



# Talking Time Evaluation report: Year 2

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## Executive Summary

Thrive at Five is a place-based initiative focused on helping children develop strong foundations for life and learning in their early years. In the 2023-24 school year, Talking Time<sup>1</sup> was implemented in Abbey Hulton and Bentilee schools to enhance nursery children's language skills. This evaluation focuses on year two of implementation and Talking Time's impact on children's language skills.

Six schools participated in Talking Time in 2024-25. In the autumn of 2024, LanguageScreen<sup>2</sup> scores (used to identify children who may benefit from language skills support) were available for 152 children. At that time, 15.7% of children were identified as needing support (red) and 20.9% as might need support (amber).<sup>3</sup> After Talking Time, LanguageScreen scores from summer 2025 were available for 147 children and showed that fewer children needed support (13.6%; red category) or might need support (12.2%; amber category).

Overall, 26 children (50%) made progress by moving from red to amber category or amber to green category. Whilst it is not possible to attribute the children's improvements in language skills to Talking Time solely without a control group, these are promising results and echo last year's evaluation findings where most children showed an improvement in language skills scores. However, a direct comparison is not possible due to the different assessments used by the schools in 2023-24 and 2024-25.<sup>4</sup>

It is worth noting that 65.5% of children in the amber category (identified as might need support) moved to the green category, however only 30.4% of the children in the red category (identified as needing support) moved to the amber category. This points to individual support being needed for a small group of children with higher need, where the small group activities and whole class approach may not have been sufficient. These children may also benefit from other initiatives such as PEEP Learning Together.<sup>5</sup>

## Recommendations

- Support the remaining school nursery and other nurseries to implement Talking Time.
- Consider additional targeted support for children with very low LanguageScreen scores at the start of the academic year.

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<sup>1</sup> [Talking Time© - Department of Education](#)

<sup>2</sup> [LanguageScreen | OxEd & Assessment](#)

<sup>3</sup> Score of 90 or above; not a concern (green). Score between 82 and 89; may need support (amber). Score 81 or below; definitely needs support (red).

<sup>4</sup> In 2023-24 the assessment used was Early Communication Screen (ECS). In 2024-25, not all schools used ECS so LanguageScreen was used instead. LanguageScreen is a reliable and valid measurement for identifying children's language skill support.

<sup>5</sup> [how the learning together programme helps children's learning | p e e p l e](#)

- Encourage schools to use LanguageScreen categories when identifying children to invite to participate in PEEP. Children in the red category should be prioritised.
- Suggest to schools that use both LanguageScreen and Early Communication Screen measures to only use LanguageScreen to reduce teacher burden.

## Background

Talking Time was introduced to our schools and early education and childcare settings in Stoke-on-Trent in 2023. Thrive at Five organised and paid for training led by a Talking Time consultant<sup>6</sup> for all local educators. Six out of seven schools implemented Talking Time in their nursery classes during the 2023-24 school year. The evaluation of this first year showed that training was perceived to be effective, improving staff confidence and enhancing teaching practices. Nursery staff reported sometimes struggling with ensuring equal access for all children in mixed ability groups and balancing small group sessions with whole class teaching and finding time to prepare Talking Time sessions. Despite these barriers, nursery staff were positive about Talking Time, stating that they believed all children benefitted from this whole class approach regardless of language development needs. The evaluation also found that the number of children with significant language delay and mild to moderate language delay had decreased by the end of the school year.

The aim of this year's evaluation was to examine the impact of Talking Time on children's language skills using the LanguageScreen measure.

## Talking Time intervention

Talking Time is an oral language intervention for nursery children, designed to enhance their language skills (see the Theory of Change in appendix 1) through high-quality interactions in small-group activities. The strategies are then carried into whole class teaching to enable continuous provision. Whole-class language enrichment has been found to be effective in nurseries.<sup>7</sup> Talking Time focuses on developing children's conversational skills, enhancing their vocabulary, and integrating these approaches into everyday practice.

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<sup>6</sup> [Lingo – Speech and Language Therapy and Consultancy by Wendy Lee \(lingospeech.co.uk\)](http://lingospeech.co.uk)

<sup>7</sup> [Oral language enrichment in preschool improves children's language skills: a cluster randomised controlled trial - West - 2024 - Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry - Wiley Online Library](https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpp.28244)

## Implementation of Talking Time

Six schools in Abbey Hulton and Bentilee implemented the Talking Time intervention in 2023-24. The same schools implemented Talking Time in 2024-25. All schools were committed to implementing Talking Time, and delivery went well in several schools, with one teacher reporting it felt like 'embedded practice'. However, implementation was inconsistent in three schools due to a lack of classroom space and combining the nursery and reception year in one school. Two schools had a change in staff, reducing delivery temporarily. These latter schools were supported by the peripatetic leaders to strengthen Talking Time delivery.

## What impact did Talking Time have on children's language skills?

### *LanguageScreen*

Children were assessed by LanguageScreen, a 10-minute app-based assessment. No specialist training is needed to administer LanguageScreen. The assessment identifies children requiring additional language support and provides a standardised score using age-appropriate benchmarks. LanguageScreen has been found to be a reliable screening tool of language skills for nursery children and assesses:

- Expressive Vocabulary (naming 24 pictures)
- Listening Comprehension (answering 16 literal and inferential questions about three short stories)
- Receptive Vocabulary (matching a spoken word to one of the four pictures, 23 items)
- Sentence Repetition (repeating 14 sentences verbatim)

Post assessment, the assessor receives a score which categorises the child into one of three categories;

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

It should be noted that last year's evaluation used the Early Communication Screen measure to evaluate Talking Time, and many schools used both this and the LanguageScreen measure this year. The current evaluation only focuses on data from the LanguageScreen assessment as all six schools used this measure which enabled cross-school comparisons, which was not possible with Early Communication Screen.

LanguageScreen is a reliable and valid screening tool for this age group of children.<sup>8</sup>

### *Autumn 2024 scores*

LanguageScreen data was available for 152 children and missing for 12 children (7.3%) in autumn 2024. Slightly more than half of the cohort were girls (54.6%) and average age was 3 years and 7 months (range 3 years to 4 years and 1 month). Few children had English as an Additional Language (EAL; 14.6%) or a Special Educational Need (SEN; 15.8%). A third of students were categorised as Pupil Premium (36%).

Out of the available data, 15.7% (N=24) of children were categorised as red, 20.9% (N=32) of children categorised as amber and, 63.4% (N=97) of children categorised as green. Within the individual schools the number of children in the different categories varied considerably. For example, Our Lady St Benedict did not identify any children in the red category, whilst St Maria Goretti scored 25% (N=4) of their children in the red category (see appendix 2 for more detail on school-level data). Future evaluations will need to monitor this low number of children in the red category closely.

An exploratory examination of the children in the three different categories shows that overall there is a higher proportion of children with English as an Additional Language and Special Educational Needs in the red category compared to the amber and green categories. There is little variation in child gender or age and no difference in Pupil Premium between the red and green category (slightly lower in amber group). This comparison needs to be interpreted with caution considering the low number of children in the red and amber categories. See appendix 3 for more details.

### *Summer 2025*

In summer 2025, LanguageScreen data was available for 147 of the children who had completed the autumn assessment. In the summer, fewer children were in the red and amber categories (see figures 1 and 2). To assess whether the autumn scores were significantly different from the summer scores, a Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test was conducted. This test showed that the summer score was significantly higher than the autumn scores with more children increasing their score than decreasing their score (see appendix 4 for more detail).

Out of the 52 children who were in the red or amber category at the start of the school year, 26 children (50%) increased a category. A considerable majority (65.5%) of children in the amber category moved to green. The proportion of children in the green category increased from 63.4% to 74.1%. This means that after Talking Time and the end of the

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<sup>8</sup> [Oral language enrichment in preschool improves children's language skills: a cluster randomised controlled trial - West - 2024 - Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry - Wiley Online Library](#)

school year, three quarters of all children were categorised as not having a language concern.

Like the autumn scores, summer results were mixed between the schools. Proportions ranged from 5.3% to 26.7% in the red category, from 0 to 26.7% in the amber category and from 60% to 94.7% in the green category. Please note that these percentages are impacted by the change in number of children; 152 in autumn and 147 in summer. The highest percentage was found in the school where Talking Time was delivered and embedded throughout the foundation stage (see appendix 2 for details).

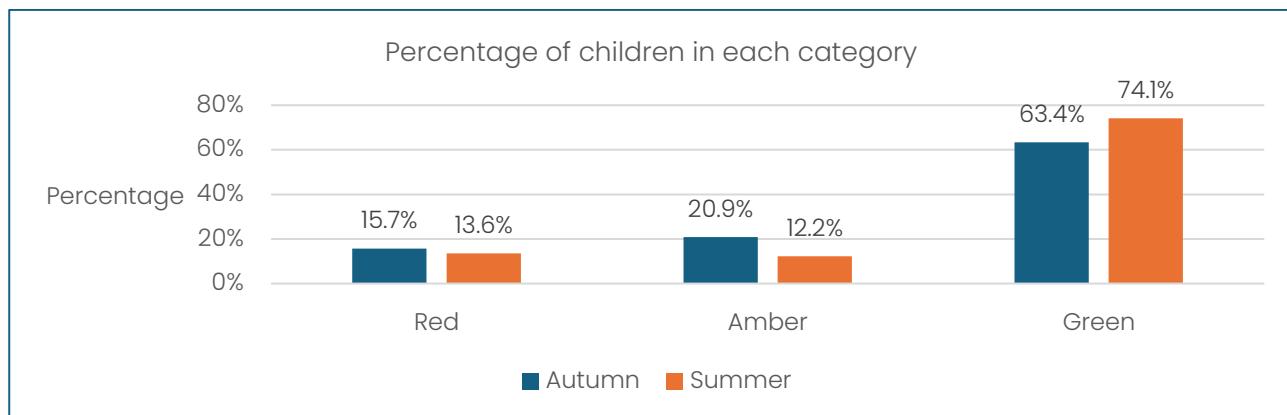


Figure 1. Percentage of children in each of the categories at the start (autumn, N=152) and end (summer, N=147) of the school year.

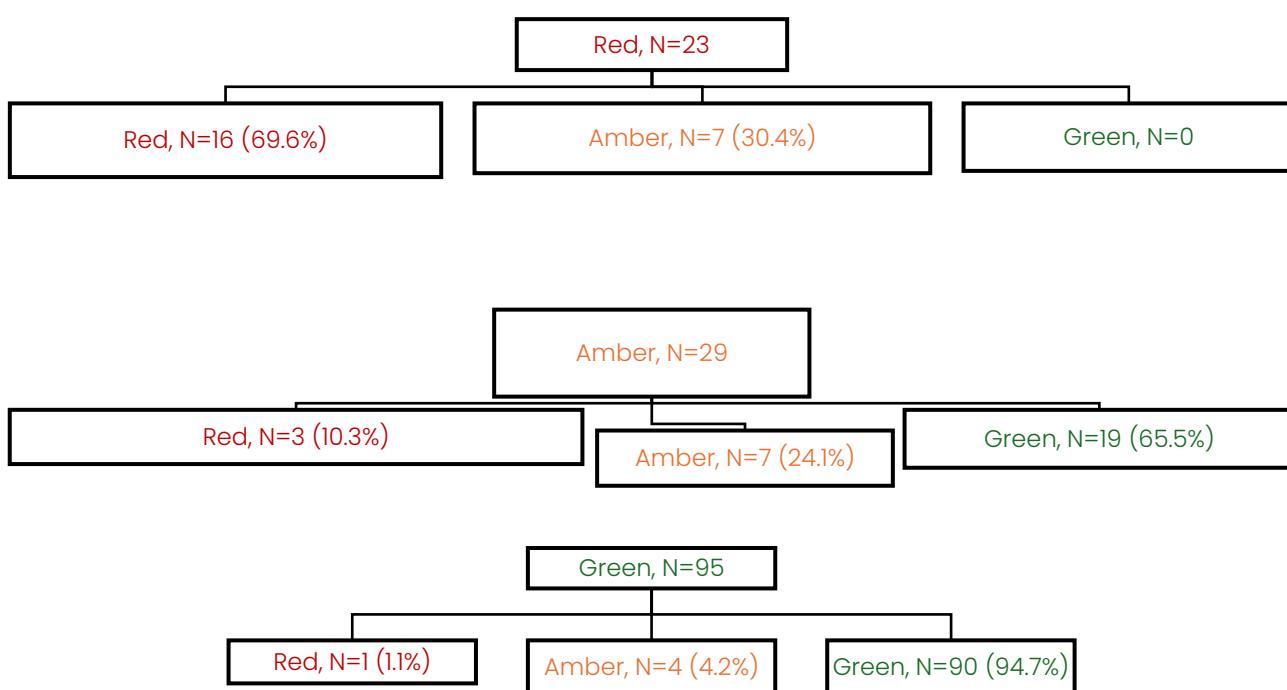


Figure 2. Number of children who were in each category at the start of the school year (box at top) and end of the school year (boxes below). Data presented is from the 147 children who have an autumn and summer score.

### *Children who stayed in the same category*

Most children (N=69.6%, N=16) in the red category remained in this category at the end of the school year. An independent samples t-test was conducted to assess if the autumn mean scores were different for the children who stayed in the red category compared to the children who were in the amber category by summer. This t-test found that there was no significant difference between these two groups ( $t(21) = -1.403$ ,  $p=.088$ ; red group mean score 73.5 (SD 5.02, N=16), amber group mean score 76.43 (SD 3.36, N=7)), but it's a small sample so caution is needed.

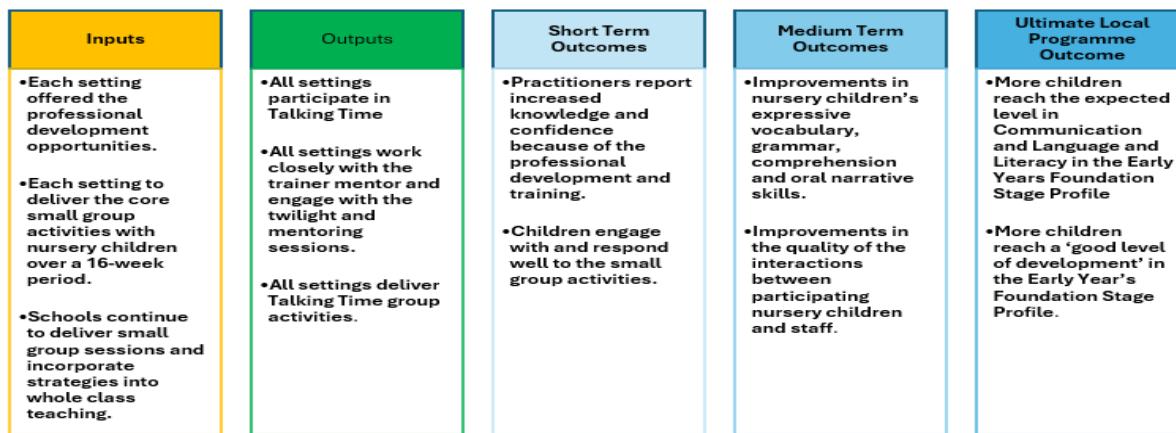
When comparing the autumn and summer scores of the 16 children who stayed in the red category, there was no statistically significant change in mean scores (autumn score 72.88, SD 5.06; summer score 73.5, SD 5.02; ( $t(15) = -.393$ ,  $p=.350$ ) meaning their scores did not improve. Nine children decreased their score (a decrease between 1 and 13). This group of 16 children also had a higher proportion of EAL (33.3%) and SEN (60%) compared to the whole cohort (14.6% EAL, 15.8% SEN) which is likely to impact their language skills.

A majority of children in the amber category moved to the green category. This suggests that a whole-class approach may benefit some children (amber category) more than others (red category) and Talking Time may not be enough for all children to improve their language skills. Last year's evaluation identified that some teachers struggled to involve all children in the Talking Time activities when working with a group of children with diverse language skills. It might also be the case that the children who remained in the red category struggled to engage in a group of mixed ability children. Tailored individual support in addition to Talking Time, may be needed to help these children increase their language skills. These children may also benefit the most from programs such as PEEP, which focuses on communication and language and the home learning environment.

## **Summary**

A total of 152 children across nursery classes in six Thrive at Five schools participated in the Talking Time intervention. The data from schools shows a significant improvement in language skills, as measured by the LanguageScreen assessment. Individual support and regular assessments is likely to be needed for the 16 children who remained in the red category and whose scores did not increase. It will be suggested to schools that the autumn LanguageScreen scores are used to identify children who should be invited to attend PEEP.

## Appendix 1 – Theory of Change



## Appendix 2 – Categories before and after Talking Time for each school

School	Autumn (153 children)			Summer (147 children)		
	Red	Amber	Green	Red	Amber	Green
Carmountside	13.3% (2)	5.9% (1)	80.0% (12)	14.3% (2)	14.3% (2)	71.4% (10)
Eaton Park	19.5% (8)	22.0% (9)	58.5% (24)	9.8% (4)	17.1% (7)	73.2% (30)
Kingsland	17.8% (8)	17.8% (8)	64.4% (29)	16.3% (7)	9.3% (4)	74.4% (32)
Maple Court	5.0% (1)	25.0 (5)	70.0% (14)	5.3% (1)	0%	94.7% (18)
OLSB	0%	33.3% (5)	66.7% (10)	13.3% (2)	26.7% (4)	60.0% (9)
St Maria Goretti	25% (4)	23.5% (4)	47.1% (8)	26.7% (4)	6.7% (1)	66.7% (10)
<i>Complete cohort</i>	<i>15.7% (24)</i>	<i>20.9% (32)</i>	<i>63.4% (97)</i>	<i>13.6% (20)</i>	<i>12.2% (18)</i>	<i>74.1% (109)</i>

## Appendix 3 – Comparison in child characteristics between red, amber and green categories in autumn 2024

Category	Age in months (range)	% boys	Attend PBT*	Before nursery**	EAL	SEN	EYPP
Red (N=24)	42.83 months (37-48)	54.2%	0%	58.3% home 33.3% PVI nursery 4.2% own school nursery 4.2% different school nursery	33.3%	50%	33%
Amber (N=32)	42.31 months (36-49)	56.3%	18.8%	46.9% home 41.9% PVI nursery 6.5% different school nursery 3.1% own school nursery	21.9%	21.9%	25%
Green (N=96)	42.74 months (36-49)	39.2%	9.2%	28.6% home 48.5% PVI nursery 12.4% own school nursery 6.2% different school nursery	5.2%	5.2%	35.1%

The table above presents data from the autumn 2024 assessment, showing differences in pupil characteristics between the three red, amber and green categories. \*There is a considerable amount of missing data for this variable. \*\*Some percentages do not add up to 100% due to missing data. Attend PBT and before nursery variables have not been included in the analysis due to high number of missing data.

#### Appendix 4: Details of Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test.

A Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test was used to compare the Autumn and Summer LanguageScreen scores to assess if their difference was statistically significant. This test examines the negative ranks (40 cases; where autumn score were higher than the summer score), positive ranks (98 cases; where summer scores were higher than the autumn scores) and ties (no difference in scores). The test statistic Z was -4.904, and this was statistically significant ( $p<.001$ ) meaning that the change in score between autumn and summer is very unlikely to be due to chance.