Department for Education

Evaluation of the Early Years Local Government Programme

Final Research Report

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Executive Summary

Peer Review Programme

This section outlines the key findings and recommendations from the mainly qualitative process evaluation of the Peer Review Programme and the Early Outcomes Fund (EOF). The research methodology for the evaluation of the Peer Review Programme included semi-structured interviews with peer reviewers and peer review recipients, as well as on a survey of review recipients. The methods for the evaluation of the EOF included qualitative interviews with project participants, triangulated with local self-evaluation reports.

Key Findings

Some of the most important findings from the evaluation of the **Peer Review Programme** include:

- Peer reviewers and LAs were positive about the **preparation activities**. Reviewers found the **training** useful and relevant, and LAs found the preparation activities helpful to set **key lines of enquiry** for the review.

- The **Maturity Matrix** was described as a useful tool, particularly in bringing stakeholders together at the planning stage. Some interviewees thought the language could be simplified and made more accessible.

- Four days was seen as a considerable amount of time for the review, and both peer reviewers and LAs valued that time as it allowed for **in-depth reviews**.

- Peer reviewers commented that having a **lead peer** reviewer helped organise the review and brought considerable experience.

- The **range of expertise** in the peer review teams was seen as a major strength of the programme. Although, one criticism LAs expressed was that they expected more speech and language experts.

- One of the strengths of the programme was that it was **'by the sector, for the sector'**. Reviewers were seen as critical friends who brought professional expertise but also an understanding of the challenging context in which the LAs operate.

- **Ongoing communication** between peer reviewers and the LA receiving the review, throughout the week the peer review happened, allowed the review to be tailored to the LAs' needs and provide useful recommendations.

- The LAs were generally not surprised by the recommendations received, but appreciated the external validation and found it an opportunity to get **senior management buy-in.** Recommendations from the peer reviews were generally implemented in full or in part.

- There was some confusion around the format and timing of **follow-up** support, or whether it would be provided at all.

- Peer reviews were perceived to have played an important role **in raising the profile of early years** in the LAs.

- The key outcomes from the peer reviews include:

  - improved **partnership working** across different teams and departments;

  - greater **senior leadership engagement** with early years, contributing to making it a strategic and policy priority;

  - development of **integrated early years strategies and pathways** across education, early years and health in the LAs;

  - development of **standardised assessment tools** to assess children's speech and language needs and monitor progress over time; and

  - improved **data collection systems** to better evaluate the impact of the changes listed above.

- LAs felt the changes were **sustainable** thanks to senior leadership buy-in and the systemic change that had taken place, but additional **funding** would help build on what the peer reviews have achieved.

Recommendations

The main recommendations presented for the **Peer Review Programme** are the following:

- **Greater clarity on the purpose of the peer review**. Some interviewees were unclear about this. Communicating clearly at the beginning of the programme would help to manage expectations.

- **Logistical arrangements** to take care of the peer review team were described by some interviewees as burdensome. Setting expectations and boundaries might address this issue.

- **Practical recommendations**. A few LAs would have liked practical steps about how to implement change included in the final report. This could be solved by providing peer review teams with guidance on how to structure the final reports.

- **Clearer communication around follow-up.** Some of those who received peer reviews either did not know follow-up was available, or would have liked more or more structured ongoing support. Additional support, including remotely, could be considered.

- **Role of external evaluators**. We recommend making all participants aware of any potential evaluation, and ideally requiring them to participate.

Early Outcomes Fund

Key Findings

Key findings from the **EOF** evaluation are:

- The main reasons for LAs to apply to the EOF were to access additional **funding** for, and **highlight** the importance of early years speech, language and communication services.

- The priority objectives of the projects were to improve **early intervention** in speech, language and communication; increase **cross-sector** working on the issues and encourage wider **community** participation.

- A number of projects highlighted the importance of having a dedicated **project manager** to oversee EOF activities.

- EOF projects found the **Maturity Matrix** useful at planning stage and at the end of the project, to measure change over time. Only a small number had used it to monitor progress during project delivery.

- All projects mentioned the **tight timeline** as a challenge, particularly around completing and evaluation and wrapping up the project at the same time.

- One of the key successes of the projects was that it fostered greater **collaboration** across different agencies and departments.

- **Buy-in** from all stakeholders, and particularly senior leaders was seen as a key enabler for both the success of the projects and the sustainability of outcomes.

- Key outcomes from the EOF projects include:

  - greater **engagement from senior leaders;**

  - developing **joint pathways and strategies** around early years speech, language and communication services;

  - improved **skills and confidence** in identifying and supporting children and families among early years professionals;

  - development of standard **shared assessment tools** to assess children's needs and track their progress;

  - improved **data collection and management systems** to track individual children over time and across services; and

  - better speech and language outcomes for **children and families.**

- Interviewees generally thought the changes made by the project would be sustained in the long-term, as they are **systemic changes** that can carry-on without much additional funding.

Recommendations

Key recommendations for the **Early Outcomes Fund** are outlined below:

- **Longer wrap up time**. The short implementation timeline, and especially the lack of wrap up time to complete the self-evaluations was a challenge. Longer timelines might allow for better planning, delivery and evaluation, and to measure some early outcomes.

- **Greater clarity around the purpose of joint bids**. Clear communication around whether and why partnership projects are preferred would lead to more thought-through bids.

- **Project management**. Ensuring all projects have an assigned project manager would facilitate the smooth running of activities and avoid individuals being overburdened by their job and EOF project management.

- **Greater support around data collection and management**. Additional guidance around GDPR, research within the NHS and accessing DfE and other datasets would save projects time and ensure data is handled safely and lawfully.

- **Improved communication around self-evaluation reports.** Providing clear guidance would avoid confusion around what is required and ensure more consistent outputs.

Introduction

Ecorys is pleased to provide the Department for Education (DfE) with this final evaluation report, which covers research on the Early Years Local Government Programme from May 2019 to March 2020.

About the Early Years Local Government Programme

In 2018, the Department launched the Local Government Programme pilot with the aim of tackling development gaps in early language and literacy skills at the earliest opportunity[1]. The Local Government Programme had two strands: the Early Years Social Mobility Peer Review Programme and the Early Outcomes Fund (EOF). Both strands aimed to collect learning from and improve practice in local services with the overall objective to improve disadvantaged young children's outcomes, particularly focussing on early language and communication.

Early Years Social Mobility Peer Review Programme

DfE partnered with the Local Government Association (LGA) and the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) to design and deliver the Early Years Social Mobility Peer Review Programme. By March 2020, the programme had been delivered over three waves in 27 Local Authorities (LAs) across England.

Peer review teams, comprised of five or more experienced sector professionals, assessed the effectiveness and opportunities for local services to improve early outcomes for disadvantaged children at age five, with a focus on early speech, language and communication. The reviews were conducted over four days, and two subsequent days were planned for 12 months later[2]. Participating LAs were encouraged to use the EIF's Maturity Matrix self-assessment tool[3] to measure local progress in a number of areas of early years speech language and communication, providing a standardised approach to self-assessment prior to receiving the peer review and potentially during and afterwards.

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[1] Department for Education (2018) Early Years Social Mobility Peer Review Programme. Available https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/703493/Early_Years_Social_Mobility_Peer_Review-Programme.pdf [accessed 20/01/2020]

[2] The Covid-19 pandemic is likely to have affected this element of the programme.

[3] The Maturity Matrix was developed as part of the DfE's Social Mobility Action Plan, using learning from experts in the delivery of prevention and early intervention in early years speech, language and communication. It is divided into four dimensions: plan, lead, deliver, and evaluate. Each dimension comprises key elements that local areas rate by progress level, and therefore identify areas for improvement. Available https://www.eif.org.uk/resource/eif-maturity-matrix-speech-language-communication-early-years [accessed 20/01/2020]

Early Outcomes Fund

The Early Outcomes Fund provided funding for LAs or LA partnerships to improve early years language outcomes through high quality local services. The Fund was designed to support activity to help LAs to initiate and/or progress system change to address these objectives, and to assess existing approaches to improvement which were thought to be effective and might be shared.

The aims of the Fund included improving leadership; capacity building and integrated system-level service improvement; and resourcing evaluation for sharing learning and innovation with the wider system. Eight LAs/partnerships were awarded with grants worth between £0.5-1.5m to deliver their projects and develop legacy tools[4]. A total of 27 LAs were involved in the project[5].

Evaluation overview

Ecorys was commissioned by the DfE to conduct a process evaluation of the Early Years Local Government Programme, from May 2019 to March 2020 with the final report due in July 2020. The evaluation focused primarily on the following areas:

- exploring the effectiveness of new and existing approaches taken to delivery, through in-depth semi-structured interviews;
- supporting quality and consistency across local area evaluations for the Early Outcomes Fund, through one-to-one bespoke support as required;
- drawing together learning across projects and sharing it nationally, to refine and improve the programme; and
- using findings to inform decisions about future investment in similar programmes.

Methodology

The evaluation was organised into three strands:
- Strand 1: Background, scoping and developing support. This phase included further developing and refining the research questions and the analytical framework, and co-producing a programme-level Theory of Change (ToC) and evaluation framework with EOF grantees.

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[4] The list of LAs awarded funding, and the total grant amounts are available https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/848149/EOF_Grant_Determination_Letter.pdf. [Accessed 30/01/2020]

[5] A list of all the LAs involved in project, with summaries of project aims, is available https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-training-for-experts-to-boost-early-communication-skills [Accessed 22/07/2020]

- Strand 2: Peer Review. This strand assesses the delivery and experience of the Peer Review Programme (waves 1 and 2), considering changes made by LAs following the process, as well as their experience using the Maturity Matrix.
- Strand 3: Early Outcomes Fund. This strand documents the delivery and experience of the Early Outcomes Fund activity and assesses the intervention's outcomes.

The evaluation took a primarily qualitative approach, exploring the process of delivery, perceived change, and structural and systemic contextual facilitators and barriers to the implementation of the programme. We examined the Peer Review Programme and EOF through document reviews and interviews with stakeholders. We also carried out a survey of peer review participants.

The evaluation tasks that have informed this report are:

- Document review of EOF projects, including funding applications and Theories of Change
- Co-production of a shared ToC and evaluation framework for the EOF
- One-to-one evaluation support to EOF projects, as required
- Semi-structured qualitative interviews with key staff from:
  - five EOF projects, about six months after receiving the funding (n=12) and about one year after receiving the funding (n=9);
  - four LAs undertaking wave one peer reviews, about six months after taking part in the project (n=10) and about one year after receiving the funding (n=4);
  - three LAs undertaking wave two peer reviews, six months after taking part in the project (n=6); and
  - peer reviewers who worked in different LAs, shortly after they completed their peer reviews (n=7)
- Survey of LA and partner staff who took part in peer reviews (n=27)
- Review of self-evaluation reports written by independent evaluators commissioned by EOF projects[6].

LAs taking part in peer reviews were sampled for participation in the evaluation according to the following criteria to take part in interviews: rural/urban classification; Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) quintile; proportion of children entitled to Free School Meals (FSM); and region where they are located. EOF projects were sampled according to the type of partnership delivering the project; whether they also received a peer review; rural/urban classification; and intended outcomes.

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[6] By the time this report was completed (July 2020), six of the eight EOF projects had submitted their self-evaluations to DfE. We reviewed the six reports and triangulated the findings with findings from our primary research.

Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. They were all conducted by telephone and audio recorded. They were then summarised and synthesised by the researchers into a framework of themes, mapped to the key research questions. Thematic analysis was then carried out by comparing and contrasting the experiences and views held by different stakeholders, to identify similarities, differences and patterns.

The peer review survey was distributed online and took approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete. Prior to sending out the survey, we distributed a 'mini survey' to 35 contacts provided by the LGA across the LAs receiving wave 1 and 2 peer reviews, asking them to share with us the contact details of their colleagues and partners involved in the process. We collected additional email addresses from participants at LGA learning events. We then distributed the peer review survey online to a total of 70 individuals across 20 LAs, and asked recipients to also forward the survey to their colleagues who had taken part in the process. The quantitative data was analysed using Excel to generate descriptive statistics. Given the small number of survey responses received (n=27, from 8 LAs), survey data should be treated with caution; however it is worth noting that survey findings are consistent with findings from the qualitative interviews.

Structure of the report

This final evaluation report presents the findings from the process evaluation activities described in the methodology section above. It is structured in three main chapters:

Evaluation of the Peer Review Programme. This chapter includes a thematic analysis of qualitative interviews with a sample of peer reviewers and key staff from LAs and partner agencies who conducted or received peer reviews during waves one and two. It also outlines the findings from the peer review survey. It describes the planning and implementation of the programme, including views on the Maturity Matrix, as well as the expertise and perceptions of the peer review team. It includes perceived strengths and weaknesses, outcomes achieved to date and perceptions on the sustainability of the outcomes.

Evaluation of the Early Outcomes Fund. This chapter includes a thematic analysis of qualitative interviews with a sample of individuals involved in EOF projects. Initially it explores the reasons for applying to the EOF, approaches to delivery, project aims and key players involved. The chapter then looks at the experience of participating in the project, including the set-up process and views on the Maturity Matrix. Finally, it analyses enablers and barriers to delivery, perceived sustainability of the projects' outcomes, and risks. Findings from our primary research were triangulated with data from the self-evaluation reports completed by the EOF projects[7].

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[7] Findings outlined in this chapter are based on the interviews we carried out with EOF project participants. Data is taken from EOF self-evaluation reports only where explicitly stated.

Conclusions and Recommendations. The final chapter includes a brief summary of findings from the evaluation of the peer review and EOF, as well as a set of recommendations for each element of the programme.

We have included the shared Theory of Change and evaluation frameworks co-produced with EOF recipients as Annex 1. The interview topic guides and the survey administered to peer review participants are included as Annex 2.

Evaluation of the Peer Review Programme

This chapter outlines the main findings from the evaluation of the peer review programme. Data was collected through qualitative interviews with a sample of peer reviewers and key staff from LAs and partner agencies who conducted or received peer reviews during waves one and two, as well as through a survey of LA and partner staff who participated in the process[8].

The first section of the chapter describes how the programme was planned and implemented, perceptions of the peer review team's expertise, the relationship between reviewers and the LA, and views on the Maturity Matrix. It then outlines perceived strengths and weaknesses of the programme, outcomes achieved to date and views on the sustainability of the outcomes.

Preparation and planning

Both peer reviewers and interviewees from LAs that received peer reviews described the importance of preparation activities prior to the peer review itself. All peer reviewers were experienced professionals working in early years, either in their local council or in the health or education sectors. Most peer reviewers interviewed said they attended a **training** workshop delivered by the LGA before they conducted a peer review. Several peer reviewers particularly emphasised the value of conducing a mock peer review during the training, as it helped them set expectations for the real peer review:

> "The information that we got from the actual training, I found it really useful when I went and did a Local Authority peer challenge because I went back to my notes and such like, just to refresh". – *Peer reviewer*

Some interviewees mentioned having previously attended general training on peer reviews, but were pleased to be offered training that was specific to becoming a peer reviewer as part of the Early Years Local Government Programme. More experienced peer reviewers appreciated that the training was not compulsory, as they felt they already understood the process.

LAs receiving peer reviews were requested to develop their **priority areas for review** and share them with the peer review team in advance of the peer review. Interviewees mentioned different approaches to identifying the priority areas. Some held **workshops** with a range of early years services providers and partners where a representative from the EIF guided them to use the Maturity Matrix. A small number of LAs implemented an

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[8] Survey data should be treated with caution given the small number of responses (n<30). However, it is worth noting that survey responses are consistent with interview data.

online survey to capture a wide range of views to inform the development of priority areas.

Interviewees generally found these exercises productive, as they led to **key lines of enquiry** for the peer reviewers that were tailored to the needs of each LA. However, one peer reviewer and one LA interviewee raised the issue that peer reviewers had limited time to thoroughly review the documentation and priority areas before the review:

> "We didn't have a lot of contact with each other before a couple of weeks ahead of the review, so we were trying to fill the blanks" – *Peer reviewer*

Generally, LAs receiving peer reviews felt they were required to do a considerable amount of **preparation work**, and sometimes reported they felt under pressure to organise everything. However, they valued this stage as it enabled them to make the most of the peer review.

The LAs receiving peer reviews were responsible for developing a **timetable of activities** and logistical arrangements for the peer reviewers during the review itself. LA interviewees reported working with colleagues and partners to decide which stakeholders to involve, based on the key lines of enquiry. One LA interviewee found the logistical element quite onerous, but most recognised this as standard practice for a peer review.

Survey respondents were asked to rate their level of **satisfaction with the preparation activities** they were required to carry out in advance of the peer review, as shown in the graph below:

Figure 1: Level of satisfaction with preparation activities for peer reviews
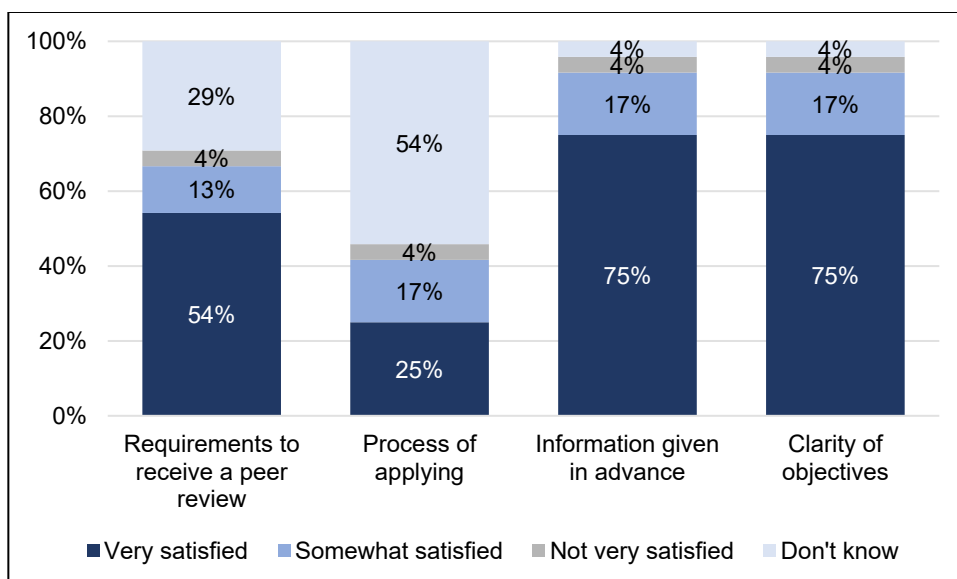
Source: Survey of LA and partner staff (n=24)

Overall, the majority of respondents were happy with the requirements to take part in a peer review, the information provided beforehand and the clarity of objectives of the review, echoing the interview findings.

Most respondents (54%) were 'very satisfied' with the requirements necessary to receive a peer review, with a further 13% being 'somewhat satisfied'. One quarter (25%) said they were 'very satisfied' with the process of applying to receive a peer review, and an additional 17% were 'somewhat satisfied'. Three quarters (75%) said they were 'very satisfied' with the information given in advance of the peer review, and the same proportion were 'very satisfied' with the clarity of objectives around the process. An additional 17% reported being 'somewhat satisfied' at both of these stages of the preparation.

Most respondent (54%) said they did not know how satisfied they were with the process of applying to receive a peer review and 29% did not know how satisfied they were with the requirements to receive a review, possibly because they were not involved in these activities. No-one said they were not at all satisfied with any aspect of preparing for the peer review.

Activities

The peer reviews lasted **four days**, over the space of one working week. One peer reviewer felt this was a long time to spend away from their usual role. However, one LA interviewee emphasised the importance of the length of the review to allow more in-depth analysis of LA activities.

> "We were very pleased with the level of scrutiny that was undertaken in the peer review. The team was in [our Local Authority] for four days, which was more extensive than any other process we've had" – *Review recipient*

Most peer reviewers described meeting for the first time the evening before the peer review was due to officially begin, though one interviewee mentioned being in contact with their peer review team via email beforehand. These initial discussions within the peer review team were seen as key in shaping the approach of the review.

Peer reviewers said they typically worked in pairs, visiting a wide range of services where they conducted a combination of **interviews, focus groups and observations** which had been pre-arranged by facilitators at the LA they reviewed:

> "We tried to showcase everything, as well as make sure our key lines of enquiry could be supported as to what we could do next" – *Review recipient*

Interviewees mentioned a **variety of stakeholders** participated in the reviews, including:

- senior leaders from health, education and early years;
- middle-management and frontline workers from a number of services, such as health visiting, speech and language therapy; alternative education providers; childcare providers;
- commissioners; and
- parent groups.

Several peer reviewers highlighted their efforts to ensure the review process was **inclusive and fair**, for example by conducting interviews both over the telephone and in person, depending on what was more convenient for the interviewee. Another peer reviewer explained that there was always more than one member of the review team present for each activity to gain multiple perspectives.

A number of peer reviewers reported daily **end-of-day meetings** where they would regroup and discuss their findings so far. These meetings were valued as they kept the group aware of progress to date and areas to focus on. Peer review managers at the local authorities found these meetings useful to keep track of the work of the review team and discuss preliminary feedback:

> "The week is punctuated with times to meet and share what has happened. And it's at those points that – because you have a wide range of experience on the team – people can contribute with what they have done previously or found to work, or just to put comments in a wider context […]. This means that the outcomes of the review are moderated as they go along." – *Peer reviewer*

Generally, survey respondents were either 'very satisfied' (74%) or 'somewhat satisfied' (13%) with the structure of the activities. Just under one in ten (9%) were 'not very satisfied', and no-one reported being 'not at all satisfied', as shown in the figure below:

Figure 2. Level of satisfaction with the structure of activities during the peer review
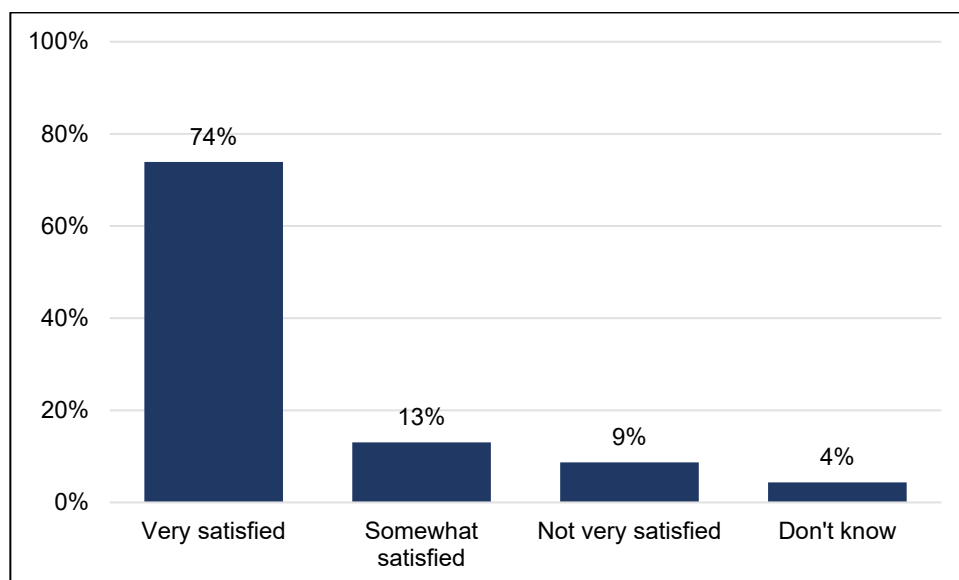
Source: Survey of LA and partner staff (n=23)

At the end of the week, peer reviewers **presented their initial findings** in a meeting with senior and middle management from the LA they reviewed. These findings were then formalised, alongside recommendations, in a final report that peer review teams shared with LAs.

Some LA interviewees were aware that **follow-up support** is planned as part of the programme, while others did not know and some even recommended it as a way to improve the programme. None of the people interviewed during the first round of fieldwork were clear about what exactly the support would be, when it would take place, or had made any arrangements around a follow-up. Some of the confusion seemed to have cleared by the time we carried out the second round of interviews.

Among survey respondents, just under two thirds (63%, n=24) said they had not received any follow-up from the peer review team after the review. All of those who had received follow up (n=9), found it 'very' or 'somewhat useful'. From the comments provided in the survey about why they rated the follow up support as they did, it appears that some of the respondents referred to the report produced by the peer review team as follow-up. One respondent said they contacted the peer reviewers for advice and information following the review, and this helped influence a particular staff member who had previously been resistant to change.

Expertise of the peer reviewers

Peer review teams were made up of between four and eight individuals, and interviewees felt that the size of their review teams had been appropriate to the work that needed to be

done, and worked well. The expertise of the peer reviewers varied. Each team comprised professionals from a **range of backgrounds**, including public health, early years, education, policy and service managers. Individuals who received peer reviews were generally pleased with the mix and relevance of expertise held by the review teams:

> "Their knowledge was very good, we had quite a range of expertise and a good range of experience from different sized LAs." – *Review recipient*

One peer reviewer noted that the variety of expertise in their peer review team was useful for gaining new and different perspectives throughout the review process:

> "Working with people from other disciplines apart from education – I found that invaluable, that strengthened the whole process. So when you were doing your visits or your focus groups you've got two people from quite different disciplines to pull out different strengths, different aspects, and see different things." – *Peer reviewer*

Some peer reviewers mentioned the importance of having a **strong lead reviewer** to direct and support the team. One peer reviewer described the value of having a group lead who was experienced in peer reviewing and therefore familiar with the process and able to guide the rest of the group.

Survey respondents echoed this sentiment of **satisfaction with peer reviewers**, as shown in the figure below:

Figure 3. Level of satisfaction with the peer review team
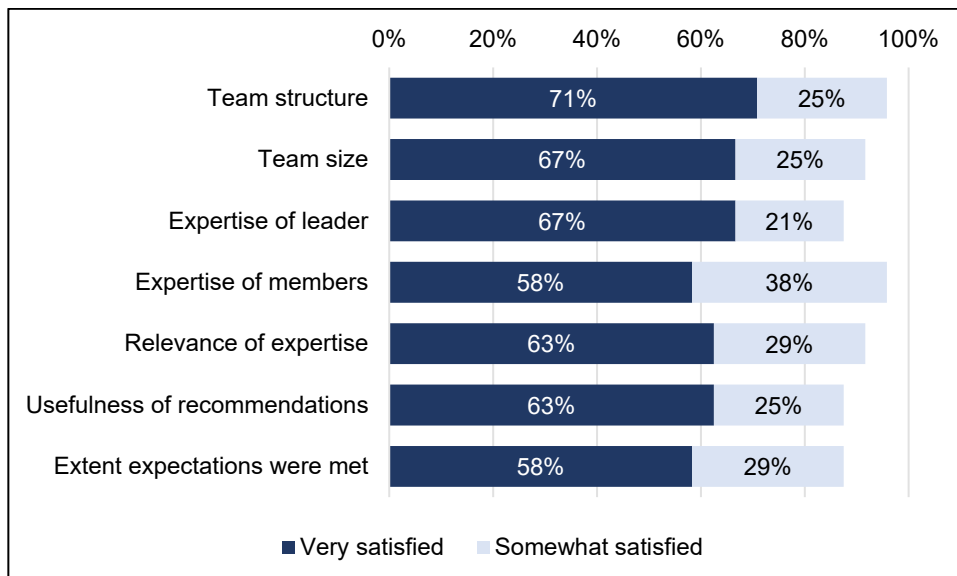
Source: Survey of LA and partner staff (n=24)

The vast majority of respondents said they were either 'very' or 'somewhat satisfied' with the size, structure and expertise of the peer review team, as well as with the

recommendations provided. Neary one in six (58%) said they were 'very satisfied' with the extent to which their expectations of the peer review had been met, with an additional 29% saying they were 'somewhat satisfied'. None of the respondents said they were 'not at all satisfied' with any aspect of the peer review team.

While the vast majority of survey respondents were 'very' or 'somewhat satisfied' with the expertise of the team leader (88%), and of the team members (96%), the main criticism of peer review teams that emerged during the interviews was a **lack of speech, language and communication expertise** among the peer reviewers. Some interviewees expressed that they had expected a more explicit focus on speech, language and communication in early years, based on information provided in advance about the programme. One interviewee suggested that having a speech and language specialist on the peer review team would have added a different and useful perspective to the review. Another would have preferred if the lead peer reviewer had been specialised in this area. Where interviewees reported a lack of speech, language and communication expertise, this affected their entire experience of the peer review:

> "There was a general feeling at the end that it was more like a corporate review, it didn't feel like an early years review, and it certainly didn't feel like it was sufficiently focused on social mobility and speech, language and communication".
> – *Review recipient*

Relationship with peer reviewers

Views on the attitude and approach of the peer reviewers were generally very positive. Two thirds of survey respondents (67%, n=24) said they were 'very satisfied' with their relationship with the peer review team, with an additional one quarter (25%) being 'somewhat satisfied'. None of the survey respondents said they were 'not at all satisfied' with the relationship.

Interviewees felt that peer reviewers were **friendly and enthusiastic**, and that their approach was **respectful and professional**. One interviewee felt that the peer review team could relate to being peer reviewed by external experts, so they were very understanding:

> "They were the most professional, they were the most experienced and they also – which was very pleasing to me – had been in the same situation as the people they were reviewing, so they were able to offer insights and empathy" – *Review recipient*

Similarly, for some interviewees the attitude of peer reviewers showed an **element of equality** between those reviewing and those who received the review, reflecting the ethos 'for the sector, by the sector' of the programme. A common theme was that peer reviews felt very different from Ofsted inspections:

"They did give examples of ways things could be done differently, but not in a 'we know better than you' type of approach." – *Review recipient*

However, a small number of peer review recipients found some peer reviewers to have an **attitude of superiority**. One interviewee described one peer reviewer continuously comparing the LA being reviewed to their own, assuming that their own experiences were the best way of doing things. This was thought to be inappropriate and unhelpful, and highlights the importance of a peer-to-peer approach.

Maturity Matrix

Most of those who participated in the programme, both as peer reviewers and as review recipients, were aware of the Maturity Matrix before their involvement in the peer review. Some had heard of the Maturity Matrix and not used it, however most had used it in some way within their LA. For example, several interviewees had used the Maturity Matrix as a self-evaluation tool for funding applications.

Three-quarters (74%) of survey respondents used the Maturity Matrix as part of the peer review process. The figure below illustrates at what specific stage of the peer review respondents used the Maturity Matrix.

Figure 4. Use of the Maturity Matrix for peer reviews
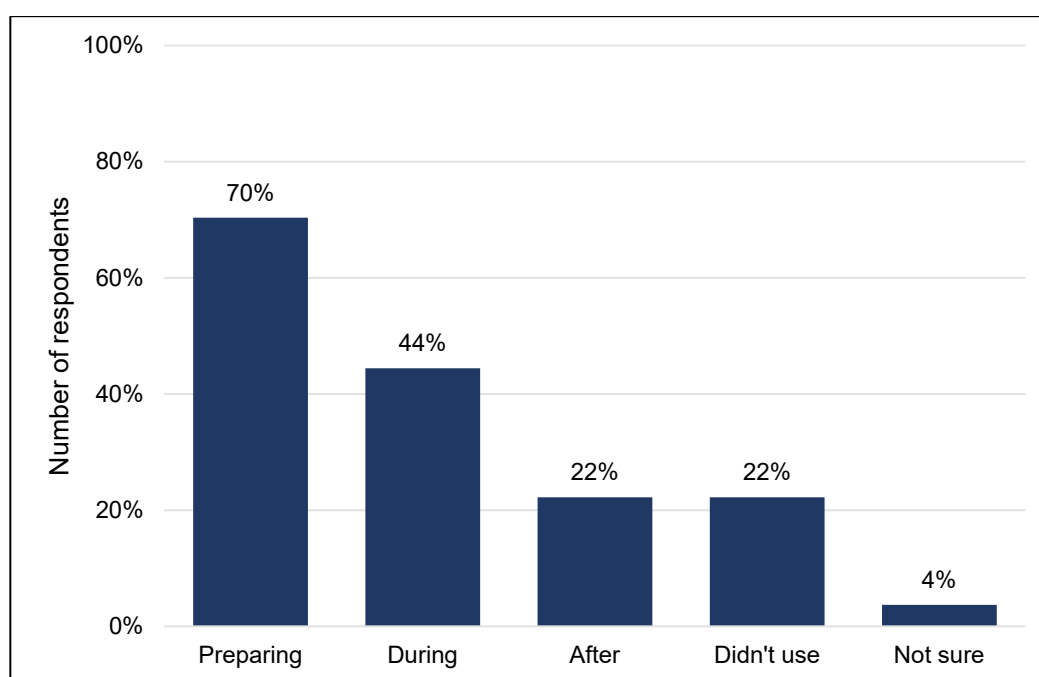
Source: Survey of LA and partner staff (n=27, respondents were allowed to select multiple answers)

Of those who used the Maturity Matrix, seven in ten (70%) used it to prepare for the peer review, reflecting the emphasis placed on the preparation stage. Nearly half (44%) used

it during the review, and 22% used it afterwards. Interview findings echoed survey responses, with most interviewees saying they had used the Maturity Matrix whilst preparing for the peer review, and only a few saying they had used it during the review. Of those who had used it during the review, it was mainly as a tool that they could refer back to if necessary. One peer reviewer mentioned using the Maturity Matrix in team discussions during the review, to ensure they were covering all the relevant priority areas. None of the people interviewed in the second round of interviews had used it again, reinforcing the view that it was seen more as a planning than as a monitoring tool. None of the interviewees reported use of other formal tools during the peer review.

During interviews, both peer reviewers and review recipients said they found the Maturity Matrix a **useful framework for initiating discussion** around the strengths and weaknesses of provision in the Local Authority:

> "It worked particularly well in bringing people together to have a conversation, and to identify where our strengths were and where we needed further thinking" – *Review recipient*

> "It does break down the questions quite usefully so that you can specify exactly what aspect you are looking at, so it's quite useful in that way." – *Peer reviewer*

All survey respondents who used the Maturity Matrix at different stages of the peer review found it to be either '**very' or 'somewhat useful.'** As shown in the chart below it was of most use during the preparation, with three quarters (74%) of those who used it to prepare for their peer review said it was 'very useful', while the rest (26%) found it 'somewhat useful':

Figure 5. Usefulness of the Maturity Matrix at various stages of the peer review
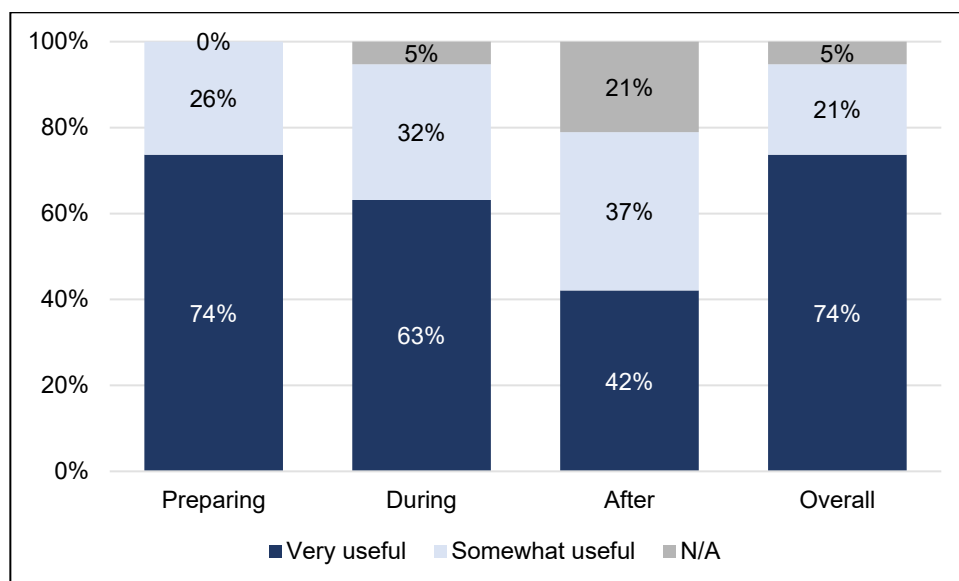
Source: Survey of LA and partner staff (n=19)

The proportion of respondents selecting 'N/A' increased from 0% during preparation, to 5% during the review and 21% afterwards, again suggesting that it was mostly used for planning and less after the peer review. However, levels of satisfaction with the tool were very high at each stage of the review and overall.

Both interviewees and survey respondents noted that the Maturity Matrix was most useful when used by a **group of stakeholders**, for example during workshops bringing together different partners. This helped create a shared understanding and a sense of joint responsibility around delivering early years services:

> "It was used for discussions with different agencies which has led to more engagement to improve and a realisation that Early Years is everyone's responsibility." – *Survey respondent*

Some interviewees reported that workshop participants scored different aspects of provision very differently, leading to further discussions until they reached agreement on the scores:

> "It's really valuable when lots of different types of people do it, because otherwise you are getting a perspective based on that one person's or organisation's view." – *Review recipient*

Survey respondents and interviewees also mentioned a few challenges when using the Maturity Matrix. When scoring the 'key elements' in the matrix, some of the interviewees who received peer reviews felt that the requirements to reach levels three 'substantial progress' and four 'mature' were **not realistic** for most LAs:

> "We might interpret it with a little flexibility, but as a framework it is a good starting point." – *Review recipient*

One person felt the Maturity Matrix criteria was too prescriptive around the types of evidence that could be used to score against each level, and LAs may have been able to score themselves higher if there were more examples of ways to meet the criteria.

Interviewees suggested that content of the Maturity Matrix could be made **more accessible** for a wider range of users including frontline staff, by simplifying the terminology. One survey respondent found that there was some overlap and repetition of themes across sections, and slimming down the Maturity Matrix might help. One other interviewee said the Maturity Matrix felt somewhat abstract, and it should be made an integral part of the entire peer review process in order to embed it as a reviewing tool. Finally, a survey respondent described a **technical issue** with the online tool, saying there was no option to save the work and return to it at a later stage, which was a problem for many stakeholders.

LGA learning events

During the second round of interviews with Wave 1 peer review participants, we asked if they had attended any of the LGA learning events, and their feedback. Only a small number had attended, with one participant commenting that they looked really interesting but were too far away and they did not have funding to stay overnight (this person said they would have preferred London as a venue, suggesting they may have missed the communication about the London event).

One participant said they found the presentations from DfE and on school readiness very useful, as they touched on issues that had emerged in their peer review as well. They also said it would have been useful if more of the agenda had been shared before the day:

> "They asked us to take two people, and I took somebody from Public Health, but if I had seen more of the agenda beforehand I might have taken someone else." – *Review recipient*

Perceptions of the programme

Strengths

Feedback on the programme from peer reviewers and those receiving reviews was overwhelmingly **positive**:

> "The whole process has benefited us so much and as a result benefited parents and families. I don't think we could do it any differently." – *Review recipient*

Survey respondents described the process as a challenging one, which required considerable hard-work and preparation, yet this made it extremely worthwhile and valuable.

One of the key strengths, identified by both LAs and reviewers interviewed, was that it provided an **opportunity for conversation and reflection** in a safe and non-judgemental setting. A number of interviewees reported that they rarely have the chance to review the way they work, and being involved in the programme opened up an honest conversation within the LA and with the external review team:

> "I would suggest the value that you get from a peer review like this is fantastic in terms of being able to have that external objective view, and you know, a real honest conversation." – *Review recipient*

Linked to this, the **'peer-to-peer' model** was seen as effective. Survey respondents described the process as "constructive" and noted that the peer review team had relevant knowledge and "created the culture of a critical friend." Interviewees appreciated having

external people going in with 'fresh eyes' but also with experience in similar contexts to review the LA in a way that was non-threatening:

> "It isn't an inspection. Because it feels like quite a safe process, I think you're more willing to, you know, share your weaknesses […]. The process was having peers come in and work *with* you, as opposed to having this done *to* you, and having those different people having the time to provide you with that insight." – *Review recipient*

Most interviewees greatly valued that the peer reviews took a **multi-agency approach**. The programme created the space for a wide range of professionals to work together, with the shared ambition of developing a more joined-up offer, particularly between health and social care. Survey respondents echoed this sentiment, noting that the process was helpful in providing focus and clarity of thinking, particularly as it involved the input of people external to the LA.

The process also helped to bring the issue of early years speech, language and communication to the **attention of senior leaders** in different sectors, and place it onto the wider LA agenda:

> "I think it helps you reflect as an organisation, in terms of having senior people involved in a process that highlights that the early years agenda is priceless." – *Review recipient*

A number of interviewees commented that the peer review process clarified the meaning of 'early years' beyond education and care, or that it had helped them come to a consensus around other terms, such as 'school readiness'.

Many peer review recipients reported that they were not surprised by the recommendations made by the review team, but having **external validation and senior leadership buy-in** gave them the motivation and endorsement needed to make change a priority.

Peer reviewers found that LAs were generally **open to feedback**, including constructive criticism, which was seen as a key first step to making change:

> "You didn't feel like they just wanted to show you the good bits, they wanted proper feedback." – *Peer reviewer*

Following the peer reviews, all the LAs interviewed had developed action plans to implement the recommendations they had received. One LA referred to the recommendations as '*something to hang our next steps on*'. Another area had booked in another peer review for SEND, as they had found the early years peer review so beneficial.

Weaknesses

The main issue that peer reviewers and LAs mentioned was the **timeframe** to prepare for and carry out the peer review. Some interviewees would have liked more set-up time, for example, one peer review team did not have the opportunity to meet or speak before the first day of the review. Conversely, one peer reviewer suggested that the review could be condensed into three days. This would make reviews less of a burden on participants and allow reviews to be conducted with a higher number of LAs, but at the same time, they recognised it would result in less detailed reviews.

One LA suggested that the short timeframe may have led to a drop in the quality of the work in some areas. However, many of those who referenced time pressures and constraints could not identify how they may have been avoided, and most felt that the programme overall was managed very well.

A number of project managers also said arranging the **logistics** for the peer review team during their stay took up considerably more time and resources than expected. One in particular found the demands of the peer review team around equipment and refreshments quite challenging to deal with, and felt that this negatively affected the relationship between peer reviewers and those receiving the review.

It seems that individual peer reviewers had different **research styles** that affected the experience of participants. While most interviewees who received a peer review had a positive experience, one respondent said they took part in a focus group that felt interrogatory, and participants became uncomfortable when the peer reviewer repeated the same question several times. Additionally, a small number of survey respondents commented that the peer review was **too generic or subjective**, depending on the makeup of the team.

Some of the LAs were not entirely satisfied with the recommendations they received. A few interviewees found the recommendations quite generic. One felt they were not particularly relevant to early years, while another would have liked **more practical advice** on how to implement change:

> "It would have been good to have recommendations that gave us some of the 'how', so instead of saying: 'you need to do this', it would have said: 'you need to do this. A way you could do this in [your Local Authority], based on all the things we gathered together is this', or: 'this is an example of how it's been done elsewhere'". – *Review recipient*

Some peer reviewers and review recipients said they would have liked **more structured follow-up** built into the programme Although some acknowledged there would be a visit one year after the original review, they felt that this may not be enough to ensure that changes were implemented and sustained. Some interviewees suggested a brief optional follow-up by the same team, six months after the peer review, to help to maintain

momentum. One peer review recipient suggested that external monitoring, as well as monitored financial investment, would help to keep LA accountable.

It appears that **communication** between the LGA and the LAs and peer review teams could be improved in some areas. For example, one of the individuals receiving the peer review was surprised that there would be a published report at the end of the review, and some were not aware that the programme includes a follow-up 12 months after the review. Others said it was not clear if the focus of the peer review should be on speech, language and communication or on early years more broadly.

Implementing recommendations

The chart below shows the extent to which survey respondents had implemented the recommendations:

Figure 6. Recommendations implemented following the peer review
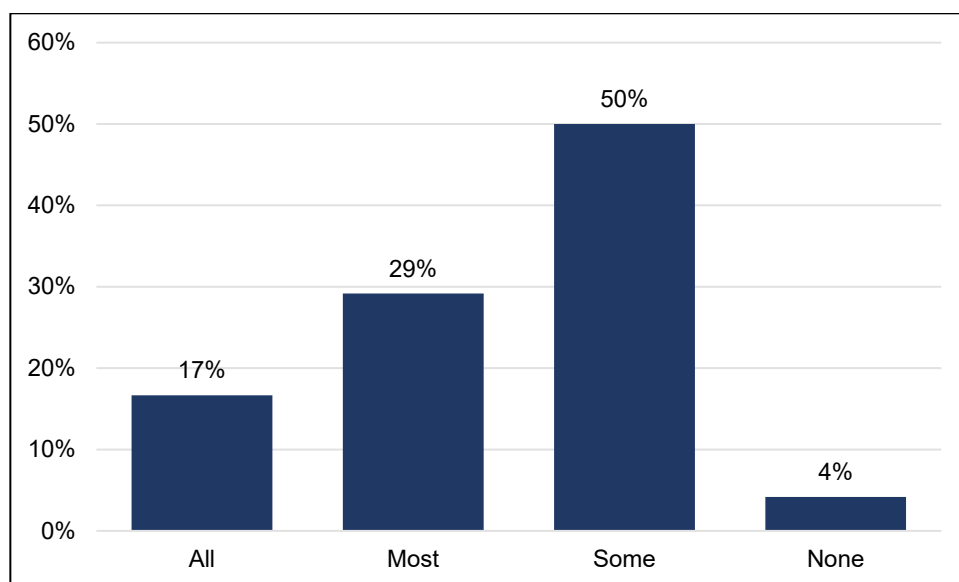
Source: Survey of LA and partner staff (n=24)

Half of all respondents (50%) reported having implemented some recommendations following the peer review, nearly one third had implemented most (29%) and 17% all. One respondent (4%) said they had not implemented any of the recommendations. Respondents were then asked to explain why they had taken recommendations on board to the extent that they said they did. Those who said that they had implemented all the recommendations had a very positive view of the recommendations and of the peer review process overall. They felt that the process helped to shape priorities and "catalysed our thinking", and that the recommendations reflected their priorities and were practical.

The majority of respondents who had implemented most of the recommendations indicated that they had just recently received the peer review, and with time they

intended to implement the rest, with some respondents highlighting that this was a priority. For some of those who had only implemented some of the recommendations, this was again an issue of time and plans were in place to implement them. Others said that they were using the recommendations as guidance in formulating their strategy or redesigning services. Some respondents indicated that implementation was outside of their remit and/or was dependent on collaboration with other areas. One respondent (who consistently reported a negative experience of the peer review process) was critical of the recommendations as too focussed on Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND).

Many of the LAs interviewed had written **action plans**, set specific targets, and were taking practical steps to achieve them. One area had a steering group that meets regularly to review progress against the action plan.

Most areas mentioned taking up some of the practical recommendations: one area had secured additional funding for a new project on transition to reception, which was being implemented with good uptake from primary schools. Another area highlighted that the recommendation to develop a multi-agency action plan, from the peer review, will enable them to consider whether they need to re-allocate resources.

A number of LAs found some of the recommendations, like making sure that the early years workforce reflects the demographics of the area, **difficult to implement by the LA alone**. They felt that without wider changes in the sector, for example addressing the low pay levels available to retain staff, this was a recommendation that was beyond the scope of the LA.

Outcomes

Survey respondents were generally extremely positive about the extent to which the peer review had **contributed to outcomes** in early years speech, language and communication in their LA, as illustrated below:

Figure 7. Perceived role of the peer review in contributing to outcomes
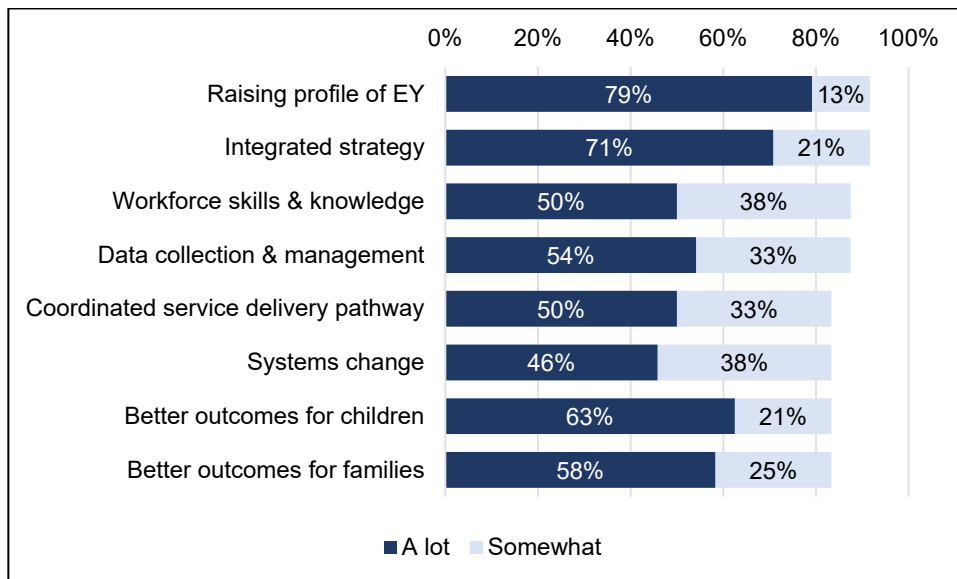
Source: Survey of LA and partner staff (n=24)

The vast majority of respondents (92%) said the peer review had contributed 'a lot' or 'somewhat' to raising the profile of the issue among senior leaders and to developing and implementing an integrated strategy in their LA. Nearly one in ten respondents (88%) said the process had improved workforce skills and knowledge, and data collection and management 'a lot' or 'somewhat'. Finally, 83% of respondents felt that the peer review had contributed 'a lot' or 'somewhat' to implementing a coordinated pathway for service delivery; bringing about systems change; generating better outcomes for children; and for families. None of the respondents said the peer review did not contribute at all to these outcomes, and 8% said the last two outcomes around children and families did not apply to their LA.

These findings are consistent with gradually achieving outcomes, with more respondents saying that earlier-stage changes (such as raising the profile of early years or developing a strategy) had been achieved, compared to outcomes that are more likely to take place as a result of these initial changed (e.g. implementing a coordinated service delivery pathway, or overall systems change).

Improved partnership working

A strong theme on outcomes that emerged from the interviews was a need for greater **collaboration across teams**:

> "The biggest change is the relationships: one of the things we knew about, but the peer review validated for us was that we were not joined up as a system, but since the peer review we are collaborating much better with partners." – *Review recipient*

Examples of greater collaboration include the speech and language therapy (SaLT) team being more proactive in trying to work with the early years team. Others found working across areas that historically have not worked well together to be challenging.

The peer review also gave staff involved the opportunity to expand their networks and work more closely with people in other services. One interviewee with a background in education talked about attending meetings around health in early years:

> "It has provided a platform to have much more robust discussions with other services. I wouldn't have met those people or come to work with them so quickly if it hadn't been for the peer review process." – *Review recipient*

Increased senior leadership engagement

One of the main outcomes LAs mentioned was greater **senior leadership engagement** with the issue of early years speech, language and communication, from the initial reflection and planning process through to implementation of the recommendations. For example, in one area the director of Public Health and the council are more aware of the programmes in place, and have been collaborating more and working more efficiently towards shared goals. In another area, the CEO took an interest in the peer review and followed-up on progress afterwards. Another interviewee said the operations director now chairs the early years strategic groups and therefore has a much greater awareness of services.

This contributed to **raising the profile of early years** and placing it on the policy agenda, which was also described as a key outcome of the peer review:

> "I would say that raising the profile of early years has probably been the biggest outcome, and not just in Children's Services, which is good in itself, but also within the LA in general as much as they have decided that our 'Closing the Gap' work will become one of the [council's] transformational targets. There are only 20 across the whole [council], and so to have 'Closing the Gap in Early Years' as one of those – I mean, I really can't quite believe it. It's really good that the specific leaders are now able to see that." – *Review recipient*

Another theme was wanting to use findings from the peer review to influence **commissioners.** One area was having conversions with commissioners about identifying levels of risk, improving their SEND provision and SaLT, as well as thinking about creative ways they could engage with schools. Finally, they felt the peer review had helped highlight speech, language and communication as a key issue in reviewing investment into their Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG).

Multi-agency strategy

Some interviewees said their area had started a multi-agency process of **strategic review**:

"It's been a catalyst for change, we managed to secure additional funding to respond to some of the priorities. This has enabled us to work with - we've commissioned [an external organisation] to help us with strategy development." – *Review recipient*

Several LAs described the introduction of **robust governance models** as a result of the peer review. One LA said their early years provision was fragmented and they are working on defining the governance and accountability structures for the new strategy. Similarly, in one area the steering group went from reluctant engagement to being highly motivated to make changes.

Structural changes to service delivery

Some of the LAs had started making some **structural changes** to how they deliver early years provision around speech and language. One LA said they expected this to be a lengthy process, involving revising the structures of some of the departments. For example, they had changed their approach to working with some of their partners, particularly around health and social care.

Another area had developed a new standalone early years service within Children's Services, which interviewees thought happened as a consequence of the peer review and improved visibility of early years:

"There have been big steps forward. The biggest thing is that finally [the council] have a standalone early years service, and that is a direct result of the peer review and the prominence it gave across the system. It has always been a bit lost before." – *Review recipient*

One area obtained funding to develop a **bespoke digital tool to measure outcomes** for children across the LA, following a recommendation from the peer review. The tool is linked to the early years funding portal, so that when early years providers claim their funding each term, they have to provide progress data for each child attending their setting. They were successfully tracking children's outcomes over time, which enabled them to identify providers that needed support. Some of these providers had high Ofsted ratings, which led to challenging conversations with senior leaders about the best way to assess the quality of early years provision and the importance of measuring outcomes for individual children:

"This is enabling us to focus the quality improvement work that we do […] on the right early years providers. […] At the moment we are working closely with about 50 providers. They are not necessarily the ones that our quality improvement service has had much to do with before – their Ofsted outcomes are all good or outstanding – and none of these providers has given cause for concern. […] In early years Ofsted take much more of a snapshot and don't take into account progress of individual children. […] So that has been tricky to have a conversation

about that with our leadership, it has really helped us to break down the problem." – *Review recipient*

Finally, one area said they developed a **school readiness plan**, as during the peer review it emerged that different stakeholders had different understandings of what the term 'school readiness' meant. They worked together to agree a definition, as well as literature and support for parents which they receive upon registering their child for school, outlining what they need to do to get the child and themselves ready for school:

> "We now have a really clear school readiness strategy and all the documentation leaflets and lots of information for parents. Lots of practical resources to make it helpful for parents, not just about can they do their own shoelaces, also emotional readiness." – *Review recipient*

Synergies between peer review and EOF

One LA that received a peer review as well as funding through the EOF reported that the **synergies between the two programmes**, and the networks created had been tremendously helpful. For example, some of the system mapping work they did through the EOF helped inform the strategic review carried out following the peer review.

Outcomes for peer reviewers

It is important to recognise that there were **outcomes for peer reviewers** as well. For example, some peer reviewers said they applied some of the **learning** from the review they conducted in their LAs, while others asked to receive a peer review after conducting one. One peer reviewer felt that the programme makes professionals feel **valued in their role as reviewers**, and gives them an opportunity to share their expertise. One interviewee had also trained to become a peer reviewer since receiving the peer review, following the advice of someone they met at one of the LGA learning events.

Enablers

One of the themes that emerged from the interviews, was that to make the most of the peer review, LAs needed to be **open and honest** with the peer review team about how services were being delivered, and accepting of constrictive feedback:

> "Everyone was so open to the peer review and there was no underlying shyness about showing just our good side, we really welcomed it and wanted the fresh eyes. The fact that our director was so open to it and supportive then when there have been difficulties - she has been able to get rid of problems." – *Review recipient*

The **timing** of the peer review was also considered important: interviewees felt that it needed to take place at a time when LAs had the opportunity and capacity to implement the recommendations and make changes.

Finally, **funding** was mentioned as crucial to successfully implementing the recommendations, where they involved additional costs, for example for expanded services or further planning work. Linked to funding was **staff capacity**, which some of the interviewees felt was needed to make some of the changes happen.

Barriers

One of the barriers mentioned was the difficulty **tracking individual children over time**, as they typically attend a number of different providers before reaching school age (e.g. childminders, nurseries, etc), who all run their separate assessments with no continuity or centralised database. As mentioned above, one area had successfully developed a digital tracking tool, but this had required separate investment and a significant amount of time.

Another issue mentioned was the difficulty in **bringing different stakeholders together** on a regular basis, as well as getting people to **agree on priorities** and implementation approaches. One interviewee expressed frustration at not being able to convince some of the key players in Children's Services about the importance of universal provision:

> "The fact that we can't work together is frustrating. Within Children' Services there are different people working in very different ways, people who don't necessarily get the value of universal services and that if you have ae really good offer for those children then those children won't necessarily have to go to specialist services." – *Review recipient*

One area said they had not been able to implement any of the recommendations for children with **SEND**, where needs are more complex, there is greater demand but not necessarily more funding. Specifically, they would like to establish an outcome measurement system for children with SEND and to map speech, language and communication support. Getting different partners to prioritise speech and language in early years for SEND children was proving to be particularly challenging, with the potential risk to increase the gap for those children.

Sustainability

The people interviewed were **committed to making and sustaining changes** following the peer reviews, and ensuring the impact of the programme.

More integrated early years systems

Generally, interviewees found that because the peer review programme is about **systems change**, structural changes introduced following the review can be sustained in the long-term without much additional funding. They felt the momentum created by the

programme changed mind-sets and practice, particularly to bring about **greater integration** in service delivery.

For example, some LAs mentioned having one system for service-delivery across the council, while another was identifying gaps within their provision and how resources could be best allocated. One area said they were working towards integrating early years services provided by the council and by health:

> "My role with the CCG is continuing going forward: 50% of my time CCG commissioning and 50% [Local Authority] commissioning, so we are looking at how we can align children's commissioning as a service." – *Review recipient*

Incorporating changes into strategy

One of the main ways that LAs felt they would sustain the changes was by integrating them into their wider **strategy**. Some of the LAs said they planned to incorporate the recommendations into their strategic review and long-term system redesign. One of the LAs was going through a process of **recommissioning services** and found the timing of the peer review particularly helpful to inform discussions around service delivery.

Committed senior leadership

A number of LAs mentioned having **senior leadership buy-in** as key to sustainability, to ensure the issue remains on the policy agenda and there is a strong drive to make change happen. One interviewee said senior management in her area immediately accepted all the recommendations from the peer review and included them in the work plan for next year

One area had restructured the early years strategic group to include stronger leadership, as well as practitioners and parent representatives, to prioritise early years speech, language and communication:

> "The early years strategic group and the revision that is done there [will ensure sustainability] because the Operations Director is chairing that, and her background is specialist child protection. I think that we now have higher level people involved […]. We also now have parent reps as well as early years practitioners. So I think it's a more robust group now who are challenging rather than just receiving." – *Review recipient*

Ongoing support from peer reviewers

Many LAs felt that **follow-up visits** would play an important role in ensuring sustainability, because knowing there would be some follow-up would help to keep people on track and focussed on the changes that they need to make:

> "We have just heard from the LGA that they are going to come back for a visit sometime in the summer[9] […]. It's good to have everyone's minds focused." – *Review recipient*

A number of interviewees said their LA was having conversations with the peer review team about organising a follow-up visit 12 months after the original review:

> "They are coming to do a follow up. We are still struggling with closing the gap, […] so the sharing of what they can bring in terms of things that are working in other areas that they can suggest and learning from other areas [is valuable]. We want them to bring that in and feedback." – *Review recipient*

Funding

However, it is worth noting that the need for **additional funding** was also a strong theme among interviewees, with some noting that they had secured funding for some initial strategic or delivery work, and others pointing out that more resources would help sustain change. One LA said they are struggling to recruit staff to implement the recommendations, because they are only able to offer short-term contracts due to the uncertainty around future funding. One LA mentioned that community events to engage local families in implementing the recommended changes helped them to attract local funders.

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[9] The research was completed in March, before the lockdown imposed as a result of Covid-19, therefore we are not aware if/how LAs that had peer reviews actually received follow-up support.

Evaluation of the Early Outcomes Fund

This chapter presents the key findings from the evaluation of the EOF. We collected data through semi-structured interviews with a sample of individuals involved in five EOF projects, and analysed it thematically. The findings were then triangulated with self-evaluation reports written by each of the EOF areas.

The chapter begins with an outline of the reasons for applying to the EOF, approaches to delivery, project aims and key players involved. It then explores interviewees' experiences of participating in the EOF, including their views on the set-up process and the Maturity Matrix. Finally, it describes perceived enablers and barriers to delivery, views on the sustainability of the projects' outcomes, short- and long-term aspirations for the project, and risks.

Delivery of the EOF

Reasons for applying

The main reason why LAs applied to the EOF was to secure **additional resource** in the area of early years speech, language and communication. Several interviewees said they were already aware of improvements they wanted to make, but were limited by their available funding.

One interviewee mentioned that they applied with the intention of using the additional funding to run an **evaluation** of existing activities, to receive constructive feedback on their impact and effectiveness:

> "It was such an exciting opportunity to get some investment and seek an evidence base for what we were already doing." – *EOF interviewee*

Another interviewee explained that they saw applying for EOF funding as a way of shining a **spotlight on early years services** and placing the issue on the council's policy agenda:

> "Because it has brought money into the County, that has got Cabinet members' ears pricked up, [it] put early years high on the agenda." – *EOF interviewee*

In some cases, LAs had worked on similar systems change initiatives before the EOF. For example, one interviewee had worked on an early intervention programme, whilst

others had received additional funding for early years through being an Opportunity Area[10] and saw the value of participating in programmes of this nature.

Approach to EOF projects

LAs took a **range of approaches** to implementing projects funded by the EOF. Some developed new approaches using the funding, others funded existing activities, and some did a combination of the two.

For some projects, funding from the EOF opened opportunities to invest in **new and innovative approaches** in early years systems. Interviewees described different methods of developing new ideas, including:

- using the Maturity Matrix to develop a new programme of activity;
- actioning recommendations from previous inspections;
- conducting a survey with early years delivery partners; and
- consulting specialised academic partners.

Most projects that used EOF funding to implement existing approaches tended to **expand on existing systems**, and hence felt that their EOF approaches were both 'new' and 'existing'. Several interviewees explained that the funding allowed them to consider what was already working well, and expand in those areas. In one project, some speech, language and communication activities were replicated across different agencies. In this and similar cases, the EOF funding provided an opportunity to embed a LA-wide early years strategy.

Project aims

Each EOF project had specific aims, unique to the local context. However, the following common themes emerged from the interviews:

- **Early intervention:** a number of projects reported working with early years services to enhance their early intervention activities. For example, one LA described testing interventions for referring pre-birth children who had been identified as high risk.
- **Cross-sector working:** most projects wished to develop or improve their integrated approach in delivering early years speech, language and communication interventions. Interviewees described using EOF funding to develop strategies for more joined-up working between relevant stakeholders and services.

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[10] Further information on Opportunity Areas is available https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-mobility-and-opportunity-areas#history. [Accessed 30/01/2020]

- **Participation:** some projects emphasised the value of wider participation in developing and implementing an early years strategy. Their EOF project aims included increased community and parental engagement, adopting a grass-roots approach. One interviewee described it as *'really exciting because it's not just about the professionals, and not just about the families. It's about everyone*.'

Key people

Most EOF projects had a **project manager** whose role was to coordinate the communication and implementation of project activities across the LA or partnership. Beyond this, LAs reported working with a **range of partners**, including LA staff at different levels, including strategic leaders, senior and middle management, and frontline workers; universities; commissioners; third sector organisations; education services; and Pupil Referral Units.

Interviewees commented on how the nature of the EOF projects had led to increased **cross-agency working**, with one person saying: "*This project is acting as a catalyst for integration*".

Views and experiences of participating in the project

Projects has a positive view of the EOF project design: they appreciated that it allowed participants to build on existing systems and on what works locally, to identify and address the gaps. This has allowed each area to develop a bespoke offer.

Set up

The activities involved in setting up varied across projects. Most interviewees who were involved in the set-up of their EOF project mentioned having **initial board meetings** with all the major stakeholders. They emphasised the importance of communication across all partners, so everyone was clear on expectations and timelines. This was considered particularly significant given the short timeframe of the funding.

Several interviewees highlighted the value of having a **project manager**. Having one dedicated person managing EOF activities was seen as extremely helpful for organisational and logistical reasons:

> "Particular successes have come from where there has been an individual who has either been told that they can concentrate on this, or there has been a PM recruited and put in place to run this." – *EOF interviewee*

In areas that did not have an assigned project manager, this created challenges in terms of competing priorities and lack of time to manage the EOF activities.

One interviewee mentioned feeling very **supported by DfE**. They felt they could ask for guidance from the Department where needed:

> "We felt very supported in the process, we had a lot of close contact with [DfE representatives], they were very helpful and came up to our initial leadership meeting." – *EOF interviewee*

Use of the Maturity Matrix

Most projects used the Maturity Matrix as a tool during the **bidding and preparation** stages. One interviewee commented that it facilitated thinking about the local area, local strengths and weaknesses, and strategy. Although a couple of interviewees found the Maturity Matrix challenging to understand at first, the majority felt that it was a **useful tool** to self-evaluate and establish a baseline at the beginning of project activities:

> "Personally, I find it incredibly useful, I think it's great and it has been a real eye-opener [for the project] to see where the gaps are and where there are more gaps than they thought. As a motivator that's great, it gets buy-in." – *EOF interviewee*

A number of projects used it as an ongoing self-assessment tool to **measure change over time**. A few areas said they found seeing changes in the scoring and colours over the course of the project a **useful visual**. One area revisited the Maturity Matrix with partners and "*used it to be brutally honest*" to assess progress and gain a clear picture of what they still needed to develop. They found that they had made the greatest progress in the areas over which they had direct control, compared to areas where they had to rely on partners. They felt it was really important to repeat the exercise to demonstrate what they had achieved over the year, and to help plan for the following year.

One project said that they carried out two more specific evaluations during project implementation, using many of the headings of the Matrix to identify gaps. However, they found the Maturity Matrix to be quite **high level and strategic** (e.g. around strategic relationships, etc) and therefore not entirely fit for their purposes. They developed a tool that was more detailed at a locality level, for example to identify specific aspects of the pathway that were not working.

One interviewee described it as a **tool for stakeholder engagement**, starting with self-evaluation and then thinking about the strategy for next 5 years. They also found the EIF sessions, during which they went through the Matrix with a group of stakeholders[11],

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[11] EIF sessions to go through the Maturity Matrix were part of the peer review programme and not the EOF. It is possible that the respondent took part in both and confused the two.

helpful and hoped it would facilitate further engagement of the Director of Children's Services who had not been actively involved in the monitoring progress.

The self-evaluation reports mentioned using the Maturity Matrix at the **end of the project** to compare results to the original ratings and assess change over time. It is possible that this was not mentioned during the interviews because they were carried out before the end of the project when the Matrix was used again.

One interviewee felt that the Maturity Matrix alone does not capture qualitative data, and therefore cannot fully convey the impact of an intervention:

> "My only caveat then would be that it's only half the picture. It's a tool you could take to policymakers and say: 'this has worked, or not' and they can take that in. But actually, all the wealth of quali data that paints the full picture, that the Matrix cannot do." – *EOF interviewee*

Finally, a number of interviewees reported using **The Balanced System**[12], developed by Better Communication CIC, to complement the Maturity Matrix, or as an alternative tool. The main benefits of The Balanced System tool were described as helping with mapping existing provision and identifying minor changes that were not identified by the Maturity Matrix.

LGA leaning events

Only a small number of EOF interviewees had attended the LGA learning events. Those who did found the learning from these events very valuable. One person found it useful to meet people from the other EOF projects, as they had expected that there would have more regular meetings organised by DfE to work collaboratively.

One area felt that perhaps they are further along the journey of integrating early years provision on speech, language and communication compared to other areas, and therefore they felt they did not get much out of some of the sessions. However, they recognised that it is difficult to cater for such a broad range of participants.

Project implementation

Generally, stakeholders reported **meeting delivery milestones** on time. However, many of those interviewed felt that the **timeline** for the project was tight and would have liked a longer implementation period, as it often took longer than expected to get activities started or to coordinate and agree action plans among the various stakeholders involved.

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[12] Further information on The Balanced System is available https://www.bettercommunication.org.uk/the-balanced-system/. [Accessed 30/01/2020]

During the first half of the year, EOF areas focused on mapping existing services and then began project delivery, including:

- developing relationships with different agencies and securing buy-in to join up early years speech, language and communication service-delivery;
- participating in strategic planning and needs assessments;
- designing workshop development plans and delivering staff training;
- developing speech, language and communication pathways, data sharing agreements and screening tools to help with signposting and referrals; and
- working with families around how to best engage with the community.

Some of the stakeholders interviewed described having made some **changes** during project implementation. For example, one project had initially planned to bring in an external organisation to support with parents and community engagement, but then realised it would be more effective and sustainable to work with the local engagement team and voluntary sector.

Initial mapping exercise

Interviewees and self-evaluation reports described carrying out an initial **mapping** of existing services to identify duplication, gaps and where services were not joined up.

As part of the mapping exercise, one project designed a bespoke **skills audit tool** to gain an in-depth understanding of the skills available and the gaps in their area. They felt that while developing their own tool caused delays in carrying out the audit compared to using an existing tool, it ensured a better end product. Others found that the initial **mapping exercise** led to unexpected findings: one area identified a gap in specialist speech, language and communication therapy in the community. This led to developing a local, tailored screening tool and to further work around providing high level SaLT in the community.

Workforce development

Interviews and self-evaluations reveal that most of the projects delivered **staff training** in response to the initial mapping or needs assessment activities. One self-evaluation report states the area carried out a training needs assessment, in which they identified staff confidence levels around early years speech, language and communication as low, but relatively few professionals identified a need for further training. They then created a comprehensive workforce development programme focusing on practical workshops.

One of the self-evaluation reports mentioned joint training for early years teams in health, social care and early help, schools, NHS, private early years settings and voluntary groups. Interviewees listed training topics ranging from the link between early speech and language and later life outcomes, bilingualism, early intervention, enhanced

communication, and others depending on local need. Uptake was generally high (with one project reporting over 90% attendance among health services personnel and just under 80% among early years staff) showing commitment and dedication from staff. Feedback was also very positive:

> "People were saying: 'gosh we didn't know that! We had no idea it mattered that much!'" – *EOF interviewee*

Stakeholder engagement

Stakeholder engagement was considered crucial to create momentum and to inform strategy and pathway development. One area reported interviewing staff at early years settings and schools, as well as parents/carers to gather insights on their needs, what they thought was working well and where there were gaps. This was followed by a meeting of strategic stakeholders, including health commissioners, SaLT, strategic council members, parent representatives, executive head-level school staff, midwives and representatives from the social care sector and other parallel projects.

Linked to stakeholder engagement was the **co-production of pathways and content** to support early years professionals and families with a range of stakeholders. One area reported using co-production to ensure the information is interesting and accessible for both parents and early years professionals, and that it allows professionals to easily create personalised pathways to support children.

Focus on universal and targeted services

A strong theme in project delivery was the need to ensure that children's speech and language issues are noticed and addressed early, by making more **universal and targeted**, as opposed to specialist, services available. One area mentioned wanting to shift the focus from referral-only services to open access or self-referral:

> "We reintroduced six stay-play-and-learn sessions for parents and children aged 0 to 4 because we found that we only had a fairly high-level need service available. At the start, these groups were referral only, but we have now opened it up to self-referral and actually pretty much everyone who turns up is in that category of people we most want to support." — *EOF interviewee*

Support from DfE

Some of the projects commented on **DfE involvement**, saying that there was a high level of engagement at the beginning, which then dropped off and it was sometimes difficult to get responses to queries. One area commented that it would have been good to receive validation and know the work was being recognised and shared with other areas. They

also expected to have more opportunities to meet with other projects. However, they also appreciated being given some autonomy.

Outcomes

All the stakeholders interviewed reported being **on-track** to achieve the milestones and making progress towards the outcomes they had originally set. The outcomes reported in this section are based on qualitative interviews which often drew on quantitative and qualitative data, collected either by project staff or by locally commissioned external evaluators.

However, it is worth noting that most interviewees mentioned that the **short timescale** did not allow them to see the full realisation of the outcomes and impacts within the year of funding, or would not even be seen until the targeted children are older:

> "I think this project has several years' lead-in before you see impact. So we have a lot of work to do over the next couple of years - so it's [the funding period] not long enough to see a long-term impact." – *EOF interviewee*

Engagement from senior leaders

A key outcome reported by projects was **increased senior leadership engagement** with early years speech, language and communication, which resulted in the issue receiving considerably more policy attention both in the LA and amongst health services. This has helped to make sure the strategies developed as part of the EOF project are driven at a much more senior level than previously. The Head of Child Services in one area described the change brought about by the project as 'transformational', which is reflective of the general attitude in the LA.

Strategic leader engagement and commitment was commonly mentioned in the self-evaluation reports as well. An example is an area in which the senior management team explicitly committed to driving forward **system change** and support early years practice through the project. Another report described excellent leadership across the project areas, which led to integrating the workforce in a strategic way, and working on shared outcomes.

To increase senior leader involvement, one project developed a **leadership coaching programme** together with a local university. This gave leaders more confidence around making changes to the local early years speech, language and communication strategy and services:

> "It has really helped our project leads to have the confidence to lead the transformation work they need to do locally." – *EOF interviewee*

Raise the profile of early years speech, language and communication

A direct consequence of greater engagement and buy-in from senior leaders was **raising the profile** of early years speech, language and communication:

> "It feels like it is being driven at a much more senior level than it was before the project, so that has been good." – *EOF interviewee*

Interviewees also hoped the higher profile of the issue would influence commissioning decisions and particularly to lead to **joint commissioning** between early years and health. One of the self-evaluation reports stated that significant change in commissioning behaviour across the project areas was expected by the end of the project.

One interviewee thought it would have been helpful if the EOF had had a **greater profile nationally**, to increase visibility, particularly alongside the Opportunity Area project. This may have enabled greater buy-in from senior stakeholders.

Integrated early years strategy and pathway

Another common outcome was the development of an **integrated early years strategy**, which often was a direct result of strategic leaders increased focus on the issue, and of greater **collaboration among agencies**. One area described developing a joint strategy through a series of workshops involving different stakeholders from the various LAs involved in the project. The strategy was being finalised when the interview was carried out, but they had completed an early years skills strategy from which each LA involved could draw to develop tailored training plans.

Joint strategic planning was detailed in a number of self-evaluation reports, with one describing the project's main outcome as the **collaboration** between the LAs in the EOF consortium to develop a shared regional strategy and joint principles, which informed staff training priorities in each locality.

A number of areas developed a **shared speech and language response pathway** between the LAs/early years services and health (including SaLT and health visiting). In some cases, this includes a website providing an online resource detailing a pathway which complements existing initiatives. Project areas can use it to develop their provision by accessing information on interventions they may not have known about at a local level.

Joint strategic planning and delivery has helped ensure that **resources** were used effectively. One area also reported exploring how widely used tools and resources, such as Tiny Happy People and the Education Endowment Foundation would fit with their strategy and provision.

Upskilled professionals

A number of projects described **workforce development** through training, resources and events as a key outcome. In one area early years staff reported feeling more confident to

deliver support services themselves, following the training they received, rather than referring children to specialist services. A self-evaluation report described an exhibition planned in consultation with the local early years advisory team and including educationally themed exhibits, which provided a **learning opportunity for education and health practitioners**, as well as parents.

Another area rolled out a programme of **leadership coaching** which, according to the project's self-evaluation, was valued by participants who said they saw the impact of the coaching they'd received on the way they led the implementation of the programme in their local area.

Standardised shared assessment tools

A number of areas developed **standardised assessment tools** to identify children's needs and track their progress over time. One area was piloting a tool and planning to roll it out across all project areas. They had moved the assessment age from 2 years to 18 months following feedback from localities that 2 years is too late to identify children with speech and language delays. The initial evidence was that the new tool, which linked the assessment to specific activities, was more effective.

Another area designed a tool and got neighbouring LAs, who were not involved in the EOF project, to use it as well. This was particularly useful as families move across LA boundaries fairly frequently:

> "We are all using the same assessment tool, the same screening tool, and that's really helpful." — *EOF interviewee*

One of the projects developed a common assessment tool to provide RAG rating at individual child level and track the support delivered, making sure that issues are identified and addressed early:

> "We are supporting early years settings to put in targeted support work for children [rated] amber, and so we are making sure [staff] have those skills. So then Red [rated] children will be referred to the speech and language team." – *EOF interviewee*

Projects trained practitioners in different settings to use the tools, to ensure as many children as possible are assessed and monitored in a consistent way. One of the self-evaluation reports described how using the assessment tool can be motivating for frontline staff:

> "I love being able to assess the children and see where they are up to and move them on, especially seeing the progress of children with additional needs: this shows the smaller steps. I now assess children in the first few weeks of starting nursery and send home activities to work on - the same as nursery - so we are all

working on the same thing". – *Early years setting practitioner, from self-evaluation report*

Improved data collection and use

A number of projects mentioned an increased and improved **use of data**. In one area, strategic data is being used to provide a population-level picture of outcomes and to incorporate partners' data. This involved developing unique identifiers and matching datasets, which the interviewee said had been challenging, but was progressing and would continue into next year.

Another project had paper-based data collection systems prior to the EOF funding, and through the project piloted an '**early years digitalisation project**', which will allow them to track the entire early years journey digitally. They hoped to share learning from this process nationally once the system is in place, as they are the first LA in England to develop a fully digital and integrated system for early years speech, language and communication data.

Children and families

Some of the projects focused more on high-level systems change, while others integrated it with more grassroots activities **supporting children and families** directly. One project self-evaluation showed positive outcomes around the quality of parent/carer interactions with children, and children's language and communication following a combination of **universal** ('stay and play', music and rhyme sessions), **targeted** (baby and toddler PEEP[13] groups) and **specialist** (individual support from health visitors and volunteers) interventions.

The self-evaluation report from another project described a Literacy Hub set up to encourage parents/carers to read with their children and integrate storytelling into play. Parents' and children's feedback was very positive, with parents saying that they valued the learning opportunities the Literacy Hub offered their children (beyond standard 'stay and play') and that they would incorporate some of the storytelling techniques from the hub at home:

> "The story - the way it was told - that was amazing, and I think I am going to put a bit more, you know, drama into my storytelling at home". – *Parent, from self-evaluation report*

Interviewees from one area said they delivered a rolling **training programme** for small groups of parents/carers focusing on simple interventions (e.g. encouraging parents to talk to their children) as well as providing games and techniques. The training had very good attendance, reach and feedback. Parents commented that they did not know that

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[13] Peep stands for Parents and Early Education Partners and is an approach to help parents/carers to support children's learning and development. It was developed by the charity Peeple, and more information can be found on their website https://www.peeple.org.uk/ [accessed 14/07/2020].

communication with babies and young children is so important and some of the parents said they noticed an improvement in their child's speech after just a few sessions.

Unintended Outcomes

A number of areas mentioned increased collaboration across services and teams as an unintended outcome of the project. One example was the **strategic alignment and collaboration** between SaLT and SEN teams, which previously had worked together operationally but not strategically, and were producing a document on how to best to deliver services collaboratively and improve accountability. Another example was **more integrated working** between health and LAs, particularly at a leadership level, which led to reviewing the pathway and including additional interventions. Interviewees said they thought joint working was already taking place, and therefore had not made it an explicit outcome of the project:

> "We thought integration was already happening, but we think it is happening now at a different level." – *EOF interviewee*

One area said that one of the key outcomes for them, which was agreed as part of the EOF grant milestones, was to achieve the use of **shared terminology** across all the partner LAs. This was achieved through workshops for LA leads and operational staff to define shared principles, plan delivery to ensure that the principles were embedded, and report back so the process could be collectively quality assured. When LAs reported on their implementation plans they all used the same language, rather than local terminology, which allowed for a more consistent joined up approach.

Enablers

Set up phase

Most EOF projects were implemented by **partnerships between LAs**, and the feedback on this approach was generally positive. In one area it appeared that the initial reason for setting up the partnership was the perception that consortium bids were more likely to be successful.

The initial work of gathering information and **mapping service delivery** in the area to identify gaps and duplication was considered key to provide a clear foundation and direction for the project.

Collaboration and joint working

The key enabling factor that emerged from the interviews was **developing partnerships** among different actors in the early years speech, language and communication landscape. A number of interviewees stressed the importance of obtaining **buy-in from**

all stakeholders involved, from commissioners to local families, to make sure everyone felt invested in the project and has the opportunity to have their voices heard.

Examples of collaboration included agencies working together with a shared focus on early years speech, language and communication. One consortium project described the EOF as a catalyst for greater integration and collaboration among the various LAs involved. According to one interviewee, the project "*has given us a vehicle to join lots of other pieces of work together*", bringing together LAs and voluntary sector providers to look at school readiness through the lens of speech and language.

One project found that training sessions delivered by a **multi-agency team** comprised of early years staff, a SEND consultant and a speech and language therapist was very effective to model joint working around systems change:

> "[When] rolling out training on system-wide change, having multi-agency training sessions is really valuable to understand different roles, and the interaction between different roles." – *EOF interviewee*

Building solid relationships throughout the project proved to be crucial to success. These relationships were mostly developed through **face-to-face meetings** and visits. This was particularly important in the case of consortium projects. These meetings encouraged engagement at senior level, and gave people the opportunity to talk about their work and to be honest about the areas in which they wanted support. They also provided an opportunity to **share learning** across the different areas of the EOF consortia.

Linked to this, one of the self-evaluation reports described the importance of the formal and informal **peer-to-peer networks** developed during the project, to foster collaboration and share learning among the members of the EOF consortium and across different agencies.

One project worked with some of its neighbouring LAs that had been unsuccessful in their EOF bid, and they see the enthusiasm and commitment of all involved as a tangible marker of the success of the project. Another interviewee mentioned that they valued building **links with national programmes**, such as the DfE's social mobility programme and the work they have been doing on improving the home learning environment.

Funding

Having dedicated **funding** to work on this project, and therefore staff time, was seen as crucial to bringing about systems change, as it created opportunities for networking and joint working:

> "It's been a phenomenal year in terms of having this additional resource to focus our mind and attention on this important issue. And having the additional resource

has made a huge difference to having the capacity to really drive the changes. The funding obviously helps and awful lot to drive strategic change." – *EOF interviewee*

"To have dedicated time for this has been one of the greatest successes. People have networked together, there's been a lot of learning between the [project] areas, a lot of peer support. I think that's been a real strength for us, of the project." – *EOF interviewee*

Funding also enabled projects to engage senior leaders, which was described as something precious, and a "rare opportunity":

"[Early years leaders] feel so well supported by the meetings we have with them…we are really supporting them and giving them the space to slow everything down and think about what they are doing." – *EOF interviewee*

Project management

Linked to funding was the importance of a **dedicated project manager**. One interviewee described the project manager on her project as "*an advocate, very persuasive, and works well with different groups of people*." One of the project managers interviewed said that having worked in the area for a long time and knowing many people locally made things easier, while making connections with senior leaders and influencing them was a 'new challenge'.

The self-evaluation report from a consortium project said Project Leadership roles were created in each locality. Initially they were asked to identify key priorities and develop implementation plans for their local area, and then to keep track of implementation and carry out a final review to help assess the impact of the project.

Some of the interviewees mentioned the importance of the **outreach and networking** role of the project manager, as well as of their personal connections. In one area the project manager had a health background, which was instrumental in engaging partners working in health.

In one area the project lead's **connections** with other council members and teams allowed for a more strategic approach; a holistic view of the services on offer; an effective allocation of staff roles and responsibilities within the EOF project; and overall effective joint working with teams across the LA and health. In another area the project manager reported pushing for the issue to be placed on the policy agenda and for a joint strategy to be developed:

"I now do updates to various senior leadership teams. I also go around to all of the different groups and make sure it's in all of their strategies." – *EOF interviewee*

Branding and dissemination

One project invested in creating a **brand** for the project, which they thought worked well as it became widely recognised locally and allowed to bring together all the resources created and the work they did in the community.

Finally, one area organised a **'good practice' event** to showcase promising examples of practice from the project:

> "We were keen to recognise that there is a lot of good stuff going on, and what we need to do is share that. Everybody has strengths but some things are stronger in some areas, so it's a great opportunity to see where best practice is." – *EOF interviewee*

Barriers

Short timeframe

A number of interviewees mentioned the project's **short timescale** as a considerable challenge from set-up through implementation and final evaluation. A potential issue for project managers was collecting the right information and speaking to all relevant stakeholders in a short period of time in the set-up phase.

Working across services, disrupting the way people are used to working and asking them to do things differently takes time, particularly given the limited capacity across the early years sector. Some felt that with more time, the initial engagement would have been of greater quality and the initial research could have been more detailed. Others said they would have benefited from some flexibility around end dates, or more time to wrap up.

Some of the interviewees mentioned a three to six months set-up period would have been helpful, particularly in light of some of the red tape around carrying out research within the NHS and of the lengthy staff recruitment process in LAs:

> "It was a March start but June/July before people were in post because local authorities have a lengthy recruitment process. […] We couldn't really get started until then and so we had to do the planning as we went along. Ideally, you'd have three to six months of planning and recruitment before you really got going. We won't have had a full 12 months of implementing anything. […] It has been difficult and stressful: lots of people are juggling lots of things." – *EOF interviewee*

Some of the interviewees mentioned that it is **difficult to measure impact**, as a one-year timeframe is too short "*to try and make transformational change*" and to carry out longitudinal evaluations of the programme. As an example, one LA mentioned carrying out follow-up interviews only 3 months after engaging stakeholders to promote their early

years communication programme, which was not sufficient to achieve outcomes. Another said it was very difficult to obtain quantitative impact data on time, particularly as it was held on paper.

While projects greatly appreciated having a programme manager leading on project implementation, some raised the concern that once the funding ended and this role no longer existed, if **additional funding** is not secured, it will be difficult to find the time and resources to keep up the momentum.

Partner engagement

While most projects had very positive experiences of cross-departmental working, it was apparent that the project lead's personal connections were often instrumental. One area where the project lead had a health background, said it had been a huge challenge to engage partners in Education.

Data collection and sharing

One project reported that they found the **strategic use of data** more complex than anticipated. They had ambitious plans about connecting different datasets to identify children at risk, but have had difficulties with their software, systems and assumptions. They adapted by changing their expectations about what is achievable.

Data sharing and specifically the requirements around **GDPR compliance** was seen as a challenge. One person gave the example of using an online survey tool and receiving complaints from respondents that the server is located in the United States. Others had difficulty obtaining ethical approval to carry out research with NHS staff for their self-evaluations. This can take up to three months, and led to delays. One area described it as an unexpected challenge, as there are no such requirements when conducting research within a LA.

Dynamics within EOF projects

One area mentioned the difficulty of bringing together different pieces of work, such as the EOF and Opportunity Area interventions, while others found the **dynamics within the EOF partnerships** could at times be challenging. For example, one person mentioned the lack of collaboration between health and education within her LA. She felt the bid writing process was a bit rushed and in retrospective, showed poor understanding of joint commissioning between health and education and little involvement of health professionals.

One interviewee reported having to overcome **resistance from colleagues** around the choice of the local evaluator, as well as around the short timescale for the project and competing priorities individuals faced.

Another respondent said that different LAs within a consortium put in hugely **different levels of effort and enthusiasm**, which affected the quality and quantity of data collected at the beginning of the project. For example, when asked to complete questionnaires with all stakeholders involved, one LA returned 50 completed surveys and another returned 1,000. Slower and less motivated partners held the entire project back to an extent.

Finally, one project manager mentioned challenges around **accountability and impartiality** for project managers in consortium projects, because even though there is a lead LA, the EOF project is with all LAs involved, giving the project manager and lead LA very limited leverage. For this reason, the interviewee described their role as more of a coordinator than manager. These issues were also discussed in detail in one of the self-evaluation reports, suggesting they presented a considerable challenge for one of the projects:

> "I think [the project manager] should really be somebody that's leading it, who is independent from [LAs], because in that way we can ask the questions that they wouldn't be comfortable asking each other, and we can suggest things based on empirical evidence, and we don't have any investment in any particular packages."
> – *Project manager, from self-evaluation report*

Sustainability

Sustainability was a central element of the project for all stakeholders interviewed, with one stating:

> "Legacy is at the forefront of our minds in everything that we are doing, as well as it being specified on our project plan." – *EOF interviewee*

Interviewees generally felt that if the projects have been successful, they have brought about systems change and set the **foundation for long-term change**:

> "We are going to do this forever, we will not just stop. There has been real systematic change. […] We are starting to form wider working relationships." – *Divisional manager, from self-evaluation report*

Embedded pathway and assessment tools

Interviewees felt that making pathways and assessment tools part of the daily work of frontline staff during the project was key to sustainability. Once the **pathway is embedded**, with practitioners aware of it and using it regularly, it does not require further funding. One interviewee suggested that the pathway they developed could be used alongside the PHE pathway as an operational 'how to' guide.

Similarly, areas where staff were using the new **assessment tools** developed during the project felt that this would continue beyond the funding period. One area had plans to share or sell one of the tools they had created to other LAs.

Making early years speech, language and communication a strategic priority

All projects interviewed had also taken steps to ensure the sustainability of the EOF project activities. A strong theme that emerged was ensuring this is a **priority for strategic leaders**, to raise the early years agenda across the area. One interviewee said the issue is now a priority in the local health and wellbeing strategy, while in another area the local Mayor committed to making school readiness a priority and there were ongoing conversations with senior management around how to make the interventions sustainable (for example, seeking funding from local budgets).

A number of projects set up **governance structures**, so that ongoing work is monitored and supported by senior people or strategic groups across early years and health. In one area, a working group met regularly to develop a **strategy**, with sustainability as one of their permanent agenda items:

> "We have formed a strategic governance group that has been brought together. So there will be meetings 4/5 times through the funding period to review the delivery that is taking place, and also to look at further analysis of the workforce development, in terms of staff confidence levels increasing." – *EOF interviewee*

Upskilling staff

To ensure the continued engagement of staff and community members, some of the projects focused on staff training. One project included **workforce development** around early years speech, language and communication as a fixed item in the local work plan, so that even in case of turnover, all staff will be familiar with the system. Another planned to focus future trainings on practicing and building confidence in using some of the newly developed assessment tools. Finally, one area was planning to develop their **leadership training programme** beyond the project timeframe, to offer an early years professional qualification.

Co-production

One project focused on community and parental engagement in **co-producing** the resources and tools recommended by the peer reviewers, to ensure sustainable outcomes. They targeted communities with poorer speech, language and communication

outcomes in early years, and ran community events to discuss the importance of the issue, and how they could address it together:

> "It's exciting work […]. I think it's got longevity in involving local people and how we want to progress it." – *EOF interviewee*

Use of data

Data management and the use of strategic data was also considered important for sustainability. One interviewee said building the data infrastructure to monitor the impact of the interventions will lead to improvements of the pathway and ensure the sustainability of the project. Another area hoped to make their database available to other LAs.

Funding

Some elements of the EOF projects are more challenging to make sustainable, such as active interventions. Some areas had secured **additional funding** to continue some of the activities (e.g. training mental health workers and others who typically find it harder to access training). One area is considering reviewing **existing services**, for example offered by children's centres, to find cost-effective ways to expand that provision. In some areas, EOF project activities were **incorporated into existing local projects**, to ensure they will continue beyond the duration of the funding. One project was discussing with the SaLT team which elements could be included in their core business.

Others expressed concern around the lack of ongoing funding and what that would mean in terms of maintaining commitment from stakeholders:

> "The challenges are [in sustaining] commitment, other things come up, other priorities. To me I think that's what the challenges will be post-funding. Unfortunately, there is not really anything we can do, it's out of our control really. We can build relationships and that is part of our stakeholder mapping and relationship building, but unfortunately in terms of LAs and other priorities we just don't have any control over that." – *EOF interviewee*

One of the self-evaluation reports said the project activities are being continued in a scaled-down version due to limited funding, while local families are requesting that activities are scaled back up to build on the successes of the EOF project.

Some of the interviewees hoped that the momentum generated by this project would have an effect on **commissioning behaviour**. One area said the SaLT health commissioner is beginning to recognise that there is a need to commission this work, and

they were hoping to trial a few approaches over the next year to inform how the service specification is written in 12 months' time.

Volunteers

A number of projects also engaged **volunteers** to maintain community involvement or carry out home visits. An example from one of the self-evaluation reports is working with Home Start to train volunteers who are support families following referrals from health visitors.

One other area engaged local people in the role of **project 'champions'**, with the expectation that they will continue promoting the project's messages and activities beyond the funding period. At the time of the interview there were 49 champions and there were plans to hold termly meetings for them to network, share and update resources.

Aspirations beyond EOF project funding

Interviewees were asked about their short- and longer-term aspirations after the end of EOF project. Maintaining the **momentum** generated by the project was considered important to achieve the goal of a Good Level of Development[14].

Evaluation and learning

A number of areas said they wanted to **capture and disseminate learning**, through their evaluation reports and other means. One area was planning to develop their tracking system to make it more user-friendly and make the analytical tasks simpler. They were planning to develop it into a product/service which could then be sold to other LAs together with training, to support wider evaluation.

One project hoped to contribute to the **evidence base** around what works, and to influence services beyond early years. Another project sought to ensure that learning, particularly around leadership coaching, is captured and disseminated beyond the EOF consortium. They were also keen to share the progress made on the digitisation of data as an example for the rest of the country.

Better outcomes for children

Some of the projects included elements of **community engagement** and **parental behaviour change**. A few areas planned to spread their messaging to families more

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[14] Children are assessed at the end of reception, and will be deemed to have achieved a Good Level of Development (GLD) if they achieve at least the expected level in the following areas: personal, social and emotional development; physical development; communication and language; literacy; and learning mathematics.

widely and to see active engagement by parents with campaign materials (posters, websites, etc.). They then expected this to lead to good communication practices, such as reading books together, to become embedded in parents' everyday interactions with their children.

Projects shared long-term goals around improved school readiness **outcomes for disadvantaged children**:

> "Ultimately what we want is to see a real diminishing of the gap. We want to see that our most deprived children's outcomes are improving at a faster rate than they are at the moment." – *EOF interviewee*

A number of areas emphasised the need to shift the focus from specialist to universal and targeted services, to support children and families earlier. One interviewee eloquently summarised the long-term aspirations of many of the projects:

> "My longer-term aspirations are that as a county, we have much better early identification and early help systems. I have an aspiration that we have the ability to recognise people easier and to be able to help children sooner, [that we have] the structures, systems and support to offer them. Reduction follows then in all of these major issues, but we have to invest the money early – it's too late by the time they are at risk of school exclusion. [We need] a shift in where we are targeting our resources that will have the most impact for children and families. The message I am hearing is that the higher-ups understand, but that the money is so tied up in high end [services]. But how do you release that funding? You have to double the funding for a few years."

Conclusions and Recommendations

This section briefly summarises the key outcomes achieved by the Peer Review Programme and Early Outcomes Fund and includes some recommendations for future programmes.

It is worth noting that since we completed the data collection phase of this evaluation, the Covid-19 pandemic hit England and lockdown measures were imposed for several months. We expect that this will have affected early years speech, language and communication service delivery in the areas targeted by the peer reviews and EOF, affecting vulnerable children and families disproportionately. We therefore recommend further research into the effects of the pandemic on services and on communities/families to inform future policy and programmes to minimise the risk of widening the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers in the early years.

Peer Review Programme

Peer reviewers and those receiving peer reviews mostly had a **positive** experience and saw the programme as a **catalyst for better integration** of services in early years speech, language and communication. Interviewees particularly valued the range of expertise in the peer review teams, the peer-to-peer approach, and the length of the process which allowed for a very thorough review.

The main outcomes achieved by the peer review included stronger partnerships among agencies and increased senior leadership engagement, which resulted in integrated strategies and pathways for early years speech, language and communication service delivery. This led to structural changes in services (e.g. bespoke integrated assessment tools, improved data collection systems), with emerging evidence of better outcomes for children and families.

There are a small number of recommendations we would like to make:

- **Greater clarity on the purpose of the peer review**. Some interviewees were unclear whether the review should have focused only on speech, language and communication or on early years more broadly. Communicating the purpose and structure clearly at the beginning would help set expectations and manage the process.

- **Logistical arrangements**. Some LAs found the practical and logistical requirements to take care of the review team quite burdensome. Setting expectations and boundaries during the initial peer reviewer training, and in the information provided to LAs might reduce the strain on LAs.

- **Practical recommendations**. A few LAs mentioned they would have liked the recommendations to include practical steps about how to implement change. Perhaps providing peer review teams with guidance on how to structure the final reports would address this.

- **Clearer communication around follow-up.** Many of the people we interviewed during our first round of research either did not know follow-up was available 12 months after the review, or would have liked it to take place sooner or be more structured. During the second round of interviews, the timing and format of follow-up seemed to have become clearer. However, it would be helpful to communicate more clearly when and in what form LAs will receive follow-up support.

  Given the cost involved in follow-up visits, remote support could be considered, for example by allocating a number of hours during which peer reviewers might review and comment on documents from the LAs they reviewed, at set points in time following the review. This could be agreed between the LA and the review team following the review, or set by DfE as a standard approach at the beginning of the programme.

- **Role of external evaluators**. Participants had not been made aware that the programme would be externally evaluated at the time of joining, nor was participating in the evaluation a requirement. We recommend making all participants aware of any potential evaluation, and ideally requiring them to participate.

Early Outcomes Fund

EOF grantees felt the programme's requirements and structure were appropriate and effective. Similarly, to peer review participants, they said the programme was bringing people together and fostering **more collaboration** across departments. The main challenge they experienced was the short implementation **timeline**.

Key outcomes achieved were greater engagement from senior leaders, which led to the development and implementation of integrated cross-departmental strategies and pathways. A number of projects also developed standardised assessment tools for children's speech and language needs, and improved their data systems to better measure change over time. This was supported by training for early years professionals, which resulted in their increased confidence and skills and therefore better outcomes for children and families.

Below are a few recommendations to improve possible future iterations of the programme:

- **Longer wrap up time**. The short implementation timeline, and especially the lack of wrap up time to complete the self-evaluations after the end of the projects, was seen as a challenge by most projects. If possible, longer timelines might allow for better planning, delivery and evaluation. It would also allow to measure some early outcomes of the project.

- **Greater clarity around the purpose of joint bids**. A few of the areas who had bid as consortiums said that their main reason for doing so was that they thought DfE was more likely to fund joint bids. Better communication around whether and why partnership projects are preferred would lead to more thought-through bids.

- **Project management**. Ensuring all projects have an assigned project manager, with a clear role and reporting and accountability lines within the project, would facilitate the smooth running of activities. It would also avoid individuals being overburdened by their job and the management of the EOF project.

- **Greater support around data collection and management**. A number of projects mentioned difficulties around understanding and following GDPR requirements, while others struggled to obtain NHS ethical clearance to collect health data or to access institutional datasets. Additional guidance around GDPR, research within the NHS and accessing DfE and other datasets would save projects time and ensure data is handled safely and lawfully.

- **Improved communication around self-evaluation reports.** Some of the projects seemed unclear about the required length, format and content of their self-evaluation reports. Providing clear guidance would avoid confusion around what is required and ensure more consistent outputs.

Annex 1. EOF TOC and Evaluation Framework

Shared TOC

Strategy

- Strategic leadership and governance (within LAs and Health) are fully committed to EY SLC* — **LEAD**
- Joint EY strategy including universal, targeted and specialist services is developed and implemented across localities — **PLAN**
- Whole system approach to design, delivery, evaluation of EY SLC services (eg joint commissioning, and partnership bidding & delivery among agencies/localities)* — **PLAN**
- Established, responsive and flexible pathway is implemented to support SLC in early years — **DELIVER**

Workforce

- Frontline workforce working with children are upskilled following a SLC needs analysis* — **PLAN**
- Workforce have knowledge, skills and behaviours to support better SLC outcomes — **LEAD**
- Workforce across localities use a common assessment tool to identify SLC needs* — **DELIVER**
- Workforce consistently & effectively use a clear pathway for referrals and support* — **DELIVER**
- Robust, consistent and timely identification of SLC need — **DELIVER**
- Referrals to specialist advice and support (eg SALT) are appropriate and timely — **DELIVER**
- Improved SLC in interactions between workforce and children — **DELIVER**

Parents/community

- Parents/community are empowered to support better SLC outcomes through knowledge, skills and behaviours — **DELIVER**
- Parents/community are involved in the EY SLC pathway — **LEAD**
- Increased quality and quantity of child-parent interaction — **DELIVER**
- Improved Home Learning Environment — **DELIVER**

Data

- Strategic level data is collected and analysed to inform a joint EY SLC strategy (including workforce development and parent/community interventions) — **EVALUATE**
- Strategic level data is used to inform commissioning and planning — **EVALUATE**
- Strategic level data is collected, analysed and shared to improve the effectiveness of the EY SLC system — **EVALUATE**
- Operational level data is collected, shared and used in a way that enables evidence-driven SLC provision — **EVALUATE**
- A strong evidence base of 'what works' at system and operational levels is developed through robust data collection, analysis, sharing and use — **EVALUATE**

Activities

Each project will carry out different, context-specific activities that contribute to the outputs, outcomes and impact in the ToC. Examples of activities are:
- Developing a joint EY SLC strategy
- Developing and implementing a programme of activities to upskill staff working with children
- Developing a data-collection, analysis and sharing framework and supporting staff to use it

More integrated & effective provision

Impact: Improved early years SLC outcomes

Activities — Outputs — Short-term Outcomes — Long-term Outcomes — Impact

Evaluation framework

The table below shows proposed indicators and sources of data for each of the outcomes that were selected as a priority for measurement.

Table 1: EOF evaluation framework

Outcome	Possible Indicators	Possible data sources
Strategic leadership and governance (within LAs and health) are fully committed to early years speech, language and communication	- Views of senior managers on the importance of EY SLC and how to improve outcomes - Number of funding proposals submitted for EY SLC - Quantity and quality of projects/programmes to improve EY SLC outcomes	- Interviews with senior managers in LAs & health - Document review (e.g. funding proposals, meeting minutes, MI data & reports from projects addressing EY SLC)
There is a whole system approach to design, delivery, evaluation of early years services (e.g. joint commissioning, and partnership bidding and delivery among agencies/ localities)	- Existence and content of EY strategy - Consistency, quality and timeliness in implementation of the strategy	- Document review (EY strategy, relevant project and policy documents) - Interviews with frontline staff working in EY across departments (pre-post)
Frontline workforce working with children are upskilled following a speech, language and communication needs analysis	- Quality and quantity of training opportunities for EY workforce	- Interviews with EY workforce (pre-post) - Workforce survey (pre-post) - Observations of workforce in EY settings
Workforce across localities use a common assessment tool to identify speech, language and communication needs	- Quality and frequency of use of the assessment tool - Quality and reach of training/ support to staff to use the tool - Staff (and parents') views on the quality and effectiveness of the assessment tool	- Review of assessment tool(s), guidance, training materials and data from the assessments - Interviews with frontline staff (pre-post) - Frontline staff survey (pre-post) - Observations of workforce in EY settings - Interviews/focus groups with parents
Workforce consistently and effectively use a clear pathway for referrals and support	- Existence and quality of a pathway and guidance on how to implement it - Workforce awareness of the pathway and understanding of how to implement it - Staff (and parents') views on the pathway, how it is used and the impact this has on referrals and support around SLC - Appropriateness of referrals and waiting times	- Referral data (pre-post) - Interviews with frontline staff - Interviews/focus groups with parents - Document review of referral pathway and guidance

Annex 2. Research tools

Topic guide for interviews with individuals who received a peer review

Section 1: Outcomes and learning

1) Have you made any changes following the peer review process?
   - What are the changes you have made?
   - Are there other changes you plan to make? Do you have a plan for these?
   - What do you hope to achieve in the short and long term?
   - Have you made/will you make changes to the areas or people you intend to reach?
   - Have you made/will you make changes to the way you allocate your resources (funding, staff, physical resources)?
   - Have you made/will you make changes to your organisational practice, leadership and systems delivery?

2) How do the changes reflect the recommendations in the peer review transformation plan?
   - Have you implemented the recommendations from the peer review?
   - Are there any recommendations you decided not to take forward? Why?
   - What are the main enablers and barriers to implementing the recommendations?

3) What has the process of making these changes involved?
   - What are the enabling factors needed to make these changes?
   - What are the barriers to implementing the changes?
   - How can they be/have they been overcome?

4) Were there any unexpected ways in which the peer review process affected your programmes/activities?
   - Either positive or negative?
   - Why did these occur?

5) How, if at all, do you anticipate the peer review programme will ultimately impact early years services around language and communication?
   - In your view, will it contribute to systems change? How? *Probe: developing and implementing a joint strategy, governance, data collection and management, coordinated pathway for service delivery*
   - What, if anything, is the impact on early years professionals to date? On the demand for EY services e.g. SALT? On parents and families? On children?
   - What impact on EY professionals, services, families and children do you hope to achieve in the next 6 months? In the next 12 months?
   - Does this meet your initial expectations upon joining the review?

6) Have you identified any ways that the programme might be improved in order to achieve greater impact?
   - How could delivery be improved?

- How could it be more effective in achieving systems change around early years language and communication?
- How could the outcomes be made more sustainable?

Section 2: LGA learning events

7) Did you attend any of the LGA learning events?
- If no, why not?
- If yes, what did you think of them? What were the most useful elements? How could they be improved?
- What were your key learnings from the events?
- How, if at all, have you applied the learning?

Section 3: Use of the Maturity Matrix

8) Did you use the MM after the peer review? If so, how useful was it?
- *Prompt: What do you think about the 10 key elements, the recording sheet and user guide included as part of the MM?*
- What was effective about the matrix? Why?
- Was there anything that was less effective? Why?
- Is there anything you would change about the matrix? Why?
9) Did you use any other assessment tools? If so:
- Which one(s)? Why did you choose it/them?
- Where did you source it/them from?
- Did you find it/them useful? Why?

Section 4: Sustainability and next steps

10) What does your LA/partnership need act on the recommendations of the peer review team? *Probe: external support, leadership buy-in, funding, time, resources.*
- Do you have what you need to act on the recommendations? Please give examples.

11) Do you think the changes made following the peer review will be sustained in the long-term? Why?
- *Prompt: in terms of service delivery, local practice, workforce capacity and capability, parents and families' capacity and capabilities, early language and communication outcomes*
- What will facilitate sustaining change?

12) Is there anything else you would like to add, which we have not covered?

Topic guide for peer reviewers

Section 1: Background and role in peer review

1) Can you give a brief overview of your role and previous experience?
- Current position and responsibilities
- Length of time working in this area
- Previous work experience

2) How did you first become involved in the Peer Review Programme?

- How did you hear about it?
- What influenced your decision to become involved?
- What was the process to become a peer reviewer?
- What training did you receive? Was it relevant? Useful?
- How could the training be improved?

3) Can you briefly describe your role in the Peer Review Programme?
- What was your area of expertise?
- Did you take on specific responsibilities in the process?
- What role did you have in the peer review team?

4) Had you previously been involved in similar peer review processes?
- If so, what for?
- How did you become involved?
- How does that experience compare to this?

Section 2: Experience of the peer review process

5) What are your views on the requirements for becoming a peer reviewer?
- *Prompt: excellent understanding of services for disadvantaged children & families, working at a senior level within your organisations, committing to 1 day training event, committing to at least one peer review per year (minimum of two in total)*
- Do you think the conditions are appropriate for the review programme? Why?
- If applicable, how do these compare to your other experiences of peer reviewing?

6) What was the process of becoming a peer reviewer?
- How did you hear about the opportunity?
- What attracted you to it?
- How was the recruitment process?
- What information were you given before carrying out the peer review?
- Were you involved in the planning and preparation stage of the peer review?
- If so, what activities were involved? Who carried these out? When?
- Did you develop resources beforehand? If so, please describe them and how they were developed.

7) Can you tell me more about the peer review team you worked with?
- How many people were in the team? Did this number work well?
- What specific roles did they take on?
- How was it decided who to include in the team and what role each person would take on?
- Was it important to have a 'Lead peer reviewer' in the team? Why?

8) Can you provide an overview of the peer review you have been involved in?
- What was the project/activities you reviewed as part of the programme?
- Briefly, what were the areas of focus? *Prompt: leadership, data and performance, partnership working, the quality of early years services and provision, access to targeted support.*
- What were the objectives of the peer review? Who set these?
- What activities were involved in the delivery of the peer review? *Prompt: reviewing documentation and/or data; interviewing staff/ commissioners/ parents/ partners; focus groups; site visits.*

- How were these organised?
- What was the timeline of these activities? How was the timeline decided?
- Did you offer/provide any follow-up support? If so, what was it? When and how was it/will it be provided?

9) In hindsight, did the make-up of the peer team reflect the requirements of the LA receiving the peer review?
- Do you think the expertise offered by the team were appropriate for the peer review?
- In what ways?
- Would the peer review have benefited from any other areas of expertise? From a different team structure?

10) What were the processes/activities for making recommendations at the end of the review?
- What are the key recommendations you made?
- How did you communicate these to the LA? Was this effective? How were these received?

Section 3: Relationship with the peer reviewed LA/ partners

11) Can you tell me more about the Local Authority you worked with for the peer review?
- *Prompt: location, size, rural/urban, levels of child deprivation, EYFS outcomes/scores*
- What are some of their strengths and weaknesses around the delivery of early years language and communication services?
- How/why were they identified as suitable for the peer review?

12) How would you describe your relationship with the LA you peer reviewed?
- Was the working relationship effective? If not, why not? If yes, what facilitated it?
- Did it meet your expectations? Please explain.

13) What was the role of the LGA, if anything, in your peer review?
- Did the LGA work with the LA/partnership to identify areas of importance for the review? Was this effective?
- Did they support you during the peer review process? If so, how? If not, did you want more support? Please give details.
- Were they involved in reviewing the recommendations and their implementation?
- How could the role of the LGA be more effective?

Section 4: Use of the Maturity Matrix

14) Were you aware of the Maturity Matrix (MM) prior to your involvement in the peer review programme?
- Had you used it before? On what occasion/for what purpose?
- What were your perceptions of the MM?
- Did this influence your decision to participate as a peer reviewer? In what ways?

15) Did the LA you peer reviewed use the Maturity Matrix as a self-assessment tool *before* the peer review? If so, how useful was it?
- *Prompt: What do you think about the 10 key elements, the recording sheet and user guide included as part of the MM?*
- What was effective about the matrix? Why?
- Was there anything that was less effective? Why?

- Is there anything you would change about the matrix? Why?

16) Did you use the Maturity Matrix *during* the peer review? If so:
- Who used it in the peer review team?
- How was it used by the peer review team?
- Did you find it useful? In what ways?
- Are there aspects you would change?
- Are there any ways you would use it differently next time?

17) Did you use any other assessment tools? If so:
- Which one(s)? Why did you choose it/them?
- Where did you source it/them from?
- Did you find it/them useful? Why?

Section 5: Strengths and weaknesses of the programme

18) Overall, what would you say are the main strengths of the Peer Review programme?
- *Prompt: programme design, peer review team, tools including the MM*
- In what ways are these strengths?
- Are there any examples of things that worked particularly well?
- Are there any enabling factors that needed to be in place for the programme to be effective? What are they?

19) Have you identified any weaknesses/challenges in the programme?
- What are they? Please give details.
- To what extent did they impact the review process?
- How did you overcome them?
- What could be done differently in the future?
- To what extent were these challenges unforeseen?

20) The Peer Review Programme has an ethos of 'for the sector, by the sector'. Based on your experience, do you think the programme reflects this ethos?
- In what ways?
- Do you think it is important that the programme is 'for the sector, by the sector'? Why?
- Are there any ways that the programme could reflect this ethos more?

Section 6: Outcomes and learning

21) How do you think the peer review process has affected service delivery and local practice so far?
- Has the LA accepted your recommendations? Are there any recommendations that they have decided not to take forward?
- Have they started to make changes?
- What are the main enablers and barriers to implementing the recommendations?
- Has this met your expectations?
- Can you provide any examples?

22) Were there any unexpected ways in which the peer review process affected local practice?
- Either positive or negative?
- Why did these occur?

23) How, if at all, do you anticipate the peer review programme will ultimately impact early years services around language and communication?
- In your view, will it contribute to systems change? How? *Probe: developing and implementing a joint strategy, governance, data collection and management, coordinated pathway for service delivery*
- What, if anything, do you expect to be the impact on early years professionals? On the demand for EY services e.g. SALT? On parents and families? On children?
- Does this meet your initial expectations upon joining the review?

24) Have you identified any ways that the programme might be improved in order to achieve greater impact?
- How could delivery of the programme be improved?
- How could the peer review programme be more effective in achieving systems change around early years language and communication?
- How could the outcomes be made more sustainable?

Section 7: Sustainability and next steps

25) What does the LA/partnership you peer reviewed need to make sustainable changes to the EY language and communication system?
- What support is available to them? Is this suitable? Why?

26) Do you think the changes made following the peer review will be sustained in the long-term? Why?
- *Prompt: in terms of service delivery, local practice, workforce capacity and capability, parents and families' capacity and capabilities, early language and communication outcomes*
- What will facilitate sustaining change?

27) Is there anything else you would like to add, which we have not covered?

Topic guide for EOF project participants

Section 1: Background and role

13) Can you give a brief overview of your role?
- Current position and responsibilities
- Length of time working in this area

14) What is your role and responsibilities within EOF?
- How were these allocated?

15) Can you describe your local context for early years, particularly around SLC?
- What are the main strengths?
- What are the main areas for improvement and how did you identify these?
- Have you tried to address these issues through different interventions before, and if so, how, and with what success?

16) Can you tell me about the Local Authority/partnership that received the EOF funding?
- *Prompt: location, size, rural/urban, levels of child deprivation, EYFS outcomes/scores, structure of the partnership if relevant*

- Was the funding bid from an individual LA or joint partnership?
- If partnership, how many LAs does it include, and what is their history of working together?
- What motivated the LAs to form a partnership for this project?

17) What factors influenced your LA's decision to apply for the EOF?
- Circumstances for the LA at the time
- Any specific issues you hoped to address through the project?
- Who were the key people who influenced the decision?

18) Have you/your LA previously been involved in similar systems change projects?
- If so, what were they?
- How did you become involved?
- How does that experience compare to this?

Section 2: Aims, characteristics and outcomes of the EOF funded project

19) Is your EOF funded project
   A) implementing a new approach to system change **AND/OR**
   B) using existing approaches that are thought to be effective and might be shared more widely.
   Researcher note: if 'both' ask both Q8 and Q9

20) **If Q7= A**
- What is the new approach to system change?
- How was this developed?
- What was the rationale behind the approach?
- Who was involved in developing the approach?

21) **If Q7 = B**
- What was the pre-existing approach to improvement that was chosen for the EOF project?
- Why was this approach chosen for the project?
- In what scenario had this approach been previously adopted?
- What evidence was there that this approach had previously been effective?

22) What are the main aims of the EOF funded project you are working on?
- Prompt: *is there a focus on leadership, funding, commissioning, workforces, data, accountability and/or evaluation?*

23) What is the overall 'theory of change' for the EOF funded project?
- What are the main activities involved? *
- What are the intended outcomes? *
- What does 'success' look like (*probe: at the strategic/leadership level, for the workforce, for parents, around the use of data*)? *
- How will the project affect change?
- What assumptions was this based on?
- What are the potential risks to the achievement of outcomes?

24) Who are the key people involved in the project?
- Who are the key strategic and delivery staff?
- What are their roles?
- Who are the main project target groups?

25) Have you combined the EOF project with other sources of funding and / or interventions with a focus on EY language and communication development?
- If so, who are the other funders? What are the conditions, timings and amount of funding?
- What are the advantages and drawbacks of combining funding streams?

Section 3: Experiences of the EOF process

26) What was the process for setting up and implementing the EOF project to date? *
- What tasks were involved in preparing the bid?
- What was involved in launching the project once you received the funding?
- Who carried out these tasks?
- Did you face any challenges during this process?
- If so, what were they and how did you address them?

27) Do you think the bidding and funding requirements are appropriate for the funding?
- Why?
- Would you suggest any changes to the process or requirements? If so, why?
- *Probe: what are your views on the requirement to carry out a self-evaluation? What has your experience of self-evaluation been so far?*

28) Did you use the EIF Maturity Matrix when bidding and implementing the EOF project? *
- If so, when?
- How did you use it?
- In what ways did you find the MM useful, or not useful? Why?
- Did you use any other tools? What were these? How did you use them?

Section 4: Progress against outcomes

29) What progress have you made to date against the project outcomes?
- Are you on track?
- Have there been any delays or setbacks?
- How have these been addressed?
- What are you planning next, and how / when will this happen?

30) What evidence is there that the project is on track to achieve the intended outcomes?
- Probe against project-specific outcomes
- Probe in each case – how do you know?

31) Have there been any unintended (positive or negative) outcomes from the project?
- What, why and how did these outcomes occur?
- What are the implications?

32) What has worked particularly well so far and why?
- What specific aspects of the model/approach/activities are working well? How do you know this?
- Can you identify the critical success factors?
- How might the model/approach/activities be further improved?

33) What has worked less well and why?
- What challenges have the project experienced? Why?

- How have/could these be overcome?
- To what extent were these challenges unforeseen or unanticipated?

Section 5: Sustainability and future plans

34) Have you taken any steps to ensure the sustainability of the activities funded through the EOF? *
- If so, what are they?
- When will they take place?
- Who will be involved?
- What resources have been allocated?

35) Do you have any plans to scale-up/replicate any examples of promising or effective practices that have been developed through the EOF project?
- How and when will this take place?
- Who will be involved?
- What resources have been allocated?

36) What are your aspirations for the project in the short term (next 6 months)?
- How will they be achieved?
- Who will benefit?
- What are the main enabling factors?
- What are the main risk factors?

37) What outcomes might you anticipate over the longer-term (12-24 months)?
- How will they be achieved?
- Who will benefit?
- What are the main enabling factors?
- What are the main risk factors?

38) Do you have anything else to feedback, which we have not covered today?

Peer review survey

Below are the questions that were asked in the survey of peer review participants.

1. What Local Authority are you based at?

Bristol
Cornwall
Cumbria
Enfield
Hertfordshire
Leeds
Lincolnshire
Liverpool
Manchester
North Lincolnshire
Nottingham

Oldham
Portsmouth
Rochdale
Stockport
Swindon
Warrington
Wirral
Wolverhampton
York

2. Which field do you work in?

☐ Education

☐ Health

☐ Other

3. How would you describe your role?

☐ Senior Management

☐ Middle Management

☐ Frontline/delivery worker

4. Did you take part in a Peer Review?
1. Yes
2. No

5. When was the peer review? (mm/yy)

6. Were you also a Peer Reviewer?
1. Yes
2. No

7. Thinking about your experience of receiving a Peer Review, did you use the Maturity Matrix? Please select all that apply
1. Yes, to prepare for the Peer Review
2. Yes, during the Peer Review
3. Yes, after the Peer Review
4. No
5. Not sure

8. How useful did you find the Maturity Matrix?

	1 – Not useful at all	2- Not very useful	3 – Somewhat useful	4 – Very useful	5- N/A
Before the Peer Review					

During the Peer Review					
After the Peer Review					
Overall					

9. Do you have any further comments on the Maturity Matrix?

10. Please rate how satisfied you were with the following aspects of the Peer Review:

	1 – Not satisfied at all	2 – Not very satisfied	3 – Somewhat Satisfied	4 – Very satisfied	5 – Don't know
The requirements to receive a Peer Review					
The process of applying to receive a Peer Review					
The information you were given before the Peer Review					
The clarity of objectives for the Peer Review					
The structure of activities during the Peer Review					

11. To what extent do you think the Peer Review will contribute to the following elements in early years speech, language and communication in your Local Authority:

	1 – Not at all	2 – Not Very much	4 – Somewhat	5 – A lot	3- Not Applicable
Raising the profile of the issue among senior leaders					
Developing and implementing an integrated strategy in your LA					

Improved workforce skills and knowledge					
Improved data collection and management					
Implementing a coordinated pathway for service delivery					
Systems change					
Better outcomes for children					
Better outcomes for families					

12. Please rate how satisfied you were with the following aspects of the Peer Review team you received:

	1 – Not satisfied at all	2 – Not very satisfied	3 – Somewhat Satisfied	4 – Very satisfied	5- Don't know
Structure of the team					
Size of the team					
Expertise of the team leader					
Expertise of the team members					
Relevance of the team's expertise to your local context					
Your relationship with the Peer Review team					
Usefulness of the recommendations received					
Extent to which your expectations of the Peer Review were met					

13. Have you had any follow up from the Peer Review team after the Peer Review?
1. Yes
2. No

14. How useful was the follow up?
- ☐ Not useful at all
- ☐ Not very useful
- ☐ Somewhat useful
- ☐ Very useful

15. Why do you say that?

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16. Have you implemented the recommendations from the Peer Review?
1. All of them
2. Most of them
3. Some of them
4. None of them

17. What are the reasons why you implemented all/ most/ some/ none of the recommendations?

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18. Do you have any other feedback on the Peer Review programme?

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Thank you for completing this survey!

For any enquiries regarding this publication, contact us at:
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