



UNIVERSITY OF
CAMBRIDGE

Identifying key impacts of the Fenland and East Cambridgeshire Opportunity Area

Evidence Review

Riikka Hofmann, Sonia Ilie, Miriam Broeks, Claudia Pik-Ki Chu
Faculty of Education University of Cambridge

January 2022

Foreword

This report was commissioned by the Fenland and East Cambridgeshire Opportunity Area (FECOA).

The aim of the report is to generate a synthesis of evidence and impacts by the overall FECOA offering and the underlying projects and initiatives by reviewing existing evidence from across the FECOA. The report subsequently generates insights into the standards of evidence of impact available across FECOA, and provides recommendations for strengthening that evidence.

For the sake of brevity, in this report we refer to the full DfE Opportunity Area programmes as *whole-OA*. We refer to the Fenland and East Cambridgeshire Opportunity Area (FECOA) as *the programme*; and to specific projects, interventions, and initiatives within FECOA as *projects*.

The report proceeds as follows:

- The report first contextualises the activity of the FECOA in the policy and evidence space, as well as in the socio-economic circumstances of the region.
- It then outlines the review and synthesis approach taken.
- The report then identifies key findings from across the six themes of activity underpinning the FECOA activity, and summarises the key impacts of theme-specific projects, and at programme-level.
- The report engages with the standards of evidence being derived and finally puts forward recommendations for evidence-building.

Contents

Contents

Foreword.....	2
Contents.....	3
Exec Summary	1
Contextualising FECOA activity	5
The Opportunity Area programme and the attainment gap	5
Fenland and East Cambridgeshire Opportunity Area	6
Approach.....	9
Key findings	10
Theme: School Improvement.....	10
Theme: Early Years.....	14
Theme: Inclusion, and Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH)	16
Theme: Post-16	19
Theme: Youth Voice	21
Theme: Teacher Recruitment and Retention	23
Key impacts	26
Impact strength.....	26
Theme-specific impacts	28
FECOA Programme-level impacts	33
Productive evidence-building approaches.....	33
Generating programme-wide evidence of impact.....	34
Embedding evidence-building early on.....	35
Harnessing synergies.....	36
References	37
Appendix 1	39

Executive Summary

The Fenland and East Cambridgeshire Opportunity Area

Low social mobility continues to be a substantial barrier to the realisation of children and young people's full potentials. A key lever for improving social mobility rests in addressing the educational inequality associated with differences in socio-economic background. This is because socio-economic disadvantage continues to be linked to fewer educational opportunities, lower educational attainment, and worse labour market outcomes.

The Opportunity Area (OA) programme is a Government flagship programme, announced in 2016 and launched in 2017 to tackle low social mobility and entrenched regional disadvantage among young people through place-based educational interventions. The programme focuses on pupils who are most likely to encounter barriers to social mobility. A key part of the programme's strategy is to improve education, by addressing deep-rooted issues that affect children and young people's outcomes.

The Fenland and East Cambridgeshire Opportunity Area (FECO) is one of twelve Opportunity Areas across the country, selected because of low levels of social mobility. The initial challenges for FECOA revolved around the attainment gap between children from different socio-economic backgrounds; the fact that disadvantaged children in the area performed relatively less well compared to similar children in other parts of the country; enduring gaps in literacy and communication skills; and the provision for children with disabilities or special educational needs. The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated these issues and posed further barriers to social mobility nationally and in the area. FECOA programmes have adapted to the pandemic context to address the substantial disruption to the educational process.

FECO Priorities and Themes

Priority 1, Themes: Early Years and School Improvement: Accelerate the progress of disadvantaged children and young people in the acquisition and development of communication, language and reading.

Priority 2, Themes Social Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) and Special Educational Needs (SEND): Strengthen the effectiveness of support for children and young people with mental health concerns and those with Special Educational Needs.

Priority 3, Themes Post-16 routes and Youth Voice: Raise aspirations and increase access for young people to a wide range of career choices and post-16 routes.

Priority 4, Theme Recruitment and Retention: Recruit, develop and retain the best leaders and teachers in Fenland and East Cambridgeshire.

Background to this document

The Fenland and East Cambridgeshire Opportunity Area (FECO) commissioned researchers from the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, to generate a synthesis of evidence of impacts of FECOA programmes delivered during the first four years of the programme (2017-2020). The synthesis reviewed just under 200 distinct documents, monitoring forms, evaluation reports, and external evidence. In determining the impact of FECOA and its constituent programmes, the synthesis also accounted for the impact of the pandemic on the ability to generate evidence of impact at a time of substantial disruption. The impacts reported here represent a snapshot of the wide range of evidence reviewed and do not cover all elements of the provision, given the diverse range of activities undertaken during the first four years of the programme.

Impacts, by theme

Priority 1

Theme: School Improvement

The School Improvement Programme made up a large proportion of the delivery under this theme, alongside the **Evidence-based Practice Fund**, a **Phonics Resource Grant Scheme**, provision for **Teaching Assistants** and others. Many schools' plans for both implementation and evaluation of programmes under this theme were disrupted by the pandemic. Pandemic impact notwithstanding, participants reported overwhelmingly positive experiences of engagement with the programmes, positive outcomes at school level, and very clear self-identified positive impacts on pupil knowledge and confidence.

Schools participating in the universal offer under the School Improvement Programme in Year 4 reported improvements in language outcomes for children; teachers benefiting from professional development opportunities; and diversifying pupil experiences.

Theme: Early Years

Activity under this theme covered a range of programmes, including **Phonics for Success**, **Five to Thrive**, **Keep Talking FEC**, the **Library Community Work** project, and others, and at times overlapped with the School Improvement Theme, particularly around literacy outcomes.

Practitioners participating in Phonics for Success reported increased knowledge, confidence and engagement with phonics; In the community, library memberships and reading time increased.

Evaluation results by the training provider around **Phonics for Success** pointed to substantial increases in knowledge, higher for childminders than for qualified teachers, and linked to increases in self-reported confidence to deliver phonics. Additional increases in confidence were noted by the provider from engagement with participants during their own recording of their process and while working together. While always possible to strengthen the evidence base around impact, such conclusions suggest that this element of the provision was successful.

Priority 2

Theme: SEMH and SEND

A wide range of programmes was delivered in Years 1 to 4 under this theme, covering a range of issues around inclusion, the provision of education for children with special educational needs and the training of professionals (including teachers) to support this provision. The **SENDIASS FEC** programme aimed to increase the time for which parents received support in relation to a child with SEND. Evaluation evidence estimated a 13% increase in the time spent directly supporting parents, clear progress towards the expected aim. The **STEPS** programme saw the generation of a case study around a school whose staff had engaged with the training, noting the shifts in staff practices and an associated reduction in the number of exclusions – the ultimate aim of this programme – of over 80% over 3 years. The **EHWS** programme, engaging with children's wellbeing practitioners, was also seen to be effective, with broad indications that staff had been successful in reducing anxiety, improving low mood and reducing behaviour problems for the children with whom they had worked. Other elements of the provision under this theme saw disruption from the pandemic both in terms of implementation and the collection of any evidence around impact.

A case study from a school whose staff received STEPS training showed a reduction of exclusions from 85 to 15 over 2 years.

Priority 3

Theme: Post-16 Routes

From the pupil perspective, work under this theme is the closest to the point of final outcomes from education and a potential move into further/higher education and the world of work. Programmes reflected this, and included amongst others, a **Careers Information Advice and Guidance** programme. While the pandemic disrupted the collection of data and therefore the generation of evidence of impact, teachers participating in this aspect of the provision reported being more knowledgeable about talking about career options for their students, being better prepared and more confident to support their students, and improvements to their own career guiding skills as a result of their engagement with the programme.

While the pandemic significantly impacted implementation of post-16 activity, emerging evidence suggests increased student and teacher knowledge and confidence in careers planning.

The **Cultural Enrichment Programme**, another element of the provision under this theme, saw both teachers and students reporting an increase in students' skills and knowledge and teachers' abilities to deliver effective in-school activity. More than half of participants in the **Aim Higher** programme (part of the Essential Skills for Life initiative) reported it had supported their thinking about their post-16 future, with two school case studies suggesting better social and emotional outcomes too. Monitoring documents revealed steady though somewhat uneven progress towards the Gatsby benchmarks which is underpinned by the desired outcomes from this theme.

Theme: Youth Voice

Programmes under this theme looked to generate engagement from young people, higher aspirations and expectations and stronger community links. The **Youth Advisory Boards** saw sustained engagement from young people, key community stakeholders, and relevant local institutions. The informal evaluation of the Youth Advisory Boards suggests improved visibility for young people's voices, with young people reporting improvements in feelings of empowerment around issues they deemed important.

Despite the pandemic, Youth Advisory Boards have become well-established and sustainable across the region. Long-term relationships are still being developed.

Similarly, the varied and provider-led **detached youth work** carried out alongside the Youth Advisory Boards were deemed in early monitoring reports to be a "definitive success" despite pandemic-related disruptions, with reports from the different providers all offering positive accounts of the implementation of their respective activity.

Priority 4

Theme: Recruitment and Retention

Activities falling under this priority involved training provision for existing teachers, including early career teachers, a **recruitment marketing campaign**, **apprenticeship/internship programmes**, **bespoke local careers guidance** and others. Sign-up to the programme was consistently high and more than 90% of programme participants gave positive or very positive feedback, with a range of self-reported positive impacts. The 1-2-1 guidance led to significant recruitment increase: 199 participants in 2019-20, 86% applied for a post being offered, and the programme generated 37 additional teacher trainees in the region.

Evidence suggests that the theme activities increased the recruitment of local people into teacher training, the mentoring of early career teachers, and recruitment and retention of teachers in the region.

The **foundation teacher training programme** in FEC also achieved increased applications and recruitment. 100% of the 45 early career teachers participating in in-house mentoring to address Covid-19 training gaps reported increased knowledge and confidence, as did their mentors. Outcomes do not yet exist for the recruitment marketing programme, but gaps were identified for improving its reach and sustainability: the website was combined with 'Teach in Cambridgeshire'. The observed impacts of the recruitment incentive varied between schools. This suggests that the provision of grants should be accompanied by a better understanding of the change mechanisms and support to schools around the deployment of these resources.

Impacts, overall

While the pandemic has disrupted the implementation of many activities and, in some cases, the generation of evidence regarding their impact, the data collected suggests a range of positive impacts from the programme. Beyond participant satisfaction, which was consistently very high, these impacts involved increased participation in development activities, and in self-reported knowledge and confidence, of both practitioners and young people themselves, as well as reductions in pupils' behavioural issues and teacher turnover. Moreover, while evidence of impact on pupil outcomes was largely self-reported, quantitative evidence, as well as Ofsted reports, where present, also pointed to positive impacts on pupil outcomes. At programme level, the evaluation suggested a high quality of leadership by the local FECOA team and a high level of support for the programme from local stakeholders, both individuals and institutions. The perhaps even greater programme level impact involves the development of and support for networks and collaboration opportunities across the region which have mediated successful work within institutions.

Conclusion

This systematic review of evidence is a first step towards ascertaining the programme-level impacts of FECOA. The evidence review suggests that a meaningful, yet minority, proportion of institutions were able to engage in school-led evidence generation and independent (self-) evaluation activity as part of improving their practice, despite the challenging public health circumstances. Such activities were well supported by the FECOA team. This in itself is evidence of significant learning and improvement in the region as a result of FECOA and offers a foundation for further engagement to counter the negative effects of the pandemic. Further support for schools, early years settings, and other providers in engaging in evaluation and evidence generation activity will support both the successful implementation of future provision and the continuous evidence-informed improvement of educational practice to help close the attainment gap in this region. This evaluation suggests the FECOA programme has provided a significant starting point for this work which is worth sustaining. What this evaluation shows is that there is now a substantial opportunity within the FECOA to build on and enhance existing approaches, to move towards systematically evaluating outcomes that matter in a way that can feed directly into improving education, equity, and social mobility.

Contextualising FECOA activity

The Opportunity Area programme and the attainment gap

There is a consistent and persistent gap in England in children and young people's educational attainment, as linked to economic disadvantage (EEF, 2018; Stewart & Waldvogel, 2017). This manifests later through reduced opportunities, including progression to higher education (Chowdry et al, 2013), and worse labour market outcomes (Carneiro et al., 2020) for those from the most deprived backgrounds. Pupils with special educational needs are another particularly educationally disadvantaged group and these two factors are often interlinked (Strand & Lindorff, 2018). Reducing educational inequality is widely seen as a key policy lever for improving social mobility (Crawford et al., 2017), with recent evidence (Carneiro et al., 2020) suggesting there are stark geographic differences between levels of social mobility, some of which can be attributed to educational experiences. Place-based policy interventions seek to address this geographic imbalance by providing contextualised approaches that reflect local needs and circumstances as they relate to the national situation.

Moreover, tackling educational inequality and raising attainment is expected to increase national wealth more widely (EEF, 2018). While improvements have been made, over recent years a significant slowing down in the closure of the disadvantage gap has been observed; data from 2018 suggests the gap might even be starting to widen further, and this observation is stronger for the most persistently disadvantaged pupils (Hutchinson et al., 2019). Overlaying these developments is the COVID-19 pandemic, which has significantly negatively contributed to educational inequalities (Andrew et al., 2020; Bayrakdar & Guveli, 2020; Hofmann et al., forthcoming). Policy interventions therefore face the task of turning these negative tides – and any programme impact analysis must be interpreted in this context.

The Opportunity Area (OA) programme is a Government flagship programme, announced in 2016 and launched in 2017 to tackle entrenched regional disadvantage among young people through place-based educational interventions. A key part of the programme's strategy is to improve education, by addressing deep-rooted issues that affect children and young people's outcomes. The programme focuses on pupils that are most likely to encounter barriers to social mobility. This includes pupils eligible for the pupil premium, looked-after children (LAC), Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children, children facing challenges to their mental health, those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), children with behavioural issues and young carers.

Multiple educational phases appear key to tackling socioeconomic inequalities in educational attainment. The gap in outcomes between children from least well-off backgrounds and their better-off peers is already evident in the early years (EEF, 2018; Crawford et al., 2017) and widens throughout compulsory education. Even initially high-achieving poor children tend to fall behind in England as they move from primary to secondary education (Crawford et al., 2017) leading to significant concern, as secondary education is a key predictor of future educational engagement and social mobility.

The gap widens even further in post-compulsory education where parental education plays a particular role in explaining students' progression between end of compulsory secondary education and high school graduation or equivalent at age 18 (Jerrim & Vignoles, 2015). The EEF's evidence synthesis (2018) finds that the majority of 19-year-olds who have been eligible for free school meals (FSM) leave their education without a good standard of qualifications in English and maths. This has significant impact on participation in higher education. Socioeconomic differences in university access are pronounced in England and greater than for example in the US and

Australia (Jerrim & Vignoles, 2015). School attainment is the particular factor mediating parental education, family income and access to higher education (*ibid.*).

Improving the educational attainment of children and young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds is therefore key to tackling educational and wider social inequalities. Moreover, young people's aspirations and academic self-belief, as well as their social identities, also play a significant role in improving educational pathways (Vignoles & Murray, 2016; Hoskins & Ilie, 2017). However, the research evidence is clear that the deficit discourse around 'low aspirations' is not borne out in the data. The focus should instead fall on the moderated expectations of progression, expectations which are created in a contextualised manner and reflect the circumstances of young people's lives, including their immediate socio-economic environments (Harrison & Waller, 2018).

Schools, colleges, and other educational institutions also play an important role in addressing the early-arising educational gaps and fewer opportunities for progression experienced by children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. While schools can, and do, make a difference to children's learning, they do so differently (Strand, 2012). Schools also operate within the local milieu that includes labour market structures and opportunities and interact with other measures aiming (sometimes only partly successfully) at addressing socio-economic disadvantage.

Against this background, the OA programme's broad scope, covering education levels from early years to post-16 provision, is simultaneously ambitious and highly suitable. The OA programme works through a place-based approach. The aim of this approach is to recognise the unique issues different areas within the UK face and the need for local involvement in decision-making about solutions. Each OA has its own delivery plan and accompanying set of goals, embedded within the broader programme objectives and remit, and its local delivery team.

Fenland and East Cambridgeshire Opportunity Area

The Fenland and East Cambridgeshire Opportunity Area (FECO) is one of 12 Opportunity Areas across the country selected from Local Authority Districts (LADs) that were in the weakest sextile for both the 2016 Social Mobility Index (SMI) and the Achieving Excellence Areas Index. The FECOA was one of the second set of six OAs announced in January 2017 and this report was initiated during its fourth year.

Nationally, Fenland ranked 319th and East Cambridgeshire 311th out of the 324 LADs on the 2016 SMI (Easton et al., 2018). These two areas were brought together as one OA to maximise programme impact. Disadvantaged children in Fenland and East Cambridgeshire have lower attainment than disadvantaged children nationally. Challenges around literacy and communication have been particularly recognised as barriers to social mobility, as has insufficiently addressing the needs of many children with special educational needs (DfE, 2017).

A lower proportion of pupils in Fenland were attending a primary school rated outstanding or good by Ofsted for leadership and management than nationally, and the proportion of schools with vacancies has been high, illustrating significant challenges with recruitment despite efforts to find new ways to recruit teachers, including internationally. Regional factors pose specific additional challenges in this area. Due to the rurality of the region, travel is difficult; cost, time, and poor networks pose barriers to educational participation and teacher recruitment. In particular, the availability of, and access to, post-16 provision is a significant concern. Apprenticeships are more popular than in many other regions, but the number of higher-level and degree-level apprenticeships was small at the start of the programme (DfE, 2017). Across FECOA, participation in Higher Education is significantly lower than national average (DfE, 2017).

While both areas within the FECOA mark high in terms of deprivation, there are also differences in the patterns of challenges in the two areas. At the start of the programme, in the early years, the percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) who achieve at least the expected level across all seventeen early learning goals was below the national average in East Cambridgeshire but around the national average in Fenland (DfE, 2017). In 2018, East Cambridgeshire was one of the 17 local authority areas within the OA programme where the disadvantage gap was already at least six months by age five (third larger than the national average of 4.5 months) and increasing (Hutchinson et al., 2019). Conversely, for all other pupils in 2017, those in East Cambridgeshire were performing slightly better on average than their peers nationally, while those in Fenland were performing worse than the national average. At key stage 2 and key stage 4 there has been a large gap between the attainment of disadvantaged pupils and their peers in both districts. At age nineteen the percentage of young people achieving a level 3 qualification has been lower for disadvantaged pupils compared to non-disadvantaged pupils (DfE, 2017).

It is worth noting that while UK-wide the gap between the most persistently disadvantaged students and non-disadvantaged students has narrowed in primary schools in recent years, in East Cambridgeshire, the gap between these groups widened from 2017-18 even in primary education (Hutchinson et al., 2019). While this analysis was done only half a school year after the FECOA published its delivery plan and should not be attributed to the programme, it is worth noting: if the development without the programme in the region would have been negative, even stabilising the gap may initially represent impact.

Like the other OA areas, FECOA has its own delivery plan and accompanying set of goals, embedded within the broader programme objectives and remit, and a local delivery team. The Fenland and East Cambridgeshire OA has four priority areas covering six themes, which reflect closely the areas identified as key in the literature above:

Priority 1: Accelerate the progress of disadvantaged children and young people in the acquisition and development of communication, language and reading. (Themes: Early Years and School Improvement)

Priority 2: Strengthen the effectiveness of support for children and young people with mental health concerns and those with Special Educational Needs. (Themes: Social, Emotional and Mental Health and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.)

Priority 3: Raise aspiration and increase access for young people to a wide range of career choices and post-16 routes. (Themes: Post-16 education and Youth Voice)

Priority 4: Recruit, develop and retain the best leaders and teachers in Fenland and East Cambridgeshire. (Theme: Recruitment and Retention)

These priorities each come with specific measurable aims. These are included in Appendix 1, where we also summarise the broad information that is available on the specific progress made towards this aim as is currently available.

Nationally, an independent evaluation of the implementation of the OA programme found significant regional commitment both to the programme and its overall goals, and effective working within the partnership boards overseeing change in each area. It also found significant investment in developing effective working relationships across the DfE teams and local stakeholders. The model and input of the DfE local delivery teams and partnership boards has been found to be a strength of the programme (Easton et al., 2018). Very early analyses of

educational outcomes show mixed results from across the first wave of OAs (Hutchinson et al., 2019).

However, the above evaluation was conducted less than a year after the launch of the first six OAs and only half a school year after the launch of the FEC OA. Little more recent analysis exists of the impact of the programme, or specific cross-OA approaches (an exception is Hofmann and Ilie, 2020, for a report on the Evidence Based Fund projects across three OA in the East of England). With the 4th year of delivery and evaluation disrupted by the pandemic, the evidence-building efforts have been negatively affected, while the need for this evidence, around effective interventions addressing growing gaps during the pandemic has increased.

Approach

This report is based on a systematic review of 197 documents provided by FECOA. These documents included project and monitoring reports, feedback forms, external evaluation reports, programme-wide documents, and activity plans. Upon a general screening, ten documents were identified as duplicates. Therefore, 187 documents were reviewed in full. An extraction template was used to capture information on OA theme, programme name and description, programme outcomes of interest, evaluation information, design (e.g., use of validated measures, participant type and participant numbers), key findings and evidence of impact, and identified programme facilitators and barriers. The extraction template was first tested with a sub-set of documents to assess its usability after which minor adjustments were made to it.

When extracting information on key findings and impact, the review approach was to assess the strength of evidence presented in the documents by carefully considering whether information was provided on the outcomes the programme or activity seeks to influence and the robustness of the design used to evaluate perceived changes in desired outcomes (e.g. whether pre-/post- information was used to corroborate claims on impact, whether conclusions were based on anecdotal data only or a triangulation of quantitative and qualitative sources, etc.). The specific criteria on which the assessments of the evidence standards were made are:

1. Whether any evaluation or evidence-building information was provided.
2. Whether the outcomes of interest (or desired) were clearly specified, and appropriately measured.
3. Whether the identified findings were warranted by the data collected.
4. Whether impact was explicitly mentioned, and appropriately identified.

Based on these considerations the reviewer assigned a label of 'good', 'fair' or 'emerging' for evidence strength captured in the documents. We note that the above assessments hold the FECOA evidence to the highest standards while recognising the impact of the pandemic and the challenges of the context in which they were derived.

In our approach, the ideal level of evidence, which we call 'robust', would be the kind that can withstand academic, practitioner, and policy scrutiny and is able to derive the causal impact from programmes on a set of relevant outcomes, attributing it with confidence to the FECOA programming, over and above general trends in the engaged schools, teachers, and young people.

Key findings

In this section we summarise key findings from across the six themes of FECOA activity. We focus on the key pieces of evidence derived from evidence-building and evaluation activity, identifying cross-cutting findings across the themes, and subsequently discussing the strength of the evidence already generated. With FECOA activity in its 5th year at the time of writing, we therefore include in the analysis the completed set of documents in relation to the 4th of year of activity (2020-21).

Theme: School Improvement

The School Improvement theme represents a key area of intervention for FECOA and underpins all four priorities, with substantial work under this theme carried out to improve the capacity of schools, and school leaders, to address the gap in educational outcomes, improve outcomes (predominantly but not exclusively, literacy-related) for children and young people, and generally offer opportunities for schools and staff to come together in networks, hubs, and events that promote best practice in these areas.

Overview of theme projects

The flagship School Improvement Programme (SIP) underpins work in this theme. The Evidence Based Fund (EBF) also sits broadly within this theme, although it is not embedded in SIP itself. Both these programmes involve providing individual schools with a particular offering. For EBF, schools were offered funding to deploy and self-evaluate an intervention with evidenced impact.

As part of SIP, a 'targeted' offer saw 31 schools invited in Year 3, and 13 schools invited in Year 4, with a range of partners providing school improvement-aimed inputs. A separate 'central' offer (in Year 3) or 'universal' offer (in Year 4) was available to all schools. Between Year 3 and Year 4, the SIP approach changed to include school support meetings, and leadership support through National Leaders of Education. A total of 76 schools engaged with SIP.

FECOA have also supported the Maths Hub, one of 40 such hubs nationally, focused on promoting best practice mathematics teaching through a convening model. Additionally, a series of mid-scale projects are also included in this theme. These include the Phonics Resources Grant; the Primary Reading Scheme support; a Teaching Assistant (TA) -focused training series; and a small number of small-scale individual-school (nursery) targeted projects.

The overarching aim of projects in this theme is to generate school improvement, as measured through improvement in the quality of learning, teaching and leadership, and ultimately narrowing the socio-economic attainment gap. This aim is not explicitly acknowledged for all projects. The School Improvement Programme, likely due to its standing in the broader FECOA offer, identifies these aims clearly and in its logic model sets out an additional aim of strengthening school leadership to sustainably support the improvement of the quality of teaching and learning, particular in reading and literacy.

The specific focus on literacy (broadly defined) is evidenced across both the SIP and all other smaller projects, with their explicit focus on phonics and reading. In EBF, approximately 60% of funded projects were literacy-based and very clearly also targeted to support the learning of disadvantaged pupils. This is in keeping with FECOA's priority one, to "accelerate the progress of disadvantaged children and young people in the acquisition and development of communication, language and reading". Further EBF projects included a focus on priority two around mental health, with projects looking at improving wellbeing, reducing anxiety, or generally improving mental health for pupils. Alongside this, the Maths Hub is the key programme explicitly focused on a different outcome domain (mathematics), and some of the TA-focused provision takes in

training on a variety of topics (e.g., behaviour, working children with English as an additional language).

Theme findings

Three critical common threads emerged:

First, **school leadership played a key supporting role** in the implementation and success of these programmes,

Second, that **building a community of practice, both within and between schools was beneficial**, but not yet fully realised, partly because (EBF) programme structures were not necessarily geared towards it.

Thirdly, **delivery of training supported by additional visits to staff was effective in supporting implementation**.

Evidence around the SIP was designed to be gathered through a multi-modal evaluation, significantly affected by the on-set of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has also affected the Programme more broadly. This disruption notwithstanding, schools reported positive perceptions of their involvement in the Year 3, targeted phase, of the Programme. The Year 4 Phase of SIP saw the start of a 'universal' provision being offered to schools (shifting from a 'central' offer in Year 3), with evidence from 46 different schools that:

- pupils' experiences in participating schools have diversified;
- some schools report seeing improvements in language outcomes for children;
- teachers have benefited from the professional development opportunities;
- and feedback from participating schools is positive.

EBF findings from 30 FECOA projects saw participants report positive experiences and unexpected implementation challenges broadly addressed through collaboration and adaptation, learning around evaluation. Engagement with the Research School, as well as with the provided training, varied between schools, but when it occurred it was seen as productive.

As outlined in the next section, only some evidence of direct impact on pupils' outcomes was forthcoming from the EBF projects. This mirrors evidence from across all projects in this theme, with:

- generally positive experiences of participation at the teacher/staff level;
- perceived improvements against set out milestones and intended outcomes;
- but difficult-to-gauge exact impacts on pupils.

Three critical common threads emerged from SIP and EBF findings. First, school leadership played a key supporting role in the implementation and success of these programmes, even when the implementation was not directly undertaken by SLT members. Without significant support and endorsement from SLT, even multiple creative iterations of a programme by the OA were not successful, as a Speech, Language and Communication project report clearly demonstrates. Second, that building a community of practice, both within and between schools was beneficial, but not yet fully realised, partly because (EBF) programme structures were not necessarily geared towards it. Some of the SIP programme elements (e.g. Maths Improvement) attempted to build in cross-school collaboration but often found it difficult to find timeslots when different schools

could take part. Thirdly, delivery of training supported by additional visits to staff was effective in supporting implementation.

As part of evidence derived around SIP, wrap-up meeting reports were available, detailing the implementation of the various interventions taken up by schools as part of the SIP. Sitting alongside these are a series of single-school single-project reports. All these provide insight to the process and quality of implementation of the different sets of actions being taken in participating schools (including nursery settings), many noting changes in practice and attitudes (for staff). In one such report, for example, a school noted accelerated progress in reading against national standards and improved staff outcomes too – and while the school attributes these to the support offered by FECOA, the strength of the evidence would need to be improved for this attribution to be robust. While few of the final reports include evidence of pupils' learning outcomes or engagement, many reports demonstrate the implementation/development of teaching infrastructures in the project schools, including new teaching resources, new teaching strategies and new curricular provision, which was available to teachers in those schools more widely and could be expected to help sustain change even when individual teachers move to other schools, which was a common occurrence in the programme schools.

Changes similar to the above were also key findings of the Maths Hub, with teachers being seen as developing their maths specialism and also reporting in one single case improvements in the attitude of pupils towards maths.

The TA-focused interventions, including Information and Computing Technology (ICT), English as Additional Language (EAL), and behaviour training, were all seen to be useful, with participants reporting an increase in their confidence and renewed interest and thinking on the topics addressed during the training. This was mirrored in overall feedback gathered in relation to broader dissemination events, such as The Phonics Conference (from 76 responding participants) and the Curriculum and OFSTED Conference (from 64 responding participants), both seen by participants as positively prompting changes in thinking about practice.

We would like to particularly highlight one of the school case studies, from a primary school which at the point of joining the programme was in very challenging circumstances, centred around teaching quality, leadership, behaviour, staffing, and pupil progress. The school joined numerous OA projects and utilised various forms of existing quantitative school and pupil data to show evidence of highly successful change. This data shows an increase in phonics screening results, EYFS communication and language standards, and a drop in exclusions. Overall, the anecdotal and qualitative participant feedback for the great majority of projects is extremely positive and shows participants enjoyed and appreciated the provision. During the pandemic's continued impact in the school year 2020-21, many schools did not have exam data to use and did not replace this through local data collection in their evaluations. Anecdotal evidence from schools suggests a positive impact on pupils and on at least two occasions this is verified by Ofsted's comments. The findings from the Year 4 consultancy evaluation contracted by the FECOA support this observation: this evaluation also noted that schools that received recent monitoring visits were all judged to be taking effective action.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, funding towards concrete things – IT provision, funding for interpreters for meetings with families, additional reading resource – received higher impact ratings from schools, while interventions for capacity building for staff/SLT received more variable ratings. The finding from the Year 4 consultancy evaluation resonate with these findings. It found that IT-related investment enabled schools to make more rapid progress than they might have otherwise (while also noting that 'fixed rate' approach meant that some schools had greater proportional benefits

than others). It further found that investments related directly to immediate pupil progress, as in Phonics, Maths or behaviour were often or 'almost always' linked with at least impact, in interventions related to curriculum or leadership the impact takes time to become evident.

Theme: Early Years

Part of the work undertaken by FECOA in years 1-4 focused on providing a wide range of support to early years (EY) practitioners, with a view to improving the support given to children in EY settings via the provision of training to EY practitioners. An associated aim was to prioritise “parental and community engagement with child development and home learning” with one of the targets as part of Priority 1 being to, by 2021, ensure that the proportion of children eligible for the EY pupil premium in EY settings that achieve expected standards is above the national average.

Overview of theme projects

Just over 20 of the reviewed documents related to the EYs theme. Of these, one provided an overview of the EYs offer (albeit setting out plans, but not reporting on impacts). Some of the EY provision also falls within the ‘Inclusion and SEMH’ theme, addressed in the subsequent section in this report, as some Inclusion and SEMH activities were also delivered in EY settings.

The reviewed overview document outlined that FECOA’s EY offer is organised into three sections: ‘OA Early Years Offer’, ‘OA Early Years Targeted Support’ and ‘OA Early Years Community Support’, with the EY Improvement Fund also operating. A large range of programmes and projects are included across these three groupings, ranging from staff support to improve EY skills, provision, and engagement, to whole-setting support, and digital solutions.

More specifically, within the ‘OA Early Years Offer’ five training programmes to upskill practitioners were included. Two focused on improving children’s literacy, language and communication, two on SEMH for children and staff (respectively), and one on upskilling leaders to improve setting management. As part of the ‘OA Early Years Targeted Support’, funding was used for Team Around Provider (TAP) meetings to provide bespoke support to 19 (latterly, 18) EY settings. Finally, the ‘OA Early Years Community Support’ included four initiatives ranging from community programmes (e.g., to increase uptake of funded places for under twos; promote the use of library services; or foster OA services collaboration with childminders), to a smartphone app with ideas on free or low-cost play-based activities or experiences for parents.

As part of this review, reports for the following programmes were screened:

- Phonics for success, a programme for practitioners working with children under-5 designed to improve their understanding around children’s skills and how to help young children become more confident and successful readers. The programme includes modules on accurate assessment, effective planning, and reflective practice.
- Keep Talking in Fenland and East Cambridgeshire, a training programme for EY practitioners to improve their practice around child speech and language.
- The “Five to Thrive” project promoted neuroscience to intervention and learning in EY education.

All of these training programmes were targeted for EY practitioners. Phonics for success was also provided to childminders. It was delivered to 68 participants (54 staying engaged for longer) while Keep Talking FEC to 35 practitioners. The outcome of interest for both these programmes was to increase practitioner knowledge to foster children phonics potential and ultimately improve child outcomes. Within the reviewed documents, one programme was designed to provide a series of Business and Governance webinars to EY providers and childminders, while the Library Community Work project engaged directly with communities.

Theme findings

A substantial amount of EY activity remains ongoing, and therefore final outcome evaluation is not yet available.

However, the evidence to date suggests that participants were positive about their training experiences.

Findings of the programmes were only reported for the latter two training programmes in the reviewed documents for this theme. This is because a substantial amount of EY activity is still underway and therefore final outcome evaluation is not yet available.

For 'Phonics for success' the delivery team gathered surveys at the start and the end of the training to gauge learning of participants. At baseline they found that about 66% of participants had not received any training for over 5 years, only 36% of settings used specific progress measures and only 24% of settings reflected on phonics provision weekly (although 64% did so on a termly basis). The baseline survey also revealed that 12% of settings did not regularly plan phonics, 20% of settings did not deliver adult led phonics. Findings from the end line survey (self-evaluation form) are presented under 'Theme-specific impacts' in Section 3.

In the case of Keep Talking FEC participants completed course evaluation forms. The feedback received for session 2 of the programme was reported in the screened document. The feedback was positive, with the vast majority of participants noting that the training met their expectations, learning objectives and that it was well structured. All participants responding to the survey agreed that the training would influence their practice and that they intended to use the course toolkit, implement strategies and changes to their setting environment to support speech and language. They also reported intending to share learning with colleagues.

Participant feedback on the Five to Thrive programme, which delivered webinars on topics like stress and resilience, and brain development and positive parenting, was positive, where 100% of them said that they would recommend the course to other people. Feedback on the Business and Governance Webinars to providers showed that those who have attended the training improved on their knowledge, understanding and confidence about business and governance issues in EY education. The "Library Community Work" project reported that compared to the baseline data, more than 200 people joining the library and people spending more time reading after the implementation.

Another area of the work in EY focused on providing targeted support to schools. Seven of the reports were reviewed. The targeted support area included language and literacy, maths, well-being, recovery post COVID, and the purchase of resources. The approved funding totalled more than £24,000. Findings of these targets support indicated positive results. Of the seven reports, five only provided progress updates on the projects. The remaining two reported positive engagements from the parents, successful training on the staff, and the delivery of new resources.

Theme: Inclusion, and Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH)

FECOIA defined as its second priority to: “*Strengthen the effectiveness of support for children and young people with mental health concerns and those with Special Educational Needs*”. To achieve this, the FECOIA set out a plan to: provide advice to schools to strengthen their SEND provision by allocating SEND and inclusion leads to work with them; launch a pilot peer review process of current practice around SEND in a group of schools and early years settings to help them self-identify their needs; provide training to school and early years staff; and work with parents to improve their understanding of SEND and what mental health services are available.

Apart from these FECOIA set out two targets. To reduce the waiting time of children and adolescents to access mental health services to 12 weeks; and to establish a minimum of four support centres for parents with children that have an education health and care plan. Provision under this theme shifted over time compared to the plans outlined initially in the Delivery Plan¹, to respond to the needs of the area, and therefore it is likely that outcomes may extend beyond the two original targets.

Overview of theme projects

As part of this review, 36 documents linked to the ‘Inclusion and SEMH’ theme were considered. These documents related to seven distinct activities:

- Four staff training or qualification programmes to improve practice around SEMH in schools and Early Years (National Award for SEN Coordination, STEPS therapeutic behaviour management, the mental health training offer from YMCA Trinity group, and the Nurture programme)
- Two SEMH services for parents and staff (SEND Information Advice and Support Services for Fenland and East Cambridgeshire, and the Emotional Health and Wellbeing Service)
- One broader review of the theme (the ‘Opportunity Area SEND Review’).

The ‘OA SEND review’ consisted of a three-step approach. A first review (June 2019) was conducted at the start of the programme to assess the type of SEND provision at FECOIA and capture information against seven areas: USP, Experience (children), Engage (parents), Effective (provision), Expectations (outcomes), Embed (leadership), Cost. Schools provided RAG ratings against each of these areas. A second review (April 2020) captured impact against the same metrics measured in the first review. The final step of the review entailed comparing both reviews to assess change over time. This review included the above programmes in addition to others.

The target participants for these programmes were mainly school/setting staff (SENCOs, SLT, teachers). Some documents provided details on the number of schools participating, this ranged between 44 and 71 schools. In terms of number of staff benefiting from the programmes this ranged between 27 to well over a thousand participants. The programme targeting parents did not specify how many benefited from the offer.

Programmes primarily focused on achieving positive outcomes at the school/setting and staff level, including:

- Fostering improvements around SEND leadership (e.g., supporting changes in school nurture and inclusion ethos, raising standards, improving school tracking system)

¹

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/696826/Social_Mobility_Delivery_Plan_Fenland_East_Cambridgeshire_v11_FINAL_WEB.PDF.pdf

- Improving practitioner confidence in detecting and approaching mental health concerns (for children, young people, and colleagues)
- Increased awareness of availability of SEND related support (e.g., training and other services)
- Increased staff well-being.

There were also parent level outcomes of interest. Some of these programmes focused on improving support for parents or carers, increasing their awareness of services, as well as their engagement with schools to collaboratively improve the support children receive (e.g., early identification of SEND). One example included seeking to increase the number of consultations parents had and the number of successfully closed cases. Pupil level (child or young person) outcomes of interest included increasing pupil inclusion by ensuring that their voice would be considered in decision making. Apart from this, one document identified reducing pupil exclusions (due to problem behaviour) as an outcome of interest.

Theme findings

- Most training offered under this theme was seen by participants to be effective, with good uptake and completion rates
- Participants agreed that training will help reflect on their practice, with leaders agreeing that the principles will be embedded in changes at school/setting level
- The OA SEND Review concluded that most schools had addressed their priorities, by the time of the second review

A wide range of findings were reported in the reviewed documents. Most commented on the effectiveness of training from the perspective of participants. Documents also reported on uptake and training completion which was overall good, while some schools reported a reduction in attendance due to the pandemic. For those reporting on training effectiveness the feedback was positive, with most participants having found the sessions and materials useful, that it helped them reflect on their own practice and some agreed that they expect the training will lead to changes in their practice (YMCA Trinity Group Training Offer, STEPS). For example for the STEPS project, a total of 133 teaching staff attended the training, and high percentages of positive feedback were reported. For instance, 99% of the participants agreed that the course contributed to school improvement. On a similar note, the “Social Emotional Mental Health Support Offer” provided outreach support to teaching staff on mental health knowledge support, which also overlapped with the “STEP” programme. Results indicated that the principles of the programmes were embedded and implemented. A case study of a school undertaking the STEP approach also indicated in their report that such an approach was successfully embedded in different areas. At the leadership level, most participants agreed that the training will help them raise standards, promote inclusion, and improve their ability drive change at their school/setting (STEPS). Other findings closely linked to impacts are reported under ‘Theme-specific impacts’ in Section 3.

The ‘OA SEND Review’ compared the aspects that schools set out as areas for action in June 2019 and the extended to which matched their activities and focus by April 2020. Overall, it found that most schools actioned their initial plans by the second review. For some areas there were slight changes in focus. However, as a whole, the review revealed all schools acted across all identified areas and had clarity on next steps.

Other projects have also been carried out to target the health aspects of the students. The “Healthy Mind, Healthy Body” focused on promoting cooking skills and knowledge in young people, while another project delivered SENDIASS support to young people and their parents in improving their self-advocacy. Both projects received positive feedback, where the participants’ self-report of cooking skills improved, and 69% of the parents supported reported increased understanding of SEN. The SENDIASS final report notes that “[i]t is likely this figure would be even higher if the question singled out the area the parent had contacted us about rather than being much broader in its focus.”

More specifically, for the ‘experience’ theme, most schools reported wanting to focus on developing SEND pupils’ voice in the first review, and by the second this was also the area where most funds were directed. In terms of ‘engagement’ (parental) a similar pattern was observed around increasing parental co-production of SEND reports. For ‘embed’ (leadership) a higher proportion of schools reported plans to focus on increasing staff knowledge on SEND. By the second review, a majority of schools reported having prioritised working on establishing visits and meetings with SEND governors. For ‘effectiveness’, most schools planned to increase staff knowledge on SEND as an area for improvement. While activities were implemented with this goal, by the second review a higher proportion of schools reported having worked towards developing and improving their self-review procedures (“the graduated approach and APDR process”). The SEND specialist who reviewed the plan attributed this shift in focus to Covid-19. Finally, for ‘expectations’ a majority of schools reported wanting to improve their tracking systems. The second review revealed that most resources were allocated to “increasing staff understanding and intervention for pupils with SEMH needs”.

Theme: Post-16

The logic model for the Post-16 theme set out an aim to:

“raise aspirations and increase access for young people to a wide range of career choices and post-16 routes”.

This aim also represents priority three for the FECOA and considers the place-based barriers to post-16 progression that young people in Fenland and East Cambridgeshire encounter, including limited opportunities to travel for post-16 provision outside immediate area of residence, limited vocational education (e.g., apprenticeship) opportunities and lower than the national average higher education progression. At the theme level the aim is to increase the proportion of secondary schools achieving at least six of the eight Gatsby benchmarks around progression. There are a total of nine secondary schools across FECOA, and activity under this theme is targeted towards them.

Overview of theme projects

This theme, and associated priority, have seen relatively less work carried out than other themes, however the absolute volume of activity is high and spread across a range of programmes, many involving several schools:

- The EAST careers training working across 10 schools;
- the Cultural Enrichment Programme aimed at building social capital, working with 7 schools and 188 students;
- Aim Higher programme (part of the Essential Skills for Life initiative) aimed at raising aspirations and engaging 4 schools and around 50 students for each of two phases;
- single-institution grants to support specific post- 16 progression activity;
- the Fenland A Level Improvement Project, potentially to be seen as also promoting school improvement as aim is to improve provision of A-levels in 4 specific schools;
- and an apprenticeship-related project to engage employers and potential students and provide support around the use of the apprenticeship levy.

Theme findings

- Teachers and students participating in the Cultural Enrichment Programme reported an increase students’ knowledge, confidence and ability to engage with follow-up activities in school.
- Quality cultural opportunities were delivered, providing meaningful engagement and career information.
- Collaboration and networking between schools, where these took place, enabled resources and ideas to be shared, leading to better student engagement.
- More time is needed for impact to be observed.

The impact of the pandemic on project implementation has been noticeable for projects under this theme. Both the Apprenticeship-focused set of activities and Aim Higher has been severely affected, with activity curtailed, though deliverers for the latter continued to provide some on-line support to initially participating students.

Despite the implementation disruption, Aim Higher participants reported a generally positive attitude towards the programme. More than half of respondents to an interim indicated that Aim Higher had supported their thinking about their post-16 future; and evidence from two participating schools suggested that students were reporting better social emotional outcomes.

Teachers participating in the Cultural Enrichment Programme reported an increase in students' skills and ability to follow up with in-school activity in a mid-programme evaluation report. These findings were replicated in the end of programme evaluation report. Student participants also reported improvements to their knowledge, again mid-way and at the end of the programme. The end of programme evidence, drawing on participant surveys, also pointed to participating staff noticing an improvement in their own confidence in assessing students' progress as they engaged in the programme. Staff noted that the programme had enabled them to "combine the chance [...] to reflect on their essential skills before and after applying them, with content specifically targeted on steps of progress" (Cultural Enrichment Programme final report, 2021). Further evidence suggested that visits to various venues as part of this programme enabled quality cultural opportunities to be delivered, provided meaningful engagement and career information. This is highly relevant evidence from the perspective of the programme's longer-term sustainability and impact, even as it relies on self-report mechanisms and therefore a description of perceived impact rather than direct estimations of impact.

This theme also saw the development of institution-specific evidence, from two separate (and very different) institutions engaging with different elements of the post-16 provision and reporting their internal findings using the FECOA-provided evidence reporting tools (here the institutional case study templates). While the evidence base varied (one of the reports did not include a sufficiently detailed description of the data upon which conclusions were drawn), both schools reported good engagement and positive impacts on students.

The majority of evidence for projects in this area focused on provision and uptake rates, showing, for example, for the A-level improvement project, or in the case of the single-school grant to Bishop Laney Sixth Form, a very good rate of participation. Even with that being positive, participation rates are limited in their usefulness for gauging key conclusions about the programmes and, later, their impacts. We return to this point in the theme-specific impacts section of this report later on.

Separately, two key findings across a variety of projects in this theme were (1) that more time was needed for the full embedding of projects and programmes and for impact to be observed, likely as a result of the stage of students' educational lives, and (2) that collaboration and networking between participating schools was supportive of better engagement in the respective programmes, for the purpose of sharing both ideas and resources. This latter finding resonates with findings for many of the projects under the School Improvement theme and as a result we tackle this separately in our formative conclusions at the end of this document.

Theme: Youth Voice

The aim of the work within this theme has been to include young people's voices regarding their lives and service so that those services can better cater to the needs of young people, improve their well-being by providing support and help young people to become aware of services available to them.

Overview of theme projects

Two of the reviewed documents focused on the Youth voice theme: Fenland Youth Advisory Board Impact Report 2019/2020 and the Evaluation of the Summer youth work Essential Skills for Life Outreach programme.

The Fenland Youth Advisory Board (YAB) was formed in October 2019 as part of the OA programme. The YABs are boards for young people and led by them. They involve young people collaborating with adults with the goal of influencing services so that they cater to the needs of young people. The Fenland YAB, discussed in the report, was made up of 15 young people aged between 13 and 20 and met monthly as a group and once every two months as a full board. During lockdown, the YAB successfully continued its meetings via Zoom.

The Fenland YAB conducted a consultation with school students, achieving 1669 responses, identifying Bullying and Mental Health as areas to focus on. The YAB invested funding in a pupil voice and safeguarding app (Tootoot) and a Mental Health Toolkit as well as purchasing 40 tablets for year 10 students in two schools and packs of arts and crafts materials for 1000 children from vulnerable families during lockdown.

The Summer youth work Essential Skills for Life Outreach programme involved sessions conducted in the school holidays by the Essential Skills for Life team in Chatteris, Whittlesey and Wisbech to get a sense of the communities about returning to school and to learn about their experience during the lockdown. Workshops were carried out in four locations, involving different foci, including young people's feelings about lockdown, antisocial behaviour, smoking and drug use, community help and food banks. Outdoor activities were offered weekly on a recreation ground throughout the school summer holidays. Over 130 Young People engaged in this activity across all of the area. Attendance numbers were very low in part, and some sessions had no participants at all. This is likely to be at least partly due to the decision taken not to advertise the events due to the pandemic, to ensure the low occupancy mandated by the public health situation.

Theme findings

Two systematic evaluations of the youth voice activities were shared for the purpose of the review: one for the Youth Advisory Board, and one for the totality of detached youth work in the OA.

The YAB report draws on several data sources, including individual-level insights into participant experiences on the YAB, attendance data (which is deemed a relevant aspect of impact), and the commissioning of various activities by the YAB; and a survey of over 1,200 young people from seven separate schools and colleges about identifying the areas of work for the YAB (i.e., not impacts, but areas where impacts are looked at via the above data). While participant recruitment was negatively affected by COVID-19, the individual-specific evidence points towards individuals feeling empowered to speak to issues they, and their peers (through the survey) had identified as relevant to the wider community, and to the commissioning of relevant activity thereafter.

Similar findings were present in relation to the wider detached youth work: while the pandemic posed challenges and led to limited recruitment of participants and later engagement, individual insights from young people that engaged with the provision, especially around the Youths of

Fenland provision, all pointed towards positive perceptions of impact, as did the reflections from providers of different aspects of the detached youth work in the 2021 summer holidays.

A consistent message emerging from the delivery and evaluation reports pointed towards the need to engage key partners across this theme work early and consistently, to ensure that relationships are in place for when young people start to engage.

Theme: Teacher Recruitment and Retention

This area of work relates to Priority 4:

“Recruit, develop and retain the best leaders and teachers in Fenland and East Cambridgeshire.”

The aim of activity under this theme has been to reduce teacher vacancy rates across Fenland and East Cambridgeshire and recruit, develop and retain the best leaders and teachers. A variety of partners have been involved in providing training and other recruitment-related activities.

Overview of theme projects

Nineteen of the reviewed documents related to the teacher retention and recruitment theme. Activities have included:

- training provision for existing teachers including an early career development programme for recently qualified teachers
- a recruitment marketing campaign with a dedicated website
- apprenticeship/internship programmes
- bespoke one-to-one guidance for local people interested in pursuing a career in teaching
- other recruitment events.

The programme has aimed at recruiting more teachers/EY practitioners to the area, retaining more practitioners including increasing support to NQTs/RQTs and encouraging local people to go into a career in teaching.

Theme findings

Training sessions. Where participant surveys or feedback were collected for training sessions for teachers/mentors, it is consistently positive or very positive. The feedback particularly mentions perceived improvements regarding managing TAs, managing teachers' own well-being and priorities, managing student behaviour and emotional and social well-being. A gap was identified by some participating teachers regarding supporting student with SEND with their social and emotional well-being. Sign-up to training has also been strong but there have been some issues with attendance due to schools struggling to release staff. Support for teachers to attend training and for schools to release staff would improve programme potential impact.

One-to-one guidance. The one-to-one guidance saw by the end of August 2021 more than 200 individuals attend information events, shadowing opportunities and individual guidance sessions. All (100%) of eligible teachers were offered an opportunity for engagement with the Teacher Training Guidance Service, and 90% of users reported high satisfaction. A similar level of satisfaction (90%) was reported in relation to participation in placements in Opportunity Area schools. An even higher rate (100%) of respondents to a short poll at the end of one Information Event in late spring indicated that the information they'd received would help them make progress in their career plans. The 2019-20 iteration of the guidance service programme saw 199 individuals engage with the programme, with 86% of those applying for a post being offered one, and the programme generating 37 additional teacher trainees.

Teacher recruitment marketing campaign. The aim of the marketing campaign was to increase recruitment measured by the number of vacancies filled by schools for vacancies advertised in their website. While data for the desired outcome does not yet exist, a thoughtful preliminary evaluation has been conducted which produced many useful insights.

The campaign has successfully reached a significant number of people through targeted online, social media and online advertising. While there is some concern regarding negative perception of the area by others/teachers as a place to work, the evaluation suggests that there is an audience

who will consider teaching jobs within the Opportunity Area region. However, the project also identified that usage levels of the campaign were lower than in similar campaigns the team have run in other local authorities. One possible reason is low engagement from some schools: scepticism and lack of willingness to use the website was identified on the part of schools, resulting in too few vacancies being presented to the website audience. Increased downloads were related to increased vacancies available on the website.

The evaluation concludes that if more schools decide to use the website and subscribe to the collaborative approach to promote teacher vacancies and the region, the Opportunity Area may likely achieve stronger rates of applications in the future. For the campaign to have been more successful, the report recommends collective approach to advertising vacancies to be adopted by all schools in the region including adopting a consistent approach at the leadership level. As another future suggestion the evaluation the need to develop the website or work with schools so that it becomes possible to track how many applications were sent and vacancies filled through the website. At the time of writing, the website has been combined with the 'Teach in Cambridgeshire' website, which allows for a sustainable long-term solution to a focus on Fenland and East Cambridgeshire for teacher recruitment.

Training programmes. The evidence suggests the foundation teacher training programme in Fenland and East Cambridgeshire is linked with increased applications for 2020-21, compared to historical averages. The project was able to attract 15 apprentices to OA schools from a total cohort of 19 apprentices as well as 3 interns from a cohort of 6. 14 of the 15 apprentices successfully achieved QTS, 8 further apprentices registered for the NQT service and remained employed in their current schools. Two of the three OA interns have stayed in their school and are beginning the apprentice programme. This could be considered evidence of impact if the attribution of the changes to the project was clearer, potentially through the use of baseline or benchmarking data. This is addressed later in the report, in the recommendations for strengthening the evidence base for FECOA. At the conclusion of Y4 FECOA activity, the internship and apprenticeship programme was being supported by the Cambridgeshire County Council.

Early Career Development Programme. The aims of the programme in 2020-21 addressed a need identified by head teachers in response to the ongoing pandemic situation, whereby newly qualified teachers and teacher trainees has had their training disrupted. Head teachers therefore arranged for a range of in-house *mentoring* opportunities for these groups of staff, with 45 participants engaging. The end of project report provides summary data from participant-reported survey insights, that saw: 100% of participants (mentees) reporting improved knowledge, confidence, or strategies to effectively support children particularly around wellbeing/mental health issues; similarly, 100% of participants reported better knowledge of teacher wellbeing research findings. And crucially, 100% of engaged mentors reported that the programme had contributed to the improvement of their early career/newly qualified teachers. While these impact conclusions are drawn on the basis of post-activity engagement questionnaires or qualitative engagement with mentors and mentees, the consistency of findings is supportive of probable impacts, that could be followed up with actual retention outcomes.

Mentoring. The mentor training programme and mentor peer network programme as a very interesting and rigorous evaluation plan which was unfortunately disrupted by the pandemic, leading to very few survey respondents and an interrupted delivery. However, we would like to highlight this aspect of the programme due the quality of its planned evaluation approach. The evaluation was planned as a pre-post approach, with a baseline and post training survey, using a validated measure to assess outcomes. We recommend this approach be adopted in future work for this and other parts of the programme when permitted by the pandemic. With regard to the

training programme itself, of those participants who were able to give feedback, 100% said they would recommend the programme for others.

Recruitment Incentive Grants. Finally, FECOA provided 42 separate recruitment grants (some to the same institution) to support the recruitment of 79 teachers. Impact was assessed through the collection of information about whether the recruited teacher was still in post, intending to remain in the school, and the school's own assessment of the impact of the programme. The evidence from this is mixed, with some information not available, a combination of outcomes (retained, left) for teachers. While some schools were very positive ("The school has benefitted enormously from OA project, and the calibre of the teachers we have managed to recruit (and retain) is testament to the positive impact the opportunities this project has had on our school"), others were not certain about the impact ("In terms of whether I think this really helped to recruit, I'm not sure it did to be honest. It was a gesture which they appreciated but I don't think it would have been a key factor in their decision-making process").

In addition, documentary evidence for this theme contains data on schools' comments on recruitment. Overall, this suggests that the programme is helping the schools with retention, with seven of eight schools agreeing that the quality of candidates had improved.

Across the substantial amount of provision under this theme, the evidence was generated either through targeted surveys and questionnaire to a range of participants, school-provided feedback, and general monitoring of specific outputs. While the evidence cannot, therefore, make strong claims to causal impact, taken together they point towards general benefit to individuals and schools.

Key impacts

- In this section of the report, we first present the overall assessment of the standards and strength of evidence of impact emerging from the review. We account for the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on both implementation and evaluation and evidence-building activity.
- We then focus on theme-specific impacts, noting evidence-building approaches and potential avenues for strengthening this where relevant. In doing so we focus on a balanced perspective on impact, providing an ongoing assessment of the type, and quality, of evidence being derived.
- We subsequently provide a range of programme-wide impact-focused formative conclusions, including a range of insights into the evidence-building practice already adopted and potential avenues for future development.
- We note that a substantial proportion of evaluation activity is still underway, it has not yet been possible to derive any evidence of impact. Our findings are therefore based on the evidence *available* at the time of generating the report, with subsequent evidence emerging from ongoing evaluation to potentially be addressed at a later date.

Impact strength

Standards of evidence

A total of 197 individual project-specific reports and documents were reviewed for this overall report. Ten of these were duplicate documents, leaving a total 187 documents relevant to the assessment of the overall standards of evidence present in the work.

Of these, 40 documents were not principally concerned with either evaluation or an understanding of the impact of programmes and were excluded from the assessment of evidence standards. Examples of such excluded documents included action plans, programme or activity descriptions, monitoring extracts (e.g. how many schools had returned case study templates). These documents were retained, however, for the overall review, as they provided useful information about what was delivered, as summarized under the FECOA themes above.

Therefore, a total of 147 documents were reviewed in depth for the purpose of identifying and quantifying the impacts and the strength of evidence for these impacts from FECOA activity on school and young person outcomes. A small number of documents (under 10) provided additional information regarding specific reports, in the form of presentation slides, survey data extracts, etc. All these are included in the review alongside the main report that they are supporting.

When categorizing the strength of the *impact* evidence reporting in the documents into three distinct categories ('good', 'fair', and 'emerging'), we considered:

1. Whether any evaluation or evidence-building information was provided.
2. Whether the outcomes of interest (or desired) were clearly specified, and appropriately measured.
3. Whether the identified findings were warranted by the data collected.
4. Whether impact was explicitly mentioned, and appropriately identified.

In the review we also considered the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the implementation, and, more relevant here, on the evaluation and evidence building activity. Where the evaluation would have generated 'good' evidence of impact had it not been for pandemic disruption, we still categorised it as such, even if the evaluation had to be adapted.

Nine (6%) of the reviewed outputs (for the Phonics project; a further Phonics school case study; Aim Higher; Mentor training and mentor peer network; EBF evaluation report across three Opportunity Areas in the East of England; the original, and the updated STEPS case studies; overall SENDIASS support report; the Cultural Enrichment programme final report) were identified as examples of ‘good’ evidence-building approaches, even though in some cases the full activity was curtailed by the pandemic and the planned evidence could not be generated.

We further categorised 20 outputs (14%) as providing a ‘fair’ quality of impact evidence. That is, they either addressed all but one of the criteria above to a relatively good degree, or they had addressed all aspects but only to a limited extent. Examples of outputs in this category usually relied on simple descriptions of engagement or participation without the further addition of either individual insights or large-scale data. Some of the evaluations reviewed also stopped short of engaging with the final outcomes of the activity or programme being evaluated, instead focusing on very short-term outputs without an in-depth consideration of how these might then translate into FECOA stated outcomes.

The remainder of the outputs (118, 80%) were categorised as providing ‘emerging’ evidence of impact, that is they only partly addressed some of the above criteria and often did not engage with the notion of impact. A vast majority of these outputs used participant attitudes towards their participation as outcome measures. While these are an important part of understanding specific projects, they are relatively limited in their ability to generate insights into the actual impacts of the specific projects. Others engaged with perceptions of impact but were limited in their overall focus either because of very small scales without consideration for external validity: we note that a single-school case study is included in the ‘good’ category above because it had considered a wide range of issues and therefore addressed all our assessment criteria.

Even if not fully identifying impacts, all outputs were successful in generating other types of evidence, predominantly around participants’ experiences and attitudes around participation, or around participants’ own self-identified impacts. These pieces of evidence overall point to anecdotal and small-scale qualitative evidence of positive perceived impacts from participation in the range of FECOA programming.

Evidence on pupils’ learning was also predominantly limited to perceptions of impact, with a small number of exceptions, as noted above, around specific qualitative, and on a few occasions quantitative, evidence from schools of improved pupil learning, which on a couple occasions were further supported by comments by Ofsted.

This is indicative of positive impacts on pupil learning that could be externally observed. And at the same time, somewhat of a missed opportunity in terms of generating evidence. While the disruption from the pandemic is clear, across both delivery and mostly evaluation, the realisation of this evidence-building opportunity would have required planning and the introduction of approaches a substantial period of time ahead of the pandemic. An evaluation that attempts to address this and capitalize on this opportunity, even within the constraints posed by the pandemic, is currently being implemented in relation to Year 5 activity.

As a result, none of the outputs, were able to unequivocally attribute measurable impacts to the implementation of FECOA activity, what we would have deemed as a ‘robust’ evaluation standard. We note that the standard of evidence we would have required to make this determination is rarely available in relation to complex place-based initiatives such as FECOA. There is, though, a growing set of experimental, quasi-experimental and robust process evaluation activity in the broad field of education and social mobility, spearheaded as is very much known to the FECOA, by the Education Endowment Foundation. This focuses on specific and stand-alone interventions that

cover most, though not all, of the FECOA themes (youth voice is least represented; reading interventions are amongst the best represented in this body of good impact evidence).

Indeed, in several of the FECOA projects, for instance EBF, stand-alone interventions with EEF-derived evidence were implemented, and (on several occasions) evaluated in the specific context of the schools. In as much as FECOA implementing schools share the broad characteristics and circumstances of schools participating in the original evidence-building effort, an assumption could be made that impact would be achieved in FECOA schools as well. This would not require additional evaluation, but a better evidencing of what has taken place.

As mentioned above, some of the evidence-building approaches employed were good examples that could easily be scaled up to other projects and inspire a programme-wide evaluation framework. All these reflect a clear focus by FECOA to develop the evidence. In this report we have particularly highlighted some examples of good practice in terms of evaluation and evidence-generation in the participating schools which demonstrated clear improvement on target outcomes. We wish to emphasise that these schools did not collect additional data to what they already do and have to do as an educational setting. Instead, they used the data they were already collecting to systematically monitor changes within and across cohorts of children in relation to the outcomes they were aiming to develop (e.g., phonics skills or reduction in exclusions).

Across all the outputs, we also noted the evaluation expertise and knowledge of the FECOA team, which appears to be associated with particularly strong evidence-building approaches. While that suggests that the FECOA team has, on the whole, the right mix of skills, it might also suggest that there are potentially bottlenecks in terms of capacity in a busy team, and from a sustainability perspective, this could be addressed to support improving the quality of impact evidence being generated.

Theme-specific impacts

School Improvement theme impacts

The document analysis suggested that direct impacts on pupil outcomes from projects in the School Improvement theme were generally difficult to accurately ascertain. Many schools' plans for both implementation and evaluation were disrupted by the repeated school closures during this period due to the pandemic. However, some of schools were able to show fairly strong evidence of positive pupil-level changes in attainment, e.g., phonics, and engagement and behaviour, e.g., exclusions.

The impact of the pandemic was also clear in relation to the result and impacts from the Phonics Resource Grant Scheme, where data collection from participating schools was halted and little information is available on either the process of implementation or impact of the different phonics schemes being taken up.

A further reason for the difficulty around gauging specific impacts centres around the approaches to evaluation and data collection. For EBF, this manifested in a mismatch between highly ambitious evaluation plans, aiming to derive good evidence of impact, and the realities of on-the-ground implementation. For SIP, the Programme evaluation report noted that "very few schools have any system for gathering evidence of impact so that feedback is mainly anecdotal" (p. 3 SIP 2nd Update report) and this continued to be evident in the final reports submitted after end of Y4 activity.

What the totality of evidence generated about projects in this theme does provide is substantial insight into implementation of the different programmes and interventions at school level, the processes at play during implementation, and stakeholders' perceptions of this. For the TA-

focused offering and the Maths Hub, clear impacts are identified on participants' self-reported knowledge and confidence, though note quality of evidence in subsequent section. In particular, the documents provide evidence of systematic changes to schools' infrastructures in direct response to the SIP provision, e.g., the implementation/development of new curricular resources, teaching resources or strategies, on at least some occasions corroborated by Ofsted comments. These provide evidence of structural changes supporting school improvement which could help other schools avoid always having to re-invent the wheel. They also provide evidence of sustainability of new developments within schools when individual teachers move on.

The school wrap-up reports, for instance, provide ample insight into the quality and progress made by each institution and in a small number of cases identify how school and pupil progress may be ascertained. The SIP update report finds that "Although much of the impact measurement is currently anecdotal, there are a number of schools who state that certain improvements are directly attributable to funding through the SIP" (p 5. SIP Update). As the subsequent section outlines, such evidence emerges from rich case studies that are insightful but ultimately have relatively limited external validity.

Establishing the overall impact of the theme may be possible through later analysis of pupil outcome data (via the National Pupil Database), potentially by creating comparable groups of schools that have not engaged with SIP and estimating the relative impact of SIP on learning outcomes.

Early Years impacts

A variety of different programmes were implemented in this area. In what follows we comment on evidence of impact based on the information available but note that the activity partly overlaps with other themes, especially around literacy-focused interventions subsumed in the School Improvement theme.

In the case of Keep Talking FEC, the reported key findings primarily linked to effectiveness of the training and relied solely on self-reports for one session. To strengthen the evidence for the programme, reporting on feedback for all sessions is a way forward. Similarly, the Five to Thrive reports and those on targeted provision focus on participant feedback. Gathering evidence that more directly shows how practice changes following the training (rather than participants reporting the belief it would) is another way to further strengthen the evidence. A clearer impact is reported by the "Library Community Work" project which compared library memberships and time reading with baseline data, showing a positive impact on both.

The Phonics for success report included results for a baseline and end line survey. Results from the latter concluded that participant knowledge around phonics had increased "by an average of 1.48 points on a 4-point scale". A higher increase was observed for childminders than for qualified teachers. They also identified that participants' confidence to deliver phonics increased "by an average of 1.36 points on a 4-point scale". However, from an evaluation design perspective it remains unclear whether the same survey questions were included in the baseline and end-line surveys to assess improvements in knowledge and confidence over time. The training provider also identified that improvements in practitioner confidence was reflected in participants' diaries and by observing their engagement in cluster groups. They included case study evidence to support these statements. Furthermore, in this instance too, evidence relies on self-reported data. However, the use of baseline and end-line surveys adds to the strength of the gathered evidence. To further improve it, it would be interesting to know if metrics reported at baseline around the use of phonics plans, progress measures or the frequency of reflecting on phonics

delivery became commonly used in more settings following the training. This information might have been gathered but was not reported as part of the end line survey results.

Finally, none of the reports included evidence on child outcomes. However, the Phonics for Success report acknowledged that this was important, but given that settings had only been exposed to 5 months of training it would be too early to see changes at the child level.

Nonetheless, one of their annexed case studies provides anecdotal evidence on improvements for children.

Overall, the available evidence on FECOA's EYs provision from the reviewed documents is limited. From the available information positive changes are expected from these programmes however no firm conclusions can be made in regards of the theme goals around improving children's outcomes specially for those from vulnerable groups (as outlined in the EYs logic model). Finally, the project report for Phonics for success is an example of good reporting containing a dedicated section on 'Evaluation and measurement of impact' that showcases reflectiveness on the part of the delivery team.

Inclusion and SEMH impacts

Some of the documents reviewed under the inclusion and SEMH theme reported findings directly linked to their stated outcomes of interest. For SENDIASS FEC, one outcome was increasing the time that parents received support for. They reported that "the average time spent supporting parents per case increased by 13% from 4.92 hours to 5.58 hours".

For STEPS, a case study from a school whose staff received the training reported a clear reduction in exclusions, changing from 85 exclusions in 2017/2018 to 27 in 2018/2019, and to 15 in 2019/2020. The EHWS programme evaluation report also identified changes. It states that the Children's Wellbeing Practitioners were "overall successful in reducing anxiety, improving low mood and reducing behaviour problems". While not provided at a more granular level of detail, they support these claims based on a "reduction of RCADS average score for a majority of the subscales over time" (measured through Strength and Difficulty Questionnaire(s) SDQ). They also noted that parents and young people reported "feeling they have reached their goals". However, the EHWS programme reported impacts do not provide pre-/post-information. While the above reports of impact of these three programmes show that there have been positive changes, evidence can be improved by providing additional details on how data was collected and defined as this will aid their overall interpretation.

Overall, moving beyond metrics on training quality will help strengthen the evidence on impact gathered for programmes under the 'Inclusion and SEMH' theme. In addition, it may be of interest to expand evidence gathering to outcomes linked more clearly to teacher skills/performance or child outcomes. Collecting pre-/post- information for all programmes is a strategy to strengthen the evidence gathering. Documentation for this theme shows that thinking on this is in the right direction: they conducted a first and second review (equating to baseline and end line data collection) using the same form to facilitate comparison of changes over time. However, reported findings from the review focused on activities planned, undertaken and next steps. Greater emphasis could be placed on metrics directly linked to the goals of this theme. Finally, in this case too evidence gathering was negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the case of the NASENCO programme, while there were plans to collect end line information from participants through a Self-Evaluation Tool this was not conducted due to COVID-19. This postponement means that the evaluation is not yet complete, and evidence of impact may be derived in the near future.

Post-16 impacts

With substantial amounts of the implementation activity affected by the pandemic, indications of impacts are relatively less broad in the post-16 theme, though there have been attempts (e.g., in relation to the Cultural Enrichment Programme, for instance) to commission evaluation activity, itself affected by the pandemic.

Evidence on the Cultural Enrichment Programme, based on teachers' and students' own reports, points towards an increase in students' skills and knowledge and an increase in teachers' ability to follow up with in-school activity in a mid-programme evaluation report. However, none of these trends are compared to general patterns in either other schools, the wider region, or non-participants, therefore limiting the extent to which these perceived impacts can directly be attributed to the programme.

Concluding ahead of the pandemic, the Careers Information Advice and Guidance (CEIAG) programme faces a similar challenge in terms of the evidence derived: the evidence of impact is limited to participant testimonies of how the programme has affected them personally. Again, while these are broadly positive, in relation to being more knowledgeable, providing better support to students, improving confidence, and building own skills, there is no evidence of how these perceived impacts have translated to the level of the students, and their progression.

At the theme-level, the evidence above suggests progress on average, and from a monitoring perspective certainly there has been steady, though somewhat uneven, school-level improvement towards the Gatsby benchmarks that represent the key outcomes for this theme. Therefore, this points to a what could holistically be interpreted as positive impact. However, without an ability to benchmark this against overall progress in the wider sector, or nationally, attributing this progress to ongoing FECOA provision is not as straightforward as potentially desirable.

To facilitate this attribution of impact and at the same time capitalise on broader evidence of participants' (schools, students, and teachers) in post-16 theme activity, one productive strategy would be to embed collaboration in these programmes in a streamlined way. This would provide participating schools with a coherent perspective of the overall FECOA offering in this theme, while maintaining adequate data streams to enable the generation of evidence about programmes beyond participation and self-reported attitudes towards the programmes.

Youth voice impacts

The evaluation of activities under the youth voice theme took the form of end-of-project reporting, which drew on participant engagement data, individual insights from specific participants, and some perspectives from providers. None of these constituted what we would have deemed as 'good' investigations of the impact of these activities on specified student, or wider, outcomes, instead falling broadly in the 'fair' categories, predominantly due to the absence of focus on the longer-term outcomes of the theme activities as specified in the theme logic model and discussed at the end of this sub-section.

That being said, the evidence collected and reported in the project-specific as well as programme-wide documents does suggest positive movement towards the desired outcomes. The programmes aimed at, first of all, a well-established and sustainable Youth Advisory Boards (YAB) in both Fenland and East Cambridgeshire. The documents suggest this has been achieved. A number of commissioning bodies across Cambridgeshire County Council were invited to support the sustainability of the YABs; a number of different commissioning groups are considering a long-term financial agreement.

The programme also aimed at stronger community links to provide support for young people in the area. The detached youth work was deemed a 'definitive success' in the early reports, despite pandemic-driven disruptions. Personal (not systematically collected) insights from young people engaging with the provision, especially around the Youths of Fenland provision, pointed towards positive perceptions of impact, as did the reflections from providers of different aspects of the detached youth work in the summer of 2021.

Finally, the programmes aimed to provide young people with the opportunity to have their voice heard, to influence services and activities aimed at young people. The informal evaluation of the YABs suggests an improved visibility for young people's voices. As part of the launch of the YEP campaign a series of sessions was delivered via social media on diverse topics including, for example, bullying, mental health, and social action. A large number of young people engaged with various YAB activities, including an agenda-setting survey, and subsequent online sessions. Personal perspectives from a small number of engaged participants pointed towards improvement in feelings of empowerment around issues deemed important.

On balance, while one of the desired impacts of the youth voice theme was to raise aspirations and increase access for young people to a wide range of career choices and post-16 routes, the evidence generated above does not directly reflect this. It remains to be seen if such impacts could be developed through post-hoc evaluation approaches that make use of increasing trends to monitor and capture data on participation in broadly defined activities to improve young people's academic and employment trajectories.

Teacher recruitment and retention impacts

Activities under the teacher recruitment and retention theme aimed to reduce teacher vacancy rates in the region through retaining more practitioners and recruiting more teachers/EY practitioners to the area. These activities aimed to do so through more effective marketing and recruitment, increasing support to newly or recently qualified teachers (NQTs/RQTs/ECTs) and encouraging local people to go into a career in teaching.

While some of the evidence generation was disrupted due to COVID-19 and other projects did not collect data systematically apart from informal participant satisfaction feedback, there is evidence to suggest positive impacts from the programme as well as beneficial next steps.

The one-to-one guidance programme brought a significant number of new teacher trainees from this project for the 2019-20 and 2020-21 academic years, resulting in improved recruitment. The data also suggests that the Early Career Development programme resulted in increased applications to OA schools from the apprenticeship and internship programmes, and participants in one-to-one activities reported very positive impacts of these on their own practice and career development plans.

The training programme evaluations focused largely on participant satisfaction. While this is useful for programme development, it represents a missed opportunity to try and capture wider impact of the provision. Some better data was available for the 2020-21 iteration of, for instance, the Early Career Development programme, however the standard of evaluation was again not sufficiently robust to allow for the clear attribution of any impact to FECOA programmes or indeed the financial support (through the grants) made available to schools.

Interestingly, and reflecting conclusions from school improvement *and* recruitment and retention activities, the provision of grants without ample targeting and a focus on behaviours and practices amenable to change via grant mechanisms were seen as not entirely effective by head teachers engaging with this type of provision. This suggests that the provision of grants would need to be

accompanied by a better understanding of the mechanisms of change and better support to schools and head teachers around the deployment of these additional resources.

FECOIA Programme-level impacts

As mentioned above, one evaluation of the overall OA programme was completed after the first year of delivery, and another evaluation is currently underway. Within that, the FECOA programme has not been evaluated as a stand-alone programme. We note, however, that in that in whole-OA evaluation, findings suggest a high level of support for the programme from local stakeholders. Certainly, this evidence review suggests that this is the case for FECOA, and the strong positive response to a vast majority of FECOA projects from institutional and individual participants supports this.

The systematic review of evidence reported here is a first step towards ascertaining the programme-level impacts of FECOA. Two approaches are productive: first, to assemble the theme-specific impacts into broad evidence, noting of course that this can only point to impacts of parts of a whole programme; and second, to return to the priorities and underlying aims specified in the FECOA Delivery Plan (in Appendix 1).

The first approach gathers together the impacts of the theme-specific activity. An interesting pattern emerges at the programme level: while good quality of impact evidence is relatively scarce (but exists in pockets of good practice as noted above), where this evidence exists, it points to positive developments and progress towards the stated aims.

This is complemented by evidence of all standards being derived, that participants in projects across the six themes were positive about their participation experiences *and* about the perceived impact of the respective projects on their immediate outcomes.

A focus on participant perceptions of professional development interventions at cost of evaluating programme impact is a wider challenge of the field (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Opfer & Pedder, 2011), not just of the FECOA. However, we suggest there is a substantial opportunity within the FECOA to build on and enhance existing approaches to move towards evaluating outcomes that matter. The subsequent sections of the report make concrete suggestions and recommendations on what steps towards this goal would look like and how they could be taken.

Therefore, while the evidence of impact may be limited, the overall evidence around the process of implementation, participants' short-term outcomes from this, including at individual and school/college level is rich and clearly suggests that impact may have occurred. It is now a matter of capturing this systematically and as robustly as possible, at the whole-programme level.

The second approach, mapping programme-level progress towards identified aims, finds that for most stated aims the key barrier to evidencing impact is the availability of targeted data specifically capturing each aim. There are some exceptions in relation to some projects in the Inclusion and SEMH, and respectively the teacher retention and recruitment theme. But by and large, any impacts that may have already been had by FECOA programme are difficult to ascertain given the lack of data.

Several approaches to strengthening this evidence base and evidencing the programme-level exist. We turn to these in what follows.

Productive evidence-building approaches

A variety of approaches may be used to improve the quality of the impact evidence generated through existing approaches.

Generating programme-wide evidence of impact

The above synthesis has identified a need for programme-level evidence of impact. We note that these impacts are likely to have occurred, but they are not fully and comprehensively evidenced. Some of this is due to the time it takes to see the impact of changes on pupil learning, as reported by many of the schools. However, the settings which have used an evaluation approach, utilising relevant baseline and post-intervention evidence, were able to demonstrate positive changes within the programme timeframe. Indeed, the findings above suggest that where a good standard of evidence has been generated, the impacts have been positive.

A first step towards generating programme-wide evidence of impact is to develop a programme-level logic model (except for the Inclusion and SEMH theme, which incidentally had an overall stronger set of evidence of impact) and theory of change that builds upon the delivery plan, which already clearly sets out all steps – that is, inputs – and to some extent, the short-term outputs from the underlying themes and projects.

A second step is to harness existing data streams, aligned to the above-developed logic model, to understand empirically what progress has been made in FECOA participating schools, and how this progress can be attributed specifically to FECOA activity. Some examples where evaluations undertaken provide steps towards such robust evaluation practice are discussed in this report.

To support this, the identification and use of baseline and historic data would be productive. On the few occasions this was done in the documents reviewed, it provided significant insights, but we note this practice was rare. Such data would be able to account for long-running trends in the region, with the introduction of the FECOA intervention as clear step-change in the provision of education-focused social mobility-enhancing activity. This data structure could be used productively in large-scale quantitative assessments of the impact of FECOA *overall*.

These approaches would of course have to consider the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which at this point has affected over a substantial proportion of FECOA activity. The disruption to all schooling, the negative effects to the economy and visible negative impacts on the labour market would all have to be carefully factored into the analysis so that what would otherwise be an impact by the FECOA programme is not obscured by worsening general outcomes.

The pandemic's impact on learning loss, students' physical and mental health and well-being, and teacher and school leader well-being has been significant across the country but has particularly exacerbated existing educational inequalities – it is absolutely crucial that evidence-informed interventions are supported in the most deprived areas to counteract these massive negative impacts and the OA programme, and FECOA specifically, with its committed and effective delivery team and structure is in an excellent position to do this.

The above notwithstanding, the pandemic impacts have further created a need for schools and local authority to find new ways of ensuring progress towards the schools' and the FECOA's aims. Given the uncertainty around a return to pre-pandemic approach, it is essential that FECOA takes a proactive and strategic view to building in an evaluation (and associated data collection) framework that capitalises on existing efforts but pulls them together in a comprehensive account that can also make the attribution of impacts to FECOA programming. This includes not losing the momentum in the work of supporting schools to develop evidence-based approaches while they are having to address the significant additional challenges and workload arising from the pandemic. These challenges notwithstanding, it appears that supporting schools to generate/identify local ways of generating evidence of pupil learning and engagement is highly relevant at this point in time: it will support schools in their need for assessment while national

assessment systems are disrupted, while ensuring baseline data continues to be produced during the pandemic to support future evaluations as pre-pandemic baseline data is likely to be unhelpful or even misleading.

Embedding evidence-building early on

Specific approaches to enhance the approach and quality of evidence being generated are outlined in what follows. These apply to both programme-level, as above, and project-level.

First, and of paramount importance, is embedding evaluation and evidence-building into projects as well as at programme level as early as possible. This ensures that there are no missed opportunities in terms of data collection, and also that data can be collected ahead of implementation (when relevant). A key part of this is to ensure the clear specification not just of the overall theme logic models (as FECOA undertook), but also of the specific programmes within, and a mapping of the shorter-term outputs of activities against these theme outcomes, so that evaluation can be designed around them.

Second, and related to collecting data ahead of implementation, simple before-and-after evaluation designs may not provide perfect evidence of impact, but they would generate what we have deemed good evidence of the progress made.

This is especially the case if outcomes and outputs are clearly, and explicitly, stated. This would also facilitate an understanding of the synergies between different projects and themes (see point below). Alongside this sits the need to use good measures to capture these outputs, ideally using the simplest and shortest instruments available, so as to retain data quality while minimising respondent burden. This approach could also see FECOA make use of other existing data streams in schools, including the pupil data (shared according to legal restrictions) essential for ascertaining the ultimate impact on pupils' and young people's outcomes.

Third, evaluating complex outcomes is challenging, as such outcomes are not easy to capture. Going forward this work would also benefit from wide conversations with stakeholders and academic partners on different ways of identifying and capturing progress. This may involve new ways of operationalising outcomes; it may also – along national conversations – involve evaluating the quality of processes. This early identification of the likely productive forms of data aligns with our first recommendation above, and we would go further to suggest that systematic forms of data collection (especially within evaluation designs as outlined above) could be prioritised over anecdotal collection of evidence from specific individuals.

In relation to the above, our review made clear that many schools reported not collecting any outcome data due to the pandemic. In some cases, this was due to the children not being in school at all, making for example, exclusions data or phonics screening nearly impossible or irrelevant. However, there appears to also be some loss of momentum regarding evaluation and evidence-use attributed to the pandemic. This is very understandable, given the extreme challenges faced by schools, particularly in disadvantaged settings, during the pandemic. However, it is an important moment to recognise that we do not want to lose the good work that has taken place, and that many forms of evidence collection are actually already happening and therefore could be harnessed for evaluation purposes without additional work.

Fourth, establishing a clear understanding of how projects are assumed to deliver impacts is essential. The logic models for the themes represent a very good starting point; however, this needs to be replicated for the specific projects being rolled out for each theme and sit alongside the *programme-level* logic model and, if possible, a more in-depth theory of change. This can then be operationalised for use in schools.

Fifth, based on this operationalisation of the theory of change, we would suggest that schools could be supported to think through how the totality of the FECOA offering that they are accessing may be leading to impact in their own school. This would not require substantial data collection, or additional evaluation activity, rather it would clarify the structure of the offering to schools and provide them with a reflection tool that they can use for self-evaluation and accountability purposes.

Sixth, we would also recommend an iterative reflexive approach to evidence-building, whereby project or intervention-specific evaluations are coupled with a review of the logic models to analyse support for the assumed mechanisms and identify any needs to revise the logic models for future provision development.

Seventh and finally, returning to the programme level, in terms of overall approaches, benchmarking against national trends would also be an interesting approach. However, this can be misleading given the busy intervention spaces (that is, other Opportunity Areas, and other place-based initiatives) and can therefore hide otherwise positive local developments in FECOA. Therefore, we suggest that any national benchmarking be undertaken with substantial care and reported with sufficient detail as to allow for a contextualised interpretation of the evidence.

Harnessing synergies

A further key finding emerging from across the FECOA themes relates to the enabling role of collaboration. Wider empirical evidence around teacher learning and practice also suggests that collaboration can be productive if practical concerns are addressed (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Specifically, with participants in some of the FECOA programmes reporting time constraints and increased workload, increasing collaboration, both within and across schools, would need to minimise additional burden on participants.

Making schools and school leadership aware of the full FECOA offering, and monitoring their engagement, as is already being done, is a good first step towards this. Supporting schools to look at the offering more strategically and using existing (not new) networks and opportunities for collaboration may well be a second.

This may also lead to cross-fertilisation across projects, themes, and priorities. Again, this is already underway, but could be supported by a more strategic and programme-wide approach to evidence-building, evaluation, and data collection. The aim of this would be to minimise the number and scope of data collection points for individual participants while retaining all relevant data streams to generate sufficient data from which to start deriving evidence of impact.

Importantly, this would need to expand beyond the collection of participation and self-reported attitudes towards programmes. Indeed, while positive attitudes towards a project or programme can be considered a necessary requirement for impact, it is not a sufficient condition. Therefore, attitudinal data collection could be reduced, instead focusing on using the extensive school- and pupil-level data (anonymised and shared in accordance with data protection laws) for the purposes of school-specific, project-specific, and programme-wide evidence generation.

In that way, the FECOA offering can genuinely become more than the sum of its parts. Recognising the overlap between the themes and underpinning projects, and how these align to the key priorities, and embedding data collection approaches that reflect this structure will likely lead to better, more comprehensive, and more robust, evidence of likely already occurring impact.

References

- Andrew, A., Cattan, S., Costa Dias, M., Farquharson, C., Kraftman, L., Krutikova, S., Phimister, A., & Sevilla, A. (2020). Inequalities in Children's Experiences of Home Learning during the COVID-19 Lockdown in England*. *Fiscal Studies*, 41(3), 653–683. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-5890.12240>
- Archer, L., DeWitt, J., & Wong, B. (2014). Spheres of influence: What shapes young people's aspirations at age 12/13 and what are the implications for education policy?. *Journal of Education Policy*, 29(1), 58-85.
- Bayrakdar, S., & Guveli, A. (2020). *Inequalities in home learning and schools' provision of distance teaching during school closure of COVID-19 lockdown in the UK* (Working Paper No. 2020–09; IPER Working Paper Series). Institute for Social and Economic Research. <https://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/research/publications/working-papers/iser/2020-09.pdf>
- Carniero, P., Cattan, S., Dearden, L., van der Erve, L., Krutikova, S., & Macmillan, L. (2020). The long shadow of deprivation: Differences in opportunities across England. Technical report. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-long-shadow-of-deprivation-differences-in-opportunities>
- Chowdry, H., Crawford, C., Dearden, L., Goodman, A., & Vignoles, A. (2013). Widening participation in higher education: analysis using linked administrative data. *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society: Series A (Statistics in Society)*, 176(2), 431-457.
- Crawford, C., Macmillan, L., & Vignoles, A. (2017). When and why do initially high-achieving poor children fall behind?. *Oxford Review of Education*, 43(1), 88-108.
- Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M. E., Gardner, M. (2017). *Effective Teacher Professional Development*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56b90cb101dbae64ff707585/t/5ade348e70a6ad624d417339/1524511888739/NO_LIF~1.PDF
- DfE (2017). Opportunity Area 2017-20A local plan to deliver opportunities for young people in Fenland and East Cambridgeshire. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/696826/Social_Mobility_Delivery_Plan_Fenland_East_Cambridgeshire_v11_FINAL_WEB.PDF.pdf
- Easton, C., Harland, J., McCrone, T., Sims, D., & Smith, R. (2018). Implementation of Opportunity Areas: An independent evaluation. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/747975/2018-09-04_OA-process-eval_FINAL.pdf
- EEF. (2018). Closing the attainment gap. https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Annual_Reports/EEF_Attainment_Gap_Report_2018_-_print.pdfhttps://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Annual_Reports/EEF_Attainment_Gap_Report_2018_-_print.pdf
- Harrison, N., & Waller, R. (2018). Challenging discourses of aspiration: The role of expectations and attainment in access to higher education. *British Educational Research Journal*, 44(5), 914-938.

- Hofmann et al., (forthcoming). *The COVID-19 learning crisis as a challenge and an opportunity for schools: an evidence review and conceptual synthesis of research-based tools for sustainable change*.
- Hoskins, K., & Ilie, S. (2017). Widening Participation to underrepresented and Disadvantaged Students: Social Identity and the Barriers to Higher Education Access in England. In *Bridges, Pathways and Transitions* (pp. 87-102). Chandos Publishing.
- Hutchinson, J., Bonetti, S., Crenna-Jennings, W. & Akhal, A. (2019). Education in England: annual report 2019. Education Policy Institute. <https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/EPI-Annual-Report-2019.pdf>
- Jerrim, J., & Vignoles, A. (2015). University access for disadvantaged children: a comparison across countries. *Higher education*, 70(6), 903-921.
- Opfer, V. D., & Pedder, D. (2011). Conceptualizing teacher professional learning. *Review of educational research*, 81(3), 376-407.
- Stewart, K., & Waldvogel, J. (2017). Closing gaps early. *The Sutton Trust*. Retrieved from <https://www.suttontrust.com/ourresearch/closing-gaps-early-parenting-policy-childcare/>
- Strand, S. (2012). The White British-Black Caribbean achievement gap: Tests, tiers and teacher expectations. *British Educational Research Journal*, 38(1), 75-101.
- Strand, S. (2016). Do some schools narrow the gap? Differential school effectiveness revisited. *Review of Education*, 4(2), 107-144.
- Strand, S., & Lindorff, A. (2018). *Ethnic disproportionality in the identification of Special Educational Needs (SEN) in England: Extent, causes and consequences*. http://www.education.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Combined-Report_2018-12-20.pdf
- Sutherland, A., Ilie, S., & Vignoles, A. (2015). *Factors associated with achievement: Key Stage 2*. Department for Education.
- Vignoles, A., & Murray, N. (2016). Widening participation in higher education. *Educ. Sci.* 6(2), 13.

Appendix 1

FECO A Priority aims, measures, and broad assessment of existing information around impact and progress towards aim, based on document review, up to and including, Year 4.

Priorities	Measures and broad assessment
Priority 1	
By 2021, both the percentage of free school meals eligible children achieving at least the expected standard in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Reading Goal and the percentage of children eligible for free school meals achieving at least the expected standard in the EYFS Speaking Goal will exceed the national average.	Both the percentage of free school meals eligible children achieving at least the expected standard in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Reading Goal and the percentage of children eligible for free school meals achieving at least the expected standard in the EYFS Speaking Goal will exceed the national average.
By 2021, the attainment of all pupils in reading at key stage 2 will be in the top half of all local authority districts in England.	The attainment of all pupils in reading at key stage 2 will be in the top half of all local authority districts in England.
By 2021, the gap between the attainment of disadvantaged pupils and all pupils at key stage 2 will be half of what it was in September 2017.	<p>The gap between the attainment of disadvantaged pupils and all pupils at key stage 2 will be half of what it was in September 2017.</p> <p>➔ Data was not available, and Covid-19 will have interfered with this (and a goal that is related to national average rather than progress is not very useful)</p>
Priority 2	
By 2021, we will reduce the waiting time for child and adolescent mental health services support to twelve weeks, with clear referral routes for schools and colleges.	<p>Reducing the waiting times for child and adolescent mental health services support to twelve weeks, with clear referral routes for schools and colleges.</p> <p>➔ Data was not available, and Covid-19 will have interfered with this goal.</p>
By 2021, we will establish at least four support centres in Fenland and East Cambridgeshire for parents with children who have an Education, Health and Care Plan, which will provide access to educational resources and tailored support for their child.	<p>Establishing at least four support centres in Fenland and East Cambridgeshire for parents with children who have an Education, Health and Care Plan, which will provide access to educational resources and tailored support for their child.</p> <p>➔ There was evidence from the Inclusion and SEMH theme documents about services for</p>

parents and carers of children and young people with SEND (SENDIASS) to provide information of support. The documents were not clear if these services amounted to the centres envisioned here.

Priorities (continued)

Priority 3	Measures and broad assessment
By 2021, all secondary schools in Fenland and East Cambridgeshire will have achieved at least six of the eight Gatsby Benchmarks.	Ensuring all secondary schools achieve at least six of the eight Gatsby Benchmarks.
By 2021, 60% of young people in Fenland and East Cambridgeshire will go on to an apprenticeship or UK higher education institution.	90% of disadvantaged young people will be in a sustained positive destination for at least two terms after finishing KS5.
By 2021, 90% of disadvantaged young people will be in a sustained positive destination for at least the first two terms after finishing key stage 5.	60% of young people will go to HE or apprenticeship. → Data was not available.
Priority 4	
By 2021, the full-time teacher vacancy rates in primary and secondary schools will have reduced and will be below national average.	Reducing the full-time teacher vacancy rates in primary and secondary schools to below the national average. → We can (and do) comment on progress but overall (benchmarked) data was not available
We will increase the percentage of all pupils attending a primary school rated outstanding or good for leadership and management to at least 86% from 76% in August 2017.	Increasing the proportion of pupils attending primary and secondary schools rated Outstanding/Good for leadership and management.
We will increase the percentage of all pupils attending a secondary school rated outstanding or good for leadership and management to at least 95% from 85% in August 2017	→ No inspections taking place due to Covid-19