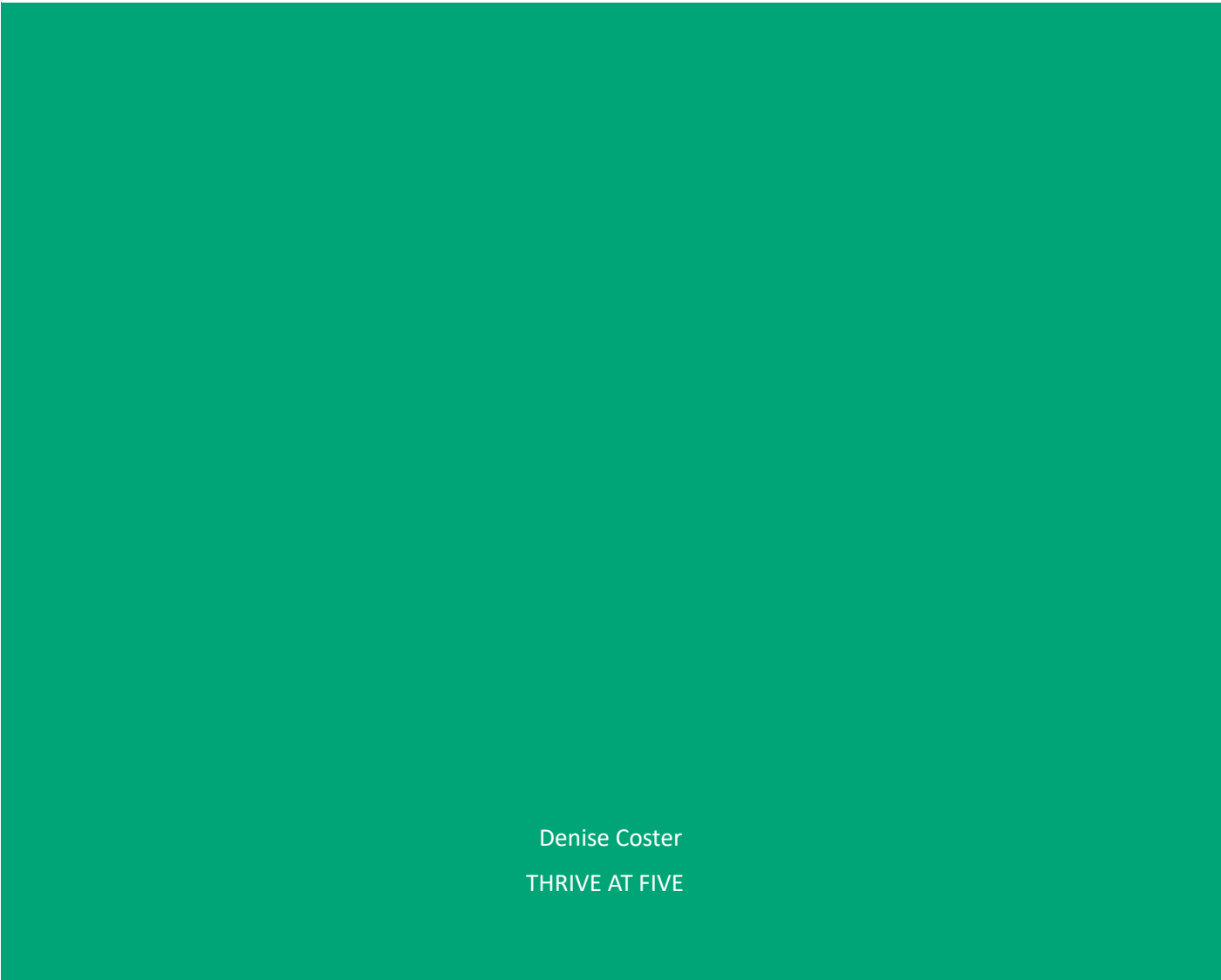




THRIVE AT FIVE SCHOOLS PATHWAY REPORT 2026



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THRIVE AT FIVE

Executive summary

Thrive at Five's mission is to help children in the early years develop the strong foundations they need for life and learning. Working with families, communities and local partners, Thrive at Five seeks to strengthen early years systems and improve outcomes for children from pregnancy to age five, particularly in areas experiencing high levels of disadvantage.

This report brings together evidence from the implementation and evaluation of two speech and language interventions delivered with local partners in Abbey Hulton and Bentilee, Stoke-on-Trent: Talking Time, a universal nursery-based programme; and the Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI), a targeted reception intervention. It examines their contribution to children's language outcomes and their role in strengthening the local early years system.¹

Across both programmes, children demonstrated improved communication and language outcomes. Talking Time has become embedded within participating nurseries, supporting practitioners to create richer language environments and helping more children reach age-expected language levels by the end of nursery. NELI proved challenging to establish in its first year, with reliance on university students whose availability was inconsistent, and difficulties coordinating delivery within schools, resulting in considerable variation in how much of the programme was delivered. However, over the years it has developed into a consistently delivered intervention, supporting hundreds of children with identified language needs and producing sustained improvements in language outcomes across four years.

A key finding is the emerging evidence that these interventions operate as a graduated pathway of support. Children attending nurseries delivering Talking Time entered reception with stronger language skills and were substantially less likely to meet the threshold for NELI than children from other settings. While this does not demonstrate causality, the consistency of quantitative findings and practitioner observations suggests that strengthening language development in the nursery years may reduce the need for later targeted intervention.

The evaluation also highlights the importance of implementation conditions. Strong leadership, workforce capacity, coaching and partnership working were associated with more successful delivery, while workforce shortages, organisational change and increasing levels of complex need continue to present challenges across the early years system.

Beyond outcomes for individual children, the findings indicate wider progress towards Thrive at Five's system strengthening ambitions. Across participating schools and the wider partnership, workforce capability has increased, evidence-informed practice has become more embedded, partnerships have matured and local ownership of interventions has grown. Initiatives such as the Talking Time Train the Trainer model demonstrate growing capacity to sustain improvement locally.

¹Thrive at Five also supports the delivery of PEEP Learning Together in several schools. [Home - Peeple](#)

Overall, the findings suggest that Thrive at Five, working alongside our local partners, is contributing both to improved communication and language outcomes for children and to the development of a more connected, preventative and sustainable local early years system.

Introduction

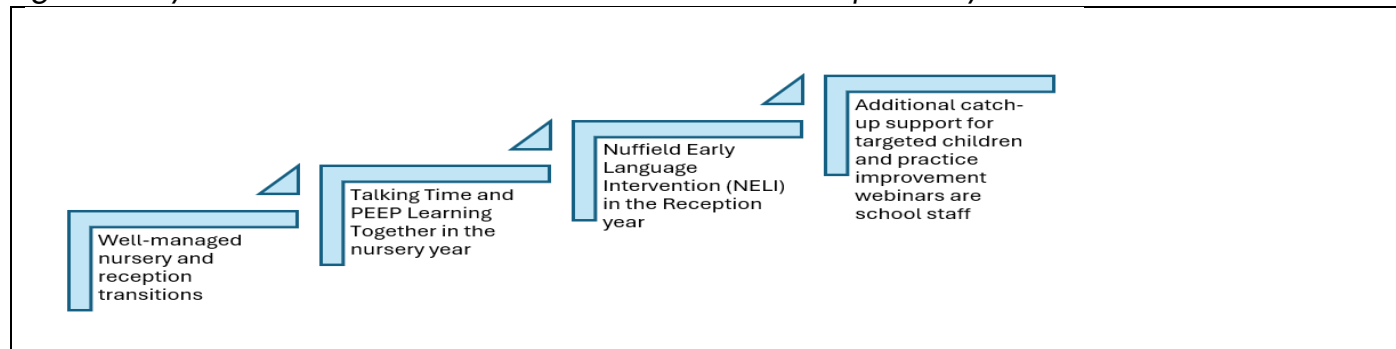
Since beginning work in Abbey Hulton and Bentilee in 2022, Thrive at Five has worked alongside the seven local primary schools and wider partners to develop a sustained, coordinated approach to improving children's communication and language development. This has included development of a school peripatetic team, with responsibility for supporting high-quality implementation of evidence-based interventions, alongside supporting the systematic use of screening tools to identify children's communication and language needs at the earliest opportunity.

The Abbey Hulton and Bentilee school pathway consists of two complementary types of activity. First, the pathway brings together the implementation and sequencing of evidence-based interventions: Talking Time and PEEP Learning Together during the nursery year, followed by the Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI) during reception. Second, this is complemented by a wider set of system-strengthening activity, including work to support children's transition into nursery and reception, additional catch-up provision, and practice improvement webinars. Together, these are intended to create a strong and coordinated pathway of support across the nursery and reception years.

This report focuses primarily on Talking Time and NELI, examining their implementation, development and outcomes over multiple years, and exploring how the two interventions work together across the nursery-to-reception pathway. PEEP Learning Together forms part of the wider school pathway and a summary relating to this intervention is also included within the report.² We also consider some of the wider system strengthening activity where this is important to understand the pathway, particularly transitions and additional catch-up support in reception. In doing so, the report seeks to understand not only the contribution of individual interventions, but also how Thrive at Five's work alongside schools and local partners is contributing to a stronger, more connected early years pathway and system capable of improving outcomes for children over the longer term. (See Fig 1 for graphic and for a note on evaluation methods, see Appendix 1.)

² [PEEP-evaluation-report-21.11.25.pdf](#) – First Year Evaluation of PEEP

Fig 1: Abbey Hulton & Bentilee in Stoke-on-Trent – school pathway



The first section of this report focuses on Talking Time, the universal communication and language intervention delivered during the nursery year.

Talking Time: implementation

Over the past three years, Talking Time³ has developed from a pilot intervention in six Abbey Hulton and Bentilee school nurseries into a more established element of early language support across Stoke-on-Trent.

Year one: (2023/24)

The approach was introduced in 2023⁴ as a universal early language intervention designed to strengthen children's communication through structured small-group activities and high-quality adult-child interactions. Alongside delivery, schools received extensive implementation support including training, coaching and opportunities for reflective practice. The focus during the first year was on establishing the approach, building staff confidence and understanding whether Talking Time could be successfully delivered within nursery settings.

Practitioners responded very positively to the implementation model, particularly the combination of training, classroom demonstrations and coaching. Schools reported that staff became more confident in supporting children's communication and language development, not only during Talking Time sessions but throughout the nursery day. The universal nature of the programme was seen as a particular strength, helping to create richer language environments and benefiting children with a wide range of language abilities. Practitioners also observed improvements in children's vocabulary, confidence and willingness to engage in conversations and group activities. However, implementation was affected by staffing changes, variation in delivery between schools and the practical challenge of finding time for preparation and small-group work alongside everyday nursery responsibilities.

³ [Talking Time© - Department of Education](#)

⁴ [TalkingTime-Final-Evaluation-Report.pdf](#)

Year two (2024/25)

By the second year, Talking Time had moved beyond initial implementation and was becoming embedded within nursery practice in some schools⁵. The same six nurseries continued to deliver the approach, with greater emphasis on sustaining delivery and improving consistency. Continued coaching and leadership support helped schools manage challenges such as staff turnover, limited classroom space and mixed nursery and reception provision. Children's language continued to improve across the year, and the introduction of a standardised assessment strengthened confidence in these outcomes⁶. The evaluation also highlighted that while Talking Time appeared particularly effective for children with mild and moderate language difficulties, some children with more complex communication needs required additional targeted support. This learning informed subsequent developments and positioned Talking Time as part of a broader continuum of early language support.

Year three (2025/26)

In year three, Talking Time continued to be delivered across Thrive at Five school nurseries, although implementation was more variable because of workforce pressures and competing demands. Three nurseries were able to provide evaluation data. Despite these challenges, practitioners continued to view Talking Time as a valuable intervention that supported both children's communication skills and wider nursery practice. Schools where nursery leaders actively championed the programme achieved the most consistent delivery, with Talking Time becoming embedded within day-to-day provision rather than being treated as an additional intervention.

Staff also emphasised the programme's role in supporting school readiness. Many felt that Talking Time helped develop children's listening, attention and vocabulary skills before they moved into reception and began more structured interventions, such as NELI. As a result, children were often perceived to be better prepared for the language demands of school.

However, year three also highlighted the ongoing challenges of sustaining delivery in a changing educational landscape. Staffing shortages, leadership changes, school reorganisation and competing priorities reduced capacity in some settings, and two schools were unable to deliver the programme during the year. Practical issues such as a lack of suitable space for small group work also affected implementation.

Building on findings from year two, schools recognised that children with the most significant communication needs often required support beyond Talking Time⁷ and began combining it with targeted interventions such as *Time to Listen* and *Time to Talk*,⁸.

⁵ [Talking-Time-Evaluation-report-final-4.11.25.pdf](#)

⁶ [Language Screen | Nuffield Early Language Intervention \(NELI\)](#)

⁷ Supported in some cases by the additional capacity provided by Higher Level Teaching Assistants provided by Thrive at Five.

⁸ [Time to Talk - Language Therapy Children - Integrated Treatment Services](#)

Despite these challenges, year three marked an important step towards long-term sustainability. Stoke-on-Trent became the first area to pilot OxEd and Assessment's *Train the Trainer* model, with four experienced Thrive at Five practitioners becoming accredited trainers. This was supported by funding from the local authority early years education team, and the Stoke early years board recommended Talking Time for wider adoption across school nurseries. These developments represent a shift from programme delivery towards system-wide capacity building, creating stronger foundations for Talking Time to continue growing and supporting children's early language development beyond the lifetime of Thrive at Five.

What does successful Talking Time implementation look like?

Over the three years of delivery, schools varied in the extent to which Talking Time became embedded within everyday nursery practice. Evaluation findings suggest that the strongest outcomes were achieved where the programme was delivered consistently and integrated into the wider language environment of the setting⁹. The example below illustrates the characteristics of high-quality Talking Time delivery.

The following case study draws together evidence from practitioner interviews and observations to illustrate what high-quality Talking Time delivery can look like in practice.

Case study

In a nursery where Talking Time is working well, it is not experienced as a standalone intervention. It becomes part of everyday practice, with the principles of high-quality conversation and language development running throughout the nursery day. The core small-group sessions are important. (twice-weekly 15-minute sessions) Children have regular opportunities to talk in a small group, where they can focus on the adult and each other, hear high-quality conversation and have plenty of opportunities to contribute. Sessions use the Talking Time texts, open questions, photographs, vocabulary and role play to stimulate conversation, but practitioners do not simply work through the materials. They listen carefully to where children are in their language development and adapt their interactions to help move them on. Learning from the sessions is then reinforced throughout the day. For example, a Talking Time story about a zoo might be followed by a zoo being created in the continuous provision, giving children opportunities to use the same vocabulary and ideas in their play. Practitioners model new words and ways of talking during whole-class teaching and look for natural opportunities to revisit language with individual children. Real experiences, such as a visit to a supermarket, can also become the basis for later conversations and reflection. This means that Talking Time starts to shape wider practice. Rather than language being confined to a particular literacy session, practitioners see it as a thread running through everything children do. As one practitioner described it, Talking Time becomes "embedded practice".¹⁰

⁹ https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/promising-programmes/talking-time?utm_source

¹⁰ One school used to have a 10 to 15 mins literacy session every morning but have now switched two days to deliver Talking Time in small group sessions – and used the same Talking Time texts to inform other literacy sessions

Good delivery also depends on skilled practitioners. Training, in-setting modelling and ongoing reflection help staff understand not just *what* to deliver, but *why*. Practitioners notice who is joining conversations, who may be quieter, what children are able to do and what they need next. Staff plan together, share ideas and continually refine their practice. There is also a clear commitment from the setting to making Talking Time happen. Small-group sessions are prioritised within the timetable, appropriate space is identified, enough staff are trained to make delivery sustainable, and responsibility for organising the programme is clear. Knowledge is shared across the nursery team rather than sitting with one practitioner. Alongside this universal approach, assessment is used to identify children who need more. Language Screen helps practitioners monitor children's development and recognise when high-quality universal language provision is not sufficient and more targeted support is required.

At its best, therefore, Talking Time combines consistent small-group delivery with a much wider language-rich approach: children hear and practise high-quality conversation in groups, revisit language through their play and everyday experiences, and are supported by practitioners who understand how to recognise where they are and help move their language forward. Many of the factors described in this example mirror those identified throughout the evaluations, including strong leadership, workforce capacity, coaching, opportunities for reflection, and a commitment to prioritising children's language development within everyday nursery practice

Talking Time: outcomes over three years

This section details some of the changes that were seen for children. Each year children are assessed at the beginning and end of nursery. In year one the Early Communication Screen (ECS) which is a tool developed by the local speech and language team was used. In years two and three language screen scores¹¹ are used to understand the language level.¹² Table 1 shows the scale of Talking Time delivery across the three years of implementation.

Table 1. Talking Time delivery across the three years.

Year	Schools delivering Talking Time	Children participating	Children with outcome data
Year 1 (2023/24)	6	187	187*
Year 2 (2024/25)	6	152 assessed	147 post-assessed
Year 3 (2025/26)	4 (data available for 3 schools)	106 assessed	94 pre and post assessments

¹¹ Both assessments used rank children according to the level of concern around their needs. In Language Screen Score of 90 or above; not a concern (green). Score between 82 and 89; may need support (amber). Score 81 or below; needs support (red).

¹² So, while Talking Time is a whole class intervention data at both time points is not always available

*Year 1 outcome reporting used Early Communication Screen scores¹³ rather than Language Screen assessments.

Year one (2023/24)

During the first year of delivery, 187 nursery children participated in Talking Time across six schools. Baseline assessments indicated that language need was high, with 38% of children experiencing significant language delay (red) and a further 34% showing mild or moderate delay (amber). By the end of the nursery year, the proportion experiencing significant delay had halved to 19%, while the proportion of children within the expected language range (green) increased from 28% to 53%. Overall, 71% of children improved their communication scores and 63% of those initially identified as red or amber improved by at least one category¹⁴.

Year two (2024/25)

In Year Two, the evaluation was strengthened through the introduction of the standardised language screen assessment. A total of 152 children were assessed at the start of the year and 147 received follow-up assessments. Outcomes remained positive, with the proportion of children in the green category increasing from 63% to 74%, while the proportion identified as amber fell from 21% to 12%. Half of all children initially identified as red or amber improved by at least one category, with almost two-thirds of amber children (66%) moving into the green range by the end of nursery. Statistical analysis demonstrated a significant improvement in children's language scores across the year, providing stronger evidence of positive change. However, children with the most significant language difficulties made less progress.

Year three (2025/26)

In year three, outcome data was available for 106 children attending three nurseries delivering Talking Time, with 94 children having pre-and-post data. Children's language outcomes showed the strongest pattern of improvement seen across the three years, although direct comparison across all three years should be treated cautiously because the assessment approach changed after year one. The proportion of children in the red category reduced from 18% to 8%, while the proportion reaching the green category increased from 67% to 83%. Mean scores increased significantly from 96.15 to 102.65, representing an average improvement of 6.5 points.

Looking at movement between categories, among the 83 children with category data available at both time points, over two-thirds (70.6%) of children with the greatest language need (red) moved out of the red category, with 29.4% progressing to amber and 41.2% progressing directly to green. Children who began in the amber category were more likely to

¹³ In 2023-24 the assessment used was Early Communication Screen (ECS). In 2024-25, not all schools used ECS, so Language Screen was used instead. Language Screen is a reliable and valid measurement for identifying children's language skill support.

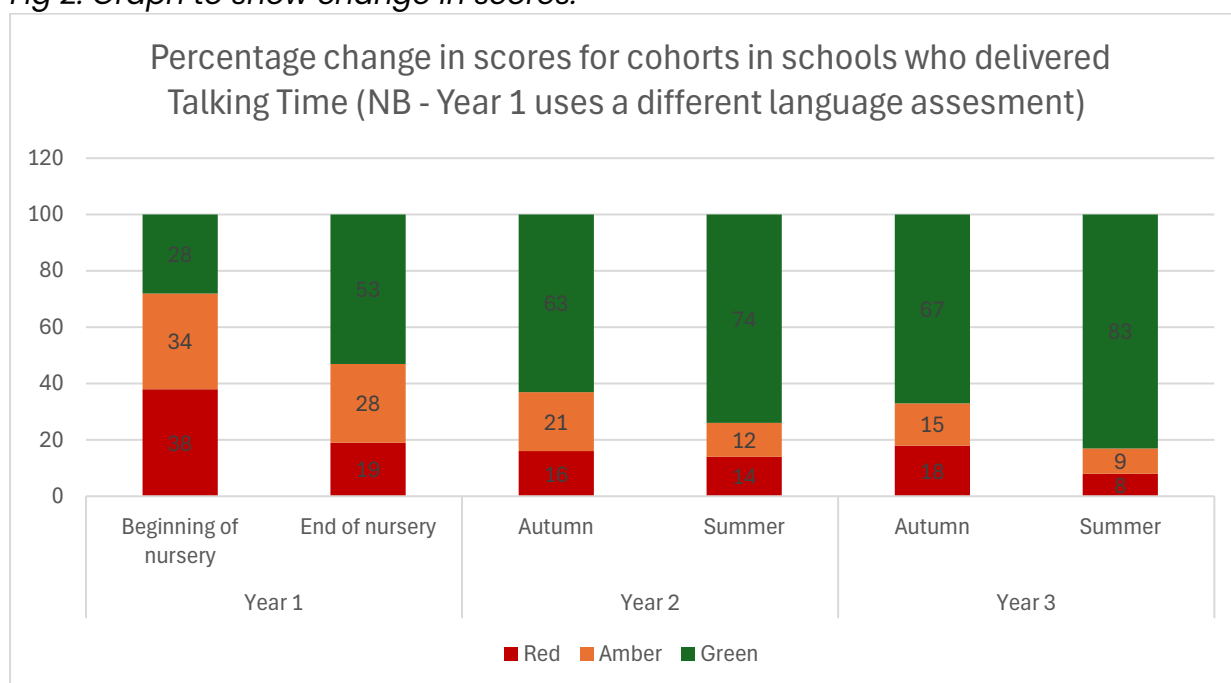
¹⁴ Although no comparison group was available, these findings provided encouraging early evidence of the programme's potential to support children's language development.

reach green (85.7%) than those who began in the red category (41.2%). This likely reflects their different starting points, as children with the highest level of need required a greater degree of progress to achieve a green rating. (See Appendix 2 for tables detailing these changes.) Table 2 shows summarises these changes and fig 2 presents a graph illustrating the change.

Table 2: Movement between categories for children each year.

Cohort	Assessment tool		Red	Amber	Green
2023/24	Early Communication Screen	Autumn	38%	34%	28%
		Summer	19%	28%	53%
2024/25	Language Screen	Autumn	16%	21%	63%
		Summer	14%	12%	74%
2025/26	Language Screen	Autumn	18%	15%	67%
		Summer	8%	9%	83%

Fig 2: Graph to show change in scores.



Key messages across three years

Talking Time has been associated with improvements in children's language development.

Across all three years, children attending nurseries delivering Talking Time showed improvements in their language skills. Practitioner feedback and assessment data consistently indicated stronger communication, with more children reaching age-expected language levels by the end of nursery. Children with more complex communication needs often required additional targeted support.

Schools should aim for consistent delivery of structured small group sessions.

There should be a clear aspiration for all participating schools to deliver Talking Time in line with the best-practice model: consistent delivery of the structured small-group sessions, alongside embedding Talking Time strategies across everyday nursery practice. This would help ensure that the programme is not experienced as a standalone intervention, but strengthens adult-child interactions, language-rich practice and learning throughout the nursery day.

Workforce capacity remains the greatest challenge to implementation.

Successful delivery depended on schools having sufficient workforce capacity. Staff turnover, leadership changes and competing priorities affected implementation throughout the programme, with these pressures becoming more pronounced in year three.

Talking Time is becoming more sustainable through local ownership.

Over three years, Talking Time has evolved from a Thrive at Five-supported programme towards a more sustainable, locally owned model. The train the trainer approach, local authority investment and endorsement from the Stoke Early Years Board have strengthened local capacity and created opportunities for wider adoption.

PEEP (Learning Together): strengthening the home learning environment

PEEP Learning Together complements Talking Time within the nursery element of the school pathway by working with parents and children together to strengthen the home learning environment. Sessions combine discussion, activities, songs and stories with ideas that parents can use at home, covering communication and language, personal, social and emotional development, health and physical development, early literacy and early maths. The programme has been supported in schools for two years.

Implementation during 2025/26 remained variable. PEEP was delivered in three of the seven schools compared with four schools in 2024/25, with only one school delivering in both years. Across the three schools, 21 sessions were delivered, ranging from two to ten sessions per school. This was broadly similar to the previous year, when schools delivered an average of 6.5 sessions each.

Delivery did not consistently cover the full range of PEEP topics, with communication and language the most frequently delivered area. Attendance also varied considerably between sessions. Overall, 43 children and 42 parents attended at least one PEEP session during the year. Facilitators nevertheless reported that most sessions went quite well or very well, and the small number of parents who completed feedback reported enjoying the sessions and using

activities at home. However, with only four parents completing the feedback survey, it is not possible to draw wider conclusions about impact.

The experience over the last two years suggests that PEEP is not yet embedded consistently across the school pathway. Barriers have included space within schools and varying levels of parent and school engagement. This is important because PEEP potentially adds something different to Talking Time and NELI: it extends the pathway beyond interventions delivered directly to children by supporting parents to strengthen learning at home. Future implementation should therefore focus not simply on increasing the number of schools offering PEEP, but on identifying approaches that make participation feasible and attractive to families who have most to benefit.

Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI)

The next section of this report examines the delivery and impact of the Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI)¹⁵ which was first introduced in Abbey Hulton and Bentilee in Stoke-on-Trent in 2022.

The workstream has developed significantly over its first four years of delivery. Delivered through a partnership between Thrive at Five, seven local primary schools and the University of Staffordshire, the programme was designed to address high levels of language need in reception classes by increasing delivery capacity with university students, supported by dedicated higher level teaching assistants (HLTA's)¹⁶. Table 3 shows how many schools delivered NELI and how many children were reached each year.

Table 3: NELI delivery

Academic Year	Schools Delivering NELI	% of 20-Week Programme Delivered	Reception Cohort (n)	NELI Participants (n)
2022/23	5*	Variable (0%-60%+)	267	46
2023/24	7	57-71% (average c.62%)	281	101
2024/25	7	100%	280	102
2025/26	7	100%	269	83

* In the pilot year, three schools delivered more than half of the intervention, two schools delivered less than half, and two schools did not begin delivery.

¹⁵ [Home | Nuffield Early Language Intervention \(NELI\)](#)

¹⁶ These staff work across all seven schools to support assessment and the delivery of NELI as well as provide some additional capacity for other targeted work. .

Year one (2022/23)

The first year focused primarily on testing the delivery model and understanding implementation challenges.¹⁷ Although the programme recruited 32 university students, more than half withdrew before the end of the year. Recruitment delays meant that the planned higher level teaching assistants were not in post until the final weeks of the academic year, significantly affecting implementation. Additional challenges included delays in student clearances, inconsistent pupil identification processes and difficulties maintaining student engagement.

As a result, implementation varied considerably between schools. Only three of the seven schools delivered more than half of the intervention, two delivered less than half, and two schools did not begin delivery. Overall, 46 children received some NELI support, representing around 30% of the reception cohort in the schools where delivery took place.

Year two (2023/24)

The second year demonstrated substantial progress in implementation¹⁸. Screening increased to 269 children across seven schools, with 101 children (35.9% of the reception cohort) participating in NELI. Two full-time higher level teaching assistants played a central role in coordinating delivery, supporting students, conducting assessments and maintaining programme continuity.

Although no school completed the full 20-week intervention, all schools completed Phase 1, and six schools completed more than 60% of the programme. This represented a significant improvement on the pilot year. Schools completed between 57% and 71% of total sessions despite ongoing challenges relating to student retention, DBS checks, competing school priorities and timetable pressures.

The evaluation concluded that the delivery model was becoming increasingly effective, with HLTAs proving crucial to successful implementation. However, challenges remained around student engagement, completion of all intervention sessions and ensuring the programme met the needs of children with the most complex SEND needs.

Year three (2024/25)

The third year demonstrated strong implementation and positive outcomes¹⁹. A total of 262 children were screened and 102 children participated in NELI, accounting for 36.4% of the reception cohort. Importantly, all seven schools completed the full 20-week intervention for the first time, marking a major milestone in the workstream's development.

¹⁷ [Nuffield-Evaluation.pdf](#)

¹⁸ [NELI-Second-Year-Evaluation.pdf](#)

¹⁹ [NELI-Evaluation-Report-2025.pdf](#)

The delivery model matured significantly, with two dedicated HLTAs providing consistent delivery, mentoring university students and maintaining fidelity across schools. Relationships between schools, university students and HLTAs were reported as a major strength of the programme.

The evaluation also highlighted that the greatest impact was seen in schools where NELI was embedded within a wider culture of communication-focused teaching and leadership. The workstream was increasingly viewed not simply as an intervention, but as part of a broader approach to improving communication and language outcomes across schools.

Year four (2025/26)

Overall, year four findings suggest that NELI has become increasingly embedded within school practice, supported by experienced coordinators, more reliable student volunteers and stronger delivery systems. The programme continues to make a positive contribution to children's language development and to schools' wider capacity. Of the 269 children in reception across seven schools, 83 (31%) participated in the programme.

There were clear differences in the characteristics of children who received NELI compared with those who did not. Children taking part in NELI were considerably more likely to have English as an additional language (EAL) or SEND: 38.6% of NELI participants had EAL compared with 12.4% of non-participants, while 36.1% had SEND compared with 16.8% of non-participants. In contrast, levels of disadvantage as measured by early years pupil premium (EYPP) were much more similar between the two groups, with 42.2% of NELI participants eligible for EYPP compared with 39.5% of children who did not receive NELI. This suggests that the NELI cohort had substantially higher levels of additional language and educational need than children who did not participate, while the level of socioeconomic disadvantage was broadly similar across the two groups.

Implementation was strong, with all completing the full 20-week intervention and coordinators reporting increased confidence in delivery. The University of Staffordshire assumed greater responsibility for student placements, while improved student retention and reliability strengthened programme delivery and provided valuable additional capacity within schools.

Practitioners consistently viewed NELI as an effective intervention that supported children's language development and school readiness. Schools reported particularly strong progress where attendance was good and delivery remained consistent. The use of practical resources and real-life objects was also felt to improve children's engagement and understanding.

Challenges remained for children with the most significant communication needs, including those who were non-verbal, had complex SEND or presented with unidentified neurodevelopmental needs. These children often required additional support, including smaller groups, one-to-one provision, Talking Time, Time to Talk or booster interventions. Attendance

issues, pupil mobility, limited intervention space and organisational instability also affected delivery in some schools.

Additional catch-up support in year four

Alongside NELI, the HLTAs and University of Staffordshire students also provided additional catch-up or 'boosting' support to some reception children during 2025/26. This was not a separate, standardised intervention. Rather, children were identified by teachers and the HLTAs, based on their knowledge of individual needs and gaps in learning, and support was tailored accordingly. The aim was generally to provide additional input for children who were close to achieving GLD or who needed further support in particular areas. Activities included additional reading, phonics and comprehension work, social and emotional development support, communication and language activities and, in some schools, maths. The amount and format of support varied between schools: in some cases, schools provided identified groups and specific tasks, while elsewhere support was more informal, such as one-to-one reading.

The support also overlapped with NELI rather than being restricted either to NELI or non-NELI children. For example, one of the HLTAs described providing additional reading and phonics support to groups which included NELI children who needed it as well as other reception children. At one school, additional support was delivered one-to-one to children identified as being close to GLD across different areas of learning. At another school, the teacher provided the HLTA with a list of children and specific reading and phonics work to undertake.

Available information suggests that around 56 Reception children received some form of additional or catch-up support during the year. This estimate combines information recorded in school data (although this was only available for four schools) with additional information provided by the HLTAs. As this support was not systematically recorded across all schools, the figure should be treated as an estimate.

NELI impact over four years

Over four years, the Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI) workstream has demonstrated increasingly strong and consistent outcomes for children with identified language needs across Abbey Hulton and Bentilee.

Year one (2022/23)

Although red, amber and green outcome categories were not reported during the pilot year, early findings were highly encouraging. Among the 29 children in schools that delivered more than 50% of the intervention, 62% made meaningful progress in their language scores and statistical analysis confirmed a significant improvement between pre- and post-intervention assessments. Teachers reported noticeable gains in children's confidence, communication skills, sentence structure, turn-taking and participation in classroom activities. Schools also

highlighted that the additional capacity provided by student practitioners enabled support that otherwise would not have been possible.

Year two (2023/24)

Outcomes strengthened considerably as implementation improved. The proportion of children assessed as having no language concerns (green) increased from 3% at baseline to 65% following intervention. More than four in five children who began in the red category (82%) progressed to either amber or green, while 89% of those who began in amber progressed to green. Average language scores improved by 12.3 points, with 98 of 101 children showing improvement. Statistical testing confirmed that these gains were highly significant.

Year three (2024/25)

The strong improvements continued in this year. The proportion of children achieving green scores increased from 3% to 52.6%. Of children starting in the red category, 68% progressed to either amber or green, while 75.5% of those starting in amber progressed to green. Overall, 91 of 94 children improved their language scores and none experienced a decline, with an average gain of 9.8 points. Importantly, participating children improved by an average of 9.8 points compared with 3.5 points for non-participating pupils, a statistically significant difference suggesting that outcomes locally may exceed those reported in national NELI evaluations.²⁰

Year four (2025/26)

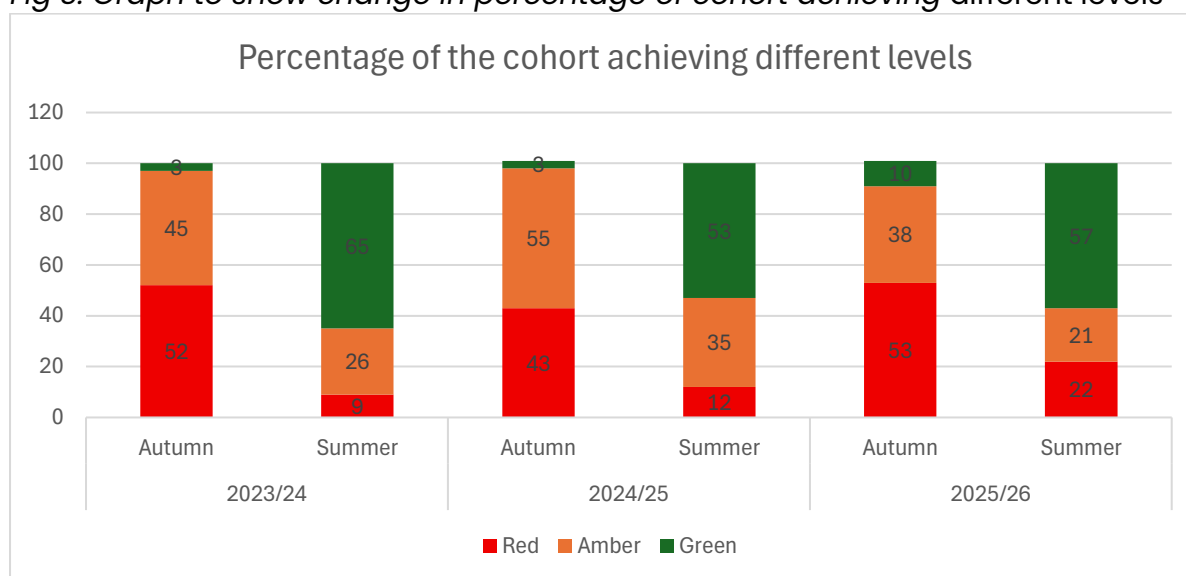
The programme continued to support a cohort with substantial levels of need. At baseline, 53% of children were assessed as red and 38% as amber. By the end of the intervention, the proportion of children achieving green scores had increased from 10% to 57%, while the proportion in the red category reduced from 53% to 22%. Sixty per cent of children who started in the red category improved to either amber or green, while 80% of amber children progressed to green. Together, these findings demonstrate sustained impact across four years of delivery. Table 4 illustrates the percentage change in red, amber and green categories across the last three years.

²⁰ 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. 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.

Table 4: Percentage of children in the red, amber and green categories before and after the NELI intervention (NB this data is not available for year 1)

Year	Time Point	Red	Amber	Green
2023/24	Autumn	51.5%	45.4%	3.0%
	Summer	8.9%	25.7%	65.3%
2024/25	Autumn	42.3%	54.6%	3.1%
	Summer	12.4%	35.1%	52.6%
2025/26	Autumn	53.0%	38.0%	10.0%
	Summer	22.0%	21.0%	57.0%

Fig 3: Graph to show change in percentage of cohort achieving different levels



Alongside examining movement between the red, amber and green language categories, we also analysed changes in children's continuous language screen scores. Looking at the underlying scores provides a more sensitive measure of progress, as children may make meaningful gains without moving into a different category. We examined change across the whole cohort and then compared children who took part in NELI with those who did not, to explore whether the amount of progress differed between the two groups.

Children who participated in NELI made greater gains in language scores across the year than children who did not participate. Among children with matched autumn and summer data, NELI participants ($n = 76$) improved by an average of 11.1 points, compared with 5.8 points among non-participants ($n = 160$). (table 5) The difference in improvement of 5.3 points was statistically significant.²¹ Consequently, although children receiving NELI continued to have lower average language scores than their peers at the end of the year, the gap between the groups narrowed from 21.7 points in autumn to 16.4 points in summer.²²

²¹ $t(234) = 4.87, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [3.17, 7.49]$, with a moderate-to-large effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.68$).

²² This pattern is consistent with NELI having contributed to children's progress, although the observational design means that the additional improvement cannot be attributed to NELI with certainty.

Table 5: Changes in underlying scores for children who took part in NELI compared to those who didn't.

	NELI	No NELI
Number	76	160
Autumn mean	80.07	101.79
Summer mean	91.20	107.59
Mean improvement	+11.13	+5.80

As a sensitivity analysis, progress was also compared among children with autumn scores close to the threshold for NELI support. NELI participants scoring 84–89 in autumn ($n = 20$) improved by an average of 12.2 points, compared with 7.7 points among non-participants scoring 90–95 ($n = 41$). The difference in improvement was 4.5 points.²³ The persistence of a similar pattern among children with more comparable starting scores provides some additional support for the main analysis, although the relatively small sample means the finding should be interpreted cautiously.

Table 6: Changes in underlying scores for children who took part in NELI (scores 84– 89 Autumn) and children who didn't take part in NELI (scores 90 – 95 in the autumn)

Group	N	Mean improvement	SD
NELI, autumn 84–89	20	12.15 points	7.90
Non-NELI, autumn 90–95	41	7.68 points	8.70
Difference		4.47 points	

Key messages across four years

Reach has increased and stabilised.

The programme moved from supporting 46 children during the pilot year to consistently supporting between 83 and 102 children annually. Since year two, all seven schools have engaged with the programme.

Implementation has strengthened significantly.

The pilot year was characterised by recruitment challenges, student turnover and inconsistent delivery. Over time, the introduction and stabilisation of HLTAs transformed the delivery model. By 2024/25, all seven schools were completing the full 20-week intervention and implementation had become considerably more consistent.

²³ representing a moderate effect (Cohen's $d = 0.53$), although it fell just short of conventional statistical significance ($t(59) = 1.94$, $p = .057$).

Language outcomes have been consistently positive.

Across all evaluation years, children participating in NELI have demonstrated substantial improvements in language skills. Across the last three years, between 60% and 82% of children who began the programme in the red category progressed to either amber or green, while between 75% and 89% of those starting in amber moved into the green category by the end of the intervention. Average language score gains ranged from 9.8 to 12.3 points, demonstrating sustained and measurable improvements in children's language development.

The model appears increasingly sustainable.

The partnership between Thrive at Five, participating schools, University of Staffordshire and the HLTAs has matured considerably over four years. What began as an innovative pilot has developed into a sustainable local model that combines evidence-based practice with workforce development and targeted support for some of Stoke-on-Trent's most disadvantaged children.

Bringing NELI and Talking Time together

While the previous sections considered Talking Time and NELI separately, The shared aim across Thrive at Five, schools and partners has been to develop a more graduated pathway of language support. Within this model, Talking Time provides universal support during the nursery years, while NELI offers targeted intervention in reception for children who continue to need additional help.

If this pathway is functioning effectively, children who attended Talking Time nurseries would be expected to enter reception with stronger language skills and be less likely to meet the threshold for NELI support.

This final section examines whether attendance at a Talking Time nursery was associated with children's language outcomes on entry to reception and their likelihood of requiring NELI.

Is Talking Time associated with reduced need for NELI in Reception?

During the fourth year of NELI delivery, reception teachers reported that children arriving from nurseries delivering Talking Time appeared better prepared for school and were less likely to require NELI. To examine whether these observations were reflected in the data, children's previous early years setting was recorded (own school nursery, another school nursery, PVI nursery or home). Analyses focused on the six schools that had delivered Talking Time in their

nursery during 2024/25 to explore whether these children entered reception with stronger language skills.²⁴

As this was not a randomised evaluation, any differences observed cannot be attributed solely to Talking Time. Children attending their own school's nursery may differ from those in other settings for many reasons, including family circumstances, SEND, nursery attendance and local availability of early years provision.

Nevertheless, if Talking Time is contributing to children's language development, we would expect children attending nurseries delivering the programme to enter reception with stronger language skills and to be less likely to require NELI.

To explore this, two complementary analyses were undertaken: (1) comparison of mean language screen scores by previous nursery attendance; (2) comparison of the proportion of children likely to require NELI (red/amber versus green); and (3) comparison of the distribution of children across the three language screen categories.

The first analysis compared children's language screen scores on entry to reception according to the setting they had attended before starting school.

Table 5: Mean reception language screen scores by previous attendance²⁵

Previous attendance	N	Mean language screen score
Own school nursery	156	97.1
Different school nursery	22	92.6
PVI nursery	33	90.6
Home	20	84.1

Children who had attended their own school's nursery achieved the highest average language screen scores on entry to reception. On average, they scored around 13 points higher than children entering reception directly from home and approximately six points higher than children attending PVI nurseries.

Although these findings cannot demonstrate that Talking Time caused higher language scores, they suggest that children attending nurseries delivering the programme entered reception with stronger language skills than children from other settings.

²⁴ The school that had not delivered Talking Time was excluded from this analysis.

²⁵ One-way ANOVA: $F(3,227) = 6.83, p < .001, \eta^2 = .083$.

Children attending Talking Time nurseries were less likely to require NELI

The second analysis addressed the evaluation question more directly by examining whether children were likely to require NELI on entry to reception. Language screen outcomes were grouped into two categories:

- Red or amber – below the language screen threshold and therefore likely to require NELI.
- Green – language skills within the expected range.

Children attending different school nurseries, PVI nurseries and those entering reception directly from home were combined into a single comparison group.

Table 6: Likelihood of requiring NELI by previous attendance²⁶

Previous attendance	Red/amber (likely to require NELI)	Green
Own school nursery	22.7%	77.3%
Other settings	52.1%	47.9%

The difference between the two groups was substantial. Fewer than one quarter of children (23%) who had attended their own school's nursery fell below the language screen threshold used to identify children requiring NELI, compared with just over half (52%) of children entering reception from other settings.

Conversely, more than three quarters (77%) of children attending their own school's nursery achieved language scores within the expected range, compared with fewer than half (48%) of children from other settings.

This association was statistically significant and represented a moderate effect size, providing encouraging evidence that children who had attended Talking Time nurseries were considerably less likely to require targeted language support when they entered reception.

Whilst the previous analysis focused on whether children were likely to require NELI, examining all three language screen categories provides additional insight into the pattern of need.

Table 7: Language Screen categories on entry to Reception by previous attendance²⁷

Previous attendance	Red	Amber	Green
Own school nursery	14.0%	8.7%	77.3%
Different school nursery	13.6%	13.6%	72.7%
PVI nursery	32.3%	25.8%	41.9%
Home	50.0%	20.0%	30.0%

²⁶ $\chi^2(1, N = 223) = 19.40, p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .295$.

²⁷ The differences between the groups were not only statistically significant but also large enough to be meaningful in practice. $\chi^2(6, N = 223) = 31.08, p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .264$

Children attending their own school's nursery were substantially more likely to achieve green language screen outcomes than children entering from PVI nurseries or directly from home. Half of all children entering reception from home were classified within the red category, compared with only 14% of children attending their own school's nursery. Although numbers in some groups were relatively small, the findings closely mirrored those from the previous analyses, strengthening confidence in the overall pattern.

Key messages

Taken individually, none of these analyses demonstrates that Talking Time caused children to require NELI less frequently. However, when considered alongside the wider findings from this evaluation, they present a coherent and plausible picture.

Across schools delivering Talking Time, practitioners consistently reported that fewer children were progressing to reception requiring NELI.

Children who attended Talking Time nurseries entered reception with significantly stronger language skills than children from other settings.

They were substantially less likely to score below the language screen threshold used to identify children requiring NELI and they were more likely to begin reception with language skills within the expected range.

Taken together, the consistency of these findings across practitioner feedback and quantitative analyses strengthens the plausibility that Talking Time is contributing to improved language readiness before school and reducing the proportion of children requiring targeted language intervention on entry to reception. Whilst other factors undoubtedly influence children's language development, these findings provide encouraging evidence that Talking Time is making an important contribution to the graduated pathway of speech and language support across participating schools in Abbey Hulton and Bentilee.

Contribution of speech and language workstreams to system strengthening and practice improvement.

While this report has focused primarily on the implementation and outcomes of Talking Time and the Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI), the findings also provide evidence of wider changes within the local early years system. The work has involved more than supporting the delivery of individual programmes. A wider ambition, shared with local partners, has been to strengthen local capacity to identify need earlier, implement evidence-informed practice and work collaboratively to improve outcomes for children. Across the four years of delivery, there is evidence that both Talking Time and NELI have evolved from externally supported interventions into increasingly embedded elements of local practice.

Building workforce capability

A consistent finding across both programmes was the growth in practitioner confidence and expertise. Nursery staff reported becoming more skilled in supporting children's communication through everyday interactions, creating richer language environments and identifying children requiring additional support. Within schools, reception staff and NELI coordinators also described increasing confidence in delivering language interventions, adapting provision where appropriate and interpreting assessment information.

The introduction of Talking Time's train the trainer model represents an important step towards sustainability. By developing accredited local trainers, knowledge and expertise are increasingly being retained within Stoke-on-Trent rather than relying on external support. Similarly, the partnership with the University of Staffordshire has created opportunities for students to develop specialist skills while contributing additional capacity to schools.

Embedding evidence-informed practice

Over time, the use of standardised language assessment has become more consistent across participating schools and nurseries. Language screen has enabled practitioners to identify children requiring additional support, monitor progress and use data to inform decisions about intervention.

The evaluations also demonstrate increasing use of evidence-informed approaches to implementation. Schools described adapting delivery to meet children's needs while maintaining fidelity to programme principles, and practitioners increasingly viewed language development as a shared responsibility across the whole setting rather than the role of individual intervention staff.

Strengthening partnerships

Both workstreams have been characterised by strong partnership working. Schools, Thrive at Five, the University of Staffordshire, OxEd and Assessment and the local authority have worked collaboratively to implement and refine both programmes. Over time these relationships have matured. Schools described greater confidence in delivery, the University of Staffordshire assumed increasing responsibility for supporting student placements and the local authority became more actively involved in sustaining Talking Time through funding the train the trainer model. These developments suggest increasing local ownership and capacity beyond the lifetime of Thrive at Five.

Developing a graduated pathway of support

Perhaps the strongest evidence of system development is the emergence of a coordinated approach to supporting children's communication and language. Rather than viewing Talking Time and NELI as separate interventions, practitioners increasingly described them as

complementary elements within a graduated pathway of support. Talking Time provides universal support within nursery, helping to strengthen language skills before children enter school, while NELI offers targeted intervention for those who continue to require additional support in reception. Schools also described using other interventions, such as Time to Talk, booster sessions and one-to-one support, to meet the needs of children requiring more intensive provision.

Conclusion

This evaluation provides encouraging evidence that Thrive at Five's work alongside schools and local partners is contributing to improved communication and language outcomes and to wider strengthening of the local early years system. Across four years of NELI and three years of Talking Time, both interventions have become embedded within local practice and have demonstrated positive outcomes for children.

Perhaps the most important finding is the emerging evidence that universal support in nursery and targeted support in reception is beginning to operate as a coherent graduated pathway. Children attending nurseries delivering Talking Time entered reception with stronger language skills and were less likely to require NELI. Although this evaluation cannot demonstrate causality, the consistency of findings across practitioner feedback and quantitative analyses suggests that early investment in children's language development may reduce the need for later targeted intervention.

The evaluation also demonstrates that sustainable improvement depends on more than effective interventions alone. Building workforce capability, strengthening partnerships and embedding evidence-informed practice appear to create the conditions for long-term improvement.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen the recording of additional catch-up support in reception

Additional catch-up support provided by HLTAs has become an important part of the support available to reception children, including additional work on reading, phonics, comprehension, communication and maths. However, the children receiving this support, its frequency, duration and focus have not been recorded consistently. A simple, consistent recording system should be introduced across schools so that the reach and intensity of this provision can be understood and its contribution considered alongside NELI and other interventions.

2. Position PEEP Learning Together as an integral part of the school pathway

PEEP Learning Together should be more explicitly positioned alongside Talking Time and NELI as an integral component of the graduated school pathway, strengthening the home learning environment and parent engagement alongside support delivered directly to children. Schools and the Peripatetic team should explore how PEEP can be used to engage families who have most to benefit, with flexible approaches informed by learning about when, where and how families are most likely to participate.

This may be particularly important for children who have had limited or no early years provision. Just under 10% of the cohort entered reception directly from home, and these children had substantially lower language scores and were more likely to have communication and language needs. Thrive at Five should therefore work with schools and local partners to consider how the school-readiness offer for this group could be strengthened, including exploring whether targeted early language and school-readiness support through PEEP could be offered to families during the summer before children start reception.

3. Establish a Thrive at Five learning community across schools

Thrive at Five is now working with a network of 34 primary schools across its three English sites. This provides an opportunity for Thrive at Five to convene a Learning Community that supports shared learning between schools and across places. A programme of webinars and learning sessions involving early years experts, practitioners and schools could support implementation quality, share practical learning between schools and strengthen professional relationships across the network. It would also provide a mechanism for sharing what is being learned about delivering Talking Time, NELI, PEEP and the wider school pathway in different contexts.

4. Continue to strengthen the quality and consistency of Talking Time delivery

The three years of implementation demonstrate increasingly positive language outcomes but also show that the quality and consistency of delivery can be affected by staffing changes, leadership, space and competing pressures within schools. Thrive at Five should continue to support schools to embed Talking Time within everyday nursery practice and to consistently deliver the small-group sessions, with particular attention to schools where delivery is less established. This could include supporting training and coaching for new staff and leaders and supporting schools to use Talking Time approaches beyond the formal small-group sessions.

Appendices and limitations

Limitations

The findings in this report should be interpreted in the light of several limitations.

First, the evaluation did not include a randomised or matched comparison group. It is therefore not possible to conclude that Talking Time or NELI alone caused the improvements observed. Children's language development may also have been influenced by maturation, wider classroom practice, attendance, family circumstances, SEND, English as an additional language and other support received during the year.

Second, assessment approaches changed over time. In the first year of Talking Time, outcomes were reported using the early communication screen, while later years used language screen. This limits the extent to which direct comparisons can be made across all three cohorts. There were also differences in the availability and completeness of data. Not all children had valid assessments at both time points, meaning that sample sizes and denominators varied between analyses. Findings relating to change over time therefore apply only to children with the relevant data available.

Each year involved a different cohort of children, rather than following the same children over several years. Differences in outcomes between years may therefore reflect variation in cohort characteristics as well as changes in programme delivery.

Implementation also varied between schools and across years. Staffing pressures, leadership changes, available space, attendance, student reliability and competing priorities all influenced how consistently the interventions were delivered. As a result, children may have received different levels of exposure to the programmes.

For Talking Time, it was not always possible to confirm the exact level of participation or dosage received by each individual child. Attendance at a nursery delivering Talking Time was therefore used as an indicator of likely exposure, but this does not establish that every child received the same programme experience.

The analysis of reception outcomes should also be interpreted cautiously. Children attending their own school nursery may differ from those attending PVI nurseries, other school nurseries or entering directly from home in ways not captured in the available data. In addition, some children attending other school nurseries may also have received Talking Time or similar language support. The observed differences cannot therefore be attributed solely to the intervention.

Finally, some findings about implementation, perceived impact and wider benefits are based on practitioner interviews. These provide valuable insight into how the programmes operated in practice, but may be influenced by individual experience, recall and positive perceptions of the interventions.

Despite these limitations, confidence in the overall findings is strengthened by the consistency between quantitative outcomes, patterns observed across several years and practitioner accounts. The evidence should therefore be understood as providing a plausible and encouraging picture of contribution, rather than definitive proof of causal impact.

[Appendix I: Evaluation approach](#)

The findings presented in this report draw together evidence collected across multiple years of Talking Time and Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI) delivery. A mixed-methods approach was used throughout, combining quantitative outcome data with qualitative evidence from practitioners to understand both programme implementation and children's outcomes.

Quantitative data were collected using standardised language assessments administered before and after each intervention. These data were used to examine changes in children's language scores, movement between language categories (red, amber and green), and, where appropriate, statistical analyses were undertaken to assess whether observed improvements were unlikely to have occurred by chance. For the final section of the report, additional analyses explored whether children attending nurseries delivering Talking Time entered reception with stronger language skills and were less likely to fall below the language screen threshold associated with NELI.

Qualitative evidence was gathered through interviews with nursery practitioners, reception teachers, NELI coordinators, HLTA staff and other delivery partners. These interviews explored experiences of implementation, perceived impacts, challenges to delivery and factors influencing successful implementation. Interview data were analysed thematically to identify common patterns and differences across schools and over time.

Bringing these sources of evidence together enabled the evaluation to examine not only whether children's language outcomes improved, but also how the interventions were implemented, how they developed over time and the wider contribution they made to strengthening communication and language support across participating schools.

Appendix 2: Movement between language screen categories from autumn to summer (Year three Talking Time cohort)

Score in Autumn	Red in Summer	Amber in Summer	Green in Summer	Interpretation
Red (n=17)	5 (29.4%)	5 (29.4%)	7 (41.2%)	70.6% improved; 41.2% improved by two categories
Amber (n=14)	0 (0%)	2 (14.3%)	12 (85.7%)	85.7% improved; none deteriorated
Green (n=52)	0 (0%)	1 (1.9%)	51 (98.1%)	Almost all remained green

This table shows how children moved between language screen categories over the nursery year. For each autumn category (red, amber and green), it shows the proportion of children who remained in the same category or moved to a different category by the summer assessment.