

The logo for 'thrive at five' is located in the top right corner. It consists of a solid green square containing the text 'thrive at five' in a white, lowercase, sans-serif font. A white curved line underlines the word 'thrive', resembling a smile.

# ***THE NUFFIELD EARLY LANGUAGE WORKSTREAM***

*Pilot Year Evaluation*

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## **Contents**

<b><i>Executive Summary</i></b>	4
<b><i>Section One: Introduction</i></b>	
1.1: About Thrive at Five	7
1.2: Our first site - Abbey Hulton and Bentilee in Stoke-on-Trent	7
1.3: The Nuffield Early Language Workstream	8
1.4: Workstream Theory of Change	8
<b><i>Section Two: Evaluation Approach</i></b>	
2.1: Evaluation Purpose	13
2.2: Evaluation Questions	13
2.3: Evaluation Methods	13
2.4: Assessing Implementation	15
<b><i>Section Three: Implementation</i></b>	
3.1: A headline description of pilot year implementation	18
3.2: Recruiting staff and students and identifying pupils	18
3.3: Supporting Students	20
3.4: Overseeing and steering delivery	23
3.5: Ensuring the intervention is delivered well	25
<b><i>Section Four: Early Indications of Positive Differences</i></b>	
4.1: Participating children	29
4.2: Student NELI Practitioners	32
4.3: Relationships between agencies	32
<b><i>Section Five: Recommendations</i></b>	
5.1: Concluding Remarks	35
5.2: Recommendations	
<b><i>Appendices</i></b>	
Appendix A: Amount of intervention completed by school	40

## ***Figures and Tables***

Figure 1 - Workstream Theory of Change	10
Table 1 - Interviews and Focus Groups	14
Figure 2 - Evidence, implementation and engagement model	15
Figure 3 - Dimensions of quality implementation	15
Figure 4 - Summary of student recruitment process	19
Table 2 - Change in individual Language Screen Scores	31
Table 3 - Quantity of the intervention delivered by school	40

## **Executive Summary**

This report presents findings from the evaluation of the pilot year of the Nuffield Early Language Workstream in Abbey Hulton and Bentilee in Stoke-on-Trent. The workstream was part of Thrive at Five's place-based approach which helps children in the early years develop strong foundations for life and learning.

The workstream was intended as an innovative approach to creating capacity in reception classes to deliver the Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI) - an evidence-based early language intervention - to all children requiring additional support, estimated before the pilot as being approximately 40% of the reception cohort. The innovation involved a partnership between Thrive at Five, seven local schools and Staffordshire University, which would see students from Staffordshire University deliver NELI instead of teachers or other early years practitioners. It was envisaged that high-quality delivery and smooth implementation across multiple settings with tens of students might require additional oversight and management resource and the intention was to use two trained teachers as Peripatetic Support Staff.

There were challenges in implementation in the pilot year. In particular: -

- (1) The recruitment of Peripatetic Support Staff, who were intended to play a key role in supporting and guiding student delivery, took longer than expected. The two members of staff were only in-post during the final weeks of the academic year.
- (2) Students from three Staffordshire University undergraduate courses (Teacher Training, Early Years, and Education Studies) were recruited to be part of the workstream. All students who showed an interest were accepted and we initially had 32 Student NELI Practitioners. Through the year, more than half of students dropped out. This made it difficult to achieve consistent delivery of the intervention in schools. There were several reasons for the high drop-out rate, but the positioning of the opportunity as an extra-curricular (volunteer) activity rather than an embedded part of undergraduate course content was probably the most significant one.
- (3) There were significant delays in clearing students to work in some schools due to time taken for proposed social media checks.
- (4) Pupils were identified for the intervention using a well-established language screening tool, but not all schools put forward all those children so identified because of delays in onboarding students and student drop out, and in some cases because of teachers exercising their discretion in determining which pupils should receive the intervention.

Partly due to the challenges identified above, implementation was inconsistent across the target schools.

- (1) In three out of the seven schools in the area, pupils received over half the intervention sessions. In two schools, less than half the intervention was delivered. In the remaining two schools, delivery did not get started. In total, 46 children received some of the intervention in the five schools where some delivery took place (approximately 30% of the reception cohort in these five schools).
- (2) Participating schools adopted a flexible approach to delivery depending on their specific circumstances. There were three main modes of delivery: students working exclusively with one group of children to deliver all the sessions, pairs of students working collaboratively to deliver sessions, and a combination of teaching assistant and student delivery of sessions.
- (3) Schools differed in the induction support they gave to students, with some providing opportunities to practice and shadow delivery. Based on insights from our research, students valued a more scaffolded approach to onboarding them into their school environments and helping them get going with delivery.

Teething issues in a pilot year are to be expected, and notwithstanding these problems the evaluation discloses the innovative workstream as having some promise:

- (1) In the three schools where over 50% of the intervention was delivered, child-level scores in the early language screen increased after the intervention. Looking at the individual scores pre-and-post the intervention, 62% of children made meaningful progress in their language skills and 38% of children made some progress but less than the five point benchmark flagged as being indicative of meaningful progress. The scores on the Language Screen were also analysed in SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) using a Wilcoxon's signed ranks test. The results indicated that median Language Screen scores were higher after the intervention and that this was statistically significant.
- (2) Some initial signs indicated that student delivery was of an acceptable quality, with examples of high-quality practice. The pilot year enabled identification of the qualities and skills that made some students more suitable for the role. However, this was not assessed systematically during the first year and needs to be ramped-up during year two.
- (3) Despite the challenges, school leaders were positive about the workstream. They confirmed that NELI was delivered to more children than would have been possible without the support of Thrive at Five. Indeed, some schools recognised that none of their children might have received NELI without the extra capacity provided by the students.
- (4) Teachers appreciated the flexibility and responsiveness of the Thrive at Five workstream lead and were positive about the quality of the students.
- (5) Students and teachers reported that children made good progress in a range of areas, including communication and turn taking. They also reported improved confidence which enabled children to be more involved in whole class teaching sessions.
- (6) The additional capacity provided by undergraduate students created new opportunities for existing school staff to provide extra support to more children.
- (7) Students also reported a range of benefits including professional development, increased employability, and increased skills and confidence, alongside feelings of pride and satisfaction.

A range of recommendations to improve implementation have been identified from the first year of delivery and are detailed at the end of this report.

## ***Section One***

# ***Introducing Thrive at Five and the Nuffield Early Language Workstream***

In Section One, we set the scene for the pilot year evaluation of the Nuffield Early Language Workstream by introducing Thrive at Five, our first site, the workstream being evaluated, and the workstream theory of change. By the end of the section, readers will understand the purpose of this individual workstream and our high-level intentions regarding how the workstream should function and contribute to improved outcomes.

### **1.1 About Thrive at Five**

Thrive at Five is a place-based initiative that helps children in the early years develop strong foundations for life and learning. Our aim is to achieve sustainable improvements in children's early years outcomes by: -

1. building parental and community capacity in the areas where we work;
2. facilitating collaborative action across (and within) the public, private, and voluntary sectors; and
3. supporting the adoption of evidence-based practice and high-quality implementation.

In our sites<sup>1</sup>, Thrive at Five works with local partners to give children and families access to a pathway of high-quality support, from pregnancy to the end of reception. This is achieved by: -

- targeting a set of prescribed intermediate outcome areas<sup>2</sup>, to ensure the pathway [of support] is focused on key drivers of positive early development,
- focusing on the different outcome areas simultaneously, to ensure the pathway represents a multi-dimensional approach<sup>3</sup>,
- employing local teams, prioritising parent engagement, and carefully monitoring implementation, all to ensure the pathway is appropriately embedded in, and responsive to, individual contexts.

Ultimately, Thrive at Five aims to help more children reach a "Good Level of Development", when assessed at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) at school, because of the work we are doing.

### **1.2 Our first site - Abbey Hulton and Bentilee in Stoke-on-Trent**

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<sup>1</sup> Work is carried out in small areas (neighbourhoods or clusters of neighbourhoods) where there are concentrations of social disadvantage. The first site (local programme) is in Abbey Hulton and Bentilee in Stoke-on-Trent. In September 2023, we will commence work in our second site within Redcar & Cleveland.

<sup>2</sup> Thrive at Five's prescribed intermediate outcomes are - a) Children's Early Communication and Language, b) Parent-Infant Relationships, c) Parent Well-Being, d) Home Learning Environments, e) the quality of Early Education and Care, and f) the strength and coherence of the local Early Years System.

<sup>3</sup> Thrive at Five's approach is underpinned by Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 1986, 2000), which posits that children's development is shaped by multiple interconnected social environments. We believe effective programmes that sustainably improve (particularly disadvantaged) children's outcomes will be multi-dimensional; so that improvements made in one aspect of a child's life are reinforced by improvements made in other aspects of their life.

## *The Nuffield Early Language Workstream (2023)*

Abbey Hulton and Bentilee in Stoke-on-Trent is Thrive at Five's first site<sup>4</sup>. These two connected wards are located on the eastern edge of the borough and are home to approximately 2,500 children aged five and under.

Through a process of Discovery and Co-Design, Thrive at Five's work in Abbey Hulton and Bentilee has been organised into nine interconnected workstreams. This includes six Ages and Stages workstreams that each focus on specific developmental periods: -

- i. Enhanced perinatal services to support strong parent-child relationships.
- ii. Parent-Baby-Toddler Groups and Early Life Workers to give the youngest children opportunities to learn and socialise and their parents a helping hand and opportunities to get out of the house and meet other parents and professionals.
- iii. Ready Steady Stoke to smooth transitions into nursery and reception.
- iv. Talking Time to ensure children benefit from excellent whole-class early language support during the nursery stage.
- v. PEEP Learning Together to improve the quality and quantity of learning activities taking place in nursery and reception children's home learning environments.
- vi. Nuffield Early Language, which draws on innovative methods to create extra capacity in schools, to help further improve reception children's language skills.

It also includes three cross-cutting workstreams, which are focused largely on creating the broader conditions that enable positive early childhood development: -

- i. Parent Engagement, so that every parent knows about the importance of the early years, parenting behaviours likely to support their child's positive development, and where to go for support.
- ii. Strengthening Practice, through upskilling the early years workforce.
- iii. System improvement, by supporting collaboration across the local early years system.

### **1.3 The Nuffield Early Language Workstream**

The Nuffield Early Language Workstream supports children who are falling behind with their communication and language development through the high-quality local implementation of the Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI)<sup>5</sup>. The workstream is targeted at children in the reception cohort (specifically children who are most at risk of not reaching a good level of development in the EYFS Profile) across all our seven primary schools in Abbey Hulton and Bentilee. Staffordshire University Teacher Training, Early Years, and Education Studies undergraduate students play a key role in delivering the intervention.

### **1.4 Workstream Theory of Change**

In Abbey Hulton and Bentilee, school staff were trained in 2020/21 with the support of *Opportunity Area* funds to deliver NELI. However, when Thrive at Five started work locally in early 2022, the

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<sup>4</sup> During this proof-of-concept phase, we hope to have five sites in total across England (with possibly one site in Scotland).

<sup>5</sup> NELI is a 20-week intervention. It comprises three small-group sessions (of between 3-6 children) which take about 30 minutes each to deliver to children every week for 20 weeks. The group sessions are followed by two individual sessions each week. These sessions are designed to consolidate learning from the group sessions, focus on developing children's narrative skills, and enable the school to adapt the level of the session to the needs of each child. Each individual session usually last for fifteen minutes.

intervention was either not being implemented at all (as in the majority of schools) or being implemented without fidelity to the proven model, and there were no plans to change this.

There were two related implementation barriers. First, local need far outstripped typical NELI delivery numbers (i.e., the intervention is routinely delivered to approximately 20 percent of a class of thirty children ((around six children)), whereas the need at local schools was often double or even treble this). Second, given this demand, schools did not feel they had the capacity to deliver the intervention - with its combination of weekly small-group and individual sessions - to the entirety of the in-need group. Equally, they felt it would be unethical to focus this intensive package of targeted support on some struggling children and not others. The implication was that no children in our target wards looked set to benefit from this strongly evidenced catch-up intervention.

Given this context, local teachers and Thrive at Five identified a potential solution that involved establishing a mixed delivery team comprised of peripatetic support staff and undergraduate students from the Institute of Education at Staffordshire University. We intended to recruit and train a cohort of approximately thirty undergraduate students and to appoint two flexi-support staff with responsibility for overseeing delivery in collaboration with schools.

The aim was to deliver NELI to around 40 percent of the total reception cohort. Eligibility would be determined through the screening of every reception child using the OxEd Language Screening tool to identify the children struggling most with their oral language skills. In line with the broader Thrive at Five approach, there would be a strong focus on high-quality implementation throughout.

Peripatetic support staff would guide the undergraduate students through delivery, with one member of staff covering the four Abbey Hulton schools and the other member of staff covering the three Bentilee schools. Outcomes would be assessed largely by monitoring the effects on participating children, but we also hypothesised there could be improvements to overall classroom environments due to significantly increased capacity.

The diagram on the next page shows the desired process of change, by outlining hypothesised causal linkages between the inputs and outputs, and the medium and longer-term outcomes.



The Nuffield Early Language Workstream (2023)

In-school strand - NELI Delivery

Inputs	Outputs	Feasibility and Acceptability	Medium term outcomes	Long term outcomes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recruit, train, and support a cohort of approximately 30 Staffordshire University Teaching and Education Studies students to help deliver NELI* to 40 percent of the reception year** across seven schools***.</li> <li>Appoint two full-time flexi-teachers to oversee and support NELI delivery**** across Abbey Hulton and Bentilee.</li> <li>Establish a Project Delivery Group***** - comprised of leads from Thrive, Staffordshire University, and participating schools that meets quarterly to review progress.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students are recruited and trained, and supervision has commenced.</li> <li>Flexi-teachers are recruited and in post.</li> <li>Children are selected through the OxEd Language Screen Tool and assigned to a NELI Group.</li> <li>NELI Groups are being delivered.</li> <li>The Project Delivery Group is established.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students feel confident and supported in delivering the sessions.</li> <li>Thrive at Five's Project Lead assesses that delivery meets our expected standards.</li> <li>Classroom teachers assess that the sessions are complementing broader teaching and support.</li> <li>Classroom teachers and flexi-teachers assess that children are responding positively to and benefiting from the sessions.</li> <li>Staffordshire University's Project Lead assesses that students are having an enriching experience.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improved language development for participating children*****.</li> <li>Enhanced whole-class learning environments*****.</li> </ul> <div data-bbox="987 555 1464 1142" style="background-color: #fce4ec; padding: 10px;"> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Assumptions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>That schools properly administer the OxEd Language Screen and that children at risk of not reaching a good level of development are selected.</li> <li>That suitable students can be recruited.</li> <li>That students can be supported to deliver NELI as intended.</li> <li>That suitable flexi-teachers can be recruited.</li> <li>That NELI can be delivered to more than one group per class without having a negative effect on whole class teaching and learning.</li> <li>That all participating schools have (or can create) quiet spaces where NELI work can take place.</li> <li>That broader child and family needs can be met via school pastoral support.</li> <li>That improved language development for children lays the foundations for both improved literacy development and improved general development.</li> </ul> </div>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More children reach the expected level in 1) Communication and language and 2) Literacy in the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile.</li> <li>More children reach a good level of development in the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile.</li> </ul>

### *The Nuffield Early Language Workstream (2023)*

In the following section, we explain the approach we took to conducting this evaluation. These two opening sections (Section One and Section Two) give readers the background information they need to start engaging with our evaluation findings.



# ***Section Two***

## ***Evaluation Approach***

In Section Two, we outline our approach to the pilot year evaluation. We briefly describe the evaluation's purpose, questions, and methods. We also consider how implementation (as a constituent part of the social change process<sup>6</sup>) should be defined and assessed for the purpose of this evaluation. By the end of this section, readers should understand how the pilot year evaluation of the Nuffield Early Language workstream was conducted.

### **2.1 Evaluation Purpose**

Given this was a pilot year and the first time Thrive at Five had delivered anything of this nature, we focused strongly on learning and improvement. As with all projects, the priority was to get the underlying processes and delivery into a place where they were fit-for-purpose. Moving forward, evaluations will then be expected to gradually shift their focus towards outcomes and impact. Our evaluation purpose was therefore to: -

- Learn about what went right and what went wrong in Year One and how in future years Thrive at Five should deliver the workstream's activities so that impact is optimised.
- Assess whether the workstream showed early signs of promise.

In evaluation parlance, this report therefore combines an Implementation and Process Evaluation with an evaluation of early outcomes.

### **2.2 Evaluation Questions**

We selected three evaluation questions as set out below.

- *To what extent was the Nuffield Early Language Workstream implemented as intended? What were the key implementation barriers and enablers?*
- *Were there any early indications that the Nuffield Early Language Workstream made a positive difference?*
- *How could the Nuffield Early Language Workstream be strengthened for the next academic year?*

The first question is focused on implementation and process issues. The second question examines evidence of early outcomes. The third question focuses on workstream improvement and next year's delivery.

### **2.3 Evaluation Methods**

For the evaluation, we reviewed core documents, carried out interviews and focus groups, and undertook some quantitative data analysis.

Interviews and focus groups were conducted in June and July 2023. Participants were identified using a purposive sampling approach<sup>7</sup>, based on membership of three participant groups (Core Project Team, Early Years Teachers, and Student NELI Practitioners). Interviews were conducted either in-person or via a web-platform (MS Teams) and were then transcribed.

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<sup>6</sup> Albers, B., et al (2020). Implementation Science 3.0. Springer.

<sup>7</sup>Purposive sampling refers to a group of non-probability sampling techniques in which units are selected because they have characteristics that you need in your sample.

There were a total of:

- two interviews with the project team (one with the Thrive at Five workstream lead and one with the Staffordshire University workstream lead);
- five interviews with teaching staff; and
- two focus groups with students (7 participants).

Table 1 below provides additional detail on the conducted interviews.

**Table 1 - Interviews and Focus Groups**

Participant group	Individual or Group Interview	Total Participants	Topics covered
Core project team	2 individual interviews (face to face) conducted on 12 <sup>th</sup> and 14 <sup>th</sup> June.	2	Explored what happened during the first year of implementation, level of involvement, what worked well and the challenges as well as perspectives on changes for pupils and students.
Teaching staff	5 individual interviews (online) Conducted between 12 <sup>th</sup> and 30 <sup>th</sup> June.	5	Explored involvement of the schools, coverage of NELI, what worked well and challenges in implementation and perceived changes.
University Student NELI Practitioners	2 online focus groups (one with 4 individuals and one with 3 individuals) conducted 3 <sup>rd</sup> May and 7 <sup>th</sup> June.	7	Experiences of recruitment, induction and training, what worked well and what were the challenges in implementation. Perspectives on changes for children and for themselves.

Interview data was analysed using the Framework Method (Ritchie at al, 2014).

Quantitative data was collected from each of our seven schools, via a preprepared data template and school-level Data Sharing Agreements. Child-level data was pseudonymised before it was shared with Thrive at Five. We collected basic child-level demographic data and information on workstream participation. We also gathered Language Screen scores for every child who participated in the workstream, collected pre-and-post intervention. Whereas 46 children received some of the NELI intervention, we included the three schools in the analysis where pupils had received more than 50% of the intervention (giving pre-and-post intervention scores for 29 pupils)<sup>8</sup>. The individual scores on the Language screen were compared before and after the intervention and were analysed in SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) using a Wilcoxon’s signed ranks test.<sup>9</sup>

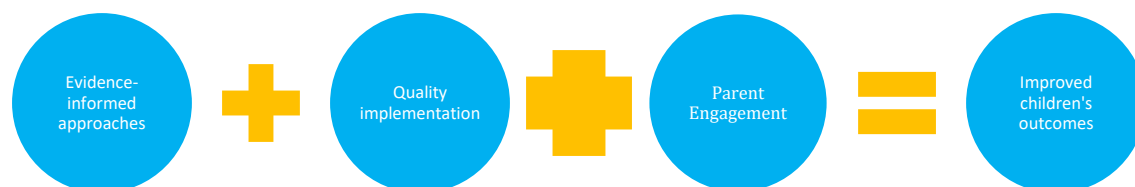
<sup>8</sup> The other schools were excluded from the quantitative analysis on the basis that we could not reasonably expect pupils who had received a very limited amount of the intervention to have made measurable progress because of their participation.

<sup>9</sup> The Wilcoxon test is a nonparametric statistical test that compares two paired groups. The tests essentially calculate the difference between sets of pairs and analyse these differences to establish if they are statistically significantly different from one another.

## 2.4 Assessing Implementation

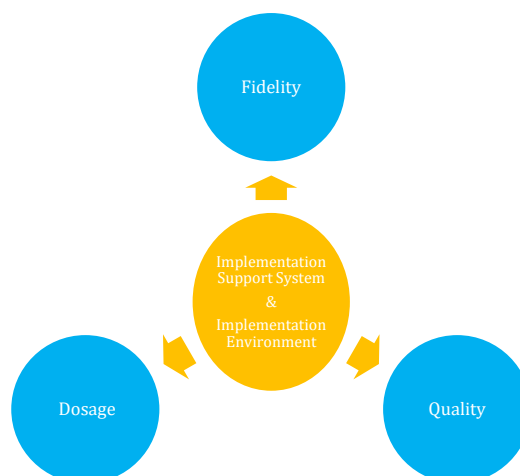
Alongside a focus on evidence-based practice, Thrive at Five also has an emphasis on high-quality implementation. Indeed, we believe these elements [evidence-based practice and high-quality implementation], when combined with our cross-cutting parent engagement workstream, will interact, and help bring about improved child-level outcomes as demonstrated in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2 - Evidence, implementation and engagement model



It was therefore important that - as part of the evaluation - we established a broad understanding of what good implementation looks like so that our current implementation could be judged with these aspirations in mind. In doing this, we have drawn on the Implementation and Process Evaluation handbook produced by the University of Manchester and sponsored by the Education Endowment Foundation<sup>10</sup>. This highlights several dimensions that inform assessments of implementation quality. We selected three of these dimensions that are particularly relevant to the NELI workstream - fidelity<sup>11</sup>, dosage<sup>12</sup>, and quality<sup>13</sup>. We also selected two identified factors that are believed to affect implementation: the implementation support system<sup>14</sup> and the implementation environment<sup>15</sup>. In the following sections, we draw on these dimensions and factors in our reflections on workstream implementation and recommendations for next year.

Figure 3 - Dimensions of quality implementation and the factors that affect implementation



<sup>10</sup> Humphrey, N., et al (2019). Implementation and process evaluation (IPE) for interventions in education settings: An introductory handbook. Education Endowment Foundation

<sup>11</sup> Fidelity - the extent to which implementers adhere to the intended treatment model.

<sup>12</sup> Dosage - how much of the intended intervention has been delivered and/or received.

<sup>13</sup> Quality - how well different components of an intervention are delivered.

<sup>14</sup> Implementation support system - the strategies and practices used to support high-quality implementation.

<sup>15</sup> Implementation environment - the context where the intervention is taking place.

In the next section, we consider the way that the workstream was implemented, and how this compared to our initial intentions around implementation as set out in the theory of change (p.9). This marks the start of our evaluation findings.



## ***Section Three***

*To what extent was the Nuffield Early Language Workstream implemented as intended? What were the key implementation barriers and enablers?*

In Section Three, we address our first evaluation question, which concerns implementation. A commitment to high-quality implementation is a guiding feature of Thrive at Five, and so this is a particularly important section. We start by providing a headline description of implementation over the course of the pilot year. The subsequent more detailed analysis is organised around four themes which are central to the implementation of the workstream: -

1. Recruiting staff and students and identifying pupils;
2. Supporting students;
3. Overseeing and steering delivery; and
4. Ensuring the intervention is delivered well.

All but one implementation theme is comprised of several sub-themes. For each sub-theme and for the final theme, we use the available data to establish (as far as possible) what happened in Year One. Where appropriate, we then reflect on how this relates to the dimensions of implementation quality and factors that affect implementation. Finally, we draw out the key implementation barriers and enablers as a precursor to the development of recommendations for delivery next year.

It feels worth flagging straightaway that pilot year implementation of this workstream took place, for the most part, without the planned staffing infrastructure. We also faced several additional unexpected challenges and some equally unexpected opportunities. Essentially, as per nearly all pilot projects, implementation was complex and messy. The structure proposed in the paragraph above is an attempt to find an accessible way of bringing some order to this complexity, but in practice the themes were inextricably connected, and timings did not follow a neat chronological sequence. We have tried to surface this complexity and messiness in the passages that follow. In Section 3.1 below, we provide a headline description of pilot year implementation. We start with outputs as experienced by children. In the remaining sections, we cover the four themes in turn.

### **3.1 A headline description of pilot year implementation**

In the workstream's pilot year, 46 children benefited from some NELI support. Three of our (seven) schools delivered over half the full NELI intervention to their participating children. Two schools delivered some of the intervention but less than half of it. In the remaining two schools, delivery did not get started. At the beginning of the academic year, we recruited 32 Student NELI Practitioners, but by the end of the year over half these students had dropped out. In the schools that did deliver, the shape of this delivery varied widely, with students playing different roles in different schools. We recruited two Peripatetic Support Staff though they were not in post until the final weeks of the year. Schools were positive about the workstream, confirming that without Thrive at Five many of them [the schools] would not have delivered NELI at all. There were some encouraging signs about the quality of student delivery, but this should be measured more systematically going forwards.

### **3.2 Recruiting staff and students and identifying pupils**

This theme is comprised of three sub-themes: Recruitment of Peripatetic Support Staff, Recruitment of Students, and Identifying Pupils. Below, we consider each sub-theme in some depth.

- **Recruitment of Peripatetic Support Staff**

As referred to above, despite sustained effort and focus the recruitment of Peripatetic Support Staff took much longer than originally anticipated. We had initially hoped staff might be in post by

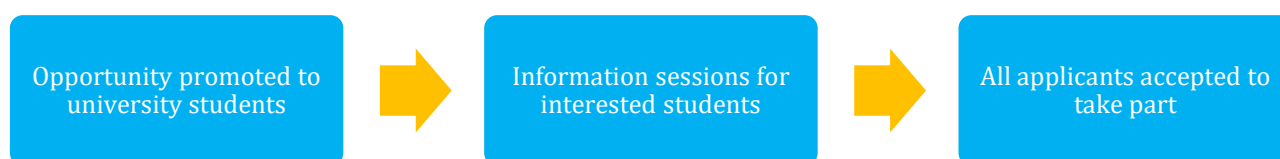
February or March, but in practice recruitment took several months longer<sup>16</sup>. These staff are not employed directly by Thrive at Five but are employed by one of the Academy trusts operating in Stoke - The Alpha Trust<sup>17</sup>. The job description produced by Thrive at Five was substantially different to that of a typical teacher, as set out by the trust. It incorporated an expectation around working flexibly, including during the holidays and across schools. When the role went to a job evaluation panel within the trust, the job came back as commensurate with a higher-level teaching assistant role which meant the job description had to be rewritten to align with these roles and responsibilities. Pay scales had to be agreed and (given the unconventional nature of the role) implications of issues such as reporting safeguarding concerns when working across multiple sites had to be resolved. The role was then advertised but no applications were received so the deadline had to be extended and the job was readvertised. We now have two staff in post, but this was too late to support the first year's implementation.

The absence of Peripatetic Support Staff was always likely to have an adverse effect on our trinity of implementation dimensions - fidelity, dosage, and quality. It meant the implementation support system that we intended to guide and support students was substantially underpowered. In terms of implementation enablers, we would not have been able to navigate this at all without the commitment and understanding demonstrated by Alpha Trust. They [the trust] understood that Thrive at Five operates in the sphere of innovation, and that business-as-usual processes were unlikely to be satisfactory. A key implementation barrier was the broader recruitment market for school staff which meant that suitable candidates wanting to do the roles were in short supply.

- **Recruitment of Students**

The opportunity to apply to be part of the workstream was open to all Staffordshire University students on three undergraduate degree courses: Teaching Training, Early Years, and Education Studies. University Course tutors promoted the opportunity amongst their student body and Information Sessions were held to give prospective Student NELI Practitioners the chance to hear first-hand about the opportunity and to ask any questions. These [Information] sessions involved both the Thrive at Five workstream lead and course tutors from Staffordshire University. Every student who expressed an interest was accepted to take part and initially 32 Student NELI Practitioners volunteered. Figure 1 below shows the process.

**Figure 4: Summary of student recruitment process**



This preplanning recruitment work can feel quite distant from dimensions of implementation such as fidelity, dosage, and quality. However, as we shall see later in the report, the recruitment of the best suited students for this specific opportunity is a cornerstone of the entire workstream. Selection of poorly suited students is likely to place an unsustainable burden on the implementation support

<sup>16</sup> Both members of staff started work at the beginning of July.

<sup>17</sup> Thrive at Five funds salary and on-costs.

system and may not provide sufficient flexibility to meet the needs of the local implementation environment.

To give ourselves the best chance of getting this right, we need to identify the enablers that can help us recruit successfully and the barriers that (unless overcome) may prevent successful recruitment. A key implementation enabler was the buy-in from colleagues at Staffordshire University who promoted the opportunity widely across selected courses and remained steadfastly committed to the workstream's vision. Equally, the Information Sessions appeared to be a useful tool for introducing the workstream to students and highlighting some of the benefits of participation for undergraduates. Through these efforts, we managed to exceed our recruitment target of 30 students. Unfortunately, over the course of the year more than half these students dropped out (as previously referenced). There were many reasons behind this high drop-out rate as will be explored further in the sections that follow. However, the challenge of recruiting enough students who are the right fit for this opportunity and who can be helped to stay engaged, emerged as a key implementation barrier.

- ***Identifying Pupils***

Children needed to be assessed using the bespoke early language screening tool to identify whether the intervention was suitable for them. In order for the intervention to be delivered for the full twenty weeks, pupils should be screened before Christmas so delivery can start in January. In some schools, children were not assessed until after Easter because the school lacked the tablets necessary to administer the screen. In other schools, GDPR checks had to be carried out before children's details could be uploaded onto the assessment tool and/or the early language screen was initially used incorrectly. In some schools, pupils were assigned to the workstream based on perceived need, rather than screening scores. This was done to make up numbers in a group with the feeling that it would not do them [the children] any harm and might help them speak more clearly and gain in confidence. This could be a factor in explaining why the mean score for participating pupils was higher than expected (see later analysis).<sup>18</sup>

This sub-theme relates primarily to implementation fidelity. If the right pupils are not identified, the intervention is not being targeted in an effective way (i.e., it will not help those children with the highest needs). A key barrier was our underpowered implementation support system which limited the support we could offer to schools. The key implementation enabler was the Language Screen tool which many schools liked and found useful.

### **3.3 Supporting Students**

This theme - Supporting Students - encapsulates two sub-themes. First, we have onboarding students into the workstream and their school environments in advance of delivery. Second, we have helping students stay engaged throughout the period of delivery.

- ***Onboarding students into the workstream and their school environments***

In our workstream theory of change (p.10), we referenced training for students and the importance of students feeling confident and supported in their delivery, but we did not prescribe specific activities. Going forwards, we can improve onboarding through the introduction of more defined expectations, based on learning from this year.

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<sup>18</sup> From the data we can also see that 21 pupils were not screened. It will be important that in year 2 all pupils are screened, so that all pupils who need support can be identified. (we don't have data from Eaton Park)

In Year One, two aspects of the nascent Student Onboarding Process worked well. First, we have the NELI training that was used directly for undergraduate students. In preparation for delivery, Student NELI Practitioners were expected to complete their own online training which was provided by OxEd and Assessment Ltd<sup>19</sup>. This training comes in two sections: the first section introduces information about the first ten sessions of delivery and the second section covers sessions eleven to fourteen. It [the training] takes approximately six hours to complete<sup>20</sup>. All interviewed students reported that the training provided by OxEd was good and prepared them, to some extent, for delivering the sessions. School staff also appreciated that Student NELI Practitioners came to them trained to deliver.

*“I was really impressed that Thrive at Five went and made sure that the training was done for the students and said we are going to fund them being trained before they come to you”.*  
(Teaching staff)

As we move into Year Two delivery, it will be important to consider the extent to which this training is sufficient as a standalone tool for undergraduate students. Generally, it feels fair to assume that undergraduates will be more inexperienced and need more guidance than teaching assistants who were the intended beneficiaries of the training. If we decide the training is not sufficient, we need to consider how it should be supplemented when used by students.

Second, and on a related point, some schools delivered a semi-structured onboarding process to Student NELI Practitioners to enhance the training. This included support with planning and practicing delivery, shadowing student sessions, and supporting initial delivery.

*“We don’t want students to deliver from the start - that’s a no from my point of view. Need to get into practice, need to understand it. Watching it on a screen is one thing, but actually delivering it is a whole different ball game. I think having that planning time first is important. That’s essential”.* (Teaching staff)

In some cases, this extended to working alongside the students to prepare materials in readiness for sessions, which in turn saved students from spending lots of time cutting out and laminating resources.

*“One challenge was just getting everything ready in the beginning. Making sure they had everything they needed for the sessions. There was a lot of preparation for the girls to do. They did a lot of laminating in their own time to get ready for it. My class TA was out for a couple of hours with them to help them get set up and everything”.* (Early years lead)

Some Student NELI Practitioners could also take resources and manuals home which meant they felt better prepared. Based on the insights gathered as part of our interviews, a scaffolded approach to onboarding and delivery appeared to be welcomed by students. Similarly, there was support for the policy (introduced by our workstream lead) of pairing students up so that those with less classroom experience learnt from those with more classroom experience.

On the other hand, it was also clear there was work still to be done to tighten the onboarding process. Some Student NELI Practitioners said they would have liked more preparation as they went straight into delivering without much practice. One student commented they had misunderstood some of the elements of the sessions and only realised they could adapt the listening session after a few weeks of being in school. Some hesitancy around post-session recording was also raised by students in the interviews. As part of the NELI intervention, Student NELI Practitioners were

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<sup>19</sup> OxEd and Assessment Ltd (OxEd) is a University of Oxford spinout company launched to support the practical application of the Nuffield Early Learning Intervention in schools.

<sup>20</sup> Although there are lots of opportunities for further learning embedded within the content.

expected to record information about group and individual sessions on NELI Record Sheets<sup>21</sup>. However, there was feedback that clearer guidance would be helpful regarding how to complete these record sheets. One Student NELI Practitioner reported that sometimes they did not record anything as they were not sure what was important.

One student expressed a desire for additional guidance regarding schools' expectations on behaviour management and how they should interact with young children. Every student received an initial briefing from their respective school, but it was clear more information would have been useful in this instance.

*"I had no training apart from being a mother. It would be helpful just knowing the rules of what's allowed and not. First thing I might think of might be to put them on my knee - but different schools have different rules. For our safety it would be good to know a bit more about rules." (student)*

Ensuring every student feels informed and comfortable about best practice in behaviour management and how best to respond to children if they are emotional or disruptive should be a priority for implementation going forwards.

As with other sub-themes, it is possible to draw a line that connects these points around student onboarding with our dimensions of implementation, particularly fidelity and quality. Without effective onboarding, students are less likely to deliver in accordance with the proven NELI model and to the required standards. In turn, our ability to provide effective onboarding is influenced by the presence and capacity of peripatetic support staff who help make up our implementation support system, and by the broader environment (and general pressures) within schools.

The variety of insights we have collected through the evaluation provide useful pointers about the ways that onboarding could be improved. For instance, we know the OxEd training is a key implementation enabler, as are the structured onboarding practices being administered in some of our schools which could be built on and rolled out. There is also an unsurprising (yet still key) implementation barrier for us to address that relates to student inexperience and the package of preparatory support they need to perform this role well.

- ***Helping students stay engaged throughout the period of delivery.***

Again, our theory of change (p.10) said relatively little about student retention, but this proved to be a critical issue for implementation. As noted earlier, 32 Student NELI Practitioners initially volunteered (exceeding our recruitment target for 30 students). However, four students dropped out and two were withdrawn before students were allocated to schools. By the end of the project, over half of our Student NELI Practitioners had dropped out. As a result of student dropout, the intervention failed to get going in two (out of our seven) schools, delivery in the remaining schools was slower and lighter than we would have ideally wanted, and our workstream lead spent a considerable amount of time re-allocating students between schools.

At this point it is important to unpack the most plausible reasons for the high student drop-out rate. One reason that almost certainly had an impact was the time it took to set the workstream up. The plan was that schools would start delivering in January, but for some schools it took several weeks to get everything in place. Some of these delays can be attributed to points already covered around the

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<sup>21</sup> These sheets were kept in files (one file for each group) within schools so that school staff could easily access information about the intervention and how children were responding.

process for identifying pupils. There were additional delays because of the social media checks<sup>22</sup> required in a couple of schools. The need for checks was eventually dropped but this led to significant delays. Schools also had different training requirements; one academy required Student NELI Practitioners to undergo additional safeguarding training which delayed delivery.

Another reason that led to several students dropping-out was an instance of poor communication between a school and their Student NELI Practitioners. Several students became frustrated because they could not arrange a time with the school to come in and talk about NELI, despite several attempts to make contact via email. The issue was resolved through the intervention of the Thrive at Five workstream lead, but the result was that some students did not remain engaged.

For some students, the expenses associated with bus fares to and from the schools were not feasible and were the main reasons given for dropping out. Although this was not a widespread reported reason for dropping out, it is still one we will want to ensure does not happen in future years. For other students, changes in circumstances and unforeseen family commitments meant that continued participation in the workstream was not possible.

Finally, several students struggled to balance a commitment to delivering NELI with the demands of their undergraduate courses. NELI delivery is an extra-curricular (voluntary) activity rather than an embedded part of courses and Student NELI Practitioners understandably prioritise their courses over extra-curricular activities. Although schools were flexible and adaptable, this impacted on whether Student NELI Practitioners were able to continue. This was particularly the case for teaching training students whose course includes a 6-week primary placement which meant there was a time when they could not commit every week. For students from all courses, Staffordshire University teaching finishes in May and while a minority of Student NELI Practitioners continued to attend schools after this date, most Student NELI Practitioners did not due to other commitments.

Ultimately, it is probably not possible for the workstream to deliver the NELI intervention with fidelity and to a high standard without a consistent cohort of engaged students. This challenge is therefore of the utmost importance. The key priority here will be working with our newly recruited Peripatetic Support Staff (our fledgling implementation support system) to greatly enhance the level of support and guidance that can be offered to students and schools. As before, the key implementation enablers are our committed partners. Another enabler is the additional capacity that our Peripatetic Support Staff will bring to the workstream. The key implementation barrier is the challenge of supporting students to commit to the full period of delivery while (as things stand) NELI is not an embedded part of their courses.

### **3.4 *Overseeing and steering delivery***

For this theme, we have two sub-themes. First, we have ensuring the work is acceptable to schools. Second, we have keeping the intervention on track.

- ***Ensuring the work is acceptable to schools.***

It largely fell to the Thrive at Five workstream lead to maintain close relationships with each of our seven schools while implementation was underway. This involved dealing with day-to-day

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<sup>22</sup> The recent Keeping Children Safe in Education guidance published in 2022 encourages schools and colleges to consider performing online searches and social media checks on shortlisted candidates, to mitigate risk and further safeguard children.

operational issues and ensuring key school stakeholders across primary schools in Abbey Hulton and Bentilee were informed about developments and happy with how everything was going.

*“She took great time and effort to ensure that everything was in place in schools to support students. Identified very quickly the needs of our students and worked tirelessly with the schools to help them understand the context”. (Staffs University lead)*

This task around stakeholder relationships and regular check-ins across schools and academy trusts at both a classroom and a school leadership level is not to be underestimated and sufficient time for this work should be factored into planning for next year.

There was plenty of evidence that all this work paid off. Schools who participated were generally positive about their involvement and indicated they would be happy to be involved again. They appreciated the extra resource and reflected that it allowed NELI, or elements of NELI, to be delivered to more pupils than would have been the case if Thrive at Five had not been involved. Consistent with our theory of change, it also gave them additional capacity to support other children in their classes who were not receiving NELI.

*“It supported us with the capacity to deliver NELI. That’s the bit that’s been the most beneficial thing for us because the one to ones would have essentially taken the practitioner out of the room so that support within the classroom that adaptive teaching we need for those children, especially those with SEND wouldn’t have happened in the same way because we wouldn’t have had the capacity to be able to deliver it in that way or be able to support all children”. (School leader)*

A number of schools indicated they would not have delivered NELI without this support.

*“Main good thing is that if we hadn’t had the support of Thrive at Five, we wouldn’t have been able to implement it as we didn’t have the staff to do that. So, we weren’t planning on doing NELI this year”. (School leader)*

Schools also seemed to appreciate the flexibility and responsiveness of Thrive at Five in trying to support schools in a way that was flexible for them.

*“It made it easier for me as an early year’s lead... having time to manage students as well as doing everything else in the early years department could have been a big workload ... I know Thrive at five have been very passionate about not sort of creating workload for staff, that it either looks at reducing the workload or they try and help in any way that they can.” (School leader)*

The willingness of schools to continue with the workstream, and their general positivity about Year One implementation, gives us a strong foundation for delivery next year. This means we are working in a welcoming implementation environment, with strong commitment from school leadership and classroom teachers. Our partnership with schools is an absolutely critical implementation enabler.

- **Keeping the intervention on track**

As summarised earlier in the report, intervention delivery across the seven schools was mixed. In three schools - Kingsland, Carmountside, and Our Lady & St Benedict - most participating children received over half of the full intervention. This means that children received the full complement of NELI activities (three small group sessions and two individual sessions each week) for over ten weeks. The full NELI intervention is delivered over 20 weeks. At two schools - St Maria Goretti & Abbey Hulton - target children received the full NELI weekly offer but for less than ten weeks. In Maple Court and Eaton Park, intervention delivery did not get underway.

In total, 46 children across the schools received some of the intervention. This included 18 pupils at Kingsland, 7 pupils at Carmountside, and 5 pupils at Our Lady St Benedict. Our initial target was for 40% of the reception cohort to receive the intervention. In practice, an estimated 30% of children were supported in the five schools where delivery occurred.

Schools adopted different approaches to delivery. In two schools, after an introductory session, all delivery was left to Student NELI Practitioners to do independently. Working in pairs (as explained previously, with a student with more classroom experience paired alongside a student with less classroom experience), students would either take sole responsibility for a NELI group and all the related group and individual sessions, or they would divide the responsibilities for each group between them with one student doing the group work and the other doing the individual sessions. In other schools, teaching assistants were involved in delivery. For example, in one school, teaching assistants delivered the entirety of the group sessions and Student NELI Practitioners delivered the individual one-to-one sessions. In another school, the teaching assistant would deliver one session a week and the Student NELI Practitioners would deliver the other two sessions (alternatively, the teaching assistant might deliver an introduction to each session and then handover to the student).

*“...it wouldn't have worked [because of the inconsistency around when students could attend sessions] to deliver three student sessions and it would have been very bitty if we had one student delivering Monday, another one delivering Tuesday...for consistency for the children better to have the practitioner delivering the sessions and the students supporting with the delivery of the one to ones and the assessments. That's what we felt was going to have the maximum benefit for us”. (School leader)*

This mixed model of delivery, which largely developed as a pragmatic response to the uncertainties around student attendance, contributed an additional layer of complexity. We need to find an appropriate balance here between identifying a delivery model that suits individual schools whilst also considering whether a more standardised approach to delivery would support our commitment to fidelity and quality.

### **3.5 Ensuring the intervention is delivered well**

There is also an important role for quality control in the implementation of this workstream. As shown in our initial theory of change (p.10), by pursuing this workstream we have assumed that - due to the highly prescribed nature of NELI - undergraduate students can be supported to carry out delivery in a way that leads to expected outcome changes for children.

Based on our conversations with schoolteachers, there are certainly reasons to be optimistic that this initial assumption was correct. Reports from school staff who were informally observing the sessions suggested that delivery was good.

*“The quality to be fair was really good. They [the students] were really good with the children and the quality of the intervention was good. They delivered the interventions in a space where there was always another adult from our department, so they were never on their own ... so that adult who was there was obviously available to observe and see what was going on”. (School leader)*

This view was shared by our workstream lead. Thrive at Five developed a checklist in collaboration with the schools to assess delivery and where this was used delivery was found to be acceptable, with some examples of strong practice.

Nonetheless, these examples of acceptable delivery cannot be used to suggest the whole issue around quality is resolved. Insights from school staff are important, but they are based on the

reflections of busy practitioners who were themselves likely multi-tasking at the time of the sessions. Similarly, due to the absence of peripatetic support staff, our workstream lead was not able to carry out observations and assessments in a formal or systematic way, despite the existence of the delivery checklist. Indeed, the checklist was only used in two schools. When our peripatetic school staff did start to oversee groups towards the end of the academic year, one of them immediately made the decision to reduce the size of a group from six to three pupils given the needs of the children. This type of decision, which requires a degree of confidence and experience, would not have been possible when the students were operating with more limited support.

This work relates directly to the fidelity and quality dimensions of implementation. Without quality delivery, in line with the expectations of the proven NELI model, we are unlikely to see positive changes for participating children. Our key vehicle for ensuring the intervention was delivered well were the peripatetic support staff, who were intended to be the central element of our implementation support system. Due to delays in recruiting these staff, we were missing a key part of the delivery machine during much of the pilot year, and the pressures within schools (the implementation environment) meant schools were often unable to fill the gap.

A key enabler to the effective implementation of this workstream is therefore having an appropriate support system in place for students. For example, where schools could offer more support, the results were positive. Some Student NELI Practitioners reported that the school was brilliant, and that any problems were sorted out by school staff straightaway. Likewise, even where it was not possible to deliver this support due to competing pressures, schools themselves acknowledged that ongoing support for Student NELI Practitioners would have been beneficial.

*“I suppose the thing for them and what they would have gained more from was spending a bit of time with Anne doing the sessions they never really had the full opportunity to do as much as they could have done”. (School leader)*

Getting this support right for students will be an essential priority for the workstream as we enter delivery in Year Two. The lack of capacity in schools (one of the reasons for this workstream in the first place) is an implementation barrier here, but we have a significant opportunity through our dedicated peripatetic support staff.

A second implementation enabler was the excellent skills and knowledge of some students (conversely, a key implementation barrier was recruiting enough of these very strong students). Generally, primary education students - compared to education and early childhood students - had more experience in schools and of delivering interventions. They also, generally, had better subject knowledge (for example an understanding of phonics) as well as skills to manage behaviour and engage children. However, strong students who were a good fit for this opportunity came from across the three courses. In fact, students from different courses worked well together and complemented each other, sometimes using innovative methods such as setting up their own What's App Group to help coordinate delivery.

*“We were quite lucky. We had two girls that were really lovely. One came from a nursery setting before so she had good experience with the children. Another didn't but she was really good with the children. There were a few things like the children could be a bit silly, but she would always make sure she told me. And I'd have a chat with the children and like I say - we'd pass by and things. But yes, they were both really confident, they were both really good with the children. They'd take their own initiative with things, but they'd also ask if they needed anything. We were very lucky with the girls we got.” (School leader)*

*“The two ladies that came into our department - they were really good behaviour management wise; they were lovely with the children ...sort of being good role models. They were good quality students that we got”. (School leader)*

### *The Nuffield Early Language Workstream (2023)*

Student NELI Practitioners seemed more likely to continue and have better delivery experiences where they had a degree of maturity, good communication skills, confidence, and the ability to build relationships with both pupils and teachers. It was also important they had good organisational skills so they could get themselves set up independently.

#### **Summary**

In this section, we considered implementation of the workstream through four themes: Recruiting Staff and Students and Identifying Pupils; Supporting Students; Overseeing and steering delivery; and Ensuring the intervention is delivered well. In the following section, we move on to consider whether there were early indications that the workstream made a positive difference.



## ***Section Four***

*Were there any early indications that the Nuffield Early Language Workstream made a positive difference?*

In Section Four, we assess whether there were early indications that the workstream made a positive difference, based on delivery during the pilot year. We consider the differences made on three fronts: for participating children, for students involved in the workstream, and for wider relationships both between schools and between schools and Staffordshire University. We draw on data from the interviews and focus groups and - in relation to child-level changes - present findings from our analysis of pre-and-post intervention Language Screen scores. In relation to participating children, we found qualitative insights suggesting the workstream helped children. We also found that average Language Screen test scores increased over the course of the intervention for children receiving a decent level of support. Regarding Student NELI Practitioners, we gathered a range of positive reflections from students themselves and from teachers, highlighting benefits that participation in the workstream can bring. We also collected evidence indicating that Thrive at Five's work in general is helping to strengthen relationships between local agencies.

## **4.1 Participating children**

- ***Insights about positive differences made for children from the interviews and focus groups.***

Student NELI Practitioners and the Thrive at Five lead reported a range of positive changes for children. For instance, participating children seemed to enjoy the intervention and spending time with the Student NELI Practitioners, developing good relationships and a positive rapport.

*“And one particular child ... at first, he was he was a bit shy ...saying - ‘I don't want to do this. Why am I doing this?’ And then all of a sudden, he just flips. He was engaging. He wanted to answer the questions” (student)*

They also identified improved communication skills, more confidence, and improved turn taking. However, some Student NELI Practitioners reflected that it was sometimes difficult to see large amounts of progress as they were not observing children in the whole classroom context. It was easier to identify some individual cases where they had seen marked progress including one child who was now using full sentences and asking questions and a child who had been a selective mute but had started to talk during the NELI sessions.

*“Mum has been and said her confidence has grown. Mum is happy that her daughter has spoken to someone in the building. So, part of NELI has been about the relationships that have been built up too” (Student)*

*“Some days I feel I leave a little bit emotional or like I feel I leave like proud and that I'm making a difference”. (Student)*

These examples of progress noted by students and our workstream lead are important. They help us understand the workstream's successes and they are a source of motivation for students who are (rightly) uplifted by seeing the results of their efforts.

Encouragingly, several teachers also said they had observed positive child-level changes.

*“The member of support staff who's been delivering it when the students haven't been in ... she said she can clearly see progress ...in the vocab they are using and in sentence structure ... and in whole class teaching they will ask questions and give whole sentence answers rather than just one-word answers.” (School leader)*

School staff even mentioned that some children had met their Early Learning Goals who might not otherwise have done so, but they also emphasised that this was the result of a whole team effort across the reception class.

*“All of the children have made progress and some of them have achieved there ELG in communication and language. So that’s an impact, but they were part of a team and their role as part of that team has been essential”. (School leader)*

Teachers also reflected that the individual progress had impacted on how pupils interacted in whole class teaching situations.

*“Those children would join in more. Because they’d had that confidence boost from the session. They came back with all the stickers from the session. They’d be more animated in class. They’d be going to talk to other children who weren’t in the groups about what they’d done and why they had the sticker ... it would often give them the confidence on the carpet to be putting their hands up a bit more because they were in that safe space doing that for quite a number of weeks ... when they returned to a larger group of children ...they felt they could speak out a bit more.” (School leader)*

Again, these reflections from school staff are positive and testament to all the hard work invested by students and our Thrive at Five workstream lead. Of course, they fall some way short of providing definitive proof that the intervention worked (children may have made progress even without this additional support), but they do serve as early signs of promise.

- ***Differences in children’s Early Language Scores***

Language Screen scores pre-and-post intervention were collected for every child who participated in the workstream using the OxEd Language Screening tool. A traffic light system is used:

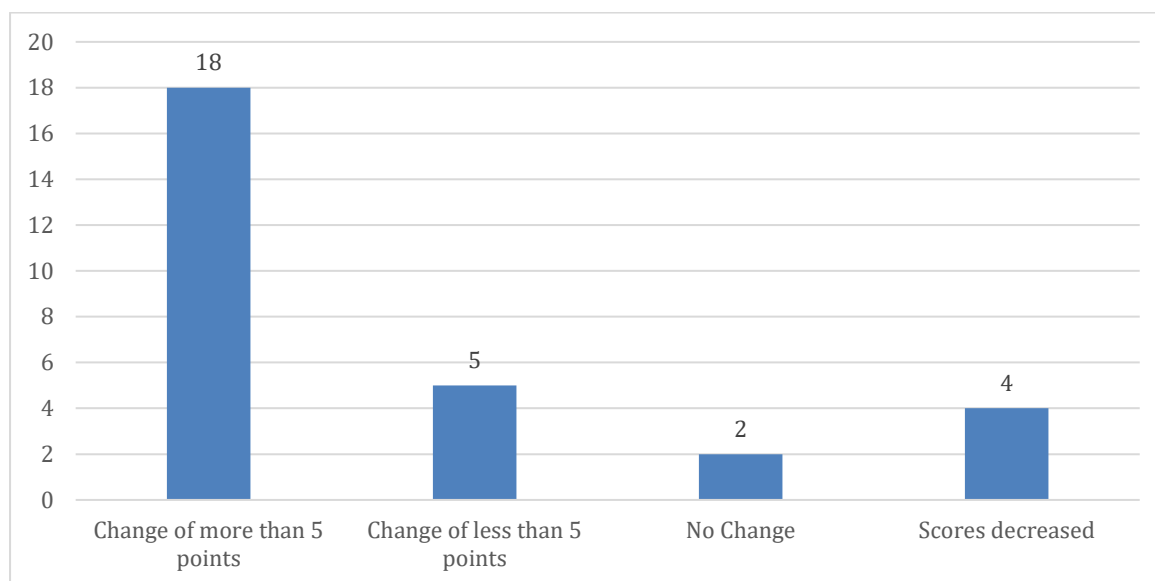
- Green (Language Screen Standard Score of 90 or above out of a maximum score of 135) indicates that a child’s language skills are not a cause for concern.
- Amber (Language Screen Standard Score between 82 and 89) suggests a child may benefit from support in developing their language skills.
- Red (Language Screen Standard Score of 81 or below) suggests a child needs support in developing their language skills.

An increase in a child’s Language Screen Standard Score shows their language skills have improved relative to other children of the same age. This is worth noting as it means that improvements in Language Screen scores are reflective of something more than just the routine progress that all children typically make over time. It is also worth emphasising that Language Screen, like any test, has a margin of error and changes should be interpreted with care. As a rough guide, a change in a child’s Language Screen Standard Score of five points or more indicates there has probably been a meaningful change in their language skills.<sup>23</sup> The graph below shows the change for the 29 children who completed over half of NELI.

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<sup>23</sup> [https://oxedandassessment.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/LanguageScreen\\_report\\_sample.pdf](https://oxedandassessment.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/LanguageScreen_report_sample.pdf)

**Table 3 - Individual change in language scores as assessed by pre and post scores on the Language Screen (n = 29)**



Looking at the individual scores, we can see that 62% of children (18) made meaningful progress and 38% (11) children made some progress but less than the five point benchmark. This looks promising, though we should also note that the data shows four children with a reduction in their scores and two children making no progress.

It is important to note that screening was carried out at different times and (as previously discussed) decisions about whether to include some children were based on teacher decisions rather than solely on the language score. This meant that children with a wide range of scores were included in the intervention. Additionally, we do not have a comparison group and so we cannot say whether the progress made by pupils was attributable to the workstream.

The scores on the Language Screen were also analysed in SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) using a Wilcoxon's signed ranks test<sup>24</sup>. This is a statistical test used to compare two sets of scores that come from the same participants. It provides another way for us to investigate any change in scores from one time point to another and to explore if they are statistically significant. In this case we wanted to see if median language scores had increased post NELI, which would mean children receiving the intervention had made progress. Whereas 46 children received some of the NELI intervention, we included the three schools in the analysis where pupils had received more than 50% of the intervention (giving pre-and-post intervention scores for 29 pupils)<sup>25</sup>.

The results indicated that median Language Screen scores were higher after the intervention (91 compared to 82) and that this result was statistically significant ( $z = 4.281^{26}$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ). The p-value<sup>27</sup> is important in this test. Researchers use a measurement known as the p-value to determine statistical significance rather than just look at differences in scores. This allows them to infer that changes in a set of observed data are real and are not the result of chance. Simply stated, if a p-value is small, as in our findings, then the result is considered more reliable.

<sup>24</sup> This test was chosen as our data is not normally distributed.

<sup>25</sup> The other schools were excluded from the quantitative analysis on the basis that we could not reasonably expect pupils who had received a very limited amount of the intervention to have made measurable progress because of their participation.

<sup>26</sup> The test statistic (z score) informs us about the difference in the two sets (pre-and-post) of language scores. A positive z score tells us there is a difference.

<sup>27</sup> Our p-score allows us to conclude that this difference is not due to chance alone.

The findings support the encouraging qualitative insights and give us an early cautious indication that the workstream has potential to improve children's speech and language. Again, it is important to include an important caveat. As there was no comparison group, we cannot be sure that the change identified was the result of children participating in the workstream activities.

## **4.2 Student NELI Practitioners**

- ***Positive differences made for Student NELI Practitioners***

In our focus groups, students described a range of positive benefits associated with acting as a Student NELI Practitioner including professional development, employability, skills, confidence, and feelings of satisfaction. They reported that the workstream gave them classroom experience and experience of managing behaviour through observing good practice in schools. Some students reflected that in their schools they were treated like a member of staff and involved in other elements of classroom teaching, and in turn this helped build their confidence.

*"The teachers were absolutely wonderful. They treated me as a member of actual staff, not as a student. And we got to engage in different things as well". (student)*

Students also talked about gaining experience of working with a diverse group of young children and having a better understanding of the importance of speech and language and how to support children's language skills. Time in school allowed them to build professional relationships and network with teachers and in some cases to build supportive relationships with other students. As one teacher said:

*"I think it definitely improved their skills. The girls are doing an education degree and I do think it's important to see different settings and things. I think one of the girls was going on to do speech and language. It is so useful to see the different ways that schools work. So definitely beneficial if that's the line of work they are going into". (School leader)*

All the examples above serve as useful evidence that the workstream can be a useful opportunity for the right students. It can complement their academic studies and enrich their university experience and wider development.

In fact, for some students being part of the workstream led to offers of employment and interviews for roles in schools. For others, it gave them clarity around what they want to do going forward and opened their eyes to career opportunities. Two students who were doing an education studies course have said their in-school experience has led to them wanting to pursue a teaching career. One teaching student is hoping to secure a position at their placement school. Another student's interest in language development has prompted them to pursue a career in speech therapy.

## **4.3 Relationships between agencies**

- ***Relationships between schools and between schools and Staffordshire University***

Referring to our initial theory of change and ambitions for the workstream (p.9), we hoped this work would help foster stronger relationships between schools. In our interviews, teachers reported that the overall Thrive at Five initiative has brought foundation stage leaders together to discuss the challenges and successes they have in common.

### *The Nuffield Early Language Workstream (2023)*

*“Being part of Thrive is really supportive. Being part of a smallish primary in a very deprived area, we sometimes feel a bit isolated - what being part of Thrive has done has sort off opened up those doors a bit more” (School leader)*

Despite this general feeling of closer working between schools, there was limited evidence from our interviews of local schools getting together to share best practice around the implementation of NELI. Supporting this focused joint working on specific workstreams should be a key priority for future delivery.

Our lead representatives from Staffordshire University also reflected that being involved with Thrive and specifically this workstream has led to them making connections with other agencies and organisations. As a result of their involvement with the workstream they had hosted an event to bring early years stakeholders together. It has also led to useful conversations with the Department for Education.

*“It’s fantastic. We love working with Thrive at Five ...we have got a lot out of it. Patrick and Norah are always seeking out opportunities where it would be useful for us to be present”.*  
*(University lead)*

This is useful evidence of Thrive at Five’s role in helping Staffordshire University become even more embedded in the local system.

### **Summary**

This section presented the evidence we have gathered on whether there were early indications that the workstream made a positive difference. Next, we propose a set of recommendations to help improve delivery next year.

## ***Chapter Five***

*How could the Nuffield Early Language Workstream be strengthened for the next academic year?*

In Section Five, we set out a brief conclusion to the evaluation, drawing together some key points from across the report. We also outline a comprehensive set of recommendations to improve workstream delivery next year. These are ordered in accordance with the core themes associated with workstream implementation, as used in Section Two.

## **5.1 Concluding remarks**

In our initial workstream planning - way back last November - we characterised the first phase of implementation as Learning and Development. This ethos of learning about what worked and thinking through how delivery could be improved has been central to the evaluation. As reviewed in the main body of the report, implementation in this pilot year has not been particularly straightforward. The recruitment of Peripatetic Support Staff took longer than envisaged and relatively high rates of student dropout made it difficult to achieve consistent delivery. That said, whilst models of delivery differed, and the intervention was not delivered in its entirety, more children received more of the NELI intervention because of the workstream. Next year, we will have Peripatetic Support Staff for the entire academic year and stronger processes to support timely and high-quality delivery. As we write, there are proposals being explored - led by Staffordshire University - around how the role of Student NELI Practitioner could be more closely tied to undergraduate education courses. Whilst acknowledging the significant implementation challenges that remain, there is reason to believe the workstream can play an important role in a wider portfolio of Thrive at Five delivery and can contribute to improving early years outcomes for children in Abbey Hulton and Bentilee. Below, we set out a series of recommendations for the next stage of the workstream.

## **5.2 Recruiting staff and students and identifying pupils**

- A great deal has been learnt during the pilot year about how to set up and operationalise the workstream (including how to recruit, what processes schools need in place, and how to ensure essential administrative tasks do not cause delays). We need to ensure this learning is applied, so that those responsible for delivery in future years - in the event this were to change - can quickly learn lessons and act upon them.
- We know from the pilot year that effective delivery is heavily reliant on Peripatetic Support Staff. Next year, they [the Peripatetic Staff] will not only have a key role in the *Nuffield workstream* but they will also be supporting workstreams around *Talking Time* and *Nursery and Reception Transitions*. Alongside this, they will be contributing to the development of (and eventually supporting delivery within) a new workstream focused on *PEEP Learning Together*. As far as possible, we want this work to span both local primary schools and private, voluntary, and independent early years settings. We should keep the capacity of our 3-5 team under review.
- Getting the recruitment of students right will be vital to the success of the workstream. Working with Staffordshire University, we should tightly plan this year's recruitment process including the development of a Person Specification, targets for student recruitment, and a process for interviewing and scoring all candidates so that we only select those with the best, most relevant skills. Over the longer-term, we should consider whether the opportunity should be opened to Education students at Keele University.

- Thrive at Five should offer a training session to schools to help them get the full benefit from the Language Screen tool (including ensuring every school has the tablets and wider resources they need to administer the screen). Thrive at Five should also establish a deadline for when the screens need to have occurred by, with assistance offered from our Peripatetic Support Staff where necessary, so all pupils can be screened. When screens have been completed, the workstream lead should bring the projected pupil participant numbers to the 3-5 Working Group, so this can be considered, and decisions made about whether to raise the threshold so that more children become eligible.

### **5.3 Supporting students**

- It will likely always be an uphill struggle to get the workstream running effectively whilst student participation is positioned as an extra-curricular activity. We need to work with Staffordshire University to - as far as practicable - embed the work of Student NELI Practitioners into formal placements that contribute to learning and are tied to student assessment. We believe the workstream offers a valuable opportunity for students that will greatly enhance their learning and professional development.
- The OxEd training was well received this year by students. For the next academic year, we need to consider whether (and if so how) this training needs to be supplemented for use by undergraduate students.
- Peripatetic Support Staff have a vital role to play next year in supporting students. Building on the internal work that has already occurred, we should develop a defined support offer (including observations, feedback, and check-ins) that provides continuous support to every Student NELI Practitioner. This support offer should include a Checklist to help them through the initial preparatory tasks, a scaffolded introduction to both their new school environment and NELI delivery, and advice on completing NELI Record Sheets. It would also be useful to have a needs assessment of each student to understand their previous experience and where they feel they might need extra support, so this training and support can be put in place.
- To celebrate the achievements of students, we should hold an Annual Awards Ceremony. This could occur as part of our annual practitioner conference.

### **5.4 Overseeing and steering delivery**

- We need to continue to factor in time for continuous communications with classroom teachers and school leaders. For the next academic year, this responsibility should be shared across the 3-5 staffing team.
- This year, most schools delivered part of the NELI intervention. Next year, we should aim to ensure that every school completes the full 20-weeks. To support this, we should create a comprehensive delivery schedule, with a series of implementation guardrails (i.e., every school should have completed the first five sessions by x date and the first ten sessions by y date).

## **5.5 Ensuring the intervention is delivered well**

- Currently, there are three modes of delivery: students working exclusively with one group of children to deliver all the sessions, pairs of students working collaboratively to deliver sessions, and a combination of teaching assistant and student delivery of sessions. While this degree of flexibility is likely to be useful for schools, it may also make it difficult to understand precisely what is working in relation to the workstream and what is not working. Ahead of next year's delivery getting underway, we need to decide about whether to continue with a highly flexible approach or to move towards greater standardisation in delivery.
- As the workstream becomes more mature, it is likely that we will want to do more sophisticated evaluation focused on impact. To support this, we should ensure tracking systems are in place so that we understand exactly how many sessions have been attended by individual children.
- We should also ensure that we put in place a system for systematically observing the quality of student delivery and giving feedback - and extra support - where needed. Our Peripatetic Support Staff should develop and implement a process for these observations, drawing on the Observation Checklist.

# ***APPENDICES***

**Appendix A**

**Table 4: Quantity of the intervention delivered by school.**

	<b>Approximate amount of intervention completed</b>	<b>Number of Pupils who were identified as needing NELI</b>	<b>Number of children who received NELI</b>	<b>Pre and post intervention scores available for Language Screen</b>	<b>No. in reception classes</b>
<b>Our Lady &amp; St Benedict Catholic Academy</b>	Over half of the intervention delivered	5	5	5	17
<b>Kingsland CE Academy</b>	Over half of the intervention delivered	18	18	18	61
<b>Carmountside Primary Academy</b>	Over half of the intervention delivered	10	7 (3 had some bespoke delivery)	6	23
<b>St Maria Goretti Catholic Academy</b>	Less than half – due to student drop out	7	7		30
<b>Abbey Hulton Primary School</b>	Less than half – due to students starting late	6	6	-	24
<b>Maple Court Academy</b>	-	13	-	-	52
<b>Eaton Park Academy</b>	-	6	-	-	60