

# EYSEND Partnership Year 3 Final Evaluation Report

September 2021



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# Executive Summary

This report, prepared by NCB's Research and Evidence Team, sets out the findings of an evaluation of the EYSEND Partnership. The evaluation is primarily based on a series of interviews of local authority participants in the Partnership's activities and those working alongside them. It focusses on how local strategic impact has been realised in the most recent year of the programme (2020–21).

Local area staff explained how those working in the early years sector have faced a range of challenges over the past year, particularly in relation to the pandemic. They were, however, also able to set out clear aims for their involvement in the Partnership and how these built on local strengths and priorities.

Four out of the six local areas from which we heard as part of this evaluation had accessed Specialist Local Action Learning Sets (SLALS). Accessing this tailored support enabled these areas to make progress they would have otherwise not done. Initial impact has come in the form of new working groups, locally-owned action plans, and co-designed resources, policies and services. All areas were able to explain how these developments could lead to improved support for young children with emerging SEND and their families. We did hear some concern, however, including from regional coordinators, that the process for accessing this support may have meant some areas, who could have benefited more, missed out.

Experiences of the less intensive and tailored Regional Action Learning Sets were mixed. Whilst they were said to provide useful information and, for some, to facilitate reflection on their practice, there were a number of barriers to participants benefiting as intended. These primarily related to the quality of discussion that was achievable in the new online format and the diversity and consistency of those participating from each local area. These barriers were critical, as they made any meaningful self-review and action planning, using CDC's relevant tools, more difficult. The

intended role of the RALS in facilitating this aspect of the work was therefore compromised this year. Learning from this experience was, to some extent, being taken forward in the delivery of additional self-review workshops in one region. It has also informed the design of nine recent national seminars, which, from the available data, appear to have been successful.

Two out of the six areas we heard from were able to give examples of how they had used elements of the free training and resources offer, provided through the Partnership, to strengthen their local improvement strategies. Agreed goals in terms of the wider reach of the training, which was primarily targeted directly at early years practitioners rather than a resource to support local strategies, were met. Interviewees awareness of the detail of the training offer was, however, in some cases, limited. They made a number of helpful suggestions on how the style, coordination and focus of training for the sector could support their local priorities going forward. Some local area staff were, in particular, keen to develop the way in which they could be involved in planning and cascading of these opportunities.

Although SLALS appeared to be more impactful than other aspects of support, interviewees generally approved of the overall structure of the Partnership and some shared examples of how the different modes of knowledge exchange strengthened each other's effectiveness. Learning from online delivery, securing local strategic engagement and supporting local areas to navigate the offer will be key considerations in making any similar future programme a success. It is also suggested that options for sharing data on training participation with local areas are assessed, as well as keeping the focus of this training offer under review. The process for targeting access to intensive tailored support such as the SLALS will be another key consideration for ensuring maximum impact.

# Introduction

## About the EYSEND Partnership 2020–21

From April 2020 to March 2021 the Council for Disabled Children (CDC) was funded by the Department for Education to work with specialist delivery partners to provide significant support on SEN and disability to early years settings and local authorities. The broad aims of this work were to:

- Train a critical mass of practitioners and increase their expertise and confidence in supporting young children with SEND;
- Increase parents' confidence in settings' ability to work with them to identify and meet their child's needs;
- Support local areas to develop improved multi-agency strategies to increase access and inclusion of young children with SEND; and
- Support the implementation of local speech, language and communication (SLCN) pathways to facilitate access to specialist expertise when this is not available to them in their local setting.

The work of the EYSEND Partnership (the Partnership) during 2020–21 was an extension of the programme that ran between 2018 and 2020. This in turn built on an earlier 15-month CDC project in 2017 and 2018. The mix of activity delivered has evolved throughout the lifetime of the Partnership, with an increasing focus on tailored support for individual local areas, alongside other changes, and based on the findings of previous evaluations.

The work between 2018 and 2020 was focussed on the Midlands and the North. The onset of the pandemic, during the planning of and mobilisation for this year's Partnership activity, meant that the delivery plan moved to the virtual environment and saw substantial revisions, in agreement with funders. Whilst the overall structure of the programme remained broadly the same, additional funding from the Department for Culture, Media and Sports expanded the work of the Partnership during the period from July 2020 to the end of March 2021 in a number of ways:

- The original group of partners, CDC, nasen, I CAN, The Communication Trust (TCT) and Contact were joined, in July 2020, by Dingley's Promise and, in January 2021, by the Early Childhood Unit (ECU) at the National Children's Bureau;
- The programme expanded in July 2020 to include the four southern regions in addition to the Midlands and the Northern regions; and
- A series of National Seminars were added into the final months of the programme.

The overall structure of the programme consisted of six key elements, which are described under the headings below.

### Regional Action Learning Sets (RALS)

Two of these events were held online for each region. The regional SEND coordinator<sup>1</sup> in each region plays an important part in disseminating information across the region and convening and 'hosting' the RALS (albeit virtually, in 2020–21).

The primary purpose of the RALS was to bring together a range of agencies from each local area and support them in developing more effective local strategies for young children with SEND. They were designed as pair of events for the same participants, held several months apart. At the first event participants are taken through a process of self-review and action planning using tools developed by CDC. At the second event, there are opportunities to reflect on progress and plan next steps. In 2020–21, as in previous years, both events were planned to include expert speakers, updates on national guidance, and opportunities to share examples of local practice, network, share learning across the region and hear from partners about the menu of support and resources available through the programme.

Across 18 events, 2 in each of the 9 regions, there were 429 attendances, with representation

<sup>1</sup> A regional SEND coordinator is appointed in each of the 9 regions to co-ordinate activity to support the implementation of the SEND reforms. They provide peer support including: sharing resources, ideas and approaches, identifying priorities and convening events, working groups and peer networks focused on specific aspects of the reforms



from 114 local authority areas, accounting for around three quarters of the relevant local areas in England.

## Support for Specialist Local Action Learning Sets

Participants of RALS were encouraged to set up local action learning sets to take forward local plans. Local areas were able to apply for specialist facilitation and advice from each of the delivery partners in respect of their particular area of expertise:

- A whole-setting approach to SEN and disability, from nasen;
- Identifying and meeting speech language and communication needs (SLCN) in settings, from I CAN;
- Developing a local SLCN Pathway, from TCT;
- Working with parents and co-production, from Contact;
- Transition into school, from Dingley's Promise and CDC;
- Provision made 'ordinarily available' by early years settings, from CDC; and
- The home learning environment, from ECU.

The application process was advertised and promoted by all the partners at the first round of RALS, from the end of May 2020 onwards. A simple form was provided, requiring the local area to set out the reason for applying for the particular support and provide an assurance that: this was a local priority; they had the capacity to benefit from the support; and they were willing to share the learning with others across the region. Sign-off from a senior colleague was also sought.

In each region, local areas were given four to six weeks between the RALS and the deadline for applications. Regional SEND coordinators supported the process; updates and reminders were sent out using the EYSEND mailing list throughout June and July, including the targeting of specific regions where support was yet to be allocated. Where necessary deadlines were extended so that local areas had additional time to apply for support, with the final area being allocated at the end of September.

Local areas from each of the nine regions

received support for Specialist Local Action Learning Sets (SLALS). Each of these areas could have up to three facilitated sessions. Including 'follow-up' sessions for local areas that had received support in 2018–20, 62 local areas received support in 2020–21.

## Training for early years practitioners and parents

Free training for early years practitioners was advertised through the RALS, the EYSEND Partnership newsletter, the partners' national networks and to all local authorities. Practitioners would primarily sign up on an individual basis to standard sessions, with some capacity made available to offer bespoke sessions for local areas. The training offer consisted of:

- Training for practitioners in working with parents/carers of children with SEND, from Contact;
- Family workshops (providing advice for parent/carers on key areas of care and wellbeing for young disabled children), also from Contact;
- Transition practice training from Dingley's Promise, for practitioners, setting managers and those in local services;
- SLCN core and in-depth training, from ICAN, primarily for practitioners and setting managers;
- Level 3 accredited training on SLCN, from TCT. This training was targeted in 5 local areas. Within those areas, recruitment was deliberately broad and included those in a range of roles such as health visitors, setting managers, SENCOs family support workers and Potage practitioners.
- Meeting the needs of every child (whole-setting SEND) self-directed online training, from nasen; and
- Training for setting managers, SENCOs and practitioners in using a setting review tool, also from nasen.

Targets were agreed with the funder for the delivery of the training offer. All of these were exceeded with a total of 4128 people, including setting managers, practitioners, parents and local representatives attending training.

## National Seminars

Nine online events, held between December 2020 and March 2021, explored good practice identified and developed during the programme. These events were led by the delivery partners, each leading in their area of specialist expertise. Across all nine events, there were 627 attendances, with some delegates attending more than one seminar, and with representation from 77% of local authority areas in England.

## Online tools and resources for local areas, settings and practitioners

A series of tools and resources supporting planning at a strategic, setting and individual child level were made available. These included, in particular, tools and resources with a focus on whole-setting approaches, family case studies, SLCN and transition into school. By the end of March 2021 there had been 6341 views of the resources.

## Infrastructure to support the flow of information

The Partnership maintains a website where all the training dates, tools and resources are held, and distributes a regular newsletter advertising the training programme, the RALS and the national seminars. The newsletter has 1071 subscribers and newsletters are circulated on a monthly basis, with additional targeted messages, mostly in the run up to events.

## About this report

This evaluation, carried out by NCB's Research and Evidence team, builds on those undertaken in relation to the previous EYSEND work. An evaluation of the work between 2017 and 2018 used a mixed-methods approach to explore the effectiveness of the RALS and CDC's approaches and tools for supporting self-review and action planning. An evaluation of the EYSEND Partnership work between 2018 and 2020, undertaken by the University of Wolverhampton, used a quantitative approach to assess effectiveness of all aspects of the Partnership in relation to key performance indicators (KPIs). This was supplemented with a series of case

studies setting out examples of local progress. This evaluation of 2020–21 activity uses a qualitative approach to build understanding of the enablers and barriers to local impact including the strengths and weaknesses of key aspects of the Partnership's support offer. A key focus is the SLALS, which have received limited attention from evaluators to date, and how these are used in combination with other aspects of the programme within local strategies. More detail on the methodology is set out below. The main body of this report is set out in five chapters.

- **Chapter 1** sets out important context for the Partnership's work this year, describing some of the barriers and enablers faced by participating local areas and the priorities they sought to pursue through their involvement.
- **Chapter 2** focuses on the SLALS including their impact, what appeared to contribute to this and what went less well.
- **Chapter 3** using a similar structure to chapter 2, focuses on the RALS and the National Seminars.
- **Chapter 4** focuses on the training offer. In particular, it looks at how it has been used as part of local area strategies and how choices regarding content and delivery did or could support this.
- **Chapter 5** explores four overarching themes of the overall structure of the Partnership offer, the extent to which local areas could navigate this, strategic engagement and learning from online delivery.

## Methodology

This evaluation is based on the experiences of staff from six local areas, four of the delivery partners and six regional partners (mainly SEND regional coordinators) working alongside them. The methodology and sample was developed in response to the fact that different people working within local areas will have had interaction with different strands of the Partnership and will have different perceptions of its local impact. It therefore focusses on a limited selection of local areas, drawing on the views of those within a wide range of roles.

The six local areas were chosen to reflect a range of levels of engagement with the Partnership. Four of the local areas had received SLALS support in 2020–21, one of which had also received SLALS support in 2019–20. Two of the local areas had not received SLALS support but were noted by the delivery team to have had good attendance at RALs over the past three years. There was one local area from each of six out of the nine regions covered by the

Partnership in 2020–21. The sample was formed of two unitary authorities, two county councils, one metropolitan borough and one London borough.

A series of 25 interviews were conducted with a total of 34 individuals between December 2020 and March 2021. These were made up of five categories each involving distinct participants as described in Table 1, below.

**Table 1: Overview of interviews undertaken**

Interview category	Interviews undertaken
<b>Local area interviews (phase 1)</b>	6 interviews with a total 14 individuals covering all 6 local areas. 13 from local authority SEND or early years teams and 1 parent
<b>Local area interviews (phase 2)</b>	Interviews with individuals from 5 of 6 local areas. Including 2 local authority staff, 2 health provider staff and one early years setting SENCO.
<b>Local strategic interviews</b>	Interviews with senior local authority managers from 4 of the 6 local areas.
<b>Regional partner interviews</b>	Interviews with 7 SEND regional coordinators or those in similar roles covering all 6 regions.
<b>Delivery partner interviews</b>	4 interviews with staff delivering SLALS support covering all 4 of the areas that received this.

All of these interviews were semi-structured. Bespoke questions were developed for each phase 2 local area interviews to build on insight gathered at phase 1. A set of four topic guides, reflecting the differing roles of those participating, were developed for the other interview categories in consultation with the delivery team.

The initial research design included interviews of all categories covering all relevant local areas. This was not always achieved, however, due to lack of staff availability. At least one local authority within the sample had, owing to pressures in relation to the pandemic, requested that its staff did not engage in any activity not directly related to their day job. The evaluation team and delivery team worked in partnership to secure as many interviewees as possible from within the local area sample.

Owing to the focus of this evaluation and the sample design, no interviews were undertaken with the members of the CDC delivery team, nor were any undertaken with two of the six delivery partners.

The interviews were undertaken on the basis that no individual person or organisation would be identifiable in any findings shared. A thematic analysis of interview transcriptions was undertaken using the NVivo software package for coding and retrieval of data. This allowed identified themes to be refined as further data was analysed and for the context of coded data to be easily reviewed to aid interpretation. The main body of findings is summarised in the words of the evaluation team. Quotes are also used where the words of an interviewee illustrated an issue particularly well, but these are not intended to be representative of the full body of data.

# Chapter 1: Local areas' opportunities, challenges and aspirations

This chapter sets out, drawing on the full range of interviews undertaken, the context in which the EYSEND Partnership has been delivered in 2020/21. In particular it describes some of the opportunities and challenges identified by interviewees as existing independently of the support offered through the Partnership, but having a bearing on how it was received. It also describes the aims and ambitions that local area staff had for their involvement.

## External opportunities

Several interviewees pointed to existing programmes and strategies from which their involvement in the EYSEND Partnership could build. This included, for example, engaging with area SENCOs (newly trained through the EYSENCO programme), drawing on learning from early years work as an Opportunity Area and gaining impetus from regional administrations' early years strategies. Written Statements of Action, developed following Ofsted inspection, were also said by interviewees in all areas to provide drive and focus to their involvement.

The local areas in our sample included some larger local authorities which had well developed services and networks to support early years settings. These areas were also able to identify and share good practice with others, through, for example, the development of written case studies of settings and presenting at RALS.

A common factor referenced by several interviewees was the ability of local area participants to develop relationships with key stakeholders. This included members of a local authority early years team being praised for their ability to empathise with parents as well as the ability of other early years teams to reach out across professional boundaries. The fact that SLALS commenced with strong engagement from relevant stakeholders – parent carer forums, settings and health services, depending on the specific focus of the SLALS work –

appeared to be at least partly a reflection of this. Some interviewees suggested that online meetings becoming routine made maintaining these relationships easier, particularly where face to face meetings previously required long journeys.

## External challenges

This period of the EYSEND Partnership commenced under the backdrop of the global COVID pandemic with the first lockdown in England having started a few weeks before. Aside from the challenge faced by CDC and the delivery partners of having to redesign most strands of the project to be delivered online, the pandemic had implications for how local area participants would be able to engage with the Partnership. In one area, most speech and language therapists has been redeployed for part of the year to support the roll out of the vaccine, whilst some local authority staff were also pulled away to support planning of continuity of services. These challenges were seen as problematic because of staff having less time or availability to engage in the work but also a potential barrier to them developing awareness of the offer of support, as information may have been coming through just as their attention had been turned to crisis response. For areas who had less well-developed multi-agency relationships the move away from face to face meetings was seen as a barrier to meeting and building rapport with new partners.

We heard particular concern about a number of early years settings being short staffed due to sickness and caring responsibilities (as schools remained closed). It was suggested that this would have made it hard for them to release staff to take part in free training or events during the second national lockdown.

Whilst in some instances national and regional initiatives provided a base or focus to build on, others gave examples of national infrastructure being less facilitative of the joint working seen as important for EYSEND. Interviewees in one



area expressed frustration that they could not arrange for early years practitioners to join in with a one-day training course on the home learning environment delivered to health visitors by Public Health England. Some regional partners also suggested that advice from the Department for Education and peer networks were not as developed for EYSEND as they were in relation to work with older children with SEND. The strength and focus of peer networks are of course partly a function of their respective regional coordinator's knowledge and locally defined role (see page 5).

## Aspirations and aims of participation

Local area staff engaging with the Partnership held a range of priorities and ambitions. For those that accessed SLALS support some particular aims for use of this were developed. Those described by interviewees included:

- Improving parents' engagement in service planning;
- Improving consistency of needs assessment and data collection to support strategic planning;

- Developing shared messages across professions to support parents with their child's transition into school; and
- Improving settings' universal offer to young children with potential SEND.

We heard several recurring themes, across the four areas that accessed SLALS and the two that didn't, with regards to wider ambitions and priorities. These were:

- Improving joint working across health and early years services;
- Reducing demand on specialist provision, both in terms of settings calling for support from the local authority and in terms of parents choosing special schools when, with a supported transition, their child might achieve just as well in a mainstream setting; and
- Tackling inequalities in early years outcomes through addressing the interaction between SEND and other issues such as poverty and vulnerability.

## Chapter 2: Support for Specialist Local Action Learning Sets

The sample of six local areas, on which this evaluation focuses, included (by design) 4 local areas who had received support for Specialist Local Action Learning Sets (SLALS). This amounts to a small proportion of the 62 local areas who received such support during 2020–21. Each of the four sample areas who received SLALS were supported by a different delivery partner. In addition to the in-depth insight gained from local area interviewees on the SLALS in these select areas, regional partners and delivery partners also shared reflections on the delivery of SLALS to the wider cohort.

### Impact

All of the interviewees who had taken part in the Specialist Local Action Learning Sets (SLALS) reported some positive impact at a strategic level. This ranged from improvements in strategic relationships to action plans, outputs and the creation of new posts.

In terms of relationships, two local areas reported improved relationships between the early years sector and parents. In one for these areas it was reported (by staff and a parent) that parents now had access to better signposting and advice and that partners had access to more constructive input through an expanded membership of parents of young children in the Parent Carer Forum. In the other area, where the primary focus of SLALS was on the use of data and needs assessment in service planning, work with parents was a secondary focus. Staff reported, however, positive feedback from the parents in terms of being listened to which they were committed to following up on to build a strengthened relationship.

*"we know that the parents that have passed through the Early Years settings, they've got a resource. They've got people that they can speak to, but also that process is also tied into that CDC project that we were doing, that the local offer developed, that the settings*

*themselves actually function to enable parents to be part of the system. To feed in, and also to develop how things are going."*

Local area interviewee (parent)

There was generally reported to be good multi-agency engagement with the SLALS, and staff from one area were particularly pleased to increase turn out (in terms of both numbers and diversity) at their second SLALS session following positive feedback on the first. One area reported stronger partnership working between the local authority and health and another reported closer working between providers and between the sector and the local authority. This overall view of strengthening relationships was also expressed by the SLALS delivery partners, who suggested that, with each meeting, the degree of focus and shared purpose amongst attendees appeared to improve.

In two of the four areas we heard of the establishment of new multi-agency working groups, spun out of the SLALS that were taking action forward and expected to continue for years to come. In one area groups had been established to address a series of 'workstreams' on diverse issues such as data, working with families at home and addressing non-attendance. The other area, notably, appeared to be giving serious consideration to commissioning the SLALS delivery partner to continue working with them.

Reflecting on these examples of new groups being established, it could be said that they should be seen as 'work in progress' rather than having immediate impact. They could, on the other hand, be seen as evidence of the ability of the SLALS to set in train improvement programmes that are locally sustained. This is arguably an important consideration where local areas are looking for short term outside support to help drive a longer-term process of practice and culture change.

*"if they get two thirds of the way along or a third of the way along, then actually that's still heading towards the end goal and because it's not my strategy or my input, it's theirs, we know that they'll get there with the rest of it, as long as lots of other things don't get in the way"*

Delivery partner interviewee

Staff in the other two areas receiving SLALS (who did not report working groups being set up) suggested that, whilst the activity had led to important outputs and facilitated difficult conversations, more buy in from senior colleagues would be needed to maintain progress.

As well as strengthened relationships and the promise of sustained partnership working, interviewees also gave a number of examples of outputs and products coming from the SLALS. One of these was the inclusion of clauses in settings' standard funding agreements, co-produced with parents and settings, on working effectively with families. Another was the creation of an online learning hub for early years settings, with content informed by information gathered through the community of practice brought together through the SLALS.

Perhaps the most tangible outcome seen was the creation of a new dedicated early years speech and language therapist post. This was described as being a significant expansion of the offer to young children and the first example for many years of the local authority and health commissioners jointly funding such a service. The post is intended to allow early years settings to access advice and training from a speech and language specialist, allow for referrals of children below the age of three for therapy and enable children in low income families to be seen at home.

*"It was really beneficial, and I was just thinking yesterday, prior to this meeting, in my head I was going back to that very first meeting [as part of the EYSEND Partnership]... it's almost unrecognisable... We've ended up with a completely different partnership way of commissioning that service, which is*

*going move us forward so much."*

Local area interviewee (local authority)

Interviewees indicated confidence that these examples had a clear path to impacting on local policy and practice in early years settings and beyond. The way in which they were described, focussing on working with parents, early speech and language, and an improved universal offer, suggests preventative element to their legacy. Linking back to some of the strategic drivers, for engagement in the SLALS, they may be said to present opportunities to reduce demands on specialist services and placements and better prepare children and families for transition to school.

*"[the document developed in the SLALS] helps people to be clearer about what they are asking for and why they are asking for it, and not just put in applications for extra money that are not appropriate. I would hope it leads to inclusive practice. It's hard at the moment to evidence that, but I would hope it just generally leads to people having more awareness and being more inclusive."*

Local strategic interviewee (local authority)

Whilst there is a narrative connecting the progress local areas have made to the focus and strengths of the SLALS, it was important, from an evaluative perspective, to press interviewees on attributability. When asked about the extent to which the SLALS had directly led to these outcomes, staff from local areas were all clear that they would not have got to where they are without this support. The strength of this view ranged from those that said they would have taken months or years longer to those that said they simply would not have had the knowledge and relationships in place to achieve what they had done.

*"Well, we weren't anywhere on the journey before we had the support... I don't think it was even a thought in our minds at that point to change the way that this spec was offered..."*

Local area interviewee (local authority)

## Strengths and enablers

Interviewees identified a range of factors that they thought contributed to the SLALS' success. These relate to the knowledge and expertise that the delivery partner brought to bear, but also to broader considerations about how the sessions were planned and facilitated.

### Tailored signposting to local and national knowledge

In terms of knowledge and expertise, local area staff valued the specialist expertise of individual delivery partners. Staff felt that they benefited from the delivery partner being able to signpost to, and help them navigate, the wide range of initiatives and resources promoted nationally. They suggested that without this support they would have found the range of potentially relevant information daunting and therefore missed opportunities for learning.

*"[The delivery partner has] clearly got their knowledge about what else is going on. Sometimes I think from a local authority perspective, we know what's happening in [our area], but in terms of other things around the country and other pieces of work, publications, all those sorts of things, we're not necessarily tapped into."*

Local area interviewee (local authority)

Local area staff and delivery partners suggested that, as the work of the Partnership progressed, they were able to draw on examples from other participating local areas to inform their thinking. Across both SLALS and RALS examples how other local areas had approached common issues were seen as a particularly powerful learning tool.

When delivery partners signposted to key information and practice examples, this was thought to be particularly helpful in that it was couched in a sound understanding of the specific services and priorities of the local area. The sharing and summarising of this local knowledge at the sessions was also, in itself, thought to help participants. This was the case, for example, where some participants

were new in post, or there was a lack of shared understanding between agencies about their respective offers to families.

### Facilitation and structure

The skilled facilitation of the SLALS by the delivery partners was frequently referred to by local area interviewees as a key factor in ensuring that benefit was realised.

Delivery partners suggested that, generally, participants were able to use the sessions to have open and frank discussions about the challenges that needed to be addressed locally. This was reflected in what we heard from the local area interviewees. This was at least partly put down to the way in which the sessions were facilitated.

*"They were very good at putting us at ease with that and making us feel very comfortable and very much that we could just be open and have these discussions and that they would be there to support us. It never felt that – I know we've used the terminology 'critical friend', but it never felt that they were being critical in an unhelpful way... It was always very constructive..."*

Local area interviewee (local authority)

Some interviewees suggested that having sessions exclusive to their local area better enabled frank discussion of the challenges they faced. Another commonly highlighted enabler was the simple fact that the sessions were facilitated by someone from outside the local area. It was suggested that they could use their neutral position, not being a part of the local dynamic between different agencies and professionals, to pose difficult but important questions of participants. A local area interviewee gave an example of such an approach being used to prompt a constructive discussion about data sharing between health and local authority staff. Whilst it was seen as knowledge and expertise that enabled the delivery partners to identify the right questions for participants, it was thought to be their position as an 'outsider' that provided the opportunity for them to pose those questions.



Interviewees reflected further on how difficult it could be to find time and motivation to drive strategic improvements in relation to SEND in the early years whilst the pandemic posed so many challenges for the sector. It was suggested that being tasked by the delivery partner to agree and deliver milestones in between the sessions, which were spaced throughout the financial year, helped maintain focus and momentum. Having the chance to reflect on progress at later sessions was also welcomed. This was seen as providing a positive stimulus as staff may have otherwise not recognised, nor drawn encouragement from, what they had achieved to date.

*"For me, it's really felt like a stop point and a bit of a checkpoint for us to be able to look back and think, gosh, we have come a long way. When you're doing this day-to-day, sometimes you can get a little bit drawn down with the frustrations or, oh, there's been a delay with that or that meeting's been moved, and it can be a little bit disheartening sometimes. I know, when we met in August with them, it was a real point for us to think, oh my gosh, we've achieved a lot!"*

Local area interviewee (local authority)

## Weaknesses and barriers

Whilst interviewees from all four local areas identified benefits of SLALS some potential weaknesses in the way this support was accessed and delivered were also identified.

### Access and targeting

The most commonly identified barrier to making the most of the SLALS was the limited timescale in which areas had to sign up and participate in the sessions. Regional coordinators and delivery partners suggested that, in order to make a successful application to receive the support, local areas would have been particularly reliant on the attention and availability of key personnel during the application window. Regional coordinators thought that there were areas that could have benefited more from the support but

were unable to mobilise during the time allowed or were not aware of the offer. Interviewees from one of the areas who did not access SLALS suggested they would have liked to do so. We observed that this local area appeared to be earlier on in the process of establishing good practice on SEND in the early years than some of other areas we spoke to and, therefore, had potentially more to gain from such support.

*"I think it's really tricky, isn't it, when as I say, we've got [around 20] local authorities and we've got a set pot of support, and because people actually bid for the support, it's most likely that those in a sense are the authorities that are the keenest and most enthusiastic. Actually, there may have been other authorities where support may actually have been of greater benefit, and it's... particularly hard in the situation where you've got a limited time to allocate your support"*

Regional partner interviewee

Whilst interviewees had some concerns about the targeting of SLALS support they also acknowledged that this would likely have been a challenge however the Partnership was designed. It was suggested that those areas who were delivering less well for young children with SEND would not necessarily be looking for opportunities to develop or be in a position to make use of them. The criteria for receiving SLALS, such as demonstrating strategic buy in and having a plan for how the support was to be used, whilst presenting challenges for some areas, were seen as important for securing sustainable impact.

### Timescales for delivery

Staff from areas that were receiving SLALS expressed regret that this would be coming to an end. They also suggested that scheduling the sessions, around the availability of key stakeholders, as well as in terms of their own preparedness in collecting information to feed into them, was a challenge. One interviewee suggested that it would have been beneficial to have more time to plan for the views of settings and parents to be more systematically

represented at the session. Another commented that the SEND strategic lead had not been available. This interviewee indicated that re-engaging with local leadership would be critical in putting into practice the solutions developed at the sessions. Indeed, we observed that the tangible outputs achieved so far by local areas are primarily policies, appointments and structures which may require continued buy-in in order to deliver outcomes for children and families. Such outcomes may, therefore, take several years to secure and evidence.

The timescales of any programme such as the Partnership are of course impacted by the requirements of the funder, its decision-making processes and the periods over which it generally makes funding available. Delivery partners suggested that the challenges in relation to timescales, and as a consequence, the options available for targeting support (see access and targeting above), were largely a consequence of the funder's requirement to deliver the latest iteration of the Partnerships activity over the course of one financial year. Regional partners and some local area interviewees also acknowledged that this may have been the case. Some delivery partners also expressed a view that timescales for delivery were further shortened by the need to spend time revising content, delivery plans and agreements with the funder in response to the onset of the pandemic.

## Building relationships in online sessions

One local area interviewee suggested that the facilitation of individual SLALS sessions could have been improved. They found it difficult to understand the purpose of the session and follow the discussion. They also felt that as sole representative from the health sector they were unfairly expected to speak for their (distant) colleagues. Part of their negative experience was bound up in the less flexible and personal nature of online sessions as opposed to those held face to face. They noted some participants having cameras turned off contributed to a less positive atmosphere and regretted not having opportunities to talk informally to smaller groups of colleagues (as may happen, during breaks, in a face to face meeting). These limitations of online sessions as opposed to face to face ones were also noted by staff from the local area that had received SLALS in both 2019/20 and 2020/21.

*"I do find, in that arena, that I'm expected to know everything about health, like health is a small thing. Health is massive! I can't talk for all of health, and I can't represent all of health, and I can't apologise for all of health. There are so many services that could come, so I think that's something that could be worked on."*

Local area interviewee (health provider)

## Chapter 3: Regional Action Learning Sets and National Seminars

All six local authority areas in our evaluation sample had been represented at Regional Action Learning Sets (RALS) at some point during the year. Not all of the local area staff we spoke to, however, had attended RALS themselves. In most of these cases a close colleague had done so and shared some feedback with them. It is, of course, hard to generalise from a small sample and from what was sometimes relayed via those who had not attended themselves. It nevertheless provides useful insight into the experiences that some of the 429 attendances from 114 local areas involved. As the National Seminars took place in the second half of March 2021, after most evaluation interviews and analysis, we have not been able to gain insight into their effectiveness from the sample interviewees. Quantitative data from online event evaluation forms has therefore been used to complement the insights from interviewees. Findings in relation strengths and enablers/weaknesses and barriers refer, unless otherwise stated, to the RALS. However, some of this learning may also be applicable to the National Seminars due to similarities in delivery methods and purpose.

### Impact – RALS

Interviewees generally felt that the RALS were useful for informing the development of local strategies and approaches. This included interviewees from the two local areas who had not access SLALS. Staff from one of these areas suggested their participation helped them prepare for Ofsted inspection by being able to better articulate the work they were doing. Staff from the other of these two areas described their successful strategy to improve what is offered by settings to children with SEND on a universal basis. This strategy was said to have been informed by a practice example shared at one of the RALS and has demonstrated success through reduced requests from settings for specialist services and funding.

*"certainly in the sessions it helped us to*

*then input into our very big complicated Ofsted and CQC action plan [for] self-evaluation"*

Local area interviewee (local authority)

*"What we see now is far more informed requests for higher levels of funding and the children clearly do have high levels of need. So, if you've equipped people to observe and assess and recognise need, then you get that knock on effect in terms of that, and also in terms of quality. So, we've seen a real shift in practice, typically using more visuals, people using, accepting the reasonable adjustments and those were real challenges when we first started out."*

Local area interviewee (local authority)

We also heard evidence that suggests the RALS contributed to the effectiveness of the more targeted and intensive SLALS. One local area had established a working group following a RALS in a previous year of the programme. Having developed an action plan through this group the local partners involved were, according those we interviewed, able to clearly focus their use of the SLALS. The delivery partners suggested that the practice examples at the RALS by local area staff formed an important part of the expert advice then offered back to the other local areas they were working with through the SLALS.

Two of the local areas, whilst welcoming the RALS and acknowledging some of the benefits, struggled to link participation in them back to their local strategies for improvement. In one of these cases the interviewee suggested that the content and format of the session did not particularly engage them. In the other local area, staff suggested that their decision to access the SLALS and their focus for this had flowed from a pre-existing relationship with one of the delivery partners, rather than a previous RALS.

## Impact – National Seminars

Table 2, below, sets out the dates, attendance and reach of the nine National Seminars.

**Table 2: Reach of National Seminars**

Event name (and delivery partner)	Date	Attendance	No of local areas	% Local areas
<b>Strategic Planning for SLCN (ICAN/TCT)</b>	17/12/2020	42	28	19%
	13/01/2021	71	33	22%
	29/01/2021	130	64	42%
	04/01/2021	114	40	26%
<b>Transition (Dingley's Promise)</b>	16/03/2021	49	37	25%
<b>Co-Production (Contact)</b>	18/03/2021	59	37	25%
<b>Ordinarily Available Provision and the Local Offer (CDC)</b>	23/03/2021	50	35	23%
<b>'Joining the Dots': A Whole Setting Approach to SEND (nasen)</b>	25/03/2021	88	50	33%
<b>The Home Learning Environment (NCB)</b>	30/03/2021	24	14	9%
<b>Total</b>		<b>627</b>		<b>77%</b>

Each of the attracted at least 24 attendees, normally much more, with two of the four 'Strategic Planning for SLCN' events attracting over 100 attendees each. Over three quarters (77%) of local authority areas in England were represented at some point in the programme of National Seminars.

Five of the national seminars were held after the evaluation interviews had started and therefore,

as discussed above, we have drawn on alternative, quantitative, data to provide insight in the impact of these events.

A summary of data from online evaluation forms, completed by participants of the National Seminars, is set out in table 3, below. Not all participants completed evaluation forms. These represent the views of 240 participants out the total of 627 attendances.



**Table 3: National Seminar Participant Feedback**

<b>National seminars, evaluation responses:</b>	<b>Agreed<sup>2</sup> the Seminar was, overall, useful and informative</b>	<b>Agreed that they increased understanding of relevant areas of policy and practice understanding of relevant areas<sup>3</sup> of policy and practice</b>	<b>Agreed that they understood how to apply this knowledge<sup>4</sup> in their own role</b>
<b>Strategic Planning for SLCN (ICAN/ TCT) (four identical seminars) (n=127)</b>	94%	85–92%	N/A
<b>Transition (n=31)</b>	94%	97%	94%
<b>Co-production (n=20)</b>	100%	95%	90%
<b>Ordinarily Available Provision and the Local Offer (n=26)</b>	96%	77–81%	88%
<b>'Joining the Dots': A Whole Setting Approach to SEND (n=36)</b>	97%	83–89%	94%
<b>The Home Learning Environment</b>	Data not yet available	Data not yet available	Data not yet available

Data from online evaluation forms shows a high rate of satisfaction with the National Seminars. At least 94% of those at each event reported that the seminar was, overall, useful and informative. Between 77% and 95% said that they had increased their knowledge, depending on the particular seminar and area of policy and practice in question. For the seminars where relevant data was collected, between 88% and 94% indicated that they left the seminar knowing how to apply this knowledge.

## Strengths and Enablers

Interviewees noted a number of positive aspects of the RALS relating to content, structure and facilitation.

### Hearing from other areas

The most frequently identified strength of the regional action learning sets was the range of examples of local practice shared

<sup>2</sup> All questions referred to in this table were asked using a five-point Likert scale where respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with a statement on a scale of 1 (disagree) to 5 (agree). The figures in this based on those who responded '4' or '5' as a proportion of total respondents ('n', as indicated on each row). The Number of total respondents is distinct from the number of attendees. The exact wording of questions in evaluation forms varies according to their aims. For some Seminars multiple questions of each type were asked, covering each relevant area of policy or practice.

<sup>3</sup> The exact wording of questions in evaluation forms varies according to their aims. For some Seminars multiple questions of each type were asked, covering each relevant area of policy or practice.

<sup>4</sup> See note 2

at the sessions. Local area staff found these to be useful inspiration in terms of possible approaches to improving joint working and delivering for families. Regional coordinators and delivery partners also welcomed the contribution that these examples made to the wider knowledge base they could bring to bear in their respective roles.

An element of the practice examples that was thought to be most useful was the fact that they were showcased by local area staff themselves and included detail on some of the challenges they had faced. Whilst local area staff reported already being aware of some neighbouring authorities' work, they welcomed hearing from a wider range of areas, from further away within their region.

*"When you're fighting for change, and you hear other people are also fighting for that change and following that pathway...that really helped. Hearing different people's models, the way that they offered support, the information they sought from settings, we found that useful because we were trying to create pathways that would make sense to Early Years providers. Understanding those models in other people's areas, you don't necessarily do what they're doing, but it just helps you to frame what you are doing and the way you're working."*

Local area interviewee (local authority)

## Relevant content and signposting

Local area staff reflected on the content set out by CDC and the delivery partners. They found this valuable in terms of being able to understand national policies and initiatives but also, more commonly, in being signposted to documents, resources and contacts that could support with the issues highlighted during the sessions. This appeared to contribute to local area staff having confidence that there was comprehensive range of support on offer (through the Partnership and elsewhere).

## Individual and group reflection

A strength of the RALS in previous years, which

was highlighted by interviewees, has been the opportunity for a multi-agency groups from each local area to reflect together on their policy and practice. Whilst this appeared to be less effective this year (see 'range and consistency of participants', below) interviewees who had attended the online sessions still found these to be useful opportunities for reflection. The structure and facilitation provided by the chair was said to be helpful in supporting participants understand the relevance of the issues discussed to their own work. One interviewee, who had presented a practice example to the RALS in question, described how this process had helped them reflect.

*"What's my purpose? What's my rationale? Does it achieve it? Why am I doing this? Is this data for data's sake, or is it meaningful? Does it tell me what I am trying to show and why I am trying to show it? Does it do it?' Whether you are a presenter or a delegate, you get a chance to... look at the work we are doing with a group of peers and someone who is really connected and knowledgeable, who has got time to stop, think about it, and lead us, give us the opportunity... to bring it out of ourselves."*

Local area interviewee (local authority)

Group reflection, of course, speaks to the primary purpose of the RALS – the facilitation of self review and action planning. Whilst there were significant challenges in achieving this in 2020–21 (see weaknesses and barriers, below) we heard about some additional activity to address this. Additional action planning workshops were arranged in one region, with support from the regional coordinator to secure appropriate attendance. Whilst insight from the relevant regional partner interviewee suggests this was successful we do not have sufficient data to comment further on the effectiveness of this approach.

## Weaknesses and Barriers

The RALS held during 2020–21, which were online, were regularly contrasted by interviewees with those held face to face in previous years. This difference, along with

other challenges presented by the pandemic, appeared to account for the key weaknesses of more recent RALS.

## Range and consistency of participants

Several of the local area staff interviewed for this evaluation had not attended, or only attended in part, the online RALS. This was typically because they had other meetings, caring commitments or had to attend to urgent business relating to the continuity of services during the lockdowns. Those that did attend noted that they did not attend 'with' colleagues from their local area and some attended only the first or the second of their sessions with a colleague attending the other. Participation by those in health-related roles was particularly impacted by the redeployment of some of these staff. This created a mis-match between the range of participants and the intended purpose of the RALS as a contiguous multi-agency discussion.

In face to face sessions, there had been success in recruiting multi-agency groups of participants from each local area in the region, who would then attend both RALS. This meant that participants could use CDCs self-review and action planning tools, and the protected time provided by the event, to develop action plans based on a range of multi-agency insight and buy-in. These could then be reviewed and refined at following sessions. Interviewees' insights into the range and consistency of participants at the online RALS suggest that this model action planning and self-review will have been unlikely to have worked under this years' circumstances.

## Quality of discussion

The RALS were designed with a view to facilitating intensive and action focussed discussions amongst local colleagues. Interviewees acknowledged that this would be harder to facilitate in an online format than at a face to face event. In the move to the online format, delivery plans were amended so that each break out room had a dedicated facilitator. Events held later in the year were also made shorter to make focussed engagement from participants easier. Where these events were compared to other online events (run

by other organisations), interviewees were complimentary about the skilled facilitation of the RALS. Experiences of the RALS amongst those we spoke to for the Evaluation were still mixed, however. Some interviewees suggested that they found the break out sessions frustrating. This was, in particular, because they thought that some participants were carrying out other duties whilst logged onto the session and not fully engaging with the discussion. The likelihood of this happening and the wider quality of discussion may have been diminished by the impact of the pandemic on the individuals availability to participate (see range and consistency of participants, above).

## Opportunities for informal discussion and networking

Interviewees regretted the loss, in the move to online sessions, of opportunities to discuss issues informally with colleagues and to network. They suggested that, in RALS held in previous years, conversations over lunch and whilst travelling to and from the session helped them to develop more detailed plans and relationships. These were seen as valuable in putting action plans, drawn up during the session, into effect.

## Accessibility of content for newcomers

Whilst interviewees were generally complimentary regarding the range and relevance of content shared, some struggled to follow or engage with it. One suggested that they did not understand the relevance of what was being discussed to their current priorities, whilst another found some of the detail hard to follow.

*"So sometimes I found myself sitting there listening and thinking, right, this will become clear in a minute but I don't really want to ask because it seems like everyone else knows what they're talking about. It's such a big complicated national picture that we almost need to say, what we're talking about is this, is everyone familiar? To what degree?"*

Local area interviewee (local authority)

As discussed above, there was a mis-match between the range and consistency of participants and the intended purpose of the RALS. It could be argued that it would inevitable that some participants, those who attended only the second RALS and not the first, without discussion with relevant local colleagues beforehand, would have struggled to engage.

It is was not clear whether the interviewees' feedback related to engaging with the action planning process or secondary aspects of the RALS (sharing local practice examples and information on national policy). If it related to the latter this may be cause for reflection on how the relevant information is pitched and explained by the delivery team.



## Chapter 4: Training and resources for settings and practitioners

As this evaluation focusses on strategic rather than individual impact it is not possible to give a representative account here of the breadth and effectiveness of the training and resources offer. This may be more appropriately drawn from monitoring and evaluation data held by the delivery partners. Interviews did draw out important insights, however, in terms of the extent to which the offer could be used as part of local improvement strategies as well as relevant reflections on which training topics and delivery methods might enhance this.

### Use of training as part of a local strategy

Staff in all local areas in the sample welcomed the wider training and resources offer to the early years sector and said that they had promoted it through their relevant channels. Reflections from regional coordinators and the delivery partners suggested that there had been good take up of the offer, including sessions made available virtually or out of hours in response to the pandemic. As set out in the introduction, over 4,000 individuals made use of the training offer in some form.

There was evidence that some areas this had used offer of tailored local training sessions to strengthen part of their local strategy. It was suggested that in two areas training from ICAN and the Communication Trust had been used to improve identification of speech and language problems. One of the areas had accessed a practitioners' workshop from Contact to complement and enhance their strategic SLALS work on engaging parents. In another area, resources from nasen were used to support better planning for young children's transition into school. Regional coordinators and delivery partners also spoke positively about the way in which areas outside of our evaluation sample had been able to arrange tailored local training sessions from the partners.

*"I think they've taken up the speech, language and communication needs development because... they were over-identifying MLD, moderate learning difficulty... and under-identifying speech, language and communication"*

Regional partner interviewee

Most local area staff we spoke to suggested that they were not in a position to integrate the full range of the free training offer into their wider development plans. There were three main reasons given for this. Firstly, staff in local authorities did not have access to information about local take up so could not monitor the training's contribution to local skills. Secondly, the short timescale in which the offer was available meant it was difficult to consider suitability as part of a rolling programme of training (a rolling approach being preferred owing to the transient nature of the early years workforce). Thirdly, the stage in the development cycle for their training strategy meant they could not easily add new aspects to it. Whilst we heard several examples of how local areas saw the work of the Partnership as helpfully building on other initiatives (see Chapter 1), for one interviewee such other initiatives may have also made it harder to see where the Partnership's training offer fitted in.

*"one of the challenges that we have in [the local area] is that we have a lot of projects going on at the moment. We've got our Opportunity Area. What they call priority one focuses on children's speech and language. They're just expanding that and twinning it in three other areas of the county, so that's expanding. We've also got something called the Early Years Professional Development Programme, which is... very similar"*

Local area interviewee (local authority)

## Considerations regarding content

### Relevance and complementarity of the offer

Local area interviewees indicated that the free training offer was relevant to the key issues facing the sector and that they thought, if available over a longer period of time, the offer would be drawn on by more local areas. Transition into school, speech and language, and working with parents, which are all covered in some form by the offer, were seen as important areas for improving practice in settings.

As discussed below under 'navigating the offer' interviewees struggled to distinguish (even with prompting) the free training offered as part of the EYSEND Partnership with other training packages. They also indicated that any offer, such as that from the Partnership, would be considered alongside those other training packages which were thought to be generally adequate, if not overwhelming, in terms of choice. This experience should be considered alongside interviewees' reflections on what topics could be prioritised within training (from all providers including the Partnership) and that this appears to align with what was in fact offered by the Partnership over the past year (See 'priorities for the future' below).

One of the delivery partners, when discussing the range of training offered, suggested that there was potential for overlap between what they and other delivery partners were providing. Given the potential for settings and local areas to feel overwhelmed with the choice of training options, this suggests a need to support local areas to understand which training packages can be of most use to the realisation of their particular priorities.

### Priorities for the future

Interviewees were asked in what areas of practice, relevant to emerging SEND, the early years sector would benefit from more training opportunities. Several interviewees, ranging from a setting SENCO to a strategic manager, highlighted the difficulties practitioners

appeared to be facing in differentiating emerging SEND from temporary developmental delay. This was thought to be a particular issue with regards to what the interviewees perceived as an oversensitivity amongst practitioners to potential autistic spectrum disorders. They suggested this may prevent settings from reflecting on how their own practice could support the social development in children from diverse backgrounds, including those from low income families and for whom English is an additional language.

*"You get that double challenge of, how do you separate, 'Is it just delay because they've not had the life experience and chances?' from, 'Is it special educational needs?' That is particularly prevalent around things like language and communication, but also around behaviour and those kinds of things... There are lots of children entering our schools in the area who have not had the early learning experiences they could do with."*

Local strategic interviewee (local authority)

It is important to stress that much of this insight into potential priorities of future training was shared by interviewees who had limited awareness of the current Partnership offer in this regard. It could be argued that the current aspects of the offer that focus on whole setting approaches and speech, language and communication needs (and the fact that autism and specialist provision is not a focus of the offer) already address this issue raised by these interviewees.

Whilst acknowledging that work with parents should be key plank of any future training offer, some interviewees also highlighted the importance learning to apply this to several areas of practice. Areas highlighted included understanding and accommodating parental mental health needs in day to day interactions, supporting them to create a positive home learning environment and involving them in the planning and design of services. Given the complexity of these topics it was suggested that they may each justify standalone training events and resources.

Interviewees also reflected on the potential impact of the pandemic on child development and the attention families have received from statutory services. Several shared a concern that more children would struggle in the transition into school and be starting this process with unidentified SEND. For this reason it was suggested that training on supporting good transition to school, as included in the 2020-21 offer, could have even more relevance in the coming year. It was also suggested that supporting the social and emotional health of young children would also be a priority for the sector in the short to medium term.

## Considerations regarding planning delivery

### Interaction with local authority training and support offers

All of the local areas we heard from in this evaluation delivered their own training offer to practitioners and settings. This was generally led by local authority staff, drawing on resources and information from other organisations, and sometimes complementing this with free or subsidised training offered by charities, including those acting as delivery partners in the Partnership. Key considerations in planning this offer were said to include the need to target areas of practice or settings that appeared to need specific attention locally and ensuring training could be delivered on a rolling basis responding to the transient nature of the early years' workforce. These considerations were seen as hard to reconcile with a fixed training offer available over a short period of time through the EYSEND Partnership.

*"it's a very fluid workforce. It doesn't pay particularly well, there are changes in staff, so continuity is quite hard to sustain. So we do need, we've recognised that we're going to have a cycle of training because you can't assume because you've run it one year, you don't need it the next."*

Local area interviewee (local authority)

Several interviewees, including a setting SENCO,

expressed a view that settings and practitioners are particularly reliant on SEND specialists in the local authority to signpost to the most relevant and high quality training and resources. It was suggested that the sector could sometimes feel inundated with offers and struggle to navigate to the opportunities that would most suit their needs.

Some local authority and regional partner interviewees suggested that it would be useful to have information about how and to what extent the Partnership's training offer had been used in specific local areas. This was seen as a potential opportunity for local authorities to dovetail their own offers with what was available through the Partnership (and elsewhere) and to follow up with settings to support staff to apply what they had learnt in training. Whilst information on attendance at training sessions was not shared with local authorities, the Partnership offered tailored separate sessions which could be arranged in collaboration with local authorities. Staff from two local areas we spoke to indicated that they had made use of this (see Use of training as part of a local strategy, above). Several interviewees highlighted more broadly the benefits of a collaborative approach.

*"It's quite helpful for us just to have a complete picture sometimes of what people have done. It's also that follow-on work, I suppose, that when [local authority colleague] and his colleagues are working with providers, you know that sometimes it's all very well people accessing training, but it's what you do with that afterwards, isn't it? More and more, we're trying to move away from this sort of bums on seats type of approach, and, 'Okay, you've been on this training, so what? You've taken it back to your setting, what have you done? What's the impact on children at the end of the day?' That's where we need to be taking all of our training, but you sort of need to know what they've done first, don't you?"*

Local area interviewee (local authority)

## Supporting practitioners to access and apply learning

We heard further reflections on how the take up and impact of training could be maximised by considering how practitioners in this specific sector access and apply learning. It was stressed that more practical or applied learning is particularly important for the early years workforce. This could include, for example, being able to see how practice can be applied to work with specific children through video demonstrations, for example. As discussed above, some local areas also try to follow up with settings after training has been accessed, which will include checking in on whether they have had opportunities to apply learning.

Delivery partners, as well as local area staff delivering their own training, highlighted their

efforts to make training accessible around practitioners work and life commitments. During the pandemic, this meant providing more, shorter, twilight sessions so that practitioners could take part without needing to be released by their setting or relieved of personal caring/home-schooling responsibilities.

As well as highlighting the need to take into account the transient nature of the wider early years workforce interviewees also stressed that setting managers were operating in a competitive market. They indicated that one implication of this would be that the approach of peer review which had been successfully used in schools and at the local authority level as a learning tool, would be less well suited to the early years sector.



# Chapter 5: Overarching themes

## Reflections on the project as whole

Interviewees generally gave positive feedback on the support offered by the Partnership across the different years in which many of them had been involved and across the different aspects of support discussed above. When asked, and with prompting on the range of activity the Partnership has encompassed during 2020/21, they did not make specific suggestions for additional forms of support that should be included in any future programme.

A key line of inquiry for this evaluation was to explore how local areas had used different aspects of the programme in combination to maximise impact. Staff from local areas who had accessed SLALS were generally able to speak about how they had made use of this particular support, but found it harder to identify how the RALS and training offer informed or complemented this.

Reflecting over several years, regional coordinators, delivery partners and some local area staff did suggest in more general terms that the different elements of the programme did strengthen each other. Local areas had taken some learning from previous years RALS to inform how they used SLALS support this year, for example, and, as discussed above, delivery partners used the RALS to gather evidence to inform their advice to local areas. Although specific examples of putting this knowledge to use were not forthcoming, staff from local areas did welcome hearing at the RALS about the training and resources available through the Partnership. Critically, the difficulties in facilitating self-review and action planning in an online format and with depleted and inconsistent attendance, meant that the RALS were less successful. As a result, some local areas may have missed out on this potential opportunity to pinpoint what wider elements of the offer they might benefit from.

As discussed in chapter 1, local area staff faced various barriers to engaging with the Partnership because of the impact the pandemic

was having on their day jobs. This would likely have raised the threshold, in terms of potential benefit offered, at which staff could justify investing significant time in development activities. During this particularly challenging year, the more intensive and tailored support offered through the SLALS may have met such a threshold whilst the other aspects of support, for some staff, may not have done so. This may have amplified the difficulties in linking the SLALS and other aspects of the Partnership both in terms of the level of engagement and impact reported and how they had been used (or not used) in combination.

## Strategic engagement

As discussed in chapter 1, local area interviewees, including the more senior service managers, were able to link their involvement in the Partnership with wider local priorities. Some of those who shared their experiences of RALS in previous years suggested that the use of Ofsted Inspection framework to structure these events had been particularly helpful in creating a focus. Staff from every local area involved in this evaluation cited their Written Statement of Action following inspection as a driver and guide for their participation in the Partnership activities.

Although the above suggests that the Partnership does have strategic relevance, local strategic engagement in the programme still appears to be a challenge in some instances. Regional coordinators identified the need for strategic level sign off as a barrier to some local areas accessing SLALS, albeit one that is crucial to securing impact. At the same time, staff from two of the local areas that were able to access SLALS suggested they would have welcomed more strategic involvement in the work to secure longer term outcomes. A local area's participation in SLALS would also, of course, need to be signed off at a sufficiently senior level to allow relevant staff permission and time to engage in the SLALS themselves.

The application process for local areas wishing to access SLALS is set out above in

the introduction to this report. This included consideration for how senior sign off could be secured through targeted reminders and flexibility on application form deadlines for local area staff who had expressed and interested but had not yet secured a senior sponsor for their participation. Interviewees shared some further ideas and insights into how strategic interest could be gained and maintained. It was suggested that more sceptical strategic managers were more likely to be convinced of the need for, and feasibility of, change through hearing positive practice examples from their peers. This is of course at least partly already reflected in the design of Partnership, with the sharing of local practice examples playing a key role. A service manager interviewee suggested that whilst their Written Statement of Action had informed their work at a strategic level, in the coming year they expected the findings of the forthcoming national SEND Review to play a similar role. Regional coordinators noted that there may be scope for the Department for Education SEND Advisors and regional peer support infrastructure to have a stronger focus on the early years.

## Navigating the offer

Interviewees had mixed levels of awareness of the full range of support on offer through the Partnership. Local area staff and regional coordinators did recall cascading information from the Partnership about training and resources to their colleagues, in addition to this being shared with all local authorities via the Partnership newsletter up to once a week by CDC. Staff from two local areas also described how they had each used one of these training opportunities to support their local strategy. Awareness amongst local area staff of the specific training and resources on offer was, however, generally limited, even when prompted on the topics and organisations delivering them. When the RALS sessions were discussed with interviewees, we heard that a key benefit was helping local area staff to navigate information and support. One of the local area staff interviewees particularly welcomed the fact that all slides and resources were shared via email so that they could refer back to them in their own time. More generally, however, interviewees sometimes struggled to recall much detail from RALS sessions they

had attended and to distinguish these from other sessions run by the LGA or through other regional fora.

It was stressed that even for those in a specific supporting role such as SEND early years advisors or regional coordinators, that a lot of information is shared about national programmes and voluntary sector resources which can be hard to keep on top of. One regional coordinator was concerned that local areas in their region had missed out on the chance to receive SLALS because they had missed the relevant information and not cascaded it. Delivery partners and those regional coordinators who were more closely involved with the Partnership acknowledged that communicating the offer had been particularly difficult this year due to last minute changes to the programme of work in response to the pandemic. Diminished participation in RALS also meant fewer local area staff will have had an opportunity to have the offer curated verbally for them by the delivery team.

## Learning from online delivery

Feedback discussed above, particularly in relation to RALS, suggests that some key benefits were lost in the necessary move to online delivery. Learning from the initial RALS was taken forward into the later RALS sessions, additional self-review workshops and the National Seminars. This included steps such as holding shorter sessions, work to further target and brief participants (so they are able to engage in discussions), and understanding which aims of the Partnership can be delivered best in the online format.

Interviewees also recognised some advantages of having virtual, rather than face to face, sessions. These primarily related to accessibility for those who may not be able to spare the time to travel and to the cost of travel and venue hire. Opportunities for easier sharing of more engaging media were also highlighted. For example, being able to view presentations and documents on one's own computer screen during talks or training, or having video training vignettes which can be viewed during staff meetings.

Data from evaluation forms for the National Seminars suggest that, where the purpose of an event is to share information on policy and practice, the online format can be used successfully by the Partnership. These events not only had high satisfaction levels but had larger attendance numbers than the RALS. The main disadvantages of online delivery is that it appeared to be less conducive for in-depth multi-agency discussions. These are critical for the development of local strategy using the self-review and action planning tools. The

delivery teams learning on how to make these work as well as possible in the online format will, therefore, be important going forward. The benefit seen from the RALS was further diminished by what interviewees saw as a lack of opportunity to develop new contacts and relationships. Given this picture of the strengths and weaknesses involved for both formats, interviewees anticipated and welcomed the prospect of mixed methods of delivery for any future programme of support.

# Conclusion

The SLALS, accessed by 62 local areas in total over the last year, have been particularly well received amongst the four relevant areas that took part in this evaluation. Local area staff have been pleased with how this support has enabled them to maintain momentum in an area of work that they thought would have ended up being paused or abandoned in light of the pandemic. We heard that some areas accessing this support have established new relationships and multi-agency initiatives that have the structure and strategic buy-in to sustain change beyond the end of their involvement with the Partnership. Those that were less confident about the ongoing momentum for change in their areas had, at least, used the SLALS to co-produce tools and documents that could inform future improvements.

The apparent effectiveness and impact of SLALS in comparison to the RALS has been particularly striking. Those who accessed SLALS described tangible and sometimes transformational impact. Feedback on the RALS suggested that, whilst for some they provided useful information and opportunities for reflection, in several instances, they appear not have fulfilled their core strategic purpose this year.

Due to the targeted and tailored nature of SLALS, and the range of people that were interviewed for the evaluation, however, it was to be anticipated that most of the evidence of impact has come from this strand of the Partnership rather than others. Indeed, in relation RALS and the training offer, the experience we heard was at times limited and, in some cases, relayed by those not directly involved.

The weaknesses and barriers identified in relation to the RALS can mostly be linked back to the pandemic, the challenges it posed for the sector and the need to move to online rather than face to face delivery. The reach of the RALS and National Seminars and positive feedback evidenced in relation to the latter, suggests that the Partnership has engaged constructively with the majority of local areas in spite of these challenges. These events saw participation from

over three quarters of local areas and at least 94 per cent of those providing feedback for each of the National Seminars found them to be useful and informative.

The potential weaknesses and barriers identified by the evaluation sample provide, nevertheless, important learning points that will need to be considered in any future national programme. Taking these alongside findings in relation to other strands of activity, this evaluation has highlighted five key issues where careful balancing of competing considerations will continue to be important. Our findings suggest that where these issues have presented barriers, this has been as much in spite of the already sophisticated and responsive design of the Partnership activity as they have been because of things that could have been done differently. Owing to the evolving impact of external factors, in particular the pandemic and requirements of funders, the exact approach taken in relation to each of these issues will need to be kept under review in the design of any future programme.

The first of these issues is establishing a strategy to maintain the engagement of strategic leaders in local areas. Features of such a strategy may include the sharing of practice examples to show what change is possible and the framing of the support offer to align with common drivers of priorities (such as inspection frameworks and national early years or SEND initiatives).

The second is deciding how to best signpost the offer of support and its specific elements so that it has the best chance of reaching those who may benefit. In particular this would include support for practitioners and regional leads to understand and share the different elements of support available from the Partnership. Awareness of the full offer amongst those we spoke to in this evaluation was sometimes limited but this was often attributed to workload and having too many information sources to navigate. Local area staff also suggested that the impact of the free training offer could be maximised by sharing information about attendance with them so that they could ensure

that their own training offer complemented this. An alternative or complementary approach could be to consider how local area colleagues could be supported to access tailored training sessions from the delivery partners on behalf of their local settings. This was a part of this year's Partnerships offer that we heard had been successfully used in some areas.

The third issue is ensuring the topics of any free training best address the challenges of the day and complement what else is on offer from local authorities and other providers. Feedback on these topics heard as part of this evaluation suggest that this has been done well this year, in particular with the training offer in relation speech, language and communication needs and transition to school.

The fourth issue is how more intensive support such as the SLALS can be most effectively targeted. Whilst it is important to ask prospective participants to demonstrate an ability to make good use of the support, it is also important that all areas have a fair opportunity to do this. Learning from this year, and hopefully more opportunities for face-to-face delivery, should enable facilitated self-review and action planning (i.e. RALS) to play a bigger role in identifying candidate local areas in any future programme. Any approach to targeting support would, of course, also need to take account of the timescales in which the funder requires the whole body of work to be delivered.

The fifth issue is how the best mix of online and face-to-face delivery can be used. Particular care

will need to be taken in planning which activities can be delivered most effectively online and to understand where different structuring of sessions may support effectiveness. This might include identifying activities where the building of new relationships, or particularly intensive discussion, is required. It is clear that this would include the facilitated self-review and action planning which formed the main purpose of RALS. Where such activities are to be delivered online, ground rules for participation (such as keeping cameras on), shorter events, and organising event by area of practice rather than region, might be considered as ways of securing more active participation of local area staff. Some of this learning has already been put into effect with the facilitation of additional action learning sets in one region and the successful, topic specific, national seminars.

There have clearly been a wide range of challenges facing early years sector in the year 2020–21 that will have made it difficult for stakeholders to engage in activities to make long term improvements to services. Despite this, the experience of the local areas in the evaluation sample, shows how the EYSEND Partnership has been instrumental in their improvement journey. Taken alongside data on the reach of the Partnership as a whole, and positive feedback from participants in the more recent National Seminars, this provides encouraging evidence that the EYSEND Partnership has been an effective and impactful programme.



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