

Early Words Together

Local authority evaluation

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Contents

Executive Summary	4
Part 1: Background and evaluation methodology	7
Methodology	8
Online survey	8
Case studies	10
Part 2: Analysis of programme impact against key outcomes	11
Key outcome 1: Increase in children’s centre and other agency staff reporting greater skills and confidence	11
Key outcome 2: Improved home learning environments.....	12
Key outcome 3: The augmentation of datasets held by local authorities on target families.....	15
Key outcome 4: Volunteers satisfied with volunteering experiences.....	16
Key outcome 5: Increase in referrals for targeted / vulnerable families to children’s centres ...	19
Stakeholder views about impact: overview	21
Impact on children’s centres and their relationships	22
Impact on local authorities.....	25
Part 3: The experiences of programme deliverers	26
Making time and meeting targets	26
Programme training and materials	26
Recruiting volunteers	28
Recruiting target families and sustaining their involvement.....	31
Usefulness of indicators	33
Legacy and sustainability	34
Conclusions	36

Executive Summary

Early Words Together (EWT) has been very positively received by local authority stakeholders in areas where the programme has operated during 2014-15. The targets it set for participating areas – including volunteers trained, families recruited and sessions run – created some anxiety and frustration early on, but the central programme team, local co-ordinators and settings worked hard to meet those targets. Over 1000 volunteers have been trained, exceeding the target of 800; 6,670 free children's books have been distributed, exceeding the target of 6000; and 1,846 families have participated, just short of the target of 2000.

In spite of the pressure to achieve ambitious results, the overall response to the programme from staff and volunteers in settings has been enthusiastic and their belief in its impact strongly evident. They have felt the programme to be a good use of their time, impactful for settings, volunteers and – in particular – families.

Programme management and resources: Positivity was high in relation to management of the programme and the materials provided, with nine out of ten local stakeholder survey respondents judging the range of free books excellent or good (91.5%). At least seven out of ten were also positive about the ordering and delivery of free books (72.4%); the volunteer training (70.3%); and the volunteer toolkit (70.2%).

Recruiting families to participate: The programme aimed to engage 2000 families in total. With 1,846 participating by March 2015, that target was almost achieved. The type of families recruited was also a focus of attention for the programme, with criteria established to ensure an emphasis on the most in need. Two thirds of survey respondents (67%) believe the programme has enabled them to increase their contact with families who are not regular service users, and over half (55.9%) believe the programme has generated new contact with families previously unknown to or not accessing children's centre services.

That not all respondents were confident of these impacts suggests that participating families were in some cases already known to settings. This was reflected in case study interviews, where it was clear that participating families were sometimes outside the strict criteria for inclusion – either to help achieve target numbers, to involve families with literacy needs who it was judged would benefit, or in order to reach and impact on target families more subtly through positioning EWT as a more universal offer.

Recruiting volunteers to support: The programme over-achieved against its targets in terms of volunteer recruitment. Just as family recruitment was a challenge for some areas and some settings, so volunteer recruitment proved challenging for others. Around half of respondents (52.2%) thought the programme had enabled them to grow the pool of volunteers available to support local families. As the case study interviews highlighted, volunteers were recruited in a

range of ways and from a variety of backgrounds. It was widely agreed that the demands on EWT volunteers were higher than for most programmes, and that this raised the bar in terms of what was required from those volunteering. For some co-ordinators and children's centre staff, this meant that confident and professionally experienced volunteers were better suited to the role, whilst others took the opposite view and favoured peers from within parents' own communities.

Engaging referral partners: The most persistently challenging aspect of engagement has been in relation to partner organisations, and in particular those which it was hoped would refer families into the programme. Just under half of survey respondents (47%) thought that the programme had increased the number of partner agencies who understood the importance of home learning environments.

Both the survey and case study interviews showed this to be the area which settings most struggled with across the participating authorities. Whilst there were some good examples of partner relationships being forged through the programme and of key partners being 'won over' by the programme's potential to help their service users, overall partner engagement remained lower than intended. The case study interviews have nonetheless highlighted some very positive examples of the programme building strong support amongst local partner organisations, and of EWT acting as a vehicle for forging closer working relationships with partners.

Impact on children, families and home learning environments: Local stakeholders show high levels of confidence in the programme's positive impact on children, families and home learning environments. Around nine out of ten agreed with the statements that: Early Words Together has had a positive impact on raising the confidence of parents to support children's communication, language and literacy (94.7%); that the programme had a positive impact on improving children's communication, language and literacy (90.5%); and that families' home learning environments had improved (89.3%).

Interviewees emphasised how parents' confidence, skills and understanding had grown through the course of the programme, and evidence that children's experiences of play and learning at home were changing. Children's centres are also seeing parents engaged through EWT remaining involved in other children's centre projects and activities – 9 out of 10 survey respondents felt that the programme had helped to enable parents or other family members to get involved in a children's centre project (89.4%).

Impact on volunteers: Confidence in the programme's impact on the skills and capacity of volunteers is high – eight out of ten survey respondents (80.9%) thought that EWT had developed volunteers' skills. Through case study interviews, volunteers themselves reiterated the valuable experience the programme had provided, whether in terms of skills and confidence beneficial to work or study, or to their own parenting. The National Literacy Trust's own survey of volunteers corroborates this picture, with almost all respondents (96.5%) satisfied with their volunteering

experience overall, and more than eight out of ten (84.4%) satisfied that they had impacted positively on families.

Case study interviewees highlighted the benefits to children's centres in terms of an increased volunteer resource for them to mobilise beyond the life of EWT specifically. In fact, this process of EWT volunteers migrating into other volunteering activities within children's centres or related services is already evident. Some co-ordinators have also reported that volunteers have gone on to gain employment directly as a result of experience gained through volunteering with EWT.

Impact on children's centres: Three quarters of survey respondents (75.5%) reported that EWT had a positive impact on the skills and /or confidence of children's centre staff to engage with families most in need of support with early learning at home. Children's centre managers often encouraged colleagues to involve themselves in the programme as a route to developing their professional practice. Some managers have also seen EWT as a useful vehicle for helping less confident staff learn how to engage with families and build stronger relationships with them. In addition, case study interviewees described how the programme had built the capacity of their volunteers – volunteers who in some cases were becoming involved in other children's centre activities.

Part 1: Background and evaluation methodology

Early Words Together (EWT) is a six week intervention, bringing practitioners and volunteers together to enable families to improve the home learning environment of their children aged two to five. Between April 2013 and March 2015 the National Literacy Trust received funding from the Department for Education (DfE) to deliver EWT in 12 local authorities across England. One further authority, Bradford, was recruited to the programme in April 2014. An average of 120 children's centres and early years settings, delivered the programme.

The programme is delivered through small group sessions of one and a half hours, and includes an important peer support factor that helps parents:

- Understand why they are important to their child's reading and language development;
- Adopt effective activities to enrich their play, engagement and attachment with their child;
- Benefit and increase their child's literacy, communication and language development.

Volunteers from the same community as the families are trained using National Literacy Trust resources and work with the families following a toolkit, which includes structured but flexible activities. The fun, easy activities help parents to extend and engage their children's learning and, importantly, to see that their children are really motivated and enjoying themselves.

During the six 1.5 hour sessions, volunteers empower families to feel confident about their ability to support their children's development and help to encourage a love of books, stories, rhymes, songs and talk. Setting staff and volunteers are also given tools to measure outcomes through observation and self-evaluation.

The programme has demonstrated positive outcomes with families who were often experiencing social or economic disadvantage, both hard to reach families and groups specifically targeted by the children's centre.

External Evaluation

Two external evaluators were appointed:

- Coventry University to look at the impact of the intervention on children (using the Pearson Pre-school Language Scale), families, and the home learning environment.
- OPM to consider the impact on children's centre practice, referral working, and the role of volunteers.

While children's centres were initially targeted as the lead delivery partners, a variety of settings were involved with EWT, including schools, libraries, early years settings and community centres.

Methodology

OPM's evaluation has comprised:

- A series of initial scoping interviews with stakeholders to help us understand the programme and localities' initial experience of implementation;
- A Year One online survey of local authority stakeholders (April-May 2014);
- A follow-up Year Two online survey of local authority stakeholders (February-March 2015);
- A series of depth interviews with stakeholders in five of the 13 project areas (Croydon, Derbyshire, Staffordshire, Sutton and Wiltshire);
- An in-depth analysis of project costs incurred by local authorities

This report also references the National Literacy Trust's own survey of EWT volunteers.

Online survey

The Year One survey, responded to by 89 local authority stakeholders, was repeated in early 2015 with some alterations (and achieved a higher response of 132). This report references the Year Two survey unless otherwise stated, and compares these findings with those of the earlier survey where questions are directly comparable. Both surveys were online-only, to enable quicker and easier analysis, and were circulated to the 13 area co-ordinators by the OPM research team and National Literacy Trust colleagues. The co-ordinators then, in turn, promoted the survey locally with colleagues and, with much more limited take-up, to referral partners.

Table 1: Year Two survey responses by area**Base: 132**

Area	Number of respondents
Staffordshire	21
Wiltshire	21
Middlesbrough	16
Rochdale	16
Derbyshire	10
Croydon	9
Lambeth	8
Bradford	7
North Yorkshire	6
Sheffield	6
Bristol	4
Ealing	4
Sutton	4

Table 2: Connection with EWT**Base: 132**

Role	Number of Respondents
Staff member at a participating children's centre	47
Manager in a participating children's centre	30
Officer in a participating local authority (not children's centre based)	18
Programme co-ordinator in a local authority pilot area	17
An agency which works with or refers into children's centres	10
Other (please specify below)	10

Case studies

Five of the 13 EWT local authority areas were included as case studies: Croydon, Derbyshire, Staffordshire, Sutton and Wiltshire. These areas were selected in order to ensure inclusion of:

- urban and suburban / semi-rural settings
- different parts of England
- council-run and externally-commissioned children's centres
- different approaches to delivery of the programme

Thirty-three depth interviews were conducted across the sample with a combination of co-ordinators; children's centre managers and staff involved in EWT; non-children's centre staff (e.g. local authority managers); and volunteers. Interviews were mainly conducted face-to-face, with some completed on the telephone, and interviews took place between mid-2014 and early 2015.

Quotes from interviewees in our five case study areas are anonymised, although their role is given in brackets alongside each quote.

Part 2: Analysis of programme impact against key outcomes

Key outcome 1: Increase in children's centre and other agency staff reporting greater skills and confidence

The Year Two online survey and case study interviews indicate that the programme had a very positive impact on the skills and confidence of staff to identify, engage and support families. 75.5% of survey respondents reported that EWT had a positive impact on the skills and/ or confidence of children's centre staff to engage with families most in need of support with early learning at home. This represents an achievement of the 75% target set out in the programme KPIs.

Providing opportunities for staff development: Children's centre managers report encouraging colleagues to involve themselves in the programme as a route to developing their professional practice. Some managers have seen EWT as a useful vehicle for helping less confident staff learn how to engage with families and build strong working relationships with those families because of its unusually focused nature.

'I'm not early years trained, but from just being in the room I now know what books a 2 year old would read... it has really helped me, I'll probably volunteer in the next round.'
(Children's centre staff member)

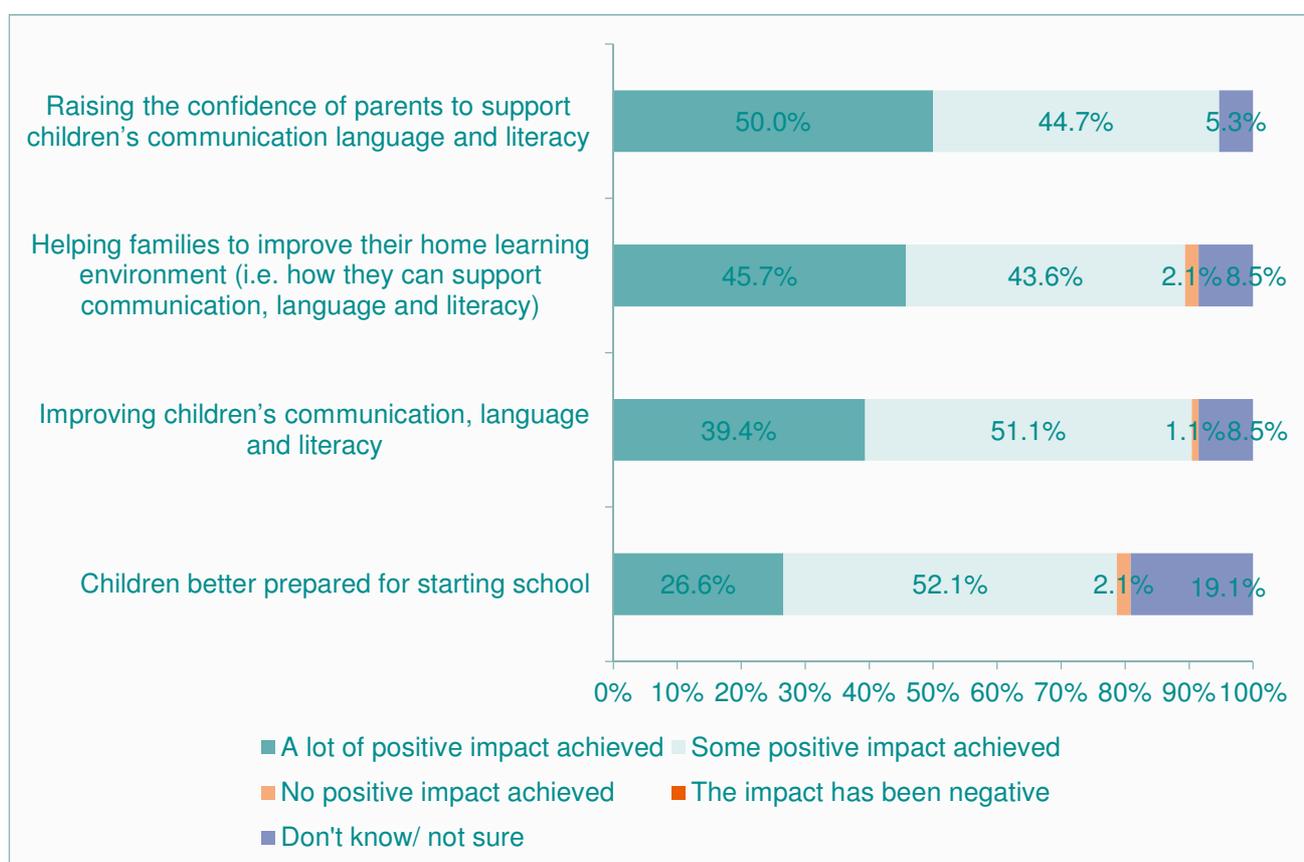
'We had a few members of staff who were quite quiet and needed help engaging with parents. We targeted them and they really enjoyed it and are re-volunteering for the next round. Early Words Together gave them a focus for their conversations with parents. They were worrying initially, almost more than the parent volunteers, but really enjoyed getting to know a family in depth.' (Children's centre manager)

Key outcome 2: Improved home learning environments

Children’s centre staff and volunteers were overwhelmingly positive about the programme’s impact on children, families, and their home learning environments. Moreover, increased positivity about impact is evident in the Year Two online survey compared to Year One in relation to all four aspects of Figure 1 (below).

Figure 1: Year Two Online Survey – To what extent do you feel the Early Words Together programme has helped to achieve positive impacts so far in terms of the following outcomes?

Base: 94



More than nine out of ten respondents (94.7%) thought that EWT has had a positive impact on raising the confidence of parents to support children’s communication, language, and literacy – an increase from 82% in Year One. A similarly overwhelming 90.5% thought the programme had a positive impact on improving children’s communication, language, and literacy (up from 81%).

Nine out of ten also thought EWT had helped families to improve their home learning environment (89.3%) – up from three quarters in the Year One survey. Moreover, half of the 2015 respondents (50%) believed it to have had a *lot* of positive impact. Finally, 78.7% of

respondents thought that EWT has led to children being better prepared for starting school (up from 62%).

Parent engagement with other services and activities

As a result of their involvement in EWT, parents are engaging with other children's centre activities, and sometimes with other local services – libraries in particular. Across the case study areas, interviewees were able to cite examples of the way in which EWT had acted as a route into wider access and greater participation for families.

'Here in Staffordshire, 90% of Early Words Together families are now library users, and they weren't before.' (Co-ordinator)

'We had a dad come along, found it invaluable, and he's gone home and passed on what he's learnt to mum, who doesn't speak English. Now the mum comes into the children's centre which she never did before. We had another woman we were targeting, she didn't engage and wouldn't do any activities at home, but now you often see her at the centre.' (Children's centre manager)

Parent confidence and relationships with their children

Across the case study areas, interviewees were able to cite compelling examples of the programme's direct impact on parents' confidence to support their children – and more widely in terms of social interaction with others, skills development (through learning techniques and activities), and as a result of both, evidence of improved home learning environments.

'In one of the families, the mum was agoraphobic, and this was the first time she came to the centre independently. She now wants to volunteer at the centre as well.' (Third sector EWT deliverer)

Parents who had never previously encouraged crafts or 'messy play' became enthusiastic about approaches they could use at home, with children keen to show the setting staff and volunteers their scrap books and other programme-inspired activities when they returned each week.

'One mum – her daughter was three and had never done any messy play of any kind, and she brought in a painting they had done together – so that child's experience is vastly different now.' (Third sector EWT deliverer)

Examples of fathers gaining from the programme came across as particularly compelling for children's centre staff, as they were generally less likely to involve themselves in children's centre activities, less likely to build friendships through the children's centre, and less confident in their play interaction with their children.

'We had a dad come on board, referred by the nursery. He was very nervous, but has teamed up with a mum, and it's brilliant. He said it was fantastic – and not like he was in a room of women! He said it had given him simple activities to do with his daughter – he's continuing that at home with other child too.' (Children's centre manager)

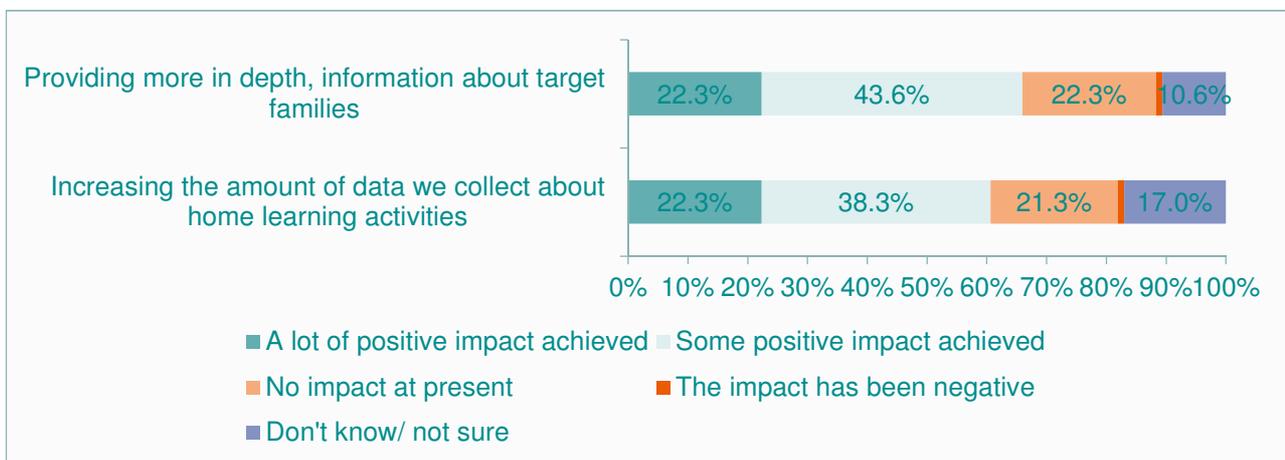
'The dad was main carer and he said at the end his relationship was so much stronger with his daughter, that they had much more interaction now as a result [of the programme]... and they joined the library after our visit there. What we've found is that we've opened up a world for people – that books are a way into other things. (Children's centre staff member)

Key outcome 3: The augmentation of datasets held by local authorities on target families

The majority of Year Two online survey respondents were positive about the impact of the programme on their intelligence about target families and home learning environments (see Figure 2 below). Two thirds of respondents (65.9%) agreed that EWT had provided more in depth information about target families, whilst a similar proportion (60.6%) thought the programme had increased the data they collected about home learning activities.

Figure 2: Year Two Online Survey – To what extent do you feel the Early Words Together programme has helped to achieve positive impacts so far in terms of the following outcomes?

Base: 94



Key outcome 4: Volunteers satisfied with volunteering experiences

OPM undertook in-depth qualitative interviews with EWT volunteers as part of our case study sample, with further testimony received from volunteers at programme workshop events. This insight into volunteer experience is augmented by the National Literacy Trust's own online survey of volunteers (separate to that designed and hosted by OPM). Volunteers largely reported very positive experiences of their involvement.

The experiences of volunteers

Of the 60 EWT volunteers who responded to the National Literacy Trust's volunteer survey, 57-58 answered questions relating to different aspects of their satisfaction with the programme. Of these:

- 96.5% were satisfied with the volunteering opportunity overall
- 93.1% were positive about the support they received as a volunteer
- 93% were positive about the induction / training provided and how prepared they felt for their volunteer role
- 84.5% were satisfied with the difference they felt their volunteering had made to families

Staff directly involved in the programme were also overwhelmingly positive about impact they had observed on volunteers, with 80.9% of Year Two online survey respondents reporting that the programme had increased the skills of volunteers.

Across different local authority areas, volunteers spoke enthusiastically and sometimes emotionally about their experiences – the skills and confidence they had gained, the sense of achievement, and their conviction about the programme's visible impact on families.

Volunteer pen portrait: 'Karen'

'I feel like a different person – I have more confidence, and it has given me ideas about what I can do with my own children that I hadn't thought about before.'

Karen was approached by the Early Words Together co-ordinator as she was taking part in some courses at her local Sure Start Centre. Karen had not worked with families or children before in any capacity, despite wanting to, because she hadn't had the confidence to approach anyone about when and how.

She has now worked on Early Words Together for a year and does three or four sessions a week. She has worked with between 20 and 30 families, and would like to continue with the programme.

Karen has a child with special needs and wanted to 'give something back' as she thought that the Early Words Together programme was doing valuable and impactful work helping children with special needs. Her involvement as a volunteer has also made her realise that she is not alone in

the challenges she faces as the parent of a special needs child. She now feels less isolated and also finds it helpful to share her own experiences and offer reassurance. On a practical level, the programme has given her ideas she can use with her own children, which in turn has improved the quality of 'family time' at home.

Karen has gained a lot of confidence through volunteering with Early Words Together and is now a co-ordinator on the programme for five hours a week. It has also helped her develop organisational skills.

Karen has felt supported by the programme throughout. Monthly 'tea parties' are held among the volunteers as an opportunity to meet one another, share and learn. The local programme co-ordinator is always at the end of the phone and attends most of the sessions. *'If I ever had a question/ issue I would know I could turn to her.'*

Volunteer pen portrait: 'Michael'

'I have got loads out of it. I've built confidence in speaking to groups of people – which I haven't done before – and the activities around books... have helped with my work placement at a school with children with special needs. It has also helped me with planning skills, and I have used these skills for the sessions at the school I work at as well...It's really rewarding as well.'

Michael was previously a parent volunteer with the children's centre, helping with events and fundraising for two years. He had not volunteered before this, and wanted to gain experience working with children. He thought this Early Words Together volunteering opportunity would help with his own career progression (he has just started training to work with children with special needs) and would look good on his CV. He started volunteering in order to meet new people and get involved in the community. He says it can be lonely being a single parent and he wanted to meet others in the same situation.

He thought the volunteer training was excellent and very interesting. He is also positive about the advice and support he has received from the programme co-ordinator.

Michael has worked on the Early Words Together programme since summer 2014, and has completed a 6 week one-to-one session with a family and also worked, alongside another volunteer, with a teenage parents' group (12 families) across four sessions. Michael and his fellow volunteers adapted the sessions to make them work for their families, brainstormed ideas around the books they would choose, and adapted sessions based on age groups and what they had come to know about the children they were supporting.

Michael likes the one-to-one format of the sessions, as it means there are fewer distractions for families and they have more time to get to know their volunteers, and therefore to trust that person. It also makes it easier for the volunteer to adapt and tailor the session.

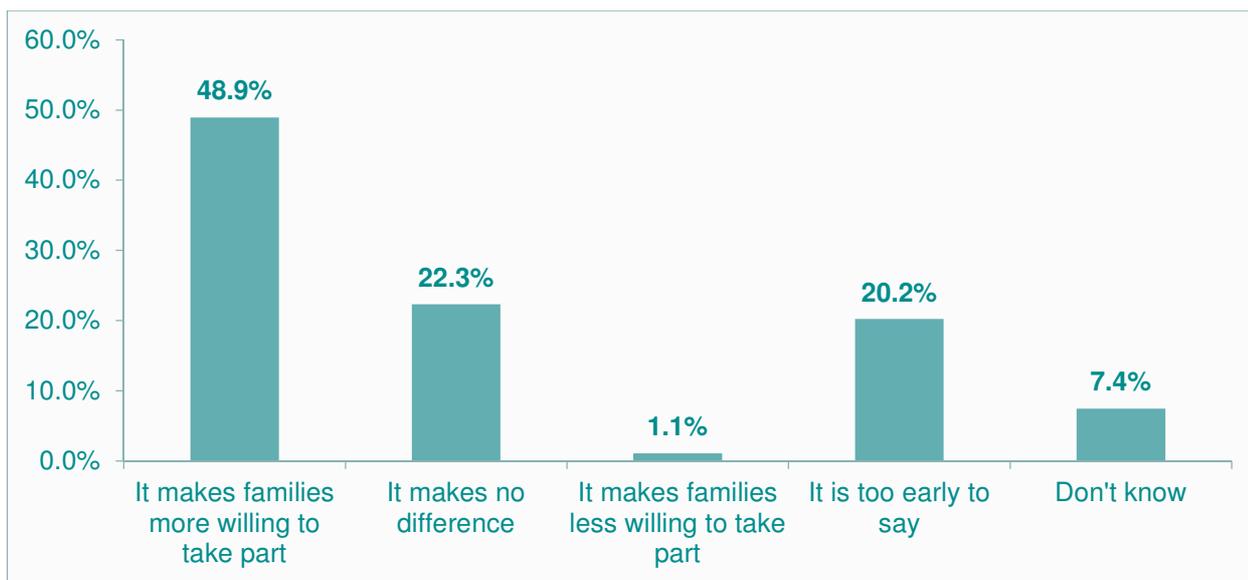
Michael would like to continue working with the Early Words Together programme and hopes that more families will be recruited. He has found the experience very rewarding.

Volunteers as a distinctive aspect of the programme

The way in which the programme utilises volunteers was commonly cited as one aspect which made EWT distinctive. The survey findings (see Figure 3 below) demonstrate mixed views about the extent to which the use of volunteers impacts on families’ willingness to engage. Just under 50% felt it made families more willing to take part, whilst just over 40% either felt it ‘made no difference’ or was ‘too early to say’. Just one respondent felt that the involvement of local people / parents as volunteers decreased families’ willingness to take part.

Figure 3: Year Two Online Survey – The active participation of local people and parents as volunteers is a central part of Early Words Together. In your experience so far, what impact is this having on families’ willingness to be involved?

Base: 94



Key outcome 5: Increase in referrals for targeted / vulnerable families to children's centres

Experience of engaging referral partners

Attracting referrals into the programme from partners has been the biggest single challenge across the case study areas, and can be seen as the area where EWT has found progress most difficult. Two thirds of survey respondents rated 'securing referrals from partner agencies' as challenging – almost half of this group thought it was 'very challenging' – reflecting the difficulty that co-ordinators and settings are having.

The case study interviews have corroborated these findings. Interviewees frequently expressed disappointment and frustration that whilst potential referral partners have shown initial positivity about the programme, actual referrals have not been forthcoming.

What are the barriers?

Staff in settings and in other local authority roles have suggested the following issues:

Insufficient reach to or follow-up contact with partners: Attendance at initial partner briefings was poor, so few were introduced to the programme at an early stage. Some programme stakeholders reflected that one-off briefing sessions for partners were not sufficient to build ongoing support and interest in EWT.

'I think because we relied on that one training session and cascading, that's where we fell down – combined with the pressures of time people face.' (Children's centre manager)

'We used to have advisory teachers based in centres, but not anymore. So the structure is thinner, with fewer chances to promote it.' (EWT deliverer)

The need for partners to trust in a programme before they refer: It was suggested that partners were inclined to be cautious about the services they referred families to, especially where those families are experiencing complex needs and thus likely to have other issues they need support with. As a new programme, untried and untested for most partners, there may be reluctance to refer service users.

'Until the project is bedded in, partners aren't going to refer in.' (EWT deliverer)

'In CCs we have advisory boards – heads, local nurses – and I've gone and talked to them about Early Words Together and they've said 'great' but nothing has come through. They're busy I suppose, but also maybe the volunteer thing – maybe feels safer to refer to things they're already referring to.' (Co-ordinator)

What has worked?

- **Where good relationships with partners already exist:** having current relationships with partners and potential referrers has been helpful for those co-ordinating and delivering the programme.

- **Where programme leads promote the programme as much as possible:** in Sutton, managers planned to proactively go to partner agencies for the next round and talk to whole teams, so not relying on representatives from organisations to disseminate the message to their colleagues – which hasn't worked.

'We learnt from the partner training and the fact we got no referrals originally – I now go out and do a roadshow, tots and teens, refugees network etc. – making sure they understand what the programme's about, who would benefit most. I think this time we'll get more partner referrals than when we had one training session – because that was just one person representing an organisation, but we need to reach whole teams.' (Co-ordinator)

- **Keeping partners informed about progress:** in Staffordshire, deliverers thought that as an externally contracted provider, they may be better connected into the local children and education 'landscape' than some colleagues within the local authority.

"With social workers or other referrers, we let them know how families they've referred are getting on, and at the end of the programme we refer back to the referrer. If it's a referral from a preschool, all their children who took part in Early Words Together would be discussed on the same letter, and it's quite brief so not onerous, but I think it's important that we follow up in that way.' (Programme lead)

Building relationships with local partners

As discussed above, programme stakeholders have on the whole found it difficult to engage local partners with EWT. A third of survey respondents (33%) thought there had been no impact on their contact with local partner organisations, and a fifth (22.1%) didn't know. Four in ten had seen a positive impact (41.5%) – similar to the Year One survey figure (38%).

That said, the case studies highlighted examples of how the programme had provided a very effective vehicle for relationships to be developed with local organisations, though this had often taken time to build momentum.

In one case study area, a children's centre had consciously used the programme as a form of outreach, taking it into different community settings such as church-based nursery groups. In an area where those community-based providers can view the children's centre as competition – and where some parents have traditionally been reluctant to access the children's centre due to its association with 'social services' – this EWT outreach had very tangibly build bridges.

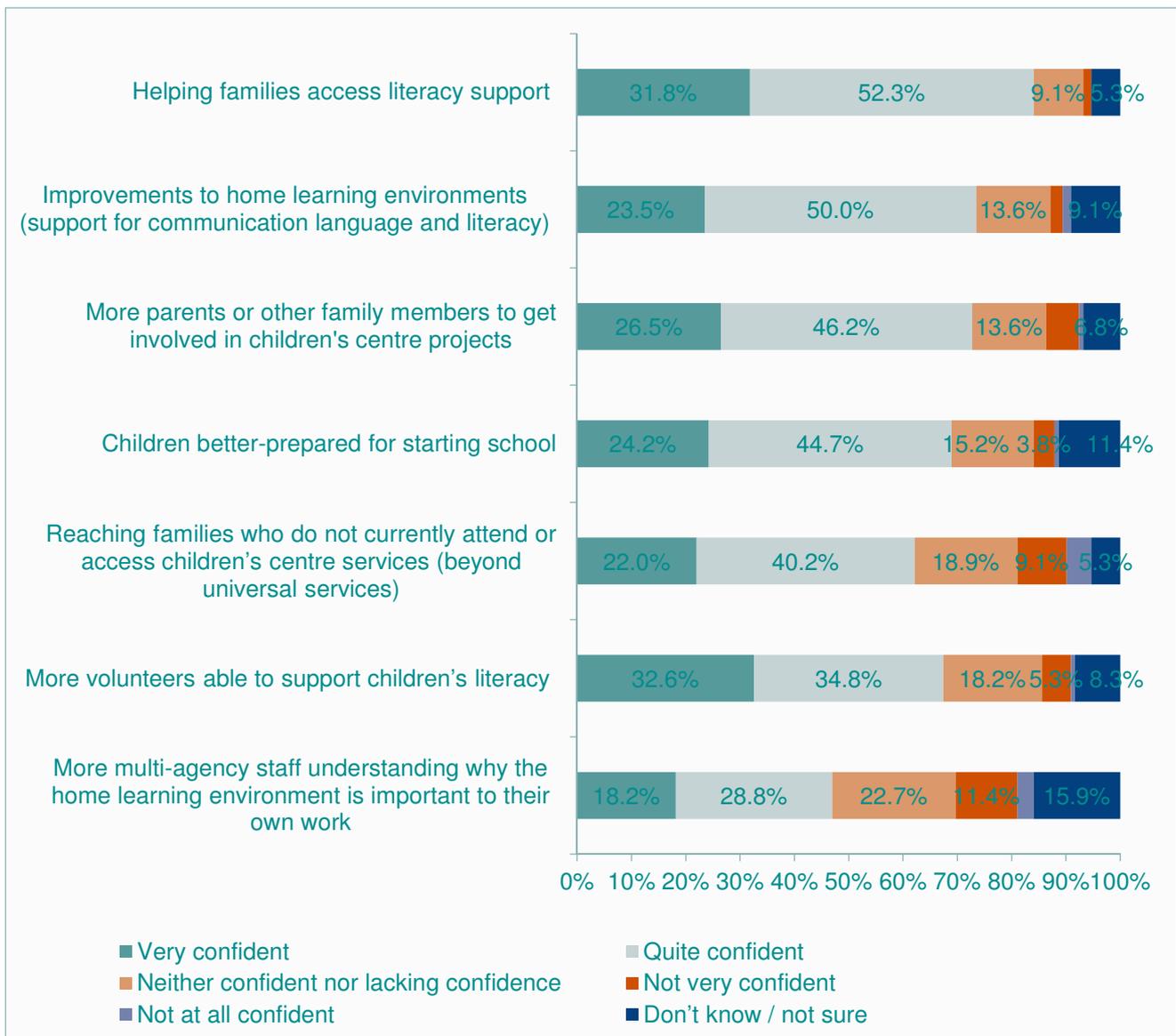
'We've developed better links with other organisations through the programme... as a centre that's part of our remit, and EWT has helped us with that. We ran EWT in other places so that it wasn't just associated with the building. With the church group, their concern initially was we'd be in to deliver this work but then out again – but we've been there for a year now, since EWT started, and doing other things as well. So for us the programme has been a way into new relationships.' (Children's centre cluster manager)

Stakeholder views about impact: overview

In six out of the seven outcomes listed, at least 60% of respondents believed that EWT was having a positive impact (see Figure 4 below). These responses broadly reflect those given at other points in the survey and through the case study interviews, with greatest positivity relating to impact on families’ access to literacy support, improved home learning environments and family involvement in children’s centres (all over 70%). Two thirds of respondents (67%) were confident that the programme had generated more volunteers to support children’s literacy. There was least confidence in the statement that EWT was increasing other agencies’ understanding of why the home learning environment is important to their work (47%).

Figure 4: Looking back at Early Words Together in your area, how confident are you that the programme is having a positive impact in terms of the following outcomes?

Base: 132



High initial confidence and moderated experience: Comparing results from both surveys, it is evident that for four of the seven outcomes listed, respondents' confidence in the programme's impact is lower than it was at the time of the Year One survey. This indicates that some of the challenges experienced in relation to issues such as recruiting volunteers and engaging partner agencies, have continued in Year Two. Table 3 (below) compares the results for this question asked in the Year Two survey and a similar question asked in the Year One version. In Year One, respondents had been asked to think about likely future impact of the programme, whereas in Year Two they were asked what they thought about the current impact. This allows us to see where people's experience has exceeded earlier expectations of the programme, and where there has been less impact than they had previously predicted. As demonstrated by the table, expectations in Year One were higher than have so far been achieved.

Table 3: How confident are you that Early Words Together is enabling you to have the following impacts?

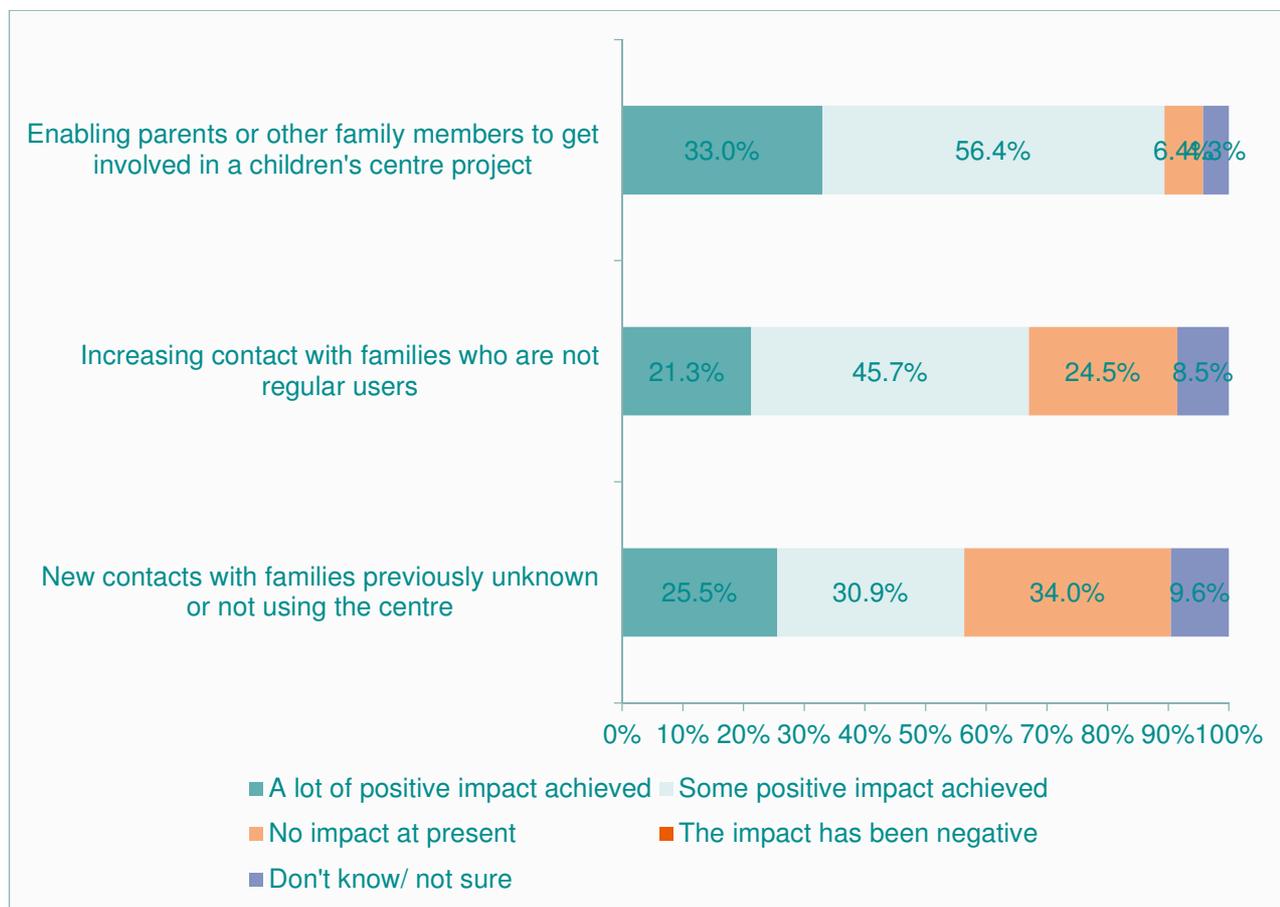
Outcome	Year One survey (% total positive about future impact)	Year Two survey (% total positive about current impact)
Helping to improve home learning environments (supporting communication, language and literacy).	84	73.5
More volunteers able to support children's literacy	82	67
More multi-agency staff understanding why the home-learning environment is relevant to their own work	62	47
Reaching families who do not currently attend or access children's centre services (beyond universal services)	72	62

Impact on children's centres and their relationships

EWT has helped children's centres to extend their reach and build stronger relationships with families, volunteers and, to a lesser extent, local partner organisations.

Figure 5: To what extent do you feel the Early Words Together programme has helped to achieve positive impacts so far in terms of the following outcomes?

Base: 94



Engaging families in their local children’s centre

Almost 9 out of 10 respondents felt that the programme had helped to enable parents or other family members to get involved in a children’s centre project (89.4%). This represents an increase on the Year One survey (70%).

The programme aimed to reach target families most in need of support, and to engage those families beyond the universal services they may already be accessing within settings.

Two thirds of Year Two survey respondents (67%) thought that the programme had helped them to increase their contact with families who were not regular users of the children’s centre (compared to 53% in Year One).

A smaller majority (56.4%) thought that EWT had generated new contacts with families previously unknown to settings.

Providing a means of ongoing involvement: Several interviewees have emphasised that whilst previously disengaged families may be the programme’s primary target audience, there is also a

need to retain families 'on the fringe' of children's centre involvement – and EWT can help to do that.

'The majority of my families on the programme have come through Book Share – I had 25 come that route by the last quarter. I see this as providing an extension to that work for families – it enables contact to continue, and builds on the trust we started to develop there.' (Third Sector EWT deliverer)

A majority of respondents (56.4%) agreed that the programme had enabled them to make new contact with families previously unknown to or not using the children's centre – and just under half of these thought that a *lot* of positive impact had been achieved in this regard. This suggests that whilst most settings did reach new, previously unknown or disengaged families through the programme, a significant minority did not. The depth interviews reflected this mixed picture.

The programme has provided settings with an additional vehicle for engaging its target families, and some interviewees therefore see it as fitting squarely within their 'core business'.

'We see them bring their friends as well – so it's bringing new people into the children's centre.' (EWT deliverer)

'Something like this is perfect in helping us evidence to OFSTED that we're helping our families, definitely.' (Third sector EWT deliverer)

The upward movement of these figures between the Year One and Year Two surveys suggests that settings became better at populating the programme with new or less engaged families over time, whilst in some cases having relied more on 'easier to reach' families at the start of the programme.

Building volunteer capacity in children's centres

EWT has supported the growth and development of settings' volunteer resource in two respects: augmenting the skills and confidence of volunteers – both new and existing – and to a lesser extent, augmenting the *number* of volunteers they can draw on to support work with families.

The great majority of survey respondents (80.9%) thought that EWT had been positive in terms of developing volunteer skills – similar to the figure registered in the Year One survey (76%). Just over a third (36.2%) believe the programme had achieved 'a lot' of positive impact.

Around half of respondents (52.2%) thought that EWT had grown the pool of volunteers able to support local families. This was also similar to the Year One survey results (56%).

Case study interviewees highlighted the benefits to children's centres in terms of a higher volume (and more capable) pool of volunteers which could be mobilised to support other projects and activities beyond EWT. This process of EWT volunteers migrating into other aspects of the children's centres or related services is already in evidence.

'The children's centre keeps poaching the Early Words Together volunteers! So it's having a really positive impact for them.' (Third sector EWT deliverer)

'People who are volunteering through the programme are now volunteering more widely within the children's centres.' (Co-ordinator)

In some cases, the contribution that volunteers have made is even encouraging staff to revise their own views about the roles that volunteers can potentially play in settings.

'I've had one volunteer who has just set up a family SEN group, she's planned it and is leading it as volunteer... I took more of a risk on this, having seen the outcomes from the Early Words Together programme.' (Third sector EWT deliverer)

Impact on local authorities

Co-ordinators, commissioners and local authority managers see the aims of EWT as a strong fit with existing organisational objectives, and thus EWT has very consciously been identified as a vehicle to progress those objectives. In addition to objectives around children's early years education, they identified the direct benefits of other objectives including building the skills and confidence to get people into work and building resilience and community capacity – the volunteering component being seen as particularly valuable.

'Early Words Together fitted in perfectly with the council's work. I think it's a good programme – it's good for us to be working with the libraries service as a partner, and great that it involves volunteers.' (Commissioner)

'There's something for us in the way in which things are moving in commissioning – it is more targeted rather than being so open and universal, and this programme fits with that. Also, this is measurable, and fits into our Back to Work stream of work as well... there's nothing not to like about it.' (Early help co-ordination lead)

Part 3: The experiences of programme deliverers

Making time and meeting targets

Finding the capacity to manage the programme alongside other pressures has been challenging in all case study areas. As local authorities seek to make savings across services, commissioners within the council and staff within early years settings are typically facing competing demands for time and resources. Across the board EWT has necessarily increased workloads to a greater or lesser extent, felt most keenly where it has coincided with a period of restructuring, uncertainty for staff, and even the closure of some settings which were initially to be involved in the programme.

In most cases, the programme has been integrated into staff's existing workloads. Although difficult to manage, especially at the beginning of the programme period, it is evident from survey responses and interviews that staff were largely positive about the potential of the programme to add value and help them achieve better outcomes locally, and were thus prepared to invest significant amounts of time and energy in making it work.

In those areas which commission-out the running of their children's centres to external agencies, the capacity needed to run the programme has had to be negotiated with the commissioning local authority. In one such area, where the National Literacy Trust's EWT funding was not sufficient to cover the cost of that contract variation, the council's libraries service took on the central co-ordination and administration role.

'We were very disappointed with the funding available to support the programme. We're having to subsidise it heavily, which we're doing because it helps the council achieve some of its outcomes, but I'm not sure we can sustain that... people reach burn-out stage if you're not careful' (Commissioner, children's centres)

Programme training and materials

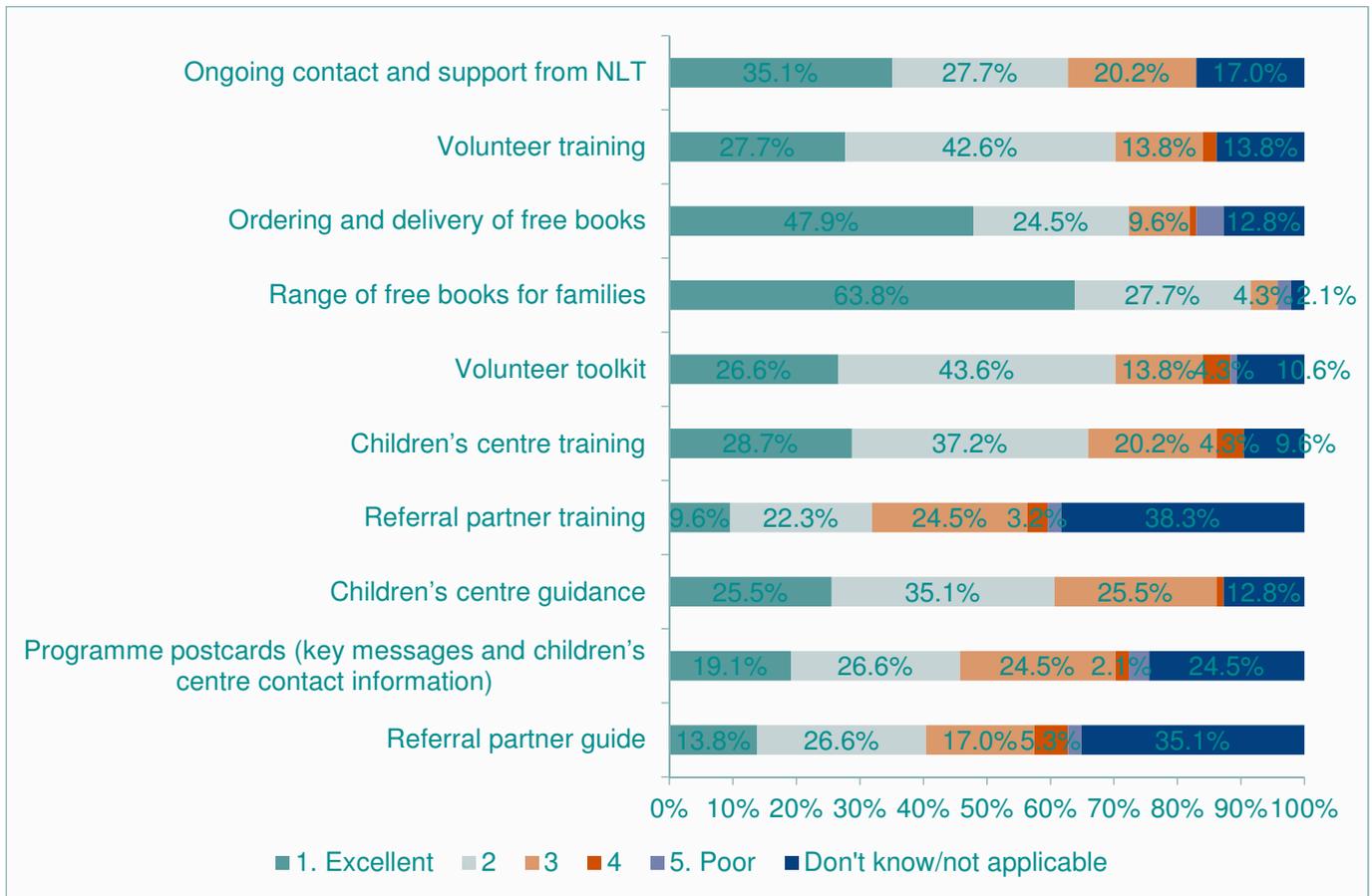
Nine out of ten Year Two survey respondents thought that the range of free books was excellent or good (90.5%), compared to eight out of ten in the Year One survey (79%).

Positivity was also registered in relation to the ordering and delivery of free books (72.4%); volunteer training (70.3%); and the volunteer toolkit (70.2%). The majority were also positive about the children's centre training (65.9%); the ongoing contact and support from the National Literacy Trust (62.8%); and children's centre guidance (60.6%).

The high proportion of 'don't know' responses in relation to referral partner training and referral partner guides reflect the limited contact that some stakeholders will have had with these inputs – which in turn reflects that levels of partner engagement have generally been lower than initially hoped for.

Figure 8: How would you rate the following training, resources and support provided as part of the programme, based on your experience so far?

Base: 94



EWT resources included, for children’s centres: programme postcards featuring key messages and contact information, and programme guidance; for volunteers: training, a toolkit, and materials to use with families; and for referral partners: training, and programme guidance.

The majority of interviewees appreciated the range and quality of the resources provided, and in the context of significant time pressures, they were important in making the programme deliverable.

‘We are quite a small charity provider, so having a toolkit was great for us. Anything to do with literacy – we know that’s where our most vulnerable families struggle – so having a tool to help with that is brilliant. (Third sector EWT deliverer)

‘They had the booklets, scrapbooks, booklists – these made it easier to manage, which is valuable in a busy children’s centre.’ (Early Years advisory teacher)

The volunteer toolkits in particular were valued for providing volunteers with a ready-made set of ideas and activities to use over the course of the six week programme with families. It has been common for co-ordinators to adapt the National Literacy Trust-provided training materials, in some

cases to reduce some of the detailed content and focus volunteers on what they felt were the most important points.

'The training sessions we went to were really good. They gave us all the training tools for volunteers, we took it away and condensed it so we could deliver in half a day – we knew a day would be hard for a lot of people, also for our staff and our volunteers.' (Co-ordinator)

'The commitment of people from the programme to come and talk to the teams was good – it meant people went into this knowing what they were doing. The materials were good.' (Third party EWT provider)

Enabling flexibility in responding to the different strengths and preferences of volunteers and families has been an important part of making the programme work. In that context, some interviewees felt that the materials implied a greater degree of structure than was, in reality, possible to sustain – and that volunteers were sometimes concerned that they were not able to keep to the process outlined. On the whole, however, interviewees felt strongly that it was invaluable to have these materials as a 'resource bank' to draw on.

'We thought the materials were good... some activities were a bit too structured, but they were a starting point, and starting points are important for helping the volunteers to feel confident. We taught them not to worry if the child went off and played with another child.' (Early Years advisory teacher)

'The toolkit was really good – lots of examples, and a guide they could follow if they wanted, but it allows room for flexibility.' (Cluster manager)

Recruiting volunteers

Volunteers are a core part of EWT, the extent and depth of the volunteer role representing a key difference with most similar programmes. This presents a series of challenges, and some settings have found it easier than others to recruit volunteers in the numbers expected by the National Literacy Trust. Their approaches to volunteer recruitment varied widely, even within local authority areas, and included:

- recruiting from pools of existing children's centre volunteers
- recruiting from pools of existing school and nursery volunteers
- recruiting from wider local volunteer networks via the local authority (and in at least one case, the local authority's own staff volunteering scheme)
- recruiting through the existing networks of a third sector children's centre provider
- recruiting through promoting the programme with local community groups and organisations

- recruiting from the immediate local community

Volunteers were sourced differently in different areas, depending on the nature of existing volunteer infrastructure and the different approaches of those leading or cooperating on the programme.

'It's lucky that we have external agencies running the centres as they have very well developed volunteering recruitment and support processes – can be longwinded, but weeds out those who won't be as good. Commissioned-out services have less money (to have) to use volunteers anyway. (Early years advisory teachers' lead)

'The fact that we have a volunteer programme really freed people up to use that volunteer programme who they hadn't used before. We tried to match people up to locations convenient for them, and the same with the training, and we ran extra training sessions to accommodate them, with children's centres working together to share training etc.' (Local authority volunteer co-ordinator)

As with the recruitment of participating families, initial time pressures at the start of the programme were a specific factor in co-ordinators and settings taking a pragmatic approach to sourcing volunteers from wherever they could. In some cases, volunteers were sourced from amongst existing children's centre or other local authority staff, or were already known to settings as volunteers.

The majority of EWT leads within our case study sample had set out with the intention of recruiting from within local communities, and latterly from amongst EWT beneficiary parents.

'The majority of our volunteers are single parents and the prime adult in their families. I think this experience has given them the knowledge they are doing the right things with their own children, and given them lots of ideas of what to do with their own children.' (volunteer co-ordinator)

Where recruitment of parent peers as volunteers has been difficult, this has been seen as the result of a combination of factors, including: lack of confidence and literacy ability in the context of the role's demands; reluctance to commit the time when their own family lives might be demanding and time-intensive; and in a smaller number of instances, concerns about volunteers knowing EWT beneficiaries directly as neighbours.

'We had hoped that the parents we involve would then go on to volunteer, but between the two of us, we've only had two do that – most are quite a few steps below being able to do that.' (Deliverer)

'On the one estate where we have a children's centre, the intention had been to recruit volunteers in that area, but that was challenging – they have challenges in their own lives etc., and there have been issues where families knew those individuals already' (co-ordinator)

The interviews highlighted different views about the necessary characteristics of an EWT volunteer. One commonly expressed view was that EWT is more demanding on the volunteers than most other programmes or children's centre activities, and that consequently more confident and experienced volunteers – perhaps with teaching or early years backgrounds – are preferable. Through the case study interviews we heard several examples of volunteers who had found the work too challenging, and either at the training stage or early in the delivery phase, backed out. The following comments came from different interviewees within the same local authority area.

'From a children's centre point of view, these were quite high calibre volunteers that they were after... the sort they may not be engaging with usually, but which this programme needs. For Early Words Together, you had to be looking at retired people or students.'
(Local authority lead)

'My best volunteers were previous outreach families. They had empathy – they had been there... One problem with professional people is they can't believe the families don't do certain things!' (Third sector EWT deliverer)

'The volunteers were all nervous after their first sessions, but rose to the challenge, and all loved it. The ones that were very nervous I did not use further, although I might in the future – so we worked with the ones who were right and ready.' (Volunteer co-ordinator)

On the whole, interviewees felt there was merit in recruiting volunteers with a range of motivations and backgrounds, acknowledging that different skill sets and characteristics were useful to have access to within the cohort.

'I think having a mixture of volunteers is good... one of our casual members of staff (LEVEL 3 childcare) is able to support volunteers and families with a bit more knowledge, but then we also had a volunteer who was good at making it very informal, and also a mum who was very creative but who had no early years background.' (Third party EWT provider)

In some areas, beneficiary parents are now successfully being recruited to future rounds of the programme, although numbers at this stage are relatively small.

EWT has a good synergy with other programmes based in children's centres, but through its use of volunteers, its six week structure and accompanying bank of high quality materials EWT is acknowledged as having particularly useful characteristics.

'Our children's centres are mostly on school sites, and that can put some parents off from engaging in the children's centres. This programme is helping parents break down those barriers about what school is, their own negative experience, and to become engaged with us.' (Co-ordinator)

The central role played by volunteers is commonly cited as marking EWT out from other programmes, and as positioning the programme more positively for many parents.

'The more capable volunteers in particular, the families gel with them because its parent-to-parent, not a member of staff. They have that empathy, those similar experiences.'
(Children's centre manager)

Recruiting target families and sustaining their involvement

Settings in most of the case study areas experienced challenges in recruiting volunteers and families in the numbers established by programme targets. The programme has sought to reach target families who have previously not engaged with settings (or whose engagement was confined to universal services), and the programme has clearly had some success at reaching families who match that description. When asked how positive they were about the programme's success at reaching families who did not otherwise access or attend services at the children's centre, 62% of Year Two survey respondents were positive.

'I'd say all our families but one were vulnerable – and with that one, the child had additional needs.' (Third party EWT provider)

'We were aiming to reach those who wouldn't be engaging. We're starting to make inroads into those families through word of mouth, through delivering in pre-schools – we're selling it as a transition project from pre-school into school – and because parents drop them off at pre-school, and we see them, we've got a captive audience where we can build those partnerships.' (Third party EWT provider)

It is also clear, however, that settings have in some cases stretched the programme criteria. This was sometimes to increase the number of families recruited, especially early in the programme when targets and deadlines were a particular challenge.

'I think [the challenge of meeting recruitment targets] has meant some settings have been looser on the recruitment, so families have not been the ones aimed at by the programme.'
(Early years advisory teachers' lead)

Interviewees often gave other reasons, however, namely:

- They felt that some families fell outside the criteria as framed by the recruitment questions, but they were confident that these were families which would benefit;

'[Most families] are linked to the children's centre in some way already, but they may not be getting help with early communication though – so they do need to be doing a lot more with us, and this is where Early Words Together really has benefits.' (Co-ordinator)

'The home learning indicators are difficult... because people are embarrassed about the judgements being made if they give certain answers.' (Early years advisory teachers' lead)

- They actively wanted to encourage a mix of parents so that those with less acute need for the programme's support could model behaviour and encourage others;
- They took a view that allowing more universal uptake across their services helped to mask (and thus 'de-stigmatise') targeted services, thus making them more attractive to target families and ultimately enabling them to reach more of those families.

'We didn't reject anyone who showed interest, so early on it was mostly families we already knew, but because it was in open settings, others came to us and asked to be involved... we think our targeted work should grow out of our universal work – that we are open for everyone. That has helped taking any stigmatisation out of 'targeting'. (Children's centre manager)

Sustaining a family's involvement across six weeks: The great majority of interviewees support the six week timeframe for the programme. Most feel that a shorter programme would not provide sufficient time to have impact, but that a longer programme would see higher levels of attrition. Sites report challenges inherent in working with the target families, such as inconsistency in weekly attendance. This makes it difficult to progress a family through the course in a 6 week period, as some sessions are often missed along the way.

'We can get them signed up, but getting them to a venue is very frustrating.' (Programme co-ordinator)

'It can be hard to get families to do it in 6 week blocks – they might come for a few weeks, then have a few weeks off – and that can be hard for the volunteers to manage.'
(Programme co-ordinator)

Co-ordinators are therefore being flexible about the model of delivery in order to get families to the end of the programme. This can mean flexibility in terms of volunteers working at different stages with different families, or in terms of the way that volunteers work with families one to one or in pairs or small groups.

'We're having to run it as a rolling programme now, because of people coming and not coming, so we can't maintain it as a single cohort that moves through together....As far as possible we keep the volunteers and families matched, but we're introducing them to each other so the volunteers can pick up other families if needed. Because like families, volunteers sometimes can't come as well.' (Programme co-ordinator)

What has worked

Building of trust between parents and volunteers: Some interviewees highlight examples of parents and volunteers gelling very strongly, with a volunteer gaining the trust of a parent who has in the past been reluctant to form strong bonds with staff from either a setting or other support service. The basis of that trust can be an appreciation of the time a volunteer is giving without financial reward; a feeling of shared experience with a volunteer; or familiarity built up over the course of weekly sessions.

'There's one parent we've managed to involve who has really come to trust their volunteer – and they don't usually trust anyone!' (Children's centre manager)

EWT helped to increase parents' trust in early years staff and this was a positive factor in keeping them involved in EWT.

'Families respond differently, the sort of relationships they build etc. In one case, a parent would not have stayed involved, but there was a support worker at the children's centre there who, whilst not involved in the programme, made her feel more comfortable being there.' (Early Years advisor teacher)

The availability of good quality, free books: Few interviewees believed that the free books available through EWT were the main motivation for maintaining parents' participation across the course of the programme. Most did identify them as a valuable part of the package, however, and noted that parents were often impressed that such good quality books were being given away at no cost.

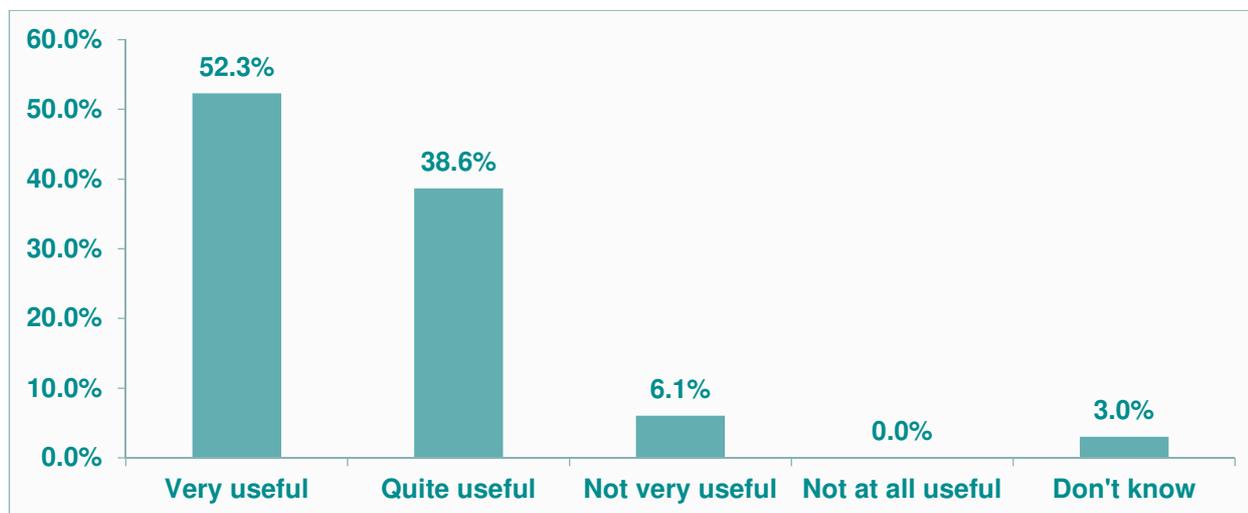
Usefulness of indicators

Survey respondents were asked how useful the following three indicators were for identifying families needing help with early learning at home from the EWT programme:

- Parents sharing books with their child
- Parents singing songs or rhymes with their child
- Number of books in the home (owned or borrowed)

Figure 9: How useful have you found these indicators for identifying families needing help with early learning at home?

Base: 94



The overwhelming majority found these indicators to be either very or quite useful. Respondents were also asked whether they had used any other indicators that had proved to be effective. The following responses were repeated by various respondents:

- Parental literacy levels (e.g. below or above E3);
- Parent's enjoyment of reading;
- Number of words a child is using;
- What other play activities parents do with their children at home;
- Amount of Early Years sessions attending/ attended.

The home learning indicators were designed to guide conversations between practitioners and parents. Some practitioners, however, viewed them as strict criteria intended to determine whether or not families were suitable for the programme, in which case they could be found to be restrictive. Several respondents reported finding the indicators difficult to interpret because of some parents' unwillingness to share information they felt would reflect badly on them (e.g. number of books in the home). A couple of respondents stated that their prior knowledge of the family that professionals at the children's centre might have was more helpful.

Legacy and sustainability

All interviewees wanted to see the programme continue in their areas beyond 2015, but continuing budgetary pressures in local authorities mean that only some areas will extend EWT in its current form. Most spoke about integrating aspects of EWT into mainstream activity, though reiterated that budgetary pressures would determine the extent that this would be possible – such as whether books could be provided free to families, for instance.

'I wouldn't want to lose the momentum this has created around literacy in our children's centres. I hope it's a programme we can adopt and continue to run in our children's centres, as we'll already have the model and the volunteers... and maybe we can develop that model, using volunteers in one to one support, in other areas too.' (Head of service)

'For us now, it'll be on our programme now for as long as we can – we're finding it's a way to register parents we weren't able to engage with, so it's been very, very worthwhile.' (Children's centre manager)

'The centres are very keen on this continuing, getting momentum as it becomes better known, so we're looking at ways of sourcing the books.' (third sector EWT delivery partner)

There are high levels of appreciation and enthusiasm for EWT across participating areas, in particular for its direct positive impact on families and their home learning environments, as well as for its impacts on volunteer and staff development. As such, even in those areas where EWT will not continue as a stand-alone programme, programme deliverers in many cases are confident that they will integrate aspects of EWT into their wider work – its tools, techniques and approaches; its use of play as well as reading to develop communication; and its enhanced role for volunteers. Those involved in the project also see the legacy in terms of more skilled, confident staff and volunteers; more engaged families; and settings better networked within their localities.

Conclusions

Judged against the targets set and the response of the early years practitioners, volunteers and parents involved, EWT can be regarded as a successful programme. It has been embraced as a new vehicle for supporting families to build better home learning environments, not only enabling stronger literacy skills but enhancing wider parent-child communication and relationships. As such there has been extensive good will and positivity shown towards the programme, in spite of managers and staff finding it demanding at times – whether due to the challenge of recruiting the right volunteers, engaging the right families, or finding adequate resources (especially staff and space) to enable the programme to run smoothly.

It is a programme which has been rooted in a clear delivery model and supported with a set of well-regarded materials, yet which has taken shape differently in different areas – and within areas, even between settings. Those involved have appreciated that flexibility to make the programme work based on their local contexts, adapting the original model based on factors such as the capacity of their settings, the presence of volunteers and their skills and aptitudes.

One of the key distinctive features of the programme has been its use of – and capacity to develop – volunteers. Whilst volunteers are an established part of the early years landscape, supporting activities across children's centres and other settings, the very substantial and usually pivotal volunteer role in EWT is recognised as particularly central to its delivery and its character. The extent of the volunteer role has brought its own challenges, and in some cases has meant that volunteers with relevant professional experience have been seen as more appropriate than community peers. Where those peers have been successfully engaged and supported in EWT volunteering roles, however, their ability to connect with participating families and to develop their own confidence, skills and future work opportunities has been a marked strength.

On a financial level, the programme's blending of paid staff and volunteer capacity will make this an attractive model for local authorities to invest in at a time when public sector budgets are under continued pressure. More than this, however, the volunteer role in EWT cements it as a programme which works to build the capacity of its delivery team as well as beneficiary families, and which is rooted in the communities it serves. Where local authorities best appreciate this and view the six week intervention as part of a wider process of development and capacity-building shared with its communities, the impacts may prove to be greatest and the programme's legacy most compelling.