

Closing the gap on speech, language and communication in the early years: Local case studies

East Sussex

This case study explores the local views on approaches taken to successfully reduce the gap between socio-economically disadvantaged children and their peers on speech, language and communication indicators in the early years. East Sussex was one of five local authorities identified as 'high performing' in closing this gap over the period 2016–2018. The case study is based on desktop research, interviews and a focus group meeting with a cross-section of individuals involved in overseeing and delivering provision relevant to early language development.

These speech, language and communication case studies have been produced by the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) as part of our work to support the delivery of the Department for Education's Social Mobility Action Plan. To read more about our project, including how local authorities were selected and the research methodology, see: <https://www.eif.org.uk/resource/closing-the-gap-on-speech-language-and-communication-in-the-early-years-local-case-studies>

Summary

East Sussex is a county council in the South East of England. Over the years 2016–18 the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile outcomes for children eligible for free school meals improved markedly, to above the national average and above the average for statistical neighbours. No known demographic changes contributed to the improved outcomes.

This case study identifies a number of factors which appear to have been important in narrowing the language gap.

Strategic leadership

There is a longstanding, high-level strategic commitment to improving school readiness. The overall strategy drives tightly managed action at every level in the system. Key performance indicators include specific indicators for activities targeted at children with impoverished language.



Early development of a Speech, Language and Communication Pathway

East Sussex was one of the first local areas to develop a pathway for speech, language and communication, setting out the tools to be used to identify children in need of help and the support that should be available to different 0–5 age bands. The longevity of the Pathway means that consistent practice is now well embedded.



Supporting quality and improvement in settings

East Sussex has retained a strong advisory team supporting quality in early years settings. The team have the scope to be in contact with every setting and childminder in the county – more than 400 registered providers. Systems for identifying settings in need of support are very tight. The advisory team look outwards, seeking out good practice wherever it may be. They successfully seek new partnerships and funding, and have secured a national profile for their projects.

Integrated working

Local structures support integrated working. Health visiting services have been brought together under integrated management with other 0–5 Early Help services. Processes such as the review of child development at age 2 are carried out jointly across health and education, with tightly structured documentation and compliance audits.

Early identification and support

Children's speech, language and communication needs are identified early and a range of support is available. There is a dedicated team of Early Communication Support Workers within the Early Help 0–5 service. They work with families, receive training and supervision from the speech and language therapy service and are funded by Public Health.

Professional development

Comprehensive models have been developed to provide professional development to practitioners in settings. There is online training, and settings work together in Early Excellence Hubs to share resources and best practice. Many of the projects developed in the Hubs are based on action learning, which has had a transformational effect, empowering and upskilling practitioners who may not have high levels of formal qualifications.

Take-up and quality of early education

East Sussex has had consistently higher take-up of funded places for 2-year-olds than the national average, with an above-average percentage of these children in good or outstanding provision. Multi-agency processes for allocating places ensure that the most disadvantaged children are prioritised.

A local culture of evaluation and use of evidence

Internally, the tight system of key performance indicators means that the local authority is able to evaluate the impact of its provision, retain the aspects that are working and critically review those that are not. Teams engage with academic partners and use validated tools to evaluate the impact of projects. The action learning projects have established a research culture in settings.

The local context

East Sussex is a county council with five districts in the South East of England. It has disadvantaged coastal areas situated alongside quite affluent rural areas and commuter towns. There is a growing cohort of children with EAL in some of the bigger towns, but otherwise it is a largely white British county.

In the period covered by this case study there were three local clinical commissioning groups (CCG), two of which worked together so that for planning and commissioning purposes the local authority worked with two CCGs.

There are 416 active early years registered providers in the county. 18% of funded 2-year-olds are in school provision (including free schools and academies) and 82% in PVI settings. For funded 3- and 4-year-olds, the balance is 17% school-based and 83% in PVI. The local authority has no maintained nursery schools. 41 out of 149 primary and two all-through schools have a nursery class.

Around a quarter of primary schools are academies, which are offered the same local authority-led early years improvement and professional development services as maintained schools.

Health visiting services are commissioned by Early Help on behalf of Public Health. They are provided by an NHS Trust but managed by integrated managers who sit within the council and oversee locality teams of health visitors, Children's Centre Services and family key workers.

KEY STATS East Sussex



The 0–5 child population is 33,004, against a national local authority average of 26,822.



The percentage of 4–5-year-olds eligible for free school meals is slightly above the national average (16% compared to 14%*). The local authority is ranked 91st out of 151 local authorities on the Index of Multiple Deprivation.*



The percentage of 4–5-year-olds who have English as an Additional Language is well below national averages (7% compared to 19% nationally*).



In 2018, 77.1% of children eligible for free school meals achieved at least the expected level of development in Communication and Language on the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile, compared to 71.9% nationally.

* 2019 data

Speech and language therapy services are commissioned jointly from Kent Community Health Foundation Community Trust by the local authority and CCGs as part of an Integrated Therapies team. 21% of the Speech and Language Therapy service's budget comes from the local authority. There are around 44 full-time equivalent speech and language therapists/therapy assistants in the East Sussex team, which represents a ratio of just over 2,500 children aged 0–19 per speech and language therapist/assistant (although around half of the therapy assistants support occupational or physiotherapy programmes alongside speech and language therapy needs, so the ratio is not exact).

The context for EYFSP improvements for disadvantaged children

In 2015, 73.9% of children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) achieved at least the expected level in Communication and Language on the EYFSP in East Sussex. By 2018 this had risen to 77.1%, well above the national FSM average of 71.9%.

These improvements were specific to children eligible for free school meals, rather than being part of an overall improving EYFSP Communication and Language trend. The improvement trend in 2016–18 was also specific to the Communication and Language area of learning, rather than being part of wider improvements for children eligible for free school meals achieving a good level of development (GLD) overall. GLD outcomes for children eligible for FSM were already above the national average before the period covered by this case study and have remained so since.

No known demographic changes contributed to the improved Communication and Language outcomes.

The speech, language and communication issues

Interviewees described the main speech, language and communication issues in the county as about impoverished language, with parents often not understanding how to interact with their children and the increasing use of new technology added to the mix ('a parenting world that allows 24/7 screen time'). While these issues are not confined to disadvantaged areas, the impact on children's language skills is perceived by interviewees to be greater there – particularly in coastal towns, but also in pockets of rural poverty.

Reflecting these trends, all those interviewed observed that numbers of children with speech, language and communication needs were increasing. The service has seen a steady rise in 0–5 referrals, the vast majority of which are considered appropriate.

Although the county's coastal towns like Hastings and Eastbourne attract low-paid hotel and restaurant workers from overseas, data shows that EAL is not a major contributor to weaker Communication and Language outcomes in those areas, because 'these children come with a tremendous work ethos ... we thought it was the EAL children who were pulling the data down but it was actually the more disadvantaged white working-class boys' (Senior Manager, Standards and Learning Effectiveness Service).



Critical success factors in narrowing the language gap

- ✓ Strategic leadership
- ✓ Early development of a Speech, Language and Communication Pathway
- ✓ Supporting quality and improvement in settings
- ✓ Integrated working
- ✓ Early identification and support
- ✓ Professional development
- ✓ Take-up and quality of early education
- ✓ A local culture of evaluation and use of evidence.



Challenges and how they have been overcome

Challenge 1: East Sussex is one of the lowest-funded shire counties in the region, with few large businesses leading to low revenue from business rates. This compounds the financial challenges facing all local authorities and consequently impacts on capacity.

- ✓ Embedding a focus on early language development across the workforce, so that it is part of everyday core business rather than requiring additional staffing.
- ✓ Proactively applying for external funding streams where there is a good fit with the local authority strategy.
- ✓ Securing a national profile for successful early years initiatives, which encourages decision-makers to fund other projects – ‘success breeding success’.

Challenge 2: The need to restructure Children’s Centres within a wider Early Help service working with the whole 0–19 age range.

- ✓ Retaining specific key performance indicators for the 0–5 age group, including early language, and monitoring these closely.
- ✓ Developing an accredited volunteer role so that universal groups can still be run in Children’s Centres.

Challenge 3: Difficulties for early years settings in attending central training.

- ✓ Developing online courses.
- ✓ Co-ordinating local Hubs linking settings and schools for professional development and action research projects.

Strategic leadership

In 2014 East Sussex was performing poorly in terms of school readiness, with communication and language a key contributor to the low EYFSP outcomes. There were also few good or outstanding primary schools. This triggered a negative Ofsted inspection focused on the local authority’s school improvement work, and a period of effective action which successfully improved the county’s outcomes in later local area inspections.

The 2014 inspection, according to the current Director of Children’s Services, was ‘a wake-up and reset for the Council in terms of taking on a broader role for school improvement’. Senior leaders together with elected members developed an Excellence for All strategy, which committed the local authority to working more directly with schools, their providers and partners to improve school readiness and the quality of provision in early years and primary phases.

The lead member for children and young people was ‘really active and a champion for Excellence for All’. The lead member had Children’s Centres in her portfolio; she ‘gets the importance of Children’s Centres and early years and has always been very involved’.

Since 2014, the local authority has put in place ‘a very clear programme that has gradually helped us move from the lower to the upper quartile of EYFSP outcomes ... and is absolutely about targeted interventions both with parents and with settings and raising the standards of learning in centres and in settings’ (Director of Children’s Services).

One consequence of the high-level strategic commitment was the retention of a strong team of Early Years advisers to provide support and challenge to settings. In the words of one interviewee: 'The Directors are wedded to retaining an Early Years team because they recognise the importance of early intervention and also that families are not preparing their children for school in the way previous generations were – they are not giving them the grounding they need and the situation is getting worse over time.'

Excellence for All was updated in 2016 (and again more recently), with the same focus on the quality of provision but an increasing emphasis on developing the sector's ability to self-improve. The updates commit the local authority to ensuring that 'quality provider-to-provider support is available across all early years provision. This will be achieved by embedding the successful practice from existing early years hubs and building capacity for system leadership through extending the network of peer champions to include childminder mentors, moderators and early communication leads.'

The Children's Services Portfolio Plan for 2015–18 included a commitment to 'ensuring that implementation of the Healthy Child Programme 0–5 provides all parents with guidance on how to strengthen the early communication, language and numeracy development of babies and young children and that the families of children who are not developing well are offered targeted support'. As a result, a range of family support services have been funded, including Early Communication Support Workers, who focus specifically on early communication.

Overall strategy drives tightly managed action at every level in the system. As the primary and early years head of service noted: 'It is a priority because we know that when children who come in to their formal education without really good speech, language and communication, the impact this will have on their education and ultimate outcomes is significant. So it is everybody's interest to make sure there is an emphasis on school readiness and early language is a really important part of this. It is writ large in performance improvement plans, team plans, in workflows and in work strands.'

A set of key performance indicators have been developed to underpin the Excellence for All strategy, some focusing on the percentage of settings judged good or outstanding, and many with a specific speech, language and communication focus, for example:

- the number of settings actively using the East Sussex Speech and Language Pathway
- the number of settings using the East Sussex Speech and Language Monitoring Tool.

Some key performance indicators relate to the work of Early Communication Support Workers in Early Help, for example:

- percentage of parents of identified children who engage with activities or strategies at home or attend communication workshops
- percentage of children identified as being at risk of delay due to impoverished language who are at expected levels within a year.

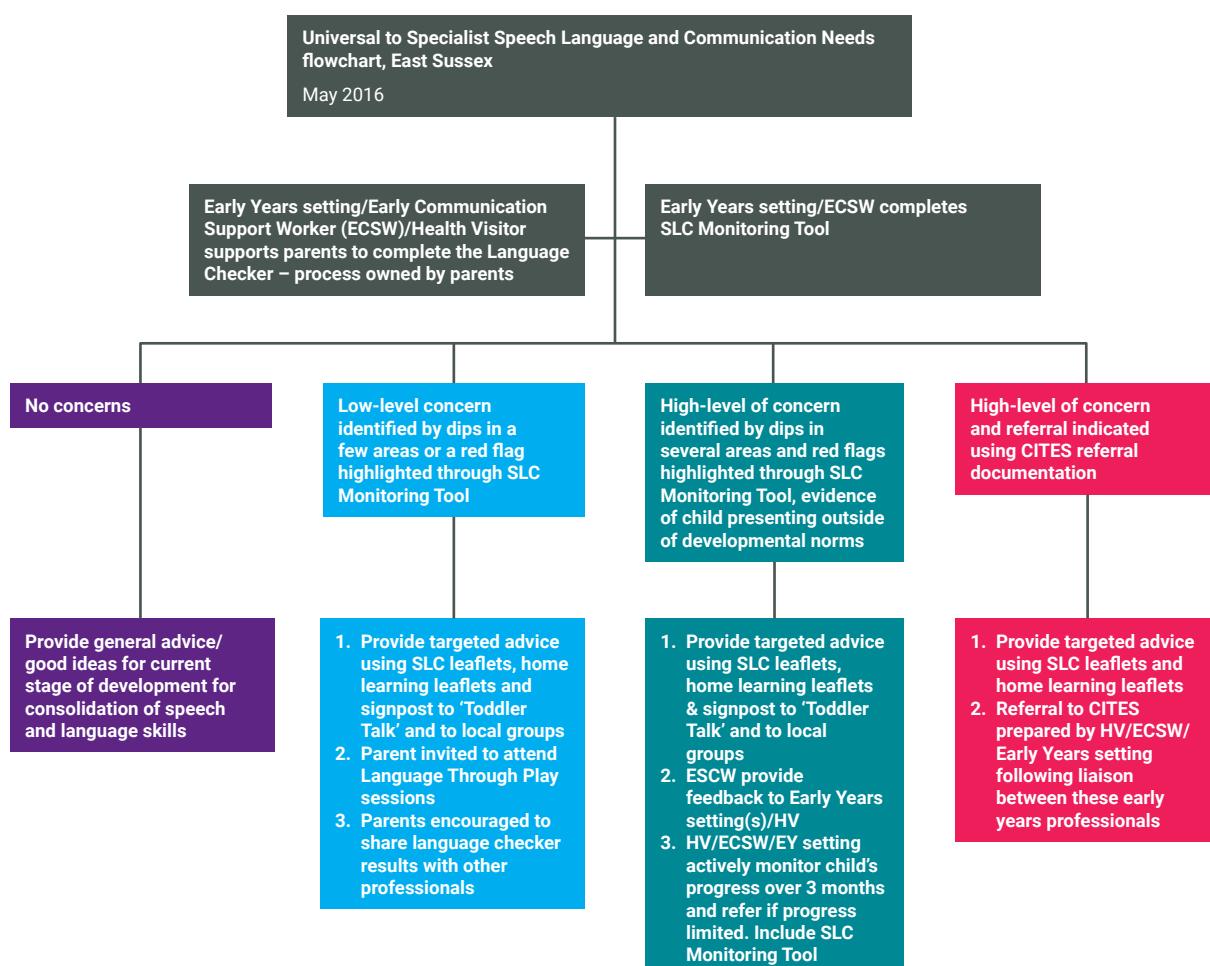
The local authority's senior management team monitor key performance indicator data on a quarterly basis, taking action where needed.

“The most important thing is having a very clear evidence base for how you are going to achieve the change you are setting out to do. You then have a very clear plan with milestones that involves the broader workforce. And then you remorselessly pursue that and you have the milestones and performance indicators to help you see whether you are still on track. And along the way you celebrate the successes and hitting a target.” Director of Children’s Services

Early development of a pathway

East Sussex was one of the first local areas to develop a pathway for speech, language and communication, setting out support that should be available for children in different 0–5 age bands. The work began in 2011 and the pathway was further developed and updated in 2014, when the role of Early Communication Support Workers was added. It includes tools that were developed to identify children with speech, language and communication needs and track their progress, and a range of training and provision at universal, targeted and specialist levels.

SPEECH, LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION ADVICE AND REFERRALS PATHWAY



The pathway was developed by a multi-agency group of speech and language therapists, early years advisers, health visitors and Children's Centre staff, and shared widely with everyone working in the early years.

The pathway is seen as fundamental to the improvements in outcomes for disadvantaged children. It has helped to shift speech, language and communication away from just being seen as an issue for individual services to being seen as everybody's issue. As one interviewee noted, 'to get that traction it has got to be ... everyone's job'. It has also provided a clear framework for referrals to specialist services, describing the interventions that well-trained practitioners can put in themselves, both in the setting and through their work with parents, for children with lower-level speech, language and communication needs. This means that speech and language therapists have time to work with the children who need them most – the right children, at the right time.

“The communication pathway and the series of resources they have developed (monitoring tool, language checkers etc.) have been really important. They have also set about monitoring this and there are a series of performance indicators that sit as part of the contracts that people are inspected on ... And they also made sure the providers were on it and understood it as well. As a result of this children are as prepared as in any other local authority for school.” Director of Children’s Services

An important feature of the pathway is the length of time it has been in place and the consistency of practice that brings. As one speech and language therapist interviewee recommended to other local areas wanting to narrow the gap: 'Have a few effective universal tools across your patch that you keep to and make sure your training to use the tools is sustainable with a changing workforce. Don't chop or change; it really takes time for such a large workforce to know what is the "East Sussex way" or similar.'

Supporting quality and improvement in early years settings

East Sussex has retained a strong advisory team supporting quality in early years settings: there are six full-time equivalent officers in the Early Years team who visit settings, 1.4 FTE Consultants (headteachers seconded from schools), three managers who have different roles around settings, provision, enterprise and schools, and an additional 0.6 capacity through the 'Support and Intervention Senior Manager' and their line manager. The team works with all non-maintained settings and reception classes; much of the support is funded by the local authority through the Dedicated Schools Grant 'top-slice'. Lead members and the Schools Forum, who make decisions about the budget, have 'committed to do this because they are aware of the benefits of having settings that are good and better and the difference that this makes to children being school ready'.

Systems for identifying settings in need of support are very tight, bringing together Early Years improvement and sufficiency officers with SEND teams. Monthly meetings look at settings at risk, and subsequent joint visits are provided where needed. While the advisory team inevitably intervene where settings are at risk, they also support all settings as they are coming into their 'Ofsted window'. They have the scope to be in contact with every setting and childminder in this large county. As the service manager notes: 'It is very rare that we go a year without meeting with or seeing a setting through contact visits or informal network meetings. And if people aren't coming out to meetings the officers do drive-bys or hold meetings in the park.'

"Across the South East region different local authorities provide a different approach to school improvement and setting improvement. East Sussex is at one end of the continuum with a strong Early Years team and providing very comprehensive support compared with others in the region." Senior Manager, Standards and Learning Effectiveness Service

The Early Years education team are skilled in looking outwards and proactively seeking new partnerships and funding. For example, in 2016 they sought and gained funding as an early innovator for the 30 hours free childcare entitlement. They are also outward-facing, proactively seeking out good practice wherever it may be – with Kirklees, for example, in relation to working with schools to create childcare places, and recently with Bradford on a '50 things to do before your child is 5' project.

"We have all made a concerted effort to look beyond the boundaries of East Sussex and its nearest neighbours to see what other practice is out there."

Head of Primary and Early Years Standards and Improvement

The team also seek opportunities to share their work with others. Their 2017 'Interacting with babies under 18 months' project, for example, was featured in several publications including the Chartered College of Teaching's Impact journal, and won a Nursery World Award. This has many benefits; in the words of one interviewee: 'We have done lots of outward-facing stuff so consequently our lead members have been happy to put funding behind other things because it is about the profile nationally that East Sussex has ... so it is kind of success breeding success.'

Integrated working

Structures in East Sussex support integrated working, with the Healthy Child Programme brought together with other 0–5 Early Help services in 2016. As the Director of Children's

Services notes: 'It just meant that there wasn't a health silo, a Children's Centre silo, and a family key work silo. You have got people in each of those strands with the specialist knowledge and expertise, but they were pulled together in one team with one locality manager with one set of performance data.' This 0–5 team has strong links with the local authority's early years sufficiency and improvement teams.

"It is as likely for the officers in our team to be speaking to people in Public Health and Early Help on a daily basis as they are to each other. This helps to prevent the provider feeling that there are different people coming in with different messages. They ensure that the message is the same and that the documentation is written together even if one team leads on it." Senior Manager, Standards and Learning Effectiveness Service

Systems and processes are brought together across teams, with tightly structured documentation and compliance audits. The 2–2.5-year Integrated Progress Review, for example, is initiated and part-completed by the health visiting team at around 27 months, then sent to the childcare setting for their input before being returned to the health visitor for completion before the child reaches 30 months. Clinical audits undertaken jointly by members of the Early Years improvement team and the Health Visiting and Children's Centre Service rate the quality of Integrated Progress Reviews and identify areas for improvement, such as ensuring that settings share and record home learning ideas, that Ages and Stages scores are always accompanied by comments, and that parents' consent to share information is always clearly documented.

Early identification and support

East Sussex' good outcomes for early language are evident well before children are 5. In 2018–19, with the exception of the Hastings area, the percentage of children at or above the expected level on communication skills at their health visitor review at 2–2.5 years was above the national average and above the average for the South East region. A major contributor to this is likely to be the 0–5 Early Help service.

Recruitment of health visitors to this service has been a challenge, and not all Healthy Child Programme reviews have been completed, but there has been an upward trend for the last four years and the local authority has kept pace with its neighbours. The health visiting team has a very strong skill mix in terms of community nursery nurses, an experienced and stable staff group who support the health visiting work with their universal visits at 12 months and 27 months. This frees the health visitors up to do more targeted work.

Where a review identifies concerns about a child's early language, health visitors can make referrals to the specialist team of seven (5.53 FTE) Early Communication Support Workers. Led by a Children's Centre teacher, they are all highly skilled in supporting early language. They receive training, telephone support and termly supervision from the Speech and Language Therapy service, and are funded by Public Health.

The Early Communication Support Workers run Pathway provision such as Toddler Talk sessions across the Children Centre clusters to support families, help parents develop their understanding of their child's speech and language development by completing Language Checkers, and give families ideas for home learning.

The Early Communication Support Workers run a number of group programmes, such as Early Words, a locally devised programme targeted at parents of children aged 12–18 months who need support with the contingent, attuned interactions that promote language and communication development.

Language through Play is a three-session group provision where two or three families come together with their children in a crèche room with a range of play resources. The Early Communication Support Worker will show them what games they can play and give them strategies around the different strands of language.

Families can also be offered the Book Trust's Bookstart Corner programme, which involves three home visits followed by a trip to the library.

Key performance indicator data gathered shows that typically just under half the children supported by Early Communication Support Workers return to at or above the expected level on Language Checkers within a year, with the remainder referred to speech and language therapists. Given that the Speech and Language Therapy service report that almost all 0–5 referrals they receive are judged appropriate (i.e. children likely to have long-term developmental language disorder or autism), the performance data is encouraging.

In the early days, Early Communication Support Workers were able to make a universal offer; now it is targeted. Because it started as an offer for all, 'it has never been stigmatised and we have never had any problems with families thinking there is a problem because they are getting extra support', noted the adviser who manages the team. Another factor is the way it is signposted: 'It has always also been appreciated and welcomed because of the way it is delivered by a trusted health visitor. The health visitor will say in passing matter-of-factly that they need to pick up on this communication issue and that someone from the team will come and visit and provide the support they need.'

Some universal services are still provided by the community through groups in Children's Centres run by volunteers, a role developed by the 0–5 Early Help Service to meet the challenges of constrained resources.



EY practitioners engaged in action learning projects:

"We are now not afraid to ask questions, reflect on our practice and think where to get further information."

"You're more likely to use it in practice when you find out for yourself."

"I thought I didn't know what 'motherese' was, but once I had researched it, I realised I did."

Volunteers complete an accredited volunteer course and are then supported to co-run groups before they work independently.

Support for communication and language can begin early. The tools developed for the Communication Pathway include engaging leaflets for parents about language development and how to support it. There is one for pre-birth ('I'm not even born yet but I love your voice'), one for three months and one for six months, as well as a series for older age groups. The Language Checkers ('How is my child progressing?') have been developed for every age band, starting with 0–11 months. The tools are available in print, online and on social media for use by practitioners from midwives to health visitors to early years practitioners in settings. They have been translated into 10 different languages.

For older children, the Communication Pathway includes further age-appropriate tools for spotting needs, along with guidance on the steps settings can take themselves to meet those needs, and when they should refer children to speech and language therapists. Settings use the East Sussex Speech and Language and Communication Monitoring Tool, developed from the former national Every Child a Talker programme. In Reception many also use Speech Link and Language Link, evidence-based commercially available online assessments. The assessments enable a teacher to see trends in their class's comprehension development and plan carefully tailored small group work to plug gaps, using ideas provided by the tool. Speech Link and Language Link were formerly funded by the local authority for all its schools; schools now have to subscribe, which the majority do.

Professional development

Core training on speech, language and communication (such as ELKLAN training, training on Language Link, on communication-friendly environments and on vocabulary development) is always on offer to practitioners from the Early Years service and CLASS (the local authority's specialist Communication, Language and Autism SEND advisory team). Staff in many settings find it increasingly difficult to release staff to attend training, however, and as a result new CPD models have been developed. The Speech and Language Therapy service promote The Communication Trust's online training, and the improvement team have developed an online course for Early Years SENDCOs, supplemented by SENDCO Inclusion Support Groups. Speech and language therapists provide input on the Communication Pathway to these groups.

The central element of CPD for settings is the work of Early Excellence Hubs, which bring together settings and schools in localities to share resources and best practice. Within the Hubs there are lead practitioners who provide training and peer-to-peer support. All early years providers, including Academies, are members of Hubs, which are supported with central funding. The system means that training can be needs-led and local, reflecting the characteristics of different areas and their differing levels of disadvantage.

One very successful project developed in the Hubs was based on action learning, with practitioners working in action learning sets of three practitioners and a facilitator to read about and reflect on a topic, implement changes to their practice and evaluate the impact. Feedback from practitioners suggests that the process has a transformational effect, empowering and upskilling practitioners who may not have high levels of formal qualifications.

Take-up and quality of early education

East Sussex has had higher take-up of funded places for 2-year-olds than the national average, their statistical neighbours and other local authorities in the South East region in every year since 2015. In 2018, 84% of 2-year-olds benefitted from a funded place compared to 72% nationally. An above-average percentage of these children were in good or outstanding provision in 2014–18. In 2018, 100% were in good or outstanding provision.

For funded 3- and 4-year-olds, the percentage in good or outstanding provision improved to above the national average from 2017 onwards.

The high-quality provision is not a consequence of settings having more staff with higher-level qualifications. Perhaps because the county historically had few nursery classes in schools until recently, the percentage of 2-, 3- and 4-year-olds benefitting from funded early years education with staff with qualified teacher or Early Years Professional Status was below the national average in 2013–16 (and not until 2018 did it rise to slightly above the national average). It is likely that the high-quality provision in East Sussex, and consequent impact on children's outcomes over the period covered by this case study, is a function of the tight local authority system for support and challenge, combined with effective CPD.

Securing high numbers of places for funded 2-year-olds was challenging. A project board of representatives from social care, health, the early years improvement service, public health and local authority data teams was set up at the start to share data and information about infrastructure. Local knowledge was vital, and services came together to identify potential providers and engage families. 'Work with Children's Centre colleagues was key and also bringing children's social care and health on board', says the Early Years funding manager. Where providers were unsure about how to make the 15 hours' provision work, the team explored what the issues were and helped them come up with solutions, including upskilling the workforce.

Care is taken to make sure that the most disadvantaged children access funded places. The Early Years funding team work closely with social care to track children on child protection plans, to make sure they can take up a place as soon as they turn 2. During the pilot programme children's speech, language and communication needs were a key indicator of concern taken into account by the multi-agency panel who prioritised children for places.

A local culture of evaluation and use of evidence

Internally, the tight system of key performance indicators in East Sussex means that the local authority's senior management team are able to evaluate the impact of provision, retain the aspects that are working and critically review those that are not. The review of the work of Children's Centres, for example, found that what was making most difference to family outcomes were family key workers. 61% of families with key worker support were able to continue to look after their children, preventing the need for social care, whereas similar outcomes could not be evidenced for parents supported through groups and courses. As a result, keywork services have been a focus for investment.

Teams engage with academic partners, as in the 'Interacting with Babies' work. This was inspired by the Baby Room research at Canterbury Christ Church University, who provided academic support and guidance to the project.

The action learning projects undertaken in settings have established a culture of reading key pieces of research and understanding how to gather evidence of impact. The local authority advisers who led them have come to 'think like researchers'. In the Interacting with Babies project, for example, they undertook repeated observations using a validated tool for assessing the quality of adult-child interactions, finding substantial improvement in scores from a baseline, both at the end of the project and at one-year follow-up.

"Learning how to research properly is the most important aspect that our staff have taken away from the project. Our staff are now confident in finding relevant academic papers and skim- reading them to identify useful areas. They share their findings with the rest of the team ... this has greatly improved our self-confidence." Manager of an early years setting



Innovations in East Sussex

- ✓ Professional development that has a transformational effect, empowering and upskilling practitioners who may not have high levels of formal qualifications.
- ✓ An Early Communication Support Worker role, providing targeted support to families where children's language development is a concern.
- ✓ An integrated 0–5 Health Child Programme with health visitors, Children's Centres, family key workers and Early Communication Support Workers sitting under one management, and Public Health funding used flexibly to co-fund the service, including the Early Communication Support Workers.

The future

Recent developments that interviewees felt will help them continue to narrow the gap include:

- A '50 things to do before you are 5' programme for families. East Sussex have adapted the Bradford programme with local activities, developed a website and app, and invested in advertising, banners and branded rucksacks. Settings are provided with giant key rings with all the activities on them, using these to target families who would most benefit from the resource.

- The DfE-funded work in the Hastings Opportunity Area, which began in 2017. This includes a focus on embedding the East Sussex Communication Pathway and additional Early Communication Support Worker posts.
- The DfE-funded early years professional development fund, which will provide training in early language to practitioners in two further disadvantaged coastal areas.
- A 'Watch, Read, Do, Review' national EYFS initiative, which is providing and researching the impact of online CPD for early years practitioners. Two-thirds of schools and a quarter of PVI settings have already signed up to the programme.

Interviewees also identified factors that present risks to continued progress.

- Increasing pressures on the Speech and Language Therapy service as a result of a rise in demand for Education, Health and Care Plans. That work gets prioritised, and (in the words of the Speech and Language Therapy children's lead) 'the client group that gets squeezed are the little ones who don't have an EHCP and who do need an intervention'.
- Broader concerns about the sufficiency of skilled professionals in the social care and health world. Interviewees noted the particular recruitment challenges to specialist roles and expressed concerns about workforce planning at national and regional level. 'You can have the greatest plans in the world, the greatest pathways in the world, you can have all of the commitment in the world, but if you can't staff those things then you have got a real problem. And the government misjudges the ability to turn the tap on and off and they don't allow for the time it takes to train' (Director of Children's Services).

“What I would advise is that local areas consider carefully what KPIs to commission from your specialist speech and language services to ensure that early years work does not get eclipsed by school years work, especially demand for EHCP assessments. Let's try to get upstream together!”

Speech and Language Therapy children's lead

Glossary

CCG: Clinical Commissioning Group
 EHCP: Education, Health and Care Plan
 EYFS: Early Years Foundation Stage
 EYFSP: Early Years Foundation Stage Profile
 FSM: Free school meals
 PVI: Private, voluntary and independent



EARLY
INTERVENTION
FOUNDATION

10 Salamanca Place, London SE1 7HB
 W: www.EI.org.uk | E: info@eif.org.uk | T: @TheEIFoundation | P: +44 (0)20 3542 2481
 First published in March 2020. © 2020