (early years adviser). The growing relationships between professionals encouraged them to share practice as a way of developing different ways of working, as one of the early help advisers emphasised:

“[When] you’re in the meetings and putting it all together, then you get to see how it works and I think we’ve learned to share best practice and get opinions and ideas from other professionals. I think it’s worked really well.”

Some of the outputs needed extensive research across the LAs to ensure that they contributed to existing resources, provided consistent messages and did not merely replicate existing information. For instance, the project team and the National Literacy Trust carried out a Black Country wide consultation that included a broad audience of professionals, settings, parents and children in order to support the development of a Black Country school readiness document (discussed below).

The universal health and speech and language therapy pathways of services work completed by members of the project team provide an output example influenced by scoping and mapping services and advice across the LAs. During Autumn 2019, research took place to see what other pathways were available nationally and in other regions. The Black Country communication and language pathway was developed

by health visitors and speech and language therapists (SaLTs) involved in the project. These project team members were tasked with developing, and communicating more effectively, an early language pathway that mapped universal services and interventions both direct (to health visitors, speech and language services) and indirect services (for instance, talk to your bump/babies, home learning support, family learning, Bookstart), which can help improve speech, language and communication (SLC) outcomes. Measures to increase the take-up of Early Years Pupil Premium will also be undertaken to give settings more resources to provide for SLC outside of and beyond what the early outcomes fund can support and contribute to the sustainability of improvements.

The pathway has two elements. The first highlights universal services and timescales for parents/carers. This provides information on what a child should be able to do at birth to 5, as well as top tips on how parents/carers can support their child to develop these skills. The parent pathway includes reference to national programmes and providers including Hungry Little Minds, I CAN and The Communication Trust. It was hoped that the advice and strategies would be easy to follow and could be implemented without the need for resources or equipment. The second element focuses on supporting professionals including early years and health care professionals to identify when a child may require universal, targeted and specialist intervention. It was hoped that a consistent pathway across the Black Country would lead to intervention being offered in a timely manner and without a postcode lottery. Examples of content in the pathway were provided by the project coordinator. The information includes the step by step journey children will take through speech and language support in a format that is informal and provides supportive information for parents. It also includes information for practitioners on what can be done to support children while they wait 12 weeks after referral forms have been submitted. It was hoped that the pathway would be consulted on at the launch event. When this was cancelled due to COVID-19, it was shared at a strategic level and embedded into the online early outcomes pack which was disseminated to practitioners and settings during the pandemic.

Members of the project team discussed the importance of the universal Black Country aspect of the pathway because as a result “it doesn’t matter where you are, that’s quite important” (health visitor). One of the SaLTs stated that this pathway was “really useful”:

“It allows us to know what other services are offering, how they work, in terms of our neighbouring services catch up and learning what we need to do as part of our service, what they do well and not so well.”

One of the SaLTs also said that the pathway is great as “it kind of cut[s] out the ambiguity about what goes on. I hope the pathways are in place so people won’t be saying I don’t know what we’re doing in speech and language therapy”. The Black Country Hub Manager believed:

“It was vital for each of the professionals to work together. Anything we had [before] has been done by health visitors or early years support . There’s never been this ‘Let’s work together and create something’.”

However, some of the project team questioned how useful the information on a joint pathways would be for schools and practitioners. One of the SaLTs said that it was difficult to provide specifics when the focus is on the universal level that applies to all services in the Black Country. For her “the useful part of it was us coming up with a sort of tips at different stages [...] which would be a useful resource for parents” The project co-ordinator said that it was a shame they could not compare this pathway to national information that was due to be published at the same time. However, members of the team used the consultation day information to support the development of the pathways and as the information is online it can be updated when necessary (SaLT).

This form of multi-agency working was initially challenging and needed the time offered in the project to establish, but it led to frequent, open and improved communication across the project team. All of the project team members reflected positively on their experiences of multi-agency working during the course of the project. This included the following observations:

“For me coming from a speech and language point of view we’ve been able to share what we have developed in-house. So when we have something different we just email each other and say what you have already got in house that supports rather than reinventing the wheel. And I hope that continues.” (SaLT)

“I’ve learned a lot from colleagues. I’ve never worked with health visitors closely like this before. That’s been really interesting and really powerful. It’s brought us all together.” (Early years adviser)

“I think the main thing is the different local authorities all coming together and being more open with sharing practice in different areas. I do think even from my leads they’re more open for us to share that information. Instead of being secretive and competing against each other, they are more open to linking in and sharing. [...] It’s all about intervention in the end.” (Health visitor)

An example of multi-agency working during the project is detailed in the case study which follows on the literacy hubs events that were planned and delivered by project team members with the National Literacy Trust.

### *Case study 1. Creating a multi-agency approach to supporting parents and children through literacy hubs*

The National Literacy Trust literacy hubs were a place-based response to intergenerational low literacy levels, working with a range of partners and professionals to shape and deliver activity as part of a local strategy. Hubs have been found by the National Literacy Trust to harness community assets, to address

poverty and joblessness through campaigning, influencing and supporting attitudes and behaviours around literacy. The National Literacy Trust broker innovative partnerships between LAs, libraries, sporting and cultural organisations, faith and voluntary community groups, as well as businesses, health and education organisations. The partners then work together to identify and implement support that improves literacy by focusing on the people who need it the most.

The National Literacy Trust drew on their experience of hubs to support the foundation of eight early years literacy hubs across the Black Country as part of the Early Outcomes project. Two hub areas were established across each LA area. Each of the hub areas were identified through cross analysis of GLD data and Experian literacy vulnerability score data. Potential partners were identified within each hub and invited to regular hub partner meetings. Through these meetings hub partners were able to assess the needs of the hub area and identify any gaps. Book-themed events were planned for each of the hubs with a range of creative craft and messy activities and a storytelling session. In total 273 people attended the literacy hub events: 112 adults and 161 children.

Many members of the project team referred to the literacy hubs when detailing success stories and positive outcomes of the project. One of the SaLTs explained that it was really important in the initial stages of the project for the team to really be involved in the shared planning of these events to fully understand the National Literacy Trust model and what was meant by a 'literacy hub'. One of the health visitors said that "the fact families were asking for more, I feel that speaks volumes, especially with all the activities, participation and the storyteller". The Black Country Hub Manager said that seeing how these hubs can work in practice has had a positive impact on perceptions of project team members and involved professionals. The project team and members of the National Literacy Trust became part of steering groups in their LAs with practitioners in their area to establish what was needed for each local literacy hub. This meant that the literacy hubs were tailored in each LA to meet the needs of children and parents in each area. It also meant that there was input and support provided by practitioners in local settings. The multi-agency approach of these events was considered vitally important by the project team coordinator who stated:

"I think the events [needed] that NHS representation whether it's a health visitor or nurse. That was a real pull for parents [...] It gave it that bit of credibility [and] made parents go 'Oh, the health visitors are there' and it wasn't just another event."

Members of the project team believe that these events have had a real impact for parents and children. One of the early years advisers stated "they had a huge impact and it was really lovely to see so many families in what is a deprived area of [the LA]. They came out in the pouring rain to go on a bear hunt". This was reiterated by an early help adviser who said "I think they had a really positive impact. Every parent was really positive about the sessions". One of the health visitors also said that one of the major benefits for her was:

“Seeing how we can really bring the families together with all the relevant agencies around them to be able to show support for the families. Also for [parents] to also have more of an understanding of the support that is there for them with regards to speech, language and communication needs”.

One of the SaLTs said that some of the parents with babies wondered whether they should be attending a reading event when their child is not ready to read. It gave professionals the opportunity to highlight how important it is to read to children regardless of their age, to keep their attention by doing things like changing voices for characters, and to use books as a conversation starter. She emphasised that reading is “about enjoying what you see, where it takes you and the connection you can have with your child”.

### **Beyond stay and play**

To assess the impact of the literacy hub, 29 parents were interviewed at four literacy hub events in all four LAs. The age of their children ranged from 9 weeks to 4 years. Five children and four professionals who were either part of the literacy hub steering group or supporting the event of the day were also interviewed.

Many of the parents chose to highlight elements of the literacy hub events that distinguish the events from a stay and play activity. One parent (16, with a 11 week old baby) would not have attended the event if it had been organised as a stay and play activity: “I get a bit put off by those. I don’t really know what to do with her so [I prefer] going to a group that leads you”. Twelve of the parents said that they liked the story and/or storytellers approach. Parent 13 (child aged 1) stated “we love anything based on a story. It’s a really good starting point, the storyteller was fantastic”. Parent 6 (children 1 and 4) liked “the story the way it was told. That was amazing and I think I am going to put a bit more, you know, drama into my storytelling at home”. Parent 7 noted how engaged her 9-week-old baby was engaged in the story: “he sat on my lap and was really like looking”. Parent 10 (child aged 3) added “it makes you think about how rubbish we read stories at home [...] We will all be making that little bit more effort tonight”. Although parent 6 was concerned that her 4-year-old son did not want to sit and listen, she appreciated the accepting atmosphere:

“Everyone has been really lovely. Like my son wouldn’t sit down to listen to the story, but whilst he was playing he was listening. The staff were very nice they were like, ‘Just leave him and let him play’. So I felt comfortable. I didn’t feel judged at all and that’s one thing that stops me coming to places like this.”

The ‘Going on a bear hunt’ theme was specifically highlighted by some of the parents. Five stated that they were attracted to the theme when deciding to attend the event. Four parents attended the event because they said the child loved the book. For Parent 13 (child aged 1), “the natural element was lovely”. However, five of the parents said that they had no expectation of what would be included in the event.

Eight parents commented that they were pleased to see either the amount and/or range of activities available to the children. Parent 8 (child aged 1) said that the event exceeded her expectations because her son was able to enjoy moving around and playing with the different activities. Parent 21 (child aged 4 months) stated that she was surprised by the variety of activities:

“To be fair I didn’t expect any of this. I thought it would be all outdoors so it was like a shock just this being there, It’s nice. Yeah, I literally thought we were just going to go on a bear hunt walk. I didn’t realise that they got a free book or anything so.”

One of the professionals emphasised the importance of including a range of activities at these events. Professional 1 (Play, Talk and Read practitioner) stated:

“There was a good range [of activities] but children could engage with them on whatever level. So there was a tiny baby in the gloop right up to a 4 year-old making sock puppets. So they could engage with them at whatever level of development they were at.”

All four professionals interviewed commented on the engagement of parents and children at the events. Professional 3 (school ready engagement officer) emphasised that these events were perfect to engage babies. Professional 4 (school ready engagement officer) said that it was important that everything on the floor was edible for the younger children. She also felt that it was important that reading was modelled for parents who were then able to take a copy of the book home. Professional 1 concluded that: “all the children were engaged. That is telling isn’t it? That tells you whether it is a successful event”.

Opportunities for messy and creative play seemed particularly important to parents. Parent 5 (9 weeks) said that her baby likes “getting messy, definitely getting messy”. Parent 8 (child aged 1) also said that her child liked “snow, the water, anything he can feel. Stuff like that he enjoys”. Parent 4 (child aged 4) and 7 (children 9 weeks and 3) both said that they were pleased to see messy activities that the event, because their children like them but they do not usually do these type of activities at home. Parent 4 said “at home we don’t do so much messy play. We focus more on reading, so I like messy play somewhere else”. Only the children of two parents did not like messy play. One said that she was concerned about messy play with her baby and had not tried it yet. Although she said she thought she would wait until he was older before trying it, when the researcher went back round the room she was by the side of one of the messy play activities giving it a go.

Table 4 below shows each activity that was identified by more than one parent when they were asked which activity their child(ren) liked the most. Age ranges of these children are also indicated in the table. The results show that the most enjoyable accounts were messy and creative activities.



Table 4. *Most enjoyable activities*

Activity	Mentions	Age of children
Snow activity	6	1-3
Water activity	6	1-4
Mud (cornflour/cocoa) activity	4	2-4
Sequin and shower gel bag activity	4	2-4
Messy play generally	4	2 mths-4
Sensory activities generally	3	3 mths-1
Teddy bears picnic activity	3	10 mths-3
Craft/colouring activities	2	2 ½-4
Music	2	3- 4 mths
Sock puppet activity	2	Both 4

Five children (aged 3-4) were also asked during the events what activity they enjoyed the most (see Table 5). They again mostly identified messy and creative activities. The snow activity was favoured by two four-year-olds, another enjoyed water play and animals, colouring and teddy bears, a fourth liked sand and water, while the three-year-old preferred the sequins and shower gel bags.

Interestingly, when the parents were asked if there were any activities they would like to try at home, the majority of the parents mentioned messy activities and some mentioned creative activities their children had liked on the day. The sequin and shower gel activity were most popular (mentioned 6 times), followed by mud (n=5), sock puppets and snow (both n=4), and storytelling (n=3).

Some parents also identified activities they would now do at home following the event that would not have occurred to them before. Comments included:

“When she was doing [the sequin and shower gel activity], I was like, ‘This is so simple’, but I hadn’t thought about it before. We have got some bags of these at home that we didn’t use up from a birthday party.” (Parent 2)

“I have never thought about doing things like that with the socks before. That would be good to do because he has got some goggly eyes and stuff and he sticks them on and pulls them off. Maybe we can do that.” (Parent 9)

“I am probably going to do this at home with him as well, the gloop [mud activity]. I have done gloop a few times, but never thought to put things in it as well [...] It smells like chocolate and looks like mud.” (Parent 5)



## Engagement with parents

Overall, the professionals that were interviewed said that there was a good turn-out at all of the events. It was the first event of its kind that three of the parents had attended. Seven had found out about the literacy hubs from the settings their children attended. Others had learned about them through family (n=4), online (n=3), at Tesco's or through friends (n=2).

Some parents mentioned specific reasons for attending the event. Two parents stated that they wanted to attend events like this to prepare their children for nursery. Parent one (child aged 2) stated "I was thinking of starting to bring my son to events, little events like this to get him ready for nursery. So I thought it would be perfect for him". Parent 22 (child aged 2) said that she was pleased her child met other children and parent 8 (child aged 1) attended to help her child's socialisation:

"I need to get him more into this, because he isn't around a lot of kids and he doesn't like sharing and things, so I need to break him into coming to places like this. He will see other kids and know how to share and do stuff."

Parent 2 said that she tries to attend as many events as possible because her child used to have speech difficulties: "he has come on no end coming to these sorts of things".

## Demand for future events

Twenty-eight of the 29 parents interviewed said that they would definitely attend another literacy hub event in the future, with the majority stating 'definitely yes'. Parent 13 said:

"There has been a lot of organisation, a lot of planning and I think people like to see that. If they have made the effort to turn up somewhere and there is just a bit of colouring to do, that's a shame".

Sixteen parents said that there was nothing different that they would want to see included in future events. Parent 1 (child aged 2) stated "I think it's really good what you have done". Despite this, 13 parents offered ideas for future events. These included holding more events, especially in the summer, different themed events, treasure hunts, or offering dedicated areas for parent and babies. Other ideas included an Easter bear hunt, half term activities, and a dedicated area to talk to other parents.

## Sustaining the literacy hubs

Many of the project team members expressed concern that the events were unable to become more established in the LAs because of the COVID-19 lockdown. The team had hoped to do at least one more



event in each LA. The project coordinator questioned whether this had reduced their long term impact. She expressed concern over whether and how these events would be able to continue after the project has ended and who would take responsibility for organising and delivering the events. She also stated that team members had tried to set up online steering group events during lockdown. However, attendance was very low, which she explained is understandable given the current difficulties settings are experiencing at this time.

The Black Country Hub Manager stated that from a National Literacy Trust perspective it was really positive that each professional wanted to continue these events post project. One of the project team members discussed needing to establish more events to get to a point where they run more independently moving forward (SaLT). Support from partners post-project was emphasised as significantly important to continue these events:

“I think it will depend on our partners still buying into it post-project. So for the duration of the lockdown has been so unfortunate because if we had more evidence to show they were successful, then I think we would have more buy-in. I don’t know if after the project has finished and there isn’t the project driving it forward whether we have the buy-in from partners.” (Another SaLT)

At least one of the LAs had plans to extend the model.

### **Summary of literacy hub findings**

- The literacy hubs used an effective multi-agency approach to support parents and children. The events were planned and delivered by professionals from education, health and speech and language in each LA. This meant that parents could be supported by all of these professionals in one location.
- Many parents felt that the literacy hubs offered more opportunities for their children to learn and develop. The main activities highlighted by parents distinguished these events from standard stay and play activities.
- Parents valued the event’s theme, its focus on a story and use of a storyteller, and the experience of actually going on the bear hunt, as well as the range of activities available.
- Opportunities for messy and creative play were particularly important for both parents and children. Many intended to try these again at home.
- Almost all of the parents said they definitely would attend another literacy hub event and almost half of the parents offered ideas for future events. All of the project team members expressed a desire to continue these events post project.

### 3.2. Sharing resources and training

Many members of the project team reflected positively on sharing resources during the time of the project, as one of the early years advisers emphasised:

“We did a lot of sharing when we were looking at school readiness, looking at what was already in each of the boroughs and pulling out what were the things we thought worked and didn’t. We’ve shared a lot of documents with each other”.

Another early years adviser valued sharing knowledge and expertise on how resources are used in different LAs. Similarly, one of the health visitors stated:

“I think some resources have been shared well, such as the delivering of activity packs to families, which while it is still in its infancy is already proving to be a useful tool for families and opening discussions around the home learning environment and parental engagement”.

One of the SaLTs stated that “the biggest benefit of that is time, we aren’t wasting time trying to reinvent something that’s already been done. It’s been tried and tested and we know it works”. While a health visitor felt she had learned a lot about resources on offer in other LAs, another SaLT felt that resources could have been shared more and that some LAs were more open to sharing resources than others.

Many members of the project team detailed a variety of resources including existing resources used across the LAs such as the Looking Glass home learning exhibition, HELLO and Early Talk Boost training. Resources were also detailed that had been developed by the team these can be found in the next section of the report. The project coordinator reflected on the limited progress that had been made sharing existing resources and planned to continue to do more of this and continue to extend the training. The Black Country Hub Manager also stated that some of the LAs were going to support one another by offering their time to continue to roll out the Early Talk Boost training.

This remainder of this section of the report analyses data collected about the effectiveness of the HELLO and Early Talk Boost training and the Looking-Glass home learning exhibition. It begins with a case study of the exhibition.

#### *Case study 2. Creating a shared resource through the Looking Glass exhibition*

The Looking Glass exhibition centre is a Dudley resource used to showcase different educationally-themed exhibits to practitioners. The Dudley early years advisory team planned an exhibition focused on the home learning environment, reducing the word gap, and supporting language at home. As one of the advisers stated this was to support outcomes for children in particular the Good Level of Development in Communication, Language and Literacy at the end of Foundation Stage [end of reception]. Another adviser explained:

“National and local data suggested that speech, language and communication was an area to focus on. Communication and language are one of the prime areas of development and research suggests that if children’s speech and language is below the expected level for their age, it will impact on other areas of development. Therefore, it is paramount that strategies are put into place to support the development of speech, communication and language.”

The main purpose of the exhibition was therefore to demonstrate the opportunities available in the home environment to support and develop children’s speech, language (early years adviser). The exhibition was offered as one of the project’s shared resources to support the project’s objectives, especially in addressing siloed working and upskilling the wider workforce. The exhibition was designed by members of the Dudley early years advisory team and a consultation day was organised in March 2020 to gather perspectives from professionals in education, health and speech and language. Five early years advisers were interviewed to gather their perspectives on designing and preparing the exhibition. Three further interviews were carried out after the end of the consultation day. These interviews were with members of the Early Outcomes project who took part in the consultation day event.

### **Designing and preparing the exhibition**

Members of the early years advisory team emphasised that the main objective of the exhibition was to get key messages about home learning to parents and practitioners. One adviser (EYA 5) stated “upskilling early years practitioners and parents by using the exhibition should have a positive impact on children’s overall communication and language development”. Team members explained that the exhibition was unique in three ways:

- *Target audience*

One of the advisers stated that “the exhibition is to be opened to a wide range of professionals, so the content and presentation needed to be planned with this in mind”. Asked about the target audience, three team members identified a wide range of people including early years practitioners, teachers, educational psychologists, school nurses, health visitors, family support workers, and parents/parents-to-be.

- *Focusing from conception*

One adviser stated that this meant “we had to think outside of the box”. She went to say that this meant helping “parents to understand their very important role in helping children learn from conception”. This made it unlike any other exhibition they had developed.

- *Multi-agency design*

Members of the team explained that exhibitions were usually designed internally by the early years advisory team and education-focused. However, this exhibition was designed using a multi-agency approach “involving everybody who is working with families to get everybody connected”. Asked about

their favourite elements of the exhibition, the early years advisory team highlighted its focus on the home environment and on meaningful everyday activities parents/carers can do with their children there.

### **Consultation day**

The purpose of the consultation day was to gain feedback from members of the project team and other professionals on its design and exhibition of information for parents from education, speech and language and health professionals. The consultation day included a tour of the exhibition with members of Dudley's early years advisory team and the project team. The consultation day was advertised to practitioners and other professionals to include as many professionals as possible in the event. In total four early years advisers (who designed the exhibition), three Early Outcomes project members and two University of Wolverhampton researchers attended the consultation day.

Three members of the project team were interviewed after they had seen the exhibition. Overall, they thought the exhibition was an effective shared resource for the four LAs across the education and health sectors. They said:

"I think it's a really well thought-out exhibition. I like the way it covers all areas within a home and it provides families with ideas of things they might not have had well-modelled to them. I like the fact that it is trying to cover health and learning and education." (SaLT)

"I love it. It kind of reinforces things and it kind of brings things to the forefront really: advice that we can give to parents and educate them [about] different things [...] Although I think it's really good for the parents, it's [also] really good for us as practitioners to keep us up to date so we are all kind of across the different services all coming from the same place and giving out the same advice." (Health visitor)

"It's really good, it's really informative. I think it's really going to help not just the practitioners, but obviously parents that are going to be able to attend, to see [how] to model to their children in their home environment." (Early help adviser).

### **Developing a multi-agency approach**

All three project team professionals highlighted the exhibition's role in helping to build a multi-agency approach. The health visitor's view was:

"I think it's good to go round and hear other professionals' take on what the actual exhibition is showing and different approaches. So speech and language will come to the exhibition slightly differently to myself as a health visitor and education."

The other professionals also identified some of the broad benefits of this approach. The SaLT said:

"I think it would be useful for parents and a range of professionals. And also it's useful just like I said to share ideas between health and education and bring them both together because we both

share similar messages, but it could be [...] made a bit more practical and a bit smarter to give to parents”.

The early help adviser thought it would benefit a range of people: “anyone really who works with young children, toddlers, babies. Any private settings, nursery schools, PVIs”.

Following the tour of the exhibition, these professionals offered advice on what could be include or change from their professional perspective. This included:

- Changing the tour of the exhibition to mirror a typical day from breakfast to bedtime. (SaLT)
- Removing some of the toys from the bedroom and replacing others with simpler toys like the train track to support imagination, role play and communication. (SaLT)
- More information about health (health visitor) and babies and toddlers at bedtime e.g. advice on temperature, safety, and sudden death infant syndrome (Early help adviser).

All three professionals discussed how they were going to share exhibition ideas with their colleagues. The SaLT wanted to explore whether Dudley would allow her to bring parents to the exhibition. She said that she felt much more could be done antenatally, as long as the information was not too overwhelming for parents at that stage. The health visitor had arranged for her team to hold a team meeting at the exhibition so they could all see it. The early help adviser took photographs of the exhibition to share with the manager of the project.

### **Creating a learning environment for the project team, professionals and parents**

All three project team professionals reflected on their favourite parts of the exhibition. The SaLT liked the kitchen area because it opened up discussion and offered opportunities for labelling. It look realistic and covered a lot of learning, including mathematics, science and general bonding. She also liked the familiar prints and labels relevant for children that supported learning for outside the home and “the cultural aspect in the bedroom because there are some toys that are very culturally relevant to me in that bedroom”. The health visitor appreciated the tour of the exhibition and hearing other professionals’ perspectives: “I think it just re-emphasised things in my mind”. The early help adviser valued the nursery rhyme and book area: “I would share ideas from all of the areas to be honest”.

### **Reflections on the consultation day**

Two of the early years advisers said that they had not known what to expect from the consultation day. They explained that the consultation day was organised as a usual exhibition day to enable the project team members to listen to an initial presentation on communication, speech and language and to walk round the exhibition collectively discuss its content. Many of the advisers mentioned the benefits of partnership working during the consultation day. They emphasised the value of the range of information

available and said that bringing together different professionals sends a positive message about multi-agency working:

“I was pleased with the consultation day. It was good that we had a range of people with different roles cast an eye and comment - health visitors, SaLT, Early Help. Listening to how they perceived what they were looking at from their professional perspectives was very interesting.”

“It’s just really useful, listening to other people talk and get their perspective and hear the messages and also references to some of the literature and research that they use. I made a lot of notes and did quite a lot of research following that.”

Two of the advisers mentioned that they would have liked to have seen more people attend the consultation day and one wondered if the timing and duration (2.5 hours) of the consultation should have been different.

### **Plans for the exhibition next academic year**

The consultation day occurred a week before the COVID-19 lockdown. A flyer had been designed and they had hoped to advertise it at Easter with a view to taking bookings throughout the summer term. Members of the team were not able to access the exhibition during lockdown. However, they plan to spend some time incorporating ideas from the consultation day before its opened to the general public. One of the advisers also said that they would need to “relook at the exhibition to better reflect the diversity of our community in light of the current Black Lives Matter campaign”. The costs for attending this exhibition (inside and outside of Dudley) were also under consideration. The team have also discussed how they can open the exhibition next academic year. According to one of the advisers, these included filming a virtual tour and requiring visitors to pre-book in bubble groups and/or with distancing. Access to the exhibition may have to be initially remote with the aim of opening it subsequently as a physical space.

### **Summary of Looking Glass exhibition findings**

- The home learning exhibition and its consultation day exemplified effective multi-agency working across the LAs and professionals in education, health and speech and language.
- The home learning exhibition (because of its focus and consultation day) is different from any other exhibition because of its large target audience, its focus from conception onwards and the involvement of professionals outside education.
- The home learning exhibition will be open virtually and/or physically to the public in 2020-21.



## Early Talk Boost training: a multi-agency approach to training

Early Talk Boost is a targeted intervention programme supporting children aged 3-4 years old with delayed language development. The programme was designed by specialist speech and language therapists and an experienced nursery teacher and was based on strong evidence of what is known to support language development in the early years. The programme and toolkit was piloted in September 2015 to 2016 to evaluate its impact on children's early language development. Evidence showed that children make statistically significant progress in their early language development and this boosts their language skills to help narrow the gap between the child and their peers. Early Talk Boost is said to support the following:

- Attention and listening as a foundation skill for speaking and listening
- Developing vocabulary; as research shows that children with weaker vocabularies are at risk of difficulties with reading.
- Building sentences; putting words together is a vital skill for having conversations and telling stories.

Project team members were trained to deliver Early Talk Boost training across the Black Country using a multi-agency approach as individuals from differing roles were trained and co-delivered the training. In total 73 practitioners were trained, as Table 5 indicates

Table 5. *Early talk Boost training and toolkits*

LA	Practitioners trained	ET boost kits supplied
Sandwell	13 in 8 settings	8
Walsall	13 in 6 settings	10
Wolverhampton	26 in 12 settings	12
Dudley	21 childminders as had already had ET boost training so	10

## Early Talk Boost: project team perspectives

All of the project team members positively reflected on the benefits of Early Talk Boost training for children and practitioners. Many members of the project team discussed the positive impact the Early Talk Boost training will have in practice. Some of their responses were as follows:

"I think that the research shows how much impact it would have I think it's a powerful tool that's supported a lot of families and practitioners themselves... I think it was much needed in the Black Country due to the low levels of literacy." (Black Country Hub Manager)

"If they are using it straight away it should show a positive impact. It should highlight where the needs are, the training was straightforward, they had all the resources and they were really self-explanatory. [...] I think even if other people in the settings haven't been officially trained they could look through the pack and get a good idea of what to look for even if it isn't their speciality." (Early help adviser).

“I think it will have an impact, I think as well for us as a department, to know which nurseries have accessed the training and which are running the groups in terms of our service. [...] I think the nurseries would know that we know what’s going on and we have staffed it and that would have a good impact on our service.” (SaLT).

However, differences in resources available in individual LA’s were discussed by two members of the project team. The project coordinator highlighted the lack of a screening tool in Wolverhampton: “I think [for] the children who have access it’s brilliant but as a city we needed more”. One of the early years advisers also stated that they already had this training in Dudley. Instead of rolling the training out to settings, it was decided that the resource would best targeted to childminders. She said that in Dudley they used “the kits given to us by the project as a loan system for the childminders and three have been out and used during COVID. The rest are in storage because we can’t get to them”. One of the SaLTs expressed hope that the training will be used, but expressed concern whether a multi-agency approach would continue post project:

“In Dudley the early years society path has kind of taken control of it, but I hope they allow speech therapists to be involved in the delivery of it. I think [for] the speech and language department, it seems a bit strange to us that there is a training package which is all about speech and language development and yet it’s not controlled by the speech and language department, its controlled by early years.”

### **Early Talk Boost training: practitioners’ perspectives**

In total 18 practitioners responded to the post training survey from 14 different settings. This included two childminders, eight school-based practitioners and eight setting-based practitioners. The early talk boost training was delivered in the few months before the COVID-19 lockdown and therefore practitioners had a wide range of weeks they had been able to run the programme in practice. The number of weeks each practitioner was able to run the programme varied considerably between 1 and 9 weeks. Just over half (n=10) of the practitioners ran the programme for 5 weeks or more. A different group of 10 practitioners had had positive experience of parents reading to their children at home, which were surprising at times: “The parents really did enjoy using these books and responded very very well to them, The parents surprised us in returning them when they should”. Another practitioner emphasised that parents had taken ownership of this element of the programme: “All the parents were engaged with reading the books and would remind staff they needed to take them home”. However, four of the practitioners had mixed experiences and four had not attempted to send books home as a result of COVID-19 or parents not attending the workshop. They also identified a range of elements that were most engaging about the course. Almost all (n=16) highlighted both the practical nature of the activities and the books themselves. After that came Tizzy the puppet (n=14) and the good listening cards (n=11).

Figure 1. *Most impact on children*

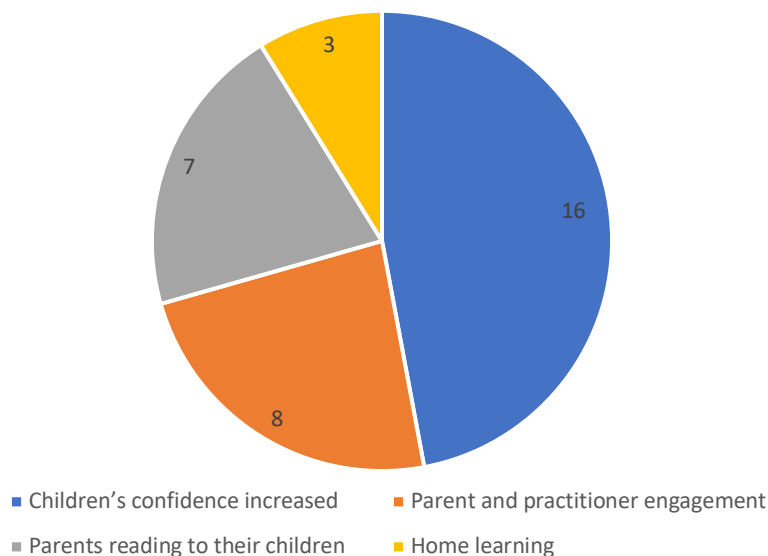


Figure 1 shows practitioner's views on the areas which they felt had had most impact on children. Almost all (n=16) identified children's increased confidence: "The children were much more talkative and were giving responses using a string of words rather than just single words". After this came parent and practitioner engagement and parents reading to their children. Only three practitioners identified home learning as an impact. In addition, all of the practitioners strongly agreed (n=5) or agreed (n=13) that they knew more about what parents need to do to help their children develop their speech, language and communication skills. Ten of the practitioners also strongly agreed (n=6) or agreed (n=4) that children have made progress with their talking and listening skills. This may be due to the various stages the practitioners are at in using the toolkit due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **HELLO training: sharing training across the Black Country**

HELLO training was delivered by the National Literacy Trust as part of the trust's involvement in the project. The Helping Early Language and Literacy Outcomes (HELLO) improvement framework is a quality improvement tool for early years settings who want to improve their communication, language and literacy provision. The self-evaluation framework provides prompts, critical questions and resources to help settings identify their strengths and areas for development. The framework focuses on four key areas: partnerships with parents; skilled practitioners; enabling environments; and working in partnership with professionals. The HELLO framework helps settings gather evidence and turn it into an action plan. The process also supports further reflection, so settings can evaluate the impact of any improvements they make.

HELLO training was completed by 100 practitioners across the Black Country. It helped practitioners to learn how to support parents to improve their home learning environment through family activity sessions and signposting to resources; how to create an enabling environment for speech, language and social

emotional development; and how to observe, track, support and monitor children's development along with their parents. The training equipped practitioners to disseminate the training and approaches throughout their settings to support other early education practitioners to embed the training. Following an audit of their provision in four key areas, practitioners were asked to focus on one area of HELLO to create an action plan and ultimately submit a case study evaluating the impact of their chosen focus on their children, families, practitioners and setting.

### **HELLO training: project team perspectives**

Four of the project team mentioned benefits of HELLO training. One of the SaLTs said that she liked the structured way of measuring what settings are doing following HELLO training recommendations. She also liked the audits "gave them activities to complete". The early help adviser said: "I personally felt it was good training, quite flexible, not too much information, they had the toolkits to take home". One of the early years advisers also commended the number of practitioners that were trained during the project but also felt that the face to face training had been more enthusiastically received than online training during lockdown. Only 11 settings across the four LAs accessed the online training. The Black Country Hub Manager agreed that it was unfortunate that they couldn't train the practitioners who were booked to take part in the training. However, she said that the National Literacy Trust planned to send out a toolkit to share HELLO: "it will get settings to self-evaluate what they are doing, and it will have an impact [in the] long run".

Project team members also outlined limitations of the training. They were associated with its use after the lockdown and the fact that it would not be promoted to more practitioners after the project ends. Five of the project team were sceptical about whether the training will have a practical impact after lockdown. For instance, the project team coordinator questioned who would monitor, 'keep on top' and offer long term support post-project. Others were concerned about the extent to which it would be used after the training:

"[For] the people that took it seriously and followed up with looking through the pack and implemented it straightaway, it will have a positive impact. But there were a few who were umming about whether they would use it, if they have the time. That'd be negative impact if they're not using it correctly from the training." (Early help adviser)

"Personally, I didn't like the training. I don't think it's what my settings need [...] It's such a big training document for them to set themselves targets and to work on. The training itself was quality but I think what they had to do after it was too much to work. I think people would go away and think 'I already know this', but they don't know where to start and I feel like a checklist with bullet points makes it easier for them." (SaLT)

Others questioned its impact and sustained use:

“Personally I don’t think that’s something had a major impact, especially for me in [name of LA], I like the concept behind it [but I] think because there were already early talk groups here I think HELLO was sort of a checklist thing. I think there’s already things happening here.” (Early years adviser)

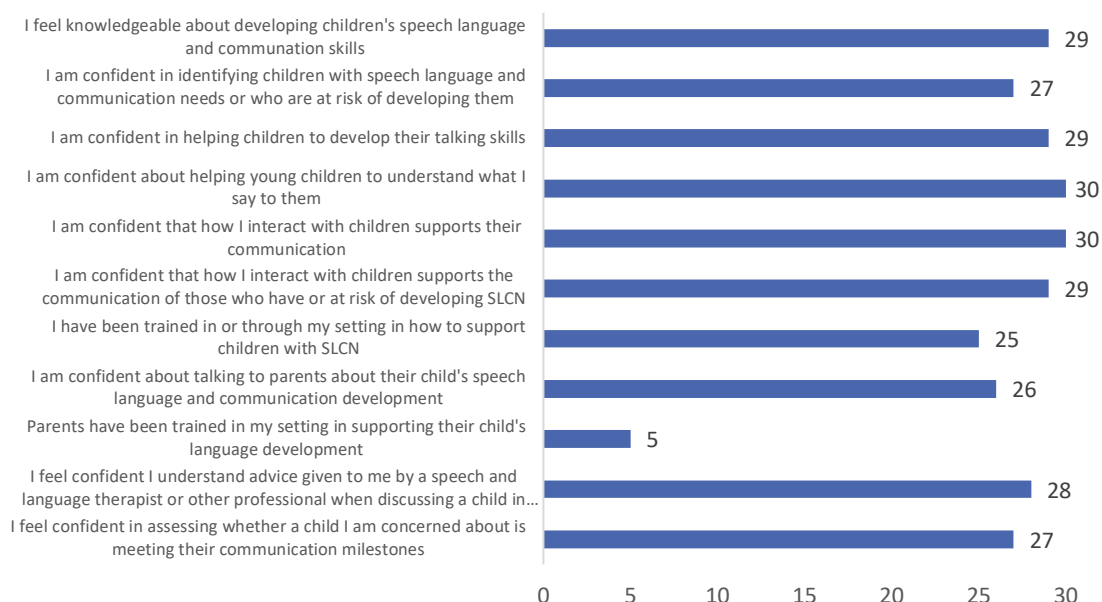
“I think the feeling is probably it’s not going to be something that is promoted in the future we think. We won’t deliver it anyhow.” (SaLT).

### HELLO training: practitioner’s responses

In total 32 practitioners from 23 settings responded to the post-training survey. Just over half had 8+ years’ experience and just over half were 36 years or older (n=18). Half of the practitioners worked in private day nurseries (n=16) and over one third in primary settings (n=12). Just under half (n=15) were in a senior practitioner role (including room leader or floor manager), ten were owners/ managers and the remaining seven were early years workers.

Most of the participants agreed or partially agreed that they feel confident in their role and in identifying and supporting children with speech and language difficulties. Figure 2 shows the number of participants that agreed with the statements relating to this in the survey. Training parents, something hampered by COVID-19, is the area which stands out as having not been achieved. Otherwise, the responses were very positive about the impact of the training on their knowledge, confidence and practice in relation to SLC.

Figure 2. ‘Agree’ responses to survey statements (n=32)



In total 30 practitioners stated they were happy with the advice (and resources) provided on the training. Two practitioners did not respond to this question. Practitioners were asked what the three most important things were that they had they learned from the training. Working with parents was

overwhelmingly the most frequent response, cited by 22 practitioners. This included encouraging parents to communicate with their children and communicating and working in partnership with parents. After this came the tools and resources provided through the training (n=6); action planning and developing the settings (both n=4). Thirteen practitioners identified potential barriers to applying what they had learned in the training in practice. Most of these responses (n=8) focused on parental support, identifying areas such as parents' reluctance to take part; parents' working hours; and staff engagement. However, 20 practitioners did not think the training needed to cover anything else. The only person who commented felt it could be "maybe a little longer".

### **Summary of Early talk boost and HELLO training findings**

- The majority of practitioners who responded to the evaluation benefited from attending Early Talk Boost and HELLO training and have used the training/resources in their practice.
- The practical implementation of the Early Talk Boost toolkits was hindered by COVID-19. However, most of the practitioners still noted a positive response from parents, commented on aspects of the course that benefited children in their care, and believed that the intervention had had a positive impact on their children.
- Project team members mostly were realistic about the HELLO training, especially its use post-pandemic and its lack of promotion and availability post-project. However, practitioners listed many benefits from attending the training and all felt that it addressed all the areas necessary.
- Parent partnership and support was an important area of development for practitioners who attended both training programmes. Practitioners who attended Early Talk Boost training felt they knew more about what parents need to help their children. Some also noted high levels of engagement among parents and practitioners and parents reading more to their children as positive impacts. Working more effectively and in partnership with parents was most commonly cited as the most important thing they had learned from the training.

### 3.3 Developing new resources for children, parents and practitioners

Many of the project team members detailed the benefits of creating their own collective online resources during their time on the project. The project team decided to design these resources at the beginning of the COVID-19 lockdown because they were unable to continue face to face support for children, parent and practitioners. These included activity packs and an early outcomes pack that included a school readiness pathway. Benefits of these resources are therefore a direct reflection of the project team's change in direction in March 2020 to ensure they could continue to address the objectives of the project. The early outcomes pack was regarded as one of the most important resource outputs for the project. One of the SaLTs valued in particular the fact that pack contained information and advice from all the LAs, agreed collectively, and felt that it reassuring for professionals to know that there had been agreement across LAs and agencies about its content.

The project coordinator stated that these resources also meant that some areas previously not addressed by the project could be considered. For instance, they had been able to investigate how they could use the book packs to support teenage parents. Designing their own resources also meant that they could easily be shared across LAs, agencies and trusts.

#### Online resources

At the time of producing this report, the activity packs had only recently been distributed to parents and the early outcomes pack was awaiting distribution. This meant that the evaluation could only explore the project team's views of the early outcomes pack, the school readiness pathway and the activity packs, alongside the perspectives of some parents on the activity packs.

Originally the proposal for the project included the development and launch of a parent app offering guidance about child development, ideas for activities to do at home, and signposting to further information and resources. Research was carried out by the project team in Autumn 2019 to see what other apps and websites were available. There were also initial talks with the National Literacy trust and I CAN regarding about setting up a bespoke Black Country version of existing resources. However, by early 2020 two national apps had been launched which focused on supporting early development and learning in the home environment: the Government's Hungry Little Minds campaign and the BBC-backed Tiny Happy People. It was felt that adding more to the already wide range of online resources would not support Black Country families as information would be lost among higher profile, higher budget apps and campaigns.

The decision to change focus coincided with the COVID-19 outbreak and project team members were tasked with compiling the **early outcomes pack** for providers (all early years settings and schools). This pack would become a 'one stop shop' for SLC information in areas such as attachment, the speech and language pathway, audits, and expected levels of speech, language and communication development. Information around early literacy was included, from sharing books to introducing phonics. Additional resources including leaflets and posters were also created and space was allocated to incorporate the

school readiness pathway created by the National Literacy trust. Each LA could also add their referral procedure to the pack to support settings and schools further. The pack was to be distributed to settings and schools and monitored by each LA in a manner that suits their existing practice. It was intended that health and education colleagues would share the pack with their teams to ensure that all services give a consistent message. All information from the pack would be uploaded on the BCEO microsite and project team members hope to meet on a termly basis post-project to monitor the use of and information within the pack. Views included the following:

“I think [it] will be a really useful tool. It’s got lots of different aspects in it. It’s looking at emotional health and wellbeing, it’s got communication-friendly environments, it suggests different activities that can promote literacy communication and language that can be used by the settings and at home. There’s links to the different services in the areas, so it helps settings, schools and parents.”  
(Early years adviser)

“[It’s] full of very useful quick easy to use resources beyond speech and language. Because of the environment we live in in the Black Country, we are a multicultural society. I think things that have been included in the pack are very user-friendly and things our settings might not necessarily have, so it’ll be a very used tool [for] our nurseries and our settings.” (SaLT)

They also were also positive about its sustainability due to the collaboration involved:

“It’s a joined-up piece of work across all the professionals. Speech and language therapists, health visitors, early years advisers have all contributed together or added in things separately to make a whole. That’s something that’s different; I’ve never seen that sort of document going out to settings before.” (Early years adviser).

and the consistent approaches that have been developed:

“It means all the settings across the Black Country have the same resource and linking up, especially for travelling families. They can get the same advice no matter what setting they’re in.”  
(Health visitor)

The **school readiness pathway** for practitioners was developed by the National Literacy Trust and is part of the early outcomes pack. It was developed following consultation with families, practitioners from schools and settings, members of local community organisations and health professionals. Consultation responses were analysed by the National Literacy Trust in order to develop a localised school readiness definition for the Black Country which was then used to create a pathway document for practitioners and a linked storybook for parents and children to share at home. The parents document also contains guidance for parents as well as links to other resources that are available to support children in being “school-ready”. It was expected that the school readiness documents would be embedded into the local offer and disseminated by health visitors, early years settings, community and faith groups and other multi-agency



professionals that work with families of children aged 0-5. Interviewees identified the uniqueness of the pathway:

“Probably the only pathway I know that has included speech therapy, not just education and the child’s voice. It’s amazing we’ve been able to try and capture that in the best way possible [...] A lot of children have said they’re excited and I love the book I think it’s very well written I like that it used animals rather than people so it can be relatable to all of them. I think the stories are well-written and easy to read and covered the majority of a child’s day in school.” (SaLT)

“They contracted one of their workers to pull it together and she’s created a storybook for parents to share with guidelines for practitioners and parents and I’ve never seen anything like it. I’m hoping it will be received because it’s different, I’ve never seen it presented like this. I think it’s a much more positive way.” (Early years adviser)

The **activity packs** were created in response to the COVID-19 lockdown. The hub events were unable to continue as planned and so it was agreed by the project team that activity packs would be developed which would complement the book titles that were originally due to be gifted through hub events. The packs were developed and designed with digital versions being shared with parents through LAs, health professionals and Early Years settings across the Black Country. The digital versions included links to online storytelling videos of each of the book titles. In total, 650 hard copies of each of the books were distributed with accompanying print versions of the activity packs to some of the most deprived families through children’s centres, health visitors and SALTs across the Black Country. The activity packs continue to be available through the project’s microsite:

“It’s not just for those that attended the event, it can be shared far and wide. I know we have shared some of the raw files so practitioners really want to create more packs so they go as far and wide as they like [...] but the fact it’s in a pack that is easily accessible and you can share via email or social media it will have benefits within itself.” (Black Country Hub Manager).

They also felt they were attractive, simple and user-friendly enough to attract children and families:

“That’s already having a major impact because the activities are practical and they’re cheap for families to do at home ,but also it brings back the love of reading and using reading skilfully and ensuring that when we read a book to a child it’s got to be meaningful. And doing activities that link in with the book allows the child to understand the book better. I’ve had feedback to say they’re very practical and cheap to do, really positive feedback.” (Early years adviser)

“I think within our department it will become a useful resource to provide parents the books. I think that will have a really good impact and will be useful. The fact they have been developed and they look so nice I think is always part of it as well.” (SaLT).

There were some concerns raised by the project team specifically on the school readiness pathway in the following areas:

- Difficulties around carrying out the consultation period
- Other available pathways
- Differing professional's perspectives on school readiness
- Date of distribution.

The project team coordinator shared her difficult experience of being involved in the consultation period of gathering information for this pathway. She said that it was difficult to get responses:

“When you look at the Black Country the amount of settings, schools, families, professionals and what we got back and it took months of just plugging [away]. You think. ‘How else we could do it better? I’m hoping the book will be useful to support children in that transition. I just wish we’d had more input.”

She also expressed her disappointment that the pathway focused on Year 1 rather than Reception. She felt that more could have been done around Reception in the consultation period. One of the early years advisers was concerned about the lack of consensus about school readiness as a concept:

“Lots of professionals have opinions on what is school readiness, I think it’s good and should be a good outcome but others may disagree. It’s straightforward. I like how it’s been devised but as I say it depends who reads it”.

One of the SaLTs feared that children would not benefit from it in the short term due to lockdown:

“because they’re the ones that are crying out for help at the moment with their children not being in nursery and worrying about them moving up to big school”. Despite this, project team members were clear that good distribution of the resources was crucial to ensure impact in practice.

“I do worry we’ve put all this work into these activity packs. [The LA] have decided to distribute them to vulnerable families and I’m worried that they might just get put on a shelf because they don’t have the time or ability to go through them with the family and get that enthusiasm. We’re talking in the area about how we can do that, thinking about possibly getting speech therapists to talk to the health visitors before they go out.” (SaLT)

“I think it will depend on how it’s given out and how [the pack]’s launched really. If it’s just sent to settings, then it might just be a resource on the side. I hope it’s launched to settings and explained so they can use it correctly.” (Health visitor)

### **Online activity packs: practitioner's perspectives**

Staff members from three sessional nurseries were asked their opinion on the book pack resource and how they planned to use it in their setting. Two out of the three nurseries stated that they had sent out in total 11 packs to 2-3 year olds and 33 packs to 3-4 year olds. Overall, the nurseries viewed the resource positively and were prepared to use it: "we have looked at the packs and think they are wonderful". Each setting was incorporating the resource into its planning. Here are examples from two settings:

"These will work perfect with our planning ideas for September. We will be making parent packs in September as we only have a few children in the setting at the moment."

"We have only received them towards the end of term. We have already got our own learning systems in place for now with both the children that are currently attending the setting or staying at home. Over the summer, I plan to put these together as individual activity packs with some of our own extra resources and use them when we come back in September to send home to individual children and families that I feel will really benefit from some extra input towards their communication and language skills".

### **Online activity packs: parents' perspectives**

One of the LAs sent out books to 42 children and then called parents for their feedback. In total they had responses from parents for 26 children (12 did not answer the phone and 4 did not receive the book). Most of the children who received the activity packs in this LA were aged 3-4 (n=17) and 2-3 (n=13). Eleven were aged 4-5 and one was under 2. Parents received a book for their child/ren when it had been identified that:

- Parents required support with SLC.
- Parents required support with their child's general development.
- They were a vulnerable family.

Overall parents had a very positive response to the pack and were grateful to have received the support. One parent said: "I am very grateful to you for thinking of us. I will read it later. I don't have many books". Others said their child had enjoyed reading the book:

"Really happy to get the book. He read it for a little bit and enjoyed pointing to the pictures. He has poor speech at the moment and he said 'woof' for the dog. It's really lovely to have activities to follow. Thank you." (Some dogs do pack, child aged 3)

"I usually only read books about Paw Patrol because I didn't really know which ones to get and he loves Paw Patrol. I was surprised that he would sit and look at this one and he loves dogs, so it was good"  
"(Some dogs do, child aged 3)

Many parents stated that they were going to use the pack's activities with their child:

"Yes we have read the book. He doesn't like to sit for long but I always read to him at bedtime and I am excited to make some of the activities. I do have lots of books in the house." (Tiger Came to Tea, child aged 3)

"My child has suspected autism and likes to take books and look at them on his own. He turns the pages and looks at the pictures. Sometimes he will bring it to me to look at. I like to watch him and watch his expression on his face and the sounds he makes. We will try and have a pretend picnic like in the story." (Hungry Caterpillar, child aged 3)

"I was really happy to get a book and he loved it because it has a shark in it and he loves to sing baby shark. We are going to make the binoculars that we saw in the advice pack. What a lovely idea. We try and read books at bedtime." (Shark in the Park, child aged 4)

Some parents noted changes in the way they read stories following advice offered in the activity packs:

"We did get the book. He loves it and we have looked through it a lot. Being in lockdown has really made me listen much more and spend more time with them. I am making a tepee in the garden and putting all sensory things in it to keep it calm and relaxing , I am going to put lots of books in there and I have been really inspired by the activities that you sent with the book. "(Some dogs do, child aged 4 )

"My wife and I were talking about us not reading enough to our children. We are really happy to receive the book and the pack of ideas. We would never think of this. We are going to spend more of this one to one time and try not to use iPad as much." (Shark in the Park, child aged 3)

A minority of parents did not believe the activity packs would engage their children. This was mainly when parents gave the book to the children without interacting with them:

"Thank you. The book is lovely. His sisters really like it, but I can't get him to sit and look at it. He wants to rip it. I really want him to like books. He doesn't have any attention and I can't do it." (Shark in the Park child aged 3)

"Well she will only look at if she wants to. She does what she wants and will sometimes look at books, but won't let me read to her. I will have a look at the pack." (Tiger came to tea, child aged 3)

Support was offered in the follow-up calls with these parents to offer advice and support for parents who were struggling to engage their child with the books and activity packs. These parents were offered an additional appointment to support them further.

### **Summary of developing new resources findings**

- These new resources have used a unique multi-agency collaboration to provide information to support children, parents, and practitioners.
- Project team members believed that the early outcomes project, school readiness pathway and activity packs will have a positive impact for practice in the Black Country.
- Initial evaluation of the activity packs evidence a positive impact for nurseries in their practice, especially in their planning for next academic year. Most of the parents were about positive about receiving and using the activity packs. Many of the parents planned to try the recommended activities included in the packs with their children. Some parents sought to change the way they read to their children following advice offered in the packs.

## 4. Limitations and lessons learned

### Limitations of the project

Three main limitations have reduced the impact of the Black Country Early Outcomes project:

- The secondments for professionals involved did not start at the same time.
- The team needed time to scope and map provision and support in the Black Country, which meant that outputs for the project did not start to be produced until December 2019.
- The COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020 meant that outputs and support shifted from face to face to online support during the project.

### Secondment and project delays

The project coordinator felt that ideally the project would have benefited from being 18-24 months instead of 12 months long in order to achieve its objectives and allow time to embed outputs in each LA.

Delays further reduced the already limited time available to achieve real impact. For instance, the start and end dates for professionals seconded to the project differed significantly (see Appendix 1). This meant that the whole team was not in place until November 2019. Both of the early years advisers and one of the health visitors highlighted the impact of this: “I also think we could’ve got the ground covered more than what we planned to do if the secondments hadn’t taken so long to be secured” (adviser). At the time of the research the project team were developing a strategic plan to ensure that those working on the project from September 2020 could use their allocated hours to help sustain project outputs.

### Outputs that had to be stopped because of COVID-19

The project team highlighted three outputs that they would have liked to have been continued in the project. These were the literacy hubs, the training, and the end of project conference. Ten of the 11 project team members interviewed said that they would have liked to have seen the literacy hubs continue and have more events in their LAs:

“I would’ve liked to see more hub work because the community work was the backbone of what the project wanted to be, working with the families and inspiring families to enjoy books, singing rhymes and talking with their children and the hub meetings that happened. At least we did have one in each LA so that was good. I feel sad we can’t do that at the moment.” (Early years adviser)

“Although each of the local authorities will continue, we had the cross-working and they could see how it worked in the other local authorities that helped to share good practice further. It was a shame we couldn’t continue. That was the key thing that would’ve shaped things and if we had a second event in each of those hubs we would’ve had a different outcomes.” (Black Country Hub Manager)

Four of the project team members would have liked to extend the training available to practitioners during the project. One of the SALTs particularly liked the flexibility of the training and reflected on the need for practitioners to be able to access training to upskill practitioners, while acknowledging the difficulty of releasing staff. Another regretted that practitioners could not access the training when it was available because of the COVID-19 lockdown and that it may now be more difficult for them to access it. The Black Country Hub Manager expressed her disappointment that the end of project conference had to be cancelled. She felt that it would have been a great opportunity to celebrate the work that had been carried out on the project and hoped it would still be possible to organise such an event.

### **Impact of the Covid-19 lockdown**

Project team members interviewed were asked whether they would have wanted to complete any additional outputs during the project. All said they were happy with the outputs achieved and did not offer examples of additional outputs. One of the health visitors said:

“I think everything we could’ve put in place we did. The main thing is we lost the parental engagement. However, we have those restrictions. We couldn’t do as much as we wanted, so we are trying but until we get out there and deliver these packs we don’t know”.

The project team co-ordinator thought that the team achieved a lot in the project, but experienced “the professional pull of conflict” during lockdown and towards the end of the project. She considers lockdown to have slowed the project and was worried that in September she would have lost people that would have benefited having their time on the project protected for next academic year, rather than using it during the lockdown period. Others stated that accessing contacts during lockdown was difficult, especially in attempting to continue the literacy hub steering groups, and the Black Country Hub Manager was disappointed that, given the experiences during COVID-19, there had been no opportunity to provide a support package for parents and children returning to school next academic year before the project ended. However, one of the early years advisers felt that lockdown had expanded the team and its capacity:

“I felt that COVID allowed us to reflect on what we achieved, but maybe allowed us to be closer because everyone was available more. I felt like at the beginning it was the same people talking and getting involved, but the project team is bigger. I think it allowed more people to be available to have meetings and have a greater impact because we’ve produced something everyone has been a part of. [...] I feel like COVID allowed us more opportunity to work together, reflect and produce something we’re really proud of.”

### **What worked less well?**

Team members had a varied range of perspectives when asked what worked less well during the project. The only commonalities in perspective were around challenges in working as a team, identified by team members. They highlighted issues familiar from previous research in this such as difficulties in

communication, different ways of working, conflicting priorities and challenges created by delays to the beginning of the project comments, as well as the need to work online post-lockdown. Other areas highlighted by individuals included lack of engagement from parents and parent volunteers; reluctance among some practitioners to take up training places; the lack of a consistent approach across LAs; and the marketing of the literacy hub events.

### **Success stories**

Asked to identify the overall success stories from the project, team members were most likely to point to the literacy hub events and their experience of multi-agency working. One of the SaLTs felt identified the success of the hubs despite COVID-19 and the early help adviser highlighted:

“The coming together, multi-agency working, completing the activity packs. They look really good and I think it’s shown even under the pressures of COVID we’ve been creative as a team and produced something worthwhile.”

The literacy hub events also emerged as the most successful project output, alongside the early outcomes online toolkit. They felt that the events had brought in parents who are usually hard to reach and that the toolkit effectively represented both the objectives and outcomes of the project:

“I think the early outcomes toolkit is going to be the most successful output, as I believe it brings the reason for the whole project together, including having more understanding and communication between families and different agencies.”

### **Professional development**

All of the project team agreed that they had benefited professionally from being part of the project and focused on how multi-agency working has had a direct impacted on them:

“I was warned at the start cross-LA projects are nightmares and it has been difficult [...] But I’ve learned a lot more [about] the health and SaLT side of it. I’ve had some fantastic work that’s going on so it has been useful.” (Project coordinator)

“I’ve learned a lot from colleagues. I’ve never worked with health visitors closely like this before, that’s been really interesting and really powerful.” (Early years adviser)

One of the SaLTs and one of the health visitors had also had the opportunity to undertake further training following their involvement in the project. The health visitor had been trained to deliver the Early Talk Boost training to practitioners, which she considered to be an ‘extra benefit’.

### **Recommendations for future practice**

Project team members were asked what objectives and outputs they felt they could continue when the project ends and they return to their former roles. The majority of responses related to using the early



outcomes pack. However, it was also felt that it was important for the project team to continue to work together. One of the health visitors said:

“Locally, I feel we now have better multi-agency working and where there may be a gap in others knowledge of who we can discuss certain situations with, now there are trailblazers in each of the areas to have input and the connections to work better together.”

This was echoed by one of early years advisers who felt that collaboration was a key part of the project’s success:

“[We are] fortunate to have speech and language therapists and health visitors that have been part of the project. We are going to plan termly meetings to share what’s going on and then one of us will join this Black Country meeting [...] I think it’s that joined-up working and working with different professionals that’s made a difference.”

Asked about the which objectives and outputs they would continue to draw on and contribute to post-secondment, it is interesting to note that the literacy hub events were not referred to as frequently in this context. Highlighted instead were the practicalities around needing strategic lead support and time to organise and deliver the literacy hub events. In fact, the early outcomes pack was mentioned most frequently, followed by multi-agency working, Early Talk Boost training, the activity packs, the literacy hub events, and awareness of the training, resources and screening available in different LAs.

## 5. Key findings and recommendations

### Key findings

- Improved multi-agency working underpinned and supported the development of all outputs in the project.
- The literacy hubs provided an effective multi-agency approach to support parents and children. The events were planned and delivered by professionals from education, health and speech and language in each LA. This meant that parents could be supported by all these professionals in one location.
- Many parents felt that the literacy hubs offered more opportunities for their children to learn and develop in an environment different to standard stay and play activities.
- The Looking Glass home learning exhibition and consultation day also provided an effective multi-agency approach in supporting children, parents and practitioners across the LAs. This supported the development of a unique exhibition that has a large target audience and content that focuses on the education, health and speech, language and communication needs of children from conception.
- Early Talk Boost and HELLO training benefited practitioners and the training/resources are being used in practice. Parent/carer partnership and support was an important area of development for practitioners who attended these training programmes.
- Developing resources, such as the early outcomes pack, school readiness pathway and activity packs through the project has provided the Black Country LAs with resources that offer a unique multi-agency collaboration of information to support children, parents and practitioners.
- The literacy hub events and multi-agency working were regarded as overall success stories and the literacy hub events and the early outcomes pack were considered the most successful outputs by project team members.
- The project has supported project team member's professional development.
- All project team members are keen to continue multi-agency working after the project ends.

### Recommendations

- Professionals from education, health and speech and language need continuing opportunities to be able to work together to ensure messages delivered to parents are consistent and reflect their areas of specialism.
- Professionals from education, health and speech and language are able to design and deliver unique events when they work collaboratively. This was clear from the events organised such as the literacy hubs and Looking Glass exhibition and the resources developed including the early outcomes pack and activity packs. When these professionals work together they are able collectively to consider a broad audience range and a wide developmental range for children from conception onwards. However, it is essential that professionals are afforded time to work collaboratively.

- The findings of this report emphasise the value and importance of continuing to work across LAs, agencies and services. In doing this, project team members were able to explore practice in other LAs, support one another and inform their own practice. Resources, events and training were then able to be developed that considered the needs of families in the Black Country as a whole. There is evidence throughout this report that many of the outputs have reduced siloed working.
- There is positive evidence of impact presented in this report in areas such as practitioners' knowledge and partnership with parents re speech language and communication which suggests that outputs like the literacy hubs, Early Talk Boost training and collaborative online resources should be sustained and extended.

## References

BERA (2018). *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* [online]. [accessed August 2019]  
<https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018>.

## Appendix 1: Secondment start and end dates for project team members

Table 7. *Start dates for interviewed project team members*

Month	Project team members (interviewed) who started their secondments in this month	Professional roles
July 2019	1	Black Country Hub Manager
September 2019	5	Project co-ordinator SALT Early help adviser 2 early years advisers
November 2019	5	3 SaLTs 2 health visitors

Table 8. *End dates for interviewed project team members*

Month	Project team members (interviewed) who will end their secondments in this month	Professional roles
July 2020	1	Early years adviser
August 2020	3	Project coordinator Early help adviser SaLT
September 2020	3	Black country Hub Manager SaLT Early years adviser
November 2020	4	2 SaLTs 2 health visitors