

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

Methodology

Five 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 the case studies, please visit: <https://www.eif.org.uk/resource/closing-the-gap-on-speech-language-and-communication-in-the-early-years-local-case-studies>

Summary

Qualitative research was carried out in five local authorities (LAs) to generate case studies of the approaches taken to successfully reduce the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers on speech, language and communication indicators in the early years. The five local authorities were identified as 'high performing' in closing the gap for disadvantaged children on language and communication indicators at the end of reception using data available in October 2019.

Selection criteria

Local areas were purposively selected according to 2018 Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) data on the percentage of children achieving at least the expected level of development in the prime area of learning: communication and language as the most recent available data in October 2019.

Main selection criteria

1. EYFSP 2018 data was used to rank local authorities based on the percentage point increase in children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) achieving at least expected level of development in the Communication and Language area of learning, over the 2016–2018 period.

LAs were eligible for case study selection if their percentage point increase was above the national increase.

Secondary selection criteria

LAs were included if, according to EYFSP 2018 data, their:

2. percentage point gap between children eligible for FSM and children who were not eligible in achieving at least the expected level of development in the Communication and Language was smaller than the national gap in 2018
3. percentage of children eligible for FSM achieving at least expected level of development in the Communication and Language was above the national average in 2018.

LAs were chosen only if they fulfilled the three criteria outlined above. Specific selection was based on how large their percentage point increase was for the main selection criteria.

Other criteria considered

In the final selection of LAs, other criteria considered were:

- A high rank of the LA against their statistical neighbour on communication and language for children eligible for FSM on the DfE's early years outcome dashboard.¹ A low rank was an exclusion criterion.
- Change in the percentage of children overall achieving at least expected level of development in the Communication and Language between 2018 and 2019. A large decrease was an exclusion criterion.
- The percentage of the EYFSP population who were children eligible for FSM in 2018. A low or high percentage of the population was not an exclusion criterion as a low overall percentage could mask small pockets of high disadvantage in an LA. However, the sample was selected to ensure a mix of LAs with an FSM population above the national average (EYFSP national average 13.4% in 2018) as well as slightly below it.
- Total EYFSP population of children. LAs with an EYFSP population under 1,000 were excluded. LAs were selected to ensure a range of LAs with large and small EYFSP populations.
- The need to ensure a range of case studies in terms of region and local authority type.

Case study data

Each case study is based on a review of documents and performance data in each local authority, three or four telephone interviews, and one or two focus groups with the key individuals who were involved in overseeing or delivering the approach taken to reduce the early years disadvantage gap in speech, language and communication.

A total of 16 telephone interviews and six focus groups were carried out across the five case study authorities, involving a total of 67 participants. The following table below provides a profile of the sample.

1 See: <https://department-for-education.shinyapps.io/smapey-dashboard/>

PROFILE OF THE SAMPLE

Role	Number of participants
Director of Children's Services or equivalent role	3
Director/AD of Education or equivalent role	2
Director of Public Health or equivalent role	3
Clinical Commissioning Group commissioner or joint CCG/LA commissioner/Public Health Specialist	7
Head of Early Years or equivalent role	4
Head of Early Help/Early Intervention or equivalent role	4
Health Visitor leads	2
Children's Centre Managers/EH Hub leads	5
Providers of specialist provision	3
Early Years/School Improvement Lead/Adviser	5
Early Years consultants/advisory teachers	4
Clinical Lead/Speech and Language therapy manager	5
Speech and language therapist	3
Early Years SEND leads/consultants/Inclusion officers	8
Early years manager/practitioner in school or setting	6
Other (Librarian, Digital Officer, Digital and Improvement Lead, Family Information lead)	3
Total	67

All interviews were based on topic guides which outlined the main topics that were to be addressed but also allowed for the coverage to be tailored according to the role and experience of each participant. The following areas were included:

- reflections on the main speech, language and communication issues in the local area
- the priority attached strategically to developing communication and language skills in the early years, governance and commissioning arrangements
- the local authority's approach to narrowing the gap on speech, language and communication
- the nature of the speech and language resources and workforce capacity in each local area
- the activities, interventions and local approaches adopted and views about these; and the factors that helped or hindered their success
- role and engagement of other agencies working in partnership to help to narrow the gap
- the pathways in place to support children to access relevant support with their speech, language and communication needs

- reflections on the approach adopted and what is critical to narrowing the communication gap in the early years
- recommendations and advice to other local authorities.

The interviews and focus groups were recorded with participants' consent. Interviews typically lasted about an hour and focus groups up to two hours. Notes were produced from the sound files and systematically analysed within the broad EIF Maturity Matrix themes for speech, language and communication.² A central Excel worksheet was also produced to distil the key messages on reducing the communication gap in the early years across all areas. This approach enabled participants' views and experiences to be compared and contrasted across the different delivery approaches adopted. The emerging findings were then analysed to draw out the critical factors which may have contributed to narrowing the language gap. Choice of critical factors was based in part on local evidence of impact provided by participants and in part on wider research evidence – such as, for example, national research showing a positive impact of the pilot of funded provision for disadvantaged wo-year-olds on their later language skills. These critical factors provided the structure for each case study report.

Note: the conclusions in the case studies are based on local opinions rather than a quantitative study.

2 See: <https://www.eif.org.uk/resource/eif-maturity-matrix-speech-language-communication-early-years>

