THE NUFFIELD EARLY LANGUAGE WORKSTREAM

Third Year Evaluation

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Evaluation of Thrive at Five's Nuffield Early Language Workstream (Third Year of Delivery)

Executive Summary

This report presents the findings from the evaluation of the third year of Thrive at Five's Nuffield Early Language Workstream in Abbey Hulton and Bentilee, Stoke-on-Trent.

The workstream uses an innovative approach to enhance capacity in Reception classes to deliver the Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI), an evidence-based early language intervention, to all children needing additional support. The innovation involves a partnership between Thrive at Five, seven local schools, and Staffordshire University, in which Staffordshire University students support the delivery of the NELI intervention. To ensure high-quality delivery and smooth implementation across multiple settings, two peripatetic learning support leaders provide additional oversight and also deliver the intervention, where student capacity is lacking, across all seven schools.

Key Findings

Identification of Children for NELI
Across the seven schools, a total of 262 children were screened for NELI using the Language Screen app[1]. Of these, 102 children[2] (36.4% of the whole Reception cohort) participated in the intervention.

Implementation of NELI
NELI was fully implemented across all schools, with all completing the full 20-week intervention. Key factors supporting effective implementation included the consistent delivery by peripatetic learning support leaders, which ensured reliability across schools. There were also strong relationships between teaching staff, students and the peripatetic staff and flexible approaches.

Impact on Children's Language Development
Improvements were observed in the language skills of NELI participants[3], with the percentage of children scoring in the green category (indicating no language concerns) rising from 3% at the start of the year to 52.6% at the end of the year. Of the 41 children who started in the red category (indicating needs support with language concerns), 22% (9 children) improved to green, while 46% (19 children) moved to amber (may need support). Among the 53 children who started in amber, 75.5% (40 children) progressed to green. Of the 12 children who remained in the red category after the intervention, nine increased their scores and three maintained their score, showing that even those at the lowest starting point made progress.

Overall, nearly all Children who participated in NELI showed improvements in language scores, with 91 out of 94 making progress and an average gain of 9.8 points across schools. On average, NELI participants improved by more than twice as much as non-participants (9.8 vs. 3.5 points). Statistical testing confirmed this difference was significant, demonstrating that the intervention had a strong and reliable impact on early language development.[4]

Qualitative feedback also highlighted how the intervention improved children's language and communication skills, with some progressing from very limited speech to holding full conversations. Even when assessment bands did not change, some children developed vital classroom behaviours such as listening, turn-taking, and concentration. Impact varied between schools: in settings where NELI was embraced and reinforced in classrooms, outcomes were stronger. In Schools which did well the intervention was underpinned by strong teaching, leadership, and a wider culture that prioritised communication, resulting in the most positive outcomes.

Areas for Improvement
The evaluation identified areas for further development, including adapting provision for the lowest and highest achievers, and addressing issues of student reliability to ensure more consistent delivery across all schools.

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[1] 18 children were not screened out of the cohort of 280

[2] We only have data at time 1 and time 2 for 94 children

[3] As assessed using the language screening tool.

[4] It is important to note, however, that non-participants started with higher baseline scores, which may have limited the extent of their improvement.

Conclusion

The third year of Thrive at Five's Nuffield Early Language Workstream has delivered measurable improvements in children's early communication and language skills across seven schools in Abbey Hulton and Bentilee. Nearly all participating children made progress. The innovative delivery model—combining dedicated peripatetic learning support leaders with well-supported university students—proved effective, particularly in schools that embedded NELI within a wider culture prioritising communication. Moving forward, refining support for children with the highest and lowest starting points and creating opportunities for schools to share expertise will further enhance the intervention's impact.

Stoke-on-Trent Nuffield Early Language 2025

1. Introduction

To evaluate third year delivery of the Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI)[5] in Stoke-on-Trent's Abbey Hulton and Bentilee wards, we carried out (a) quantitative data analysis using data gathered from seven local primary schools and (b) qualitative research with members of the Thrive at Five team. Below, we describe the key activities.

Quantitative data analysis: A pre-specified set of quantitative data was collected from the seven local primary schools partnered with Thrive at Five. The data included (1) child-level demographic data, (2) information about children's participation [in NELI] and school delivery of NELI, and (3) Language Screen scores which were gathered before and after implementation of NELI for all children regardless of whether they participated in the intervention[6].

Qualitative interviews: Interviews were carried out with Thrive at Five's Early Years Development Lead and the Peripatetic Learning Support Leaders[7] who helped deliver NELI and coordinate implementation of the intervention[8].

2. About the Reception Cohort

In this opening section, we draw on the quantitative demographic data collected, to describe the Reception Cohort within and across the seven schools. This will help us better understand the starting context for the third year of NELI delivery in Abbey Hulton and Bentilee.

2.1. School size and Gender Breakdown

The total reception cohort in 2024/25 across the seven schools comprised 280 children. Three schools were two-form entry (Eaton Park, Maple Court, and Kingsland) and the remainder of schools were one-form entry. The gender breakdown across these schools revealed that 48% were boys and 52% were girls.

2.2. Additional Needs by School

Across the 2024/25 reception cohorts at the seven schools, 21% of children (58 children) had English as an Additional Language (EAL), 38% of children (106 children) were eligible for the Pupil Premium, and 24% of children (67 children) had Special Educational Needs (SEN). [9]

Figure 1: Distribution of EAL, SEND, and Pupil Premium by School

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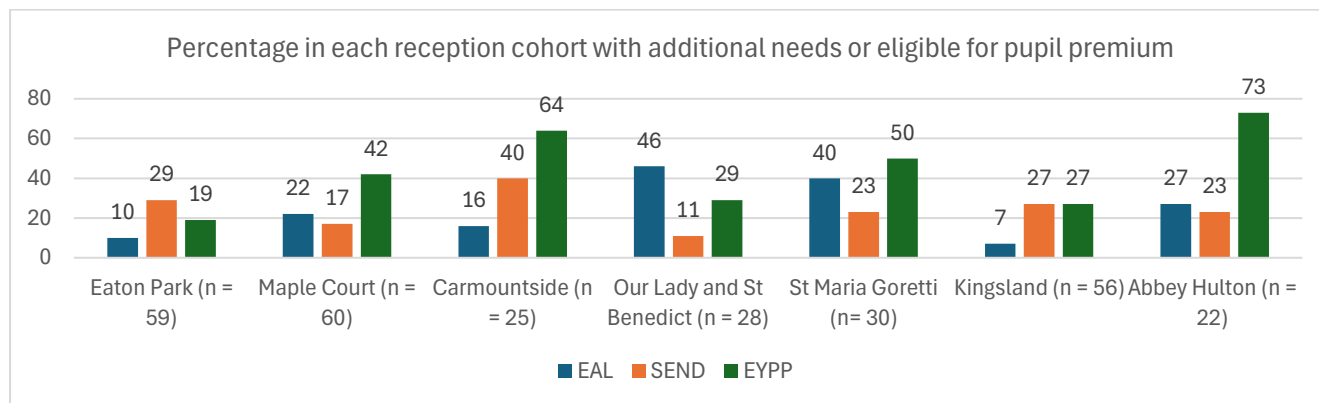
[5] The Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI) is a targeted intervention designed to improve the language skills of children in the early years, particularly those struggling with speech and language development. It involves small group and one-to-one sessions focusing on vocabulary, listening, narrative skills, and phonological awareness. The intervention has been shown to effectively boost children's language abilities, helping them catch up with their peers.

[6] The Language Screen is a validated measure that allows us to compare change in a child's language and communication skills, focusing on vocabulary, sentence structure, narrative abilities, listening and comprehension, and phonological awareness.

[7] These staff are not employed directly by Thrive at Five but are employed by one of the Academy trusts operating in Stoke - The Alpha Trust. Thrive at Five funds salary and on costs. They work across all 7 schools.

[8] In previous years, we asked school staff to share their perspectives as well. However, for this year's lighter-touch evaluation, we relied on quantitative data and on Thrive at Five staff to tell the story of what happened, in order to reduce demands on teachers who were also involved in delivering several other interventions.

[9] In 2023-2024: Among the seven schools, 18.9% of children (53 children) have English as an additional language (EAL), 21.7% (61 children) have special educational needs (SEND), and 44.5% (125 children) are eligible for the pupil premium.

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Eaton Park had the lowest percentage of children eligible for the pupil premium, while Carmountside, Abbey Hulton, and St Maria Goretti had the highest. SEND prevalence ranged from 11% at Our Lady and St Benedict to 40% at Carmountside. Kingsland had the fewest percentage of children with EAL (7%), whereas Carmountside had the highest (40%).

3. Identifying children for NELI

3.1. Screening

The screening process for NELI identifies children who need support in language development. Screening happens at the start of the school year and is also completed at the end of the year to assess progress. The screening uses a digital tool called the Language Screen app (developed by Ox Ed, an Oxford University spin-off organisation), which quickly assesses key areas of language development such as vocabulary, listening comprehension, and sentence structure, all in about 10 minutes. The Thrive at Five peripatetic learning support leaders administer the screening, guiding the child through engaging tasks on a tablet or computer[10]. The app automatically scores the child's responses against age-appropriate benchmarks, identifying those who may benefit from the intervention.[11] The tool uses a traffic light system to categorise language skills:

- **Green:** Language Screen Standard Score of 90 or above (not a concern)
- **Amber:** Score between 82 and 89 (may need support)
- **Red:** Score of 81 or below (needs support)

Across the schools 262 children were screened with 18 children not screened[12]. Of these 102 children went on to receive NELI. Of the cohort that did NELI 37.3% had English as an additional language, 35.3 % had SEND and 42,4% were eligible for pupil premium. 10.8% of the cohort had come from home rather than a nursery setting and 18.1% were previously at a PVI.[13]

4. The Implementation of NELI

The NELI intervention consists of 20 weeks of sessions, divided into two phases. This year all schools completed all the sessions.

- **Phase 1 (Weeks 1-10):** 3 group sessions and 2 individual sessions per week, totalling 50 sessions.
- **Phase 2 (Weeks 11-20):** 2 group sessions and 2 individual sessions per week, totalling 40 sessions. Two full-time staff were in the peripatetic learning support leader role throughout the school year.

The table below summarises the University of Staffordshire undergraduate students that were involved this year. Overall, most students came from Early Years or Early Childhood Studies programmes, mainly in their first or second year of their degree, and these students tended to be the most reliable deliverers. Psychology and Education Studies students were present in several schools but often less consistent, with fewer remaining engaged across the year.

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[10] Having the screening completed by the peripatetic teachers should help with consistency of assessment.

[11] [Language Screen | OxEd & Assessment UK (oxedandassessment.com)](http://oxedandassessment.com)

[12] These children may have joined classes after the initial screening period as staff reported there was movement between schools during the reception year.

[13] Children who participated in NELI were more likely to have additional learning needs and vulnerabilities compared to the overall Reception cohort. While 21% of all children had English as an Additional Language (EAL), over a third of NELI participants (37.3%) were EAL learners. Similarly, 35.3% of children in NELI had Special Educational Needs (SEN), compared with 24% across the whole cohort, and 42.4% were eligible for the Pupil Premium, higher than the 38% overall.

Table 1: Student Delivery by School

School	No. of Students	Courses / Years Represented
Abbey Hulton	2	Early Years (1st year), Psychology student
Carmountside	1	Early Years (2nd year)
Maple Court	3	Early Years (2nd year ×2), Psychology student
Our Lady and Saint Benedict	3	Early Years (1st year ×2), Psychology student
St Maria Goretti	4	Education Studies (1st year ×1), Early Childhood Studies (1st year ×2), Early Childhood Studies (1st year, late start)
Eaton Park	4	Early Childhood Studies (1st year ×2), Education Studies (3rd year), Psychology student
Kingsland	2	Education Studies (1st year), Education Studies (2nd year)

5. Exploring changes for children.

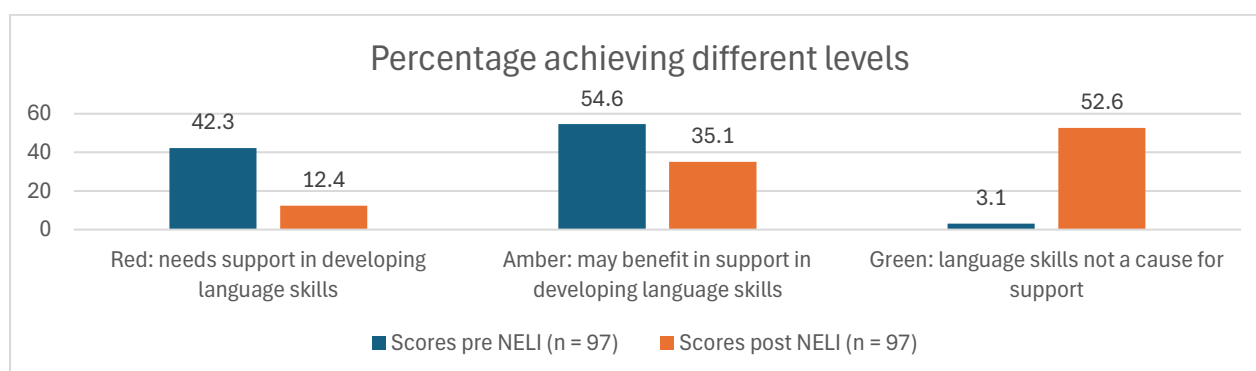### 5.1. Exploring Changes in Children's Language Screen Scores

In Section 5, we explore changes in children's Language Screen Scores before and after the NELI intervention. At each stage (before and after), children received both a numeric score and a resulting green, amber, or red rating.

Improvements were found in children who completed NELI with the number (of children) whose language skills were not a cause for concern (scoring green) rising from 3% to 52%[14].

Among children who started off in the red category (41 children) – 12 (29%) remained in the red category, 19 (46%) moved to amber and 9 improved to green (22%). 1 didn't have a score.

Of the 53 that started in the Amber category 13 children (25%) stayed in the Amber Category and 40 (75%) children progressed to green.

Figure 2: Change in Language Scores from Autumn to Summer Term for those taking part in NELI

Percentage achieving different levels

	Scores pre NELI (n = 97)	Scores post NELI (n = 97)
Red: needs support in developing language skills	42.3	12.4
Amber: may benefit in support in developing language skills	54.6	35.1
Green: language skills not a cause for support	3.1	52.6

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[14] It is not possible to infer that the NELI intervention caused these positive improvements. It is possible that wider confounding factors were responsible for the changes. To ascribe attribution, we would require a more robust evaluation with a control group and intervention group as the basis for comparison. Nonetheless, the positive shifts that can be seen in the data support the case that NELI appears to be working locally

There are 12 children who started in the red category and remain in the red category after the intervention – but 9 of those children increased their scores and 3 scored the same. Of those who remained in the amber category all 13 improved their score.

It is important to understand that even if a child remains in the red band before and after the Nuffield Early Language Intervention, they may still have made meaningful progress. They might show improvement in their raw scores, reflecting development that isn't visible through banding alone. Many children make gains in specific language skills such as vocabulary, sentence structure, listening, and expressive communication, even if their overall classification doesn't change. These improvements can help reduce the risk of later difficulties in literacy, wellbeing, and school engagement. Some children may simply start from a lower baseline and need more time or continued support beyond the intervention. Factors like a child's starting point, and any additional needs all influence how progress shows up—and highlight the importance of a more nuanced view than colour bands alone.

We also looked at changes in the overall scores for all individuals. This provides a more nuanced understanding of changes across all the scores, rather than simply examining movement between different bands. We used a Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test, a method used to compare two related samples, particularly when the data is not normally distributed (see Appendix 1 for the SPSS output). We assessed changes in children's NELI scores between summer and autumn. The results showed a statistically significant improvement, with the vast majority of children demonstrating progress over time ($Z = -8.29$, $p < .001$). Of the 94 children, 91 showed an increase in scores, 3 had no change, and none experienced a decline. This suggests that the intervention or support in place during this period had a strong positive impact on early language development. The Wilcoxon test also confirmed that this difference is significant and not due to chance. Furthermore, 70% of children improved by more than 5 points[15].

Looking at the average change in language scores for NELI participants allows us to explore whether different schools were experiencing more improvement among children than others – see table 3.

Table 3: Mean Change Score by School for NELI Participants

School	Baseline Mean	Mean Change	N (Pupils)	Std. Deviation
Eaton Park	82.5	7.29	14	3.95
Maple Court	82.2	14.07	27	10.14
Carmountside	80	8.50	6	5.43
Our Lady and St Benedict	82.5	10.00	6	3.35
St Maria Goretti	79.1	8.29	17	5.21
Kingsland	79.9	7.00	14	4.21
Abbey Hulton	84.2	9.30	10	4.92
Total (All Schools)	**81.5**	**9.84**	**94**	**7.11**

The average change in language scores across the schools was 9.84 points, with a standard deviation of 7.11. Maple Court had the highest mean improvement (14.07 points), though it also had the largest standard deviation (10.14), indicating greater variability in student outcomes.[16] Most schools demonstrated a positive improvement, with all mean changes above 7 points, suggesting that the intervention had a broadly beneficial effect. Although all schools showed meaningful progress, the extent of catch-up varied. Maple Court pupils made the largest gains, despite starting below average.

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[15] As a rough guide, a change in a child's LanguageScreen Standard Score of 5 points or more indicates that there has probably been a meaningful change in their language skills - LanguageScreen_report_EXAMPLE_231103.pdf

[16] Maple court also did whole class NELI along with Eaton Park.

We also compared changes in scores for those children who participated in NELI with those who did not. A total of 280 participants were considered, with 251 included in the analysis (89.6%) and 29 excluded due to missing data. Children were divided into two groups based on whether they took part in the NELI programme (94 participants) or not (157 participants). On average, children in the NELI group improved by 9.84 points , while children who did not take part improved by 3.54 points. This shows that children in the NELI programme improved by more than twice the amount achieved by those who did not participate. It is important to note that children who did not take part in NELI generally had higher baseline language scores than those who did. This means they had less scope for improvement, as their scores were already closer to age-expected norms. By contrast, children selected for NELI started further behind, so larger gains were both possible and necessary. The difference in progress therefore partly reflects these baseline differences. However, even allowing for this, the fact that NELI pupils made gains more than twice as large as their peers provides strong evidence that the programme had a meaningful impact on language development.

Table 4: Mean Change in Scores by Group

Took Part in NELI	Mean Change	N (Students)	Std. Deviation
Yes	9.84	94	7.11
No	3.54	157	6.15
Total	**5.90**	**251**	**7.19**

A Mann-Whitney U test confirmed that this difference was statistically significant (see Appendix2).

Finally when we compare this to national evaluations of the Nuffield Early Language Intervention these have found that the programme gives children the equivalent of around four months of additional progress in language skills compared to children who do not receive it (Education Endowment Foundation, 2020; 2023[17]). This impact was based on large-scale randomised trials, using standardised language measures such as Language Screen. When NELI is described as giving children *4 months of additional progress*, this doesn't directly translate into a fixed number of score points, because test scores are adjusted for age and the amount of progress depends on children's starting points. In other words, "4 months' progress" usually means a small but meaningful shift in scores, and the exact number of points depends on how varied the children's scores are at the beginning.

In our study, children who took part in NELI improved their language scores by an average of 9.8 points. Which is a sizeable change in points and indicates potentially a much larger effect than that reported in previous national evaluations. This suggests that NELI had a very substantial and positive impact for the children in our schools.

6.   Understanding Implementation

6.1   Key factors which supported effective implementation and impact.

One of the strongest features of the intervention has been the use of peripatetic learning support leaders. Because their role (while in the classroom) was focused on NELI , they were not pulled away to cover other duties, as might have happened if individual school teaching assistants had been responsible. This consistency made a difference: schools came to trust them, children benefited from uninterrupted sessions, and delivery across multiple schools was sustained for the whole 20 weeks of the programme. Peripatetic staff were also able to adapt flexibly to each setting, "wearing different hats" depending on the ethos and routines of individual schools. Their relationship-

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[17] Education Endowment Foundation (2020). *Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI): Evaluation report.* London: EEF.
Education Endowment Foundation (2023). *Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI) – Scale-up impact evaluation report.* London: EEF.

building skills were crucial, with positive links forged not only with headteachers and teachers but also with office staff, whose cooperation was essential for smooth organisation.

A further strength lay in the way staff adapted the intervention. Timetabling was managed carefully to work around phonics, assemblies, PE lessons and other interruptions. Children were often grouped by ability rather than strictly in mixed-ability groups, which allowed less confident pupils to engage more fully rather than being overshadowed by stronger peers. Peripatetic learning support leaders were also able to set highly specific targets for individuals: for example, moving a child from one-word responses to two-word phrases, or encouraging the use of fuller sentences. These small but significant steps were not always visible in headline data, yet they represented real and valuable progress.

The intervention had clear impact on children's language and communication skills. Some children began with extremely limited speech but went on to hold conversations and use complex sentences. Even where pupils did not move between "red, amber and green" bands in the assessment data, they nevertheless developed essential classroom behaviours such as listening, turn-taking and concentration. Schools that embraced NELI as part of a broader commitment to communication, such as Maple Court, saw the greatest benefits. Strong teaching and leadership meant that NELI could be reinforced in classrooms, creating a culture where language development was prioritised.

University students also made an important contribution. When consistent and well-supported, they provided valuable additional capacity, and many grew in confidence to deliver sessions independently. For some, the experience became part of their dissertation work or school-based practice, and several are returning next year. Increased buy-in from the university, including tutors visiting schools and the awarding of certificates, strengthened the sense that NELI delivery was both a learning opportunity and a form of professional development.

6.3. Key implementation challenges

At the same time, there were still some challenges. Variation between schools was marked. In some settings, staffing challenges limited the impact of NELI despite the commitment of staff and students delivering it. The second half of the programme also proved problematic for certain children. Less able pupils often struggled with the heavier content of Part 2, and there were suggestions from peripatetic staff that repeating Part 1, or adopting a gap-analysis approach to focus on specific needs, might be more beneficial. Children with high needs, especially some EAL and SEND pupils, often required additional or alternative interventions in order to make meaningful progress. In some cases, children were tested mid-year achieving high scores that suggested they no longer needed the programme; there is a question mark over whether these students should stay on the intervention.

The involvement of university students, while valuable, was not without difficulty. Not all students were equally suited to the role. Those with prior educational experience, or with clear professional ambitions in teaching, speech and language therapy or SEND, tended to be stronger, more reliable, and more likely to stay with the intervention. Less experienced students, such as some from psychology backgrounds, often needed more intensive training, though they did bring diversity and, in some cases, valuable male role models. Students who faced practical barriers such as travel costs, were more likely to drop out. The role of the peripatetic learning support leaders in mentoring and supporting students was therefore critical in turning enthusiasm into effective delivery.

Beyond the intervention itself, there were wider systemic issues which may have limited the impact. Workforce training on communication would complement the intervention. Opportunities for schools to share good practice were also limited. While peripatetic staff informally passed on ideas across schools, formal communities of practice didn't develop, as staff were often too time-pressured to engage.

7. Conclusion.

The third year of Thrive at Five's Nuffield Early Language Workstream has demonstrated measurable impact on children's language development in Abbey Hulton and Bentilee. The NELI intervention was delivered consistently across all seven schools, with almost all children who participated showing improvements in their language scores. The gains were particularly striking for those who began the year in the amber band, with three-quarters

progressing to green. Even children who remained in the red category typically showed positive movement in their scores, demonstrating that the intervention supports progress even for those with the greatest needs.

The delivery model, which combined peripatetic learning support leaders with well-supported university students, has proven to be an effective way to embed NELI across multiple schools. Schools that fully embraced the intervention and reinforced its principles within classroom practice achieved the best results, illustrating that a whole-school culture that prioritises communication significantly enhances the impact of targeted interventions like NELI.

Challenges remain, including variability in outcomes between schools, the need for more tailored provision for both the lowest and highest achievers, and the challenge of ensuring consistent student engagement. There is also scope to strengthen professional development, knowledge-sharing, and leadership around early language support to embed improvements more deeply and consistently.

8. Recommendations

1. **Increase the size of our local peripatetic team to enable greater support and depth of involvement.** Continue supporting peripatetic learning support leaders, whose consistency and expertise underpin the intervention's . Consider recruiting more peripatetic learning support leaders to ensure every school has guaranteed delivery capacity.

2. **Adapt intervention delivery as necessary.**
   o Ensure children with the highest needs have additional appropriate support, including targeted Speech and Language Therapy referrals where required.
   o Provide higher-attaining pupils, with differentiated content or early exit options for those no longer requiring intervention.
   o This could be supported by a review at week 10 of the programme to assess progress.

3. **Create Opportunities for Schools to Share Practice**
   Establish structured forums or communities of practice to enable schools to share effective strategies, leadership approaches, and classroom reinforcement techniques as well as how to develop a whole school approach to supporting communication and language development.

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Appendix 1.

Table 2. SPSS results from test comparing before and after scores for children who participated in NELI.

This SPSS output comes from a **Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test**, which is used to compare two sets of related data — in this case, the NELI (Nuffield Early Language Intervention) scores from summer and autumn. Here's what the output means:

Ranks

		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
NELI score summer – NELI score autumn	Negative Ranks	0[a]	.00	.00
	Positive Ranks	91[b]	46.00	4186.00
	Ties	3[c]		
	Total	94		

a. NELI score summer < NELI score autumn

b. NELI score summer > NELI score autumn

c. NELI score summer = NELI score autumn

Test Statistics[a]

	NELI score summer – NELI score autumn
Z	–8.288[b]
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001

a. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test

b. Based on negative ranks.

Appendix 2

A Mann–Whitney U test was conducted to compare improvement scores (**diff_score**) between children who took part in the NELI programme and those who did not.

The results showed that the children in the NELI group had higher improvement scores than those who did not take part. The NELI group had a mean rank of 168.49, compared to 100.56 for the non-NELI group, indicating that their scores were generally higher.

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The difference between the groups was statistically significant (Mann–Whitney U = 3385, Z = -7.18, p < .001), meaning that children who took part in NELI improved significantly more than those who did not.

Ranks

	Took part in NELI	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
diff_score	Y	94	168.49	15838.00
	N	157	100.56	15788.00
	Total	251		

Test Statistics[a]

	diff_score
Mann–Whitney U	3385.000
Wilcoxon W	15788.000
Z	-7.184
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001

a. Grouping Variable: Took part in NELI