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# Identifying key impacts of the Fenland and East Cambridgeshire Opportunity Area

## Year 5 Evidence Review

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## 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, specifically as it has emerged from the fifth and final year of FECOA activity.

The report proceeds as follows:

It first offers a brief background to FECOA activity, specifically the priorities of Year 5.

The report then outlines the principles underpinning the evaluation design for Year 5 of FECOA activity and provides an overview of the implemented evaluation approach.

It then identifies key impacts across five priorities and themes of activity for FECOA (Ready to Learn; Community Support; Early Years; Special Educational Needs and Disability and Socio-Emotional and Mental Health; Twinning Activity), before providing cross-theme and whole-programme insights of impact. In doing so, the report engages with the standards of evidence being derived and the challenges emerging in relation to this.

The report concludes with a series of lessons learned and recommendations in relation to impact and evidence building as relevant to educational programming. These lessons build both on insights from Year 5 of the FECOA programme, and earlier activity during the first four years of the programme.

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## The Fenland and East Cambridgeshire Opportunity Area

The Fenland and East Cambridgeshire Opportunity Area (FECO) was one of several Opportunity Areas set up in 2017 to respond to low local rates of social mobility with place-based approaches emphasising local needs and solutions. FECO was distinct to other Opportunity Areas because, comparatively, it covered a larger, more sparsely populated, and geographically more diverse region.

FECO's programming focused, as did most Opportunity Areas, on delivering a range of educational programmes, targeting early-years settings, schools, as well as young people beyond the school gates including in their community. Much of the intended FECO programming was affected during 2020 and 2021 by the COVID-19 pandemic. Partly in response to this, but also as the full Opportunity Area initiative was extended first into a fourth, and later into a fifth and final year (the 2021 to 2022 school year, to August 2022), the priorities for FECO shifted slightly in its fifth year. The focus on education remained as strong as previously, but the specific programming provided within that focus reflected lessons learned from the first four years of the programme, including around the evidence previously derived in relation to the ongoing impact of the programme.

Specifically, Year 5 FECO programming followed several key strands: *School Standards Activity*, encompassing the *Ready to Learn* theme, with activity in schools and early years settings and engaging at both setting-level and staff level with a focus on staff development. Alongside this sat activity under a *Beyond the School Gates* banner, which included *Community Support* projects, aimed at engaging young people outside education alongside their parents and other community stakeholders. Further emphasis was separately placed on *Early Years* provision. Cutting across these was a further theme around *Special Educational Needs and Disability and Socio-Emotional Mental Health (SEND/SEMH)*; and a variety of activities specifically aimed at ensuring the legacy and sustainability of the FECO programme beyond its funded lifetime. In 2021, in the final year of the programme, Opportunity Areas were 'twinned' with new areas who have faced similar challenges. The aim of the twinning activity has been to build on existing Opportunity Area work enable new areas to collaborate with and benefit of the expertise and experiences of earlier Opportunity Areas. This twinning activity, that saw FECO collaborate with specifically with the non-OA Peterborough to share its learning and insights, aimed to disseminate good practice to this neighbouring region.

Across the themes above, and as a programme-long approach, the use and building of evidence were two key pillars of FECO delivery. At the end of the fourth year of delivery, a series of lessons learned and opportunities for development for the fifth year were identified. These were derived by the FECO team upon reflection of their activity and with support from the evidence synthesis and review undertaken in relation to the first four years of the programme. These lessons are as follows.

Firstly, the programme recognised the importance of building evidence-generating approaches (including evaluation approaches) into the programme and specific project delivery from the start. This included a focus on the collection of data *prior* to the start of implementation of specific projects, to be later complemented with the collection of data *after* the completion of respective projects. While this would attract additional work from participating educational settings (early years providers, schools, colleges, etc.), using light-tough approaches and simple but high-quality measurement instruments could mitigate against undue burden on participants.

Secondly, while FECOA had from the start developed a series of comprehensive logic models for each of the programme's respective priorities and strands of activities, capturing the inputs, processes, short-term outputs, and longer-term outcomes of projects under each priority, a clearer and more in-depth focus on the specific mechanisms of change that would facilitate these outcomes to develop, and therefore impact to occur was seen as beneficial to the evidence building efforts. This was particularly relevant given that practice during the first four years of FECOA programming had suggested that many of the outcomes being sought through the programme were complex, multi-faceted, and potentially impacted upon by combinations of the activities being delivered. This applied at the level of each specific project but was further complemented by both a more granular focus (specifically, the impact from each respective project in each respective participating educational setting), and by a more general focus (specifically, looking at the totality of the programming as more than the sum of its parts).

Thirdly, while contending with substantial disruption to its own delivery emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, FECOA activities further had to adjust to a changing baseline in the participating educational settings, as well as nationally. This was partly reflected in the wide-spread and (at least temporarily) geographically specific disruption to the educational process. This meant that intentions around benchmarking against national trends using existing data were no longer feasible, partly because of the absence of such data (again motivated by the COVID-19 pandemic) and partly because of the changing nature of 'the baseline', that is, the new starting point of educational settings and children as a result of the wide-spread disruption.

Despite the above challenge, our previous impact synthesis report, focusing on the first four years of FECOA delivery suggested there was "a substantial opportunity within the FECOA to build on and enhance existing approaches to move towards evaluating outcomes that matter" (Hofmann et al., 2022, p. 33). In response to this, and in close collaboration with the FECOA team, we designed a broad, comprehensive, yet pragmatic evaluation for the fifth and final year of the FECOA programme.

## Principles underpinning the evaluation design for FECOA Year 5

The evaluation design was co-developed in collaboration with the FECOA team, drawing on lessons from the first four years of the programme and good practice in evidence building in an educational context, while mindful of the likely limitations (many realised, as the next section outlines) stemming from enduring COVID-19 disruption.

The evaluation design rested on several key principles.

A *first principle* was that the design would move beyond cross-sectional data collection on practitioners' self-assessed knowledge and confidence, and instead focus on a *change over time*. While this approach on its own would not be able to generate evidence of causal impact, and would not be able to offer conclusive attribution of any observed change to FECOA activity, it would offer substantially more nuanced insight into the general direction of travel for educational settings and practitioners within. This, coupled with further evidence (as below) would provide insight into the direction of change in the FECOA area.

A *second principle* emphasised that, wherever relevant, good, valid, and reliable measures would be used. This included in before-and-after data collection at project or whole programme level, but also at educational setting level, whereby good measures would be provided to early-years settings or schools looking to conduct their own (small-scale) evaluation.

These two principles manifested in a planned before-and-after staff survey, using both factual questions around their involvement in specific aspects of the FECOA programme, and a series of validated and reliable measurement scales around professional practice, the existence of a professional community, as well as around features of (an existing) professional community of practice.

A *third principle* centred around the need to provide scaffolding and support to practitioners in participating settings around the implementation of evidence building approaches and evaluation, as they relate to FECOA programming, but also more broadly. This principle emerged partly from evidence during the first four years of FECOA activity that there was substantial variation in the understandings of evaluation by staff in participating educational settings, and suggestions that simple messaging that would provide guidance to improve these understandings would be well-received (Hofmann & Ilie, 2022).

This third principle translated to redeveloped setting-specific reporting and evaluation templates, which sought to clarify the ways in which practitioners (or settings overall) could *evidence* the impact that they perceived participation in FECOA activity to have had (if any). This principle also translated in the development of bespoke tools for educational settings which would want to go beyond standard templates provided and required by FECOA.

Finally, a *fourth principle* emerged directly from learning from the first four years of the programme, specifically the impact synthesis report, which highlighted the likely programme-level impacts. This principle centred around a ‘multi-level’ focus of the Year 5 synthesis, taking in all levels relevant within FECOA: pupils, staff members, the individual setting, specific projects, overall programme, and beyond. In practice, this translated into a focus on data collection to include a wider range of stakeholders beyond those immediately participating in specific FECOA projects. The specific nature of data collection could vary between stakeholders, with the underpinning logic of this principle being that a flexible approach to data collection that would provide insights from a range of stakeholders was preferable to a rigid approach that would yield no data.

### Realised evaluation design

While all above principles were applied to the development and later implementation of the evaluation design for the fifth year of the FECOA programme, not all intended evaluation activities were successfully completed. The reasons for this ranged from low response rates to, most importantly, ongoing disruption due to COVID-19, which meant that while FECOA activity was less disrupted than in the previous two years, educational settings were still faced with substantial challenges during the 2021-22 school year and therefore their capacity to engage with all aspects of the proposed evaluation was, understandably, limited. Intended and ultimately realised approaches are outlined in what follows, first overall, then at the level of FECOA priority.

The staff survey was undertaken twice, once at the start of the 2021-22 school year (as a Baseline) and once at the end of the school year (as an Endline), with validated robust measures around

professional practice and (the existence of a) professional community of practice in addition to factual questions about expected and perceived impacts associated with participation in respective FECOA activities. Response rates were small at Baseline (58 responses total), and even smaller at Endline (19 responses total). We are therefore unable to trace the same respondents over time (to do so would lower the sample even further) and present average and overall results in later sections of this report.<sup>1</sup>

The stakeholder survey attempting to capture programme-level perceived impacts (in accordance with the fourth principle above) had an even smaller response rate, of only 2 individuals. Further opportunities to engage with stakeholders (e.g., with head teachers) were capitalised upon and used. We led, or facilitated via systematic questions, focus groups/interviews with OA stakeholders (primary and secondary head teachers, Early Years setting staff, education system leaders) in January 2022, February-March 2022 and again in June 2022. These conversations explored the stakeholders' experiences and perceptions of enablers of change, within and cross setting collaboration, practitioner learning, ways of engaging stakeholders, impacts of the programme and evidence used to inform perceived impacts. We further attended various stakeholder meetings, led interviews with FECOA team leads and members, and discussions with partnership board members.

Across all activities, under all priorities, the redeveloped templates and additional (self-)evaluation guidance was provided to settings. The templates proved popular, with a very high number of 'case studies' returned to FECOA using these templates. These case studies, setting-specific insights into the implementation of activity, either FECOA-delivered or emerging from participation in a FECOA project, constitute a vast majority of the documents that were reviewed and synthesised for the purposes of this report.

The overall planned synthesis approach was followed as planned, with a total of 278 individual documents reviewed for the purposes of this report. The review focused on the nature and magnitude of reported impacts as well as on the robustness of the evidenced impact, returning to the same standards of evidence that we used in the impact synthesis report focusing on the first four years of activity. These are summarised as follows (Hofmann et al., 2022, p. 9)

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.

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<sup>1</sup> Instruments drawn from the work of Pyhältö et al., 2012 (Teacher's professional agency in the teacher community scale; Teacher's professional agency in the classroom scale) and Vermunt et al., 2017 (Teachers' professional learning orientations scales).

#### 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.

The standards of evidence outlined above are relevant to programme-level impacts as well as to theme-specific approaches. These evaluation approaches are:

For the Early Years theme, staff were surveyed using the all-staff survey above. Unfortunately, however, there were no responses from early years settings to the Baseline survey, and only a very small (three) set of responses to the Endline survey, making the data unreportable as the results would be far too contingent on the self-selection into that small responding sample to offer any theme-wide insights. Case studies using the updated templates were, however, successful, with early years setting carrying out a range of these case studies and returning further associated self-evaluation documents. A total of 23 such case studies were produced, with a further 25 evaluation documents being submitted to FECOA in respect to settings' engagement with various aspects of the Early Years Provision. An additional 10 documents covered the 'universal' provision under this theme. The evaluation further intended to include a range of case studies in early years settings which had not experienced substantial change despite participation in FECOA activities, but these were not carried out for ethical reasons, relating primarily to the existing challenges facing such settings from the COVID-19 pandemic.

For the SEND/SEMH theme, the planned evaluation initially included a proposed document analysis of Education and Health Care Plans applied for by educational settings who had participated in FECOA activity under this theme, as well as a quantitative time-series analysis. Neither of these elements could be completed: the former because of challenging circumstances within educational settings, many of which were faced with responding to substantially increased levels of need around SEND and SEMH as emerging from the pandemic and associated lock-downs and negative influence on mental health more generally as well as challenges arising from significant and impactful reduction in healthcare and social support services to young people and their families affected by disability/illness during the pandemic; the latter for similar reasons associated with the fact that what was expected to be a minimally-disrupted period instead continued to suffer from pandemic-related impacts and therefore to look at long-term time trends would capture the hypothesised much stronger impact of the pandemic than the impact of any FECOA activity. Setting-specific case studies were, however, completed, as was the staff survey (as part of the staff survey outlined above). A particular focus was added to capture initially unplanned learning opportunities and insights emerging from the FECOA's response to the pandemic. A total of 12 evaluation documents and 8 case studies were reviewed under this theme.

For the Ready to Learn theme, the approach to evaluation included originally a post-intervention staff survey. This was to capture specific perceived impacts by staff in participating settings. Instead of a stand-alone survey, these questions were included in the all-staff survey mentioned above. Case studies from participating settings (predominantly schools) were also deployed as planned, using the updated templates and, where schools saw fit, the additional (self-) evaluation guidance. As for the Early years theme, case studies carried out by the evaluation team specifically in 'stagnant settings',



that is educational settings where earlier evidence has suggested challenges to enacting change did not go ahead, because of the perceived challenges stemming from COVID-19 and a view that to do so would be unethical given the likely pressures felt by such settings. Instead, a small interview study with head teachers in schools engaging in Ready to Learn activity was carried out. Seven head teachers were interviewed.

For the Community Support theme, it was agreed that the synthesis report would focus on evidence derived through self-evaluation activity carried out by the provider of one of the key activities under this theme, the Parent Power programme, alongside the review of other relevant documentation, which amounted to eight case studies, several multi-media resources and four additional evaluation documents. The same approach applied to the Twinning activity, with an impact synthesis constituting the focus of the review, using 8 case studies around the implementation of phonics (the focus of a lot of the Twinning activity) and additional seven evaluation documents. For both themes, the derived case studies and evaluation documents used the bespoke Year 5 templates derived in support of settings' own evidence building approaches.

While clearly affected by disruption stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, the overall evaluation approach for Year 5 of the FECOA programme is substantially more comprehensive than previous approaches. This is partly reflected in the range of evidence being developed by settings, and outside of settings, but also by the scale of the case studies and reports returned to FECOA by participating educational settings, with 278 documents provided for this synthesis of Year 5 activity, compared to around 200 available for the full first four years of the programme.

Across all the evaluation activity outlined above, the FECOA team played an active role in facilitating interviews, focus group, conversations, and participation in meetings, the administration of surveys, and collation of data directly from schools and early years settings. This was in addition to their participation in interviews and further discussions to provide context and relevant information.

This report now turns to synthesising impacts at theme level.

## Early Years

The Early Years part of the FECOA programme was linked to the three priorities of the Early Years Service Outcomes Strategy, involving:

1. Pre-birth to 3-year-olds practice
2. Learning and development, especially communication and language
3. Parental engagement and home learning

At the time of the Years 1-4 evaluation, much of the Early Years activity remained ongoing with few results available. These priorities were reactive to the Covid-19 pandemic which had major impact on the delivery of the projects and provision overall.

The fifth and last year of the FECOA programme aimed to work collaboratively with settings to develop bespoke support for recovery. In Year 5, despite significant impediments to the EY projects from the COVID-19 pandemic, there was clear evidence that participant settings had successfully completed projects.

Although the focus of this synthesis is on the *achieved* impacts, compared to prior years when substantial proportions of activity (both FECOA, but also educational activity more broadly) was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, completion of a project in itself represents a substantial success. The Early Years activity is a good illustration of this.

## Projects

### 50 things to do Before You're Five Public Health Project Report

The 50 things is a framework of accessible low cost or no cost activities for families that aimed to improve both parents' and settings' understanding of accessible and available activities and support for families with young children. It has had a good reach in the area. 18 months after its launch, the 50 things App has nearly 5,000 users, plus a further 2,500 hits on its website. A third to over a half of early years settings reported using this service to support parents.

### Five to Thrive

The Five to Thrive project involved a unique approach taking key messages from neuroscience to support early intervention and lifelong learning. Its aims focus more on the success of embedding the principles than identifying child-level outcomes. Identifying child-level outcomes is challenging and would require a longer timeframe. Participant feedback from the Five to Thrive webinars is very positive. A case study of a family and their early years setting offered a strong illustration of how this project enabled practitioners, carers and children better knowledge and vocabulary to manage tricky situations.

### Phonics for Success

The aim of the Phonics for Success project was to train and provide ongoing support for practitioners in evidence-based approaches to early literacy development. While it is too early to assess impact on young people especially with the impact of the pandemic, the project involved an assessment which demonstrated that practitioners' self-assessed knowledge increased an average of 1.48 points on a 4-point scale, and their confidence by an average of 1.36 points on a 4-point scale. Qualitative evidence supported this observation. In year 1 the project trained 68 practitioners, representing 29

unique settings from the PVI sector, 15 schools and 13 unique childminding settings. It can be estimated that through the trained practitioners, the project would have impacted at least 850 children.

### Raising Early Achievement in Literacy (REAL) Programme

The aim of the REAL project was to deliver a programme of early literacy methods to help parents to be more confident in helping their children's development. A total of 82 EY practitioners have been trained in REAL methods to support parents, and 31 children received direct support into home learning via home visits (limited by the pandemic). While the pandemic had a significant impact on the delivery of this project in Year 5, participant feedback for the project is outstanding. The majority of participants self-reported improvements in knowledge and confidence. Parents' self-reported large increases in confidence in supporting their children's language development. This is supported by qualitative evidence.

### Steps

The Steps project supports the inclusion of children with difficult or dangerous behaviours and a consistent response to these behaviours. While the project was unable to achieve its target of reaching half of Early Years group settings due to the pandemic, 35% of PVI group settings and 19% of childminders took up the offer. The evidence shows that for the 13 settings who have completed all or some of the training and took part in an evaluation survey, on a scale of 1-5 knowledge of therapeutic practices rose from 1.85 prior to starting the training to 4.46 during or after the training. The qualitative feedback for the project is very positive.

### Library programme

The library programme aimed to increase the engagement of families with children aged 0-4 years through increasing knowledge about library services. The aim was to increase service use and, in the long term, ultimately children's communication and language skills. The project recruited existing members of staff to engage with the project and families during term time. The evaluations showed that by 31st March 2022 the project had recruited nearly 600 new 0-4yr old members (compared to 200 new members at the time of our previous report), half of whom had visited the library at least 4 times. This illustrates a strong development was the start in previous years and suggests the project has established itself and its reach continues to grow. The proportion of 0-4s taking part in the Reading Challenge rose from 8% in 2019 to 11.3% in 2021.

### Targeted provision

Since during the pandemic, the Department for Education paused the assessment and Early Years Foundation Stage profiles, there is little comparable quantitative evidence of impact of the programme in this area. However, we note that the revised case study and evaluation forms implemented in Year 5 have led settings and practitioners to documenting very rich and detailed case studies of activities undertaken. They demonstrate huge success in designing and implementing ambitious projects at these settings, despite the major difficulties generated by the pandemic. They have also recorded qualitative evaluations of impact, including participant feedback from staff, parents and sometimes children themselves, photographic evidence of changes and case studies of children. We found the case studies and the documentary evidence to be insightful and demonstrate a clear focus on children's development and engagement, parental learning and staff engagement and wellbeing.

The rich case studies and reports from the targeted settings show consistently that the primary uses of the project focused on visits from and to nurseries to enrich children's experiences and enhancements to indoor and outdoor spaces and play area to enable more child-led creative play. The reports demonstrate that significant planning and inquiry about ways to support children's learning went into designing the changes. The reports qualitatively detail focused descriptions of how the changes impacted on children's engagement in play, their communication as well as staff engagement, motivation and wellbeing in their work settings.

Going forward, these rich reports provide a strong basis for better understanding what matters to practitioners and children in such settings. A strong body of research clearly demonstrates that for change efforts, to be successful in educational settings, they need to be linked explicitly with what matters to practitioners in local contexts (Hofmann & Ilie, 2022; Edwards, 2010). The documents demonstrate that the bespoke programme has been successful in motivating participants to engage in change efforts at the very challenging time.

In terms of systematic approaches to generating evidence, some challenges remain. To enable a consistent approach across settings, all targeted settings were provided with a Leuven Scale Assessment resource and toolkit with a pre-recorded webinar to use for assessment. However, very few case studies make reference to use of this scale, suggesting that supporting its adoption necessitates more work and support.

## Ready to Learn

### Provision

Ready to Learn was the key offering from FECOA in respect of its *School Standards Activity* priority. Ready to Learn included both a universal offer, that is, the same approach applied across participating schools and early years settings, and a targeted offer, which was to respond to specific needs of engaging schools and early years setting. Alongside this sat the OA Webinar Series, developed with a view to providing opportunities for staff professional development that could be easily accessible to staff in a range of settings.

### Approach to evidencing impact

The main focus of the synthesis of evidence is represented by two essential pieces of documentation that schools and early years settings engaging with Ready to Learn were invited to generate: first, an action plan, detailing the learning needs and specific issues being sought to be addressed with specific within-school projects funded through Ready to Learn; and second, a post-implementation case study, using templates amended to reflect learning from the first four years of the FECOA programme, and outlining schools' own perspectives on the impact of the specific project being implemented in their context.

Fifteen schools and early years settings provided these documents (though not always consistently). A review of all these documents (where provided) was carried out by a separate independent evaluator. To supplement this work, we carried out an interview study with head teachers in schools engaging with Ready to Learn, focusing particularly on perceived impact on learning from the projects being supported by Ready to Learn and the key mechanisms of change identified in that process. We synthesise findings across these two aspects of the research in what follows.

The process of developing the action plans saw participating schools and early years setting clearly articulate the learning needs, barriers to learning and, in most cases, the likely activities that were hoped would address these identified needs. The independent report noted that SEMH issues and parental engagement with learning topped the list of identified barriers and that many further issues emerged directly from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the experiences and outcomes of children and their families, with attendance, ability to play and interact with others and a range of other similar skills seen as having been negatively impacted by repeated lockdowns and disruption to education.

### Identified impacts

The evidence of impacts identified in the case study documents generated by schools and settings varied substantially between these, and also varied by the key outcome that their Ready to Learn supported project was meant to affect.

The top priority and barrier around SEMH reflected a substantial turn in the choice of project to be supported by Ready to Learn, towards nurture groups, play, sensory circuits-type provision, learning and/or play mentors. We note overlap here with Early Years provision, whereby two educational settings had used Five to Thrive, suggesting cross-fertilisation. Partly related to this identified barrier

to learning were also projects that focused on play and basic skills that were seen as essential precursors of both learning and good socio-emotional development (e.g., fitness, motor skills).

Of the eleven schools identifying improvements broadly around SEMH as a key target of their project, eight perceived impacts to be positive and reported general insights from their context in support of that perspective. However, only two were able to back up the perception of impact with either data (collected using specific measures available to the schools) or a systematic understanding of the process of change (e.g., by engaging with pupils). In most other settings, various forms of feedback were collected from teachers, parents, or pupils, but this only generated emerging evidence of perceived impact, and often the insight fell short of attempting to translate changes in SEMH or behaviour into learning outcomes. Interviewed head teachers who had engaged in projects with this emphasis unanimously reported positive perceived impacts, but noted challenges around engagement from initially targeted pupils, continued disruption from COVID-19. They all reported that, over time, they were hopeful that impacts on learning would materialise, but also emphasised that while learning was a key outcome for their respective schools, any improvements in mental health, behaviour, interactions, and any decreases in negative play incidents or behavioural difficulties for children, had value in and of themselves.

Despite it being a priority for schools, parental engagement, and specifically changes in parental engagement due to projects supported under Ready to Learn were not well evidenced in the case studies generated by schools and settings. One single school had attempted to quantify this, collecting data on parental engagement in relation to its phonics-aimed Ready to Learn project. In interviews, head teachers whose projects had had a parental engagement component noted the challenges around communication and engagement against a backdrop of worsening social conditions due to COVID-19 and related economic downturns. There were instances of anecdotal successes, for instance in relation to generating consensus amongst parents in relation to the importance of a given project. Such evidence, however, is not able to capture impact of the full mechanisms of change whereby parental engagement is either increased or acts as a mediator for improving children's learning.

The turn towards SEMH-related provision was accompanied by a relatively small number of projects that included a focus on curriculum (one school, and even then, only partially), specific learning outcomes (exclusively reading). Six schools in total included these as priorities and sought outcomes from their respective projects, and in all but one instance, evidence of impact on actual outcomes was not forthcoming from the case studies despite substantial insight into the experiences and process of implementation around each project. Despite the lack of good or even fair evidence of impact, submitted case study templates were rich with detail of children being seen to enjoy reading more, and were also transparent about challenges (e.g., school library books intended to support children with SEND not being borrowed). One school provided fair evidence of impact via a before-and-after survey of staff and pupils, showing an increase in the level of knowledge about specific authors in the context of a project looking to improve knowledge about children's texts and authors. Despite not being able to attribute impacts, clear and well evidence positive trends were encouraging.

In relation to the attendance outcome, four settings identified this as a key outcome, with four providing some evidence of impact. In most instances this consisted of settings reporting the level of attendance prior to the implementation of the Ready to Learn supported project and comparing it to

the level of attendance after the implementation. This emerging evidence was therefore not conclusive in being able to attribute impacts specifically to Ready to Learn projects. In interviews, head teachers who had targeted improved attendance noted the impact of the pandemic on attendance levels as a substantial confounder in terms of understanding how much of a difference their participation in Ready to Learn had made.

A small number of educational settings had further project aims, sometimes linked to those outlined above, and occasionally stand-alone. This was the case for one school implementing a democracy-focused project to provide children opportunities to develop knowledge about the UK's parliamentary system alongside new experiences (visits to London and Parliament). While quantitative evidence of impact would have been difficult to assemble in relation to this, insights from children, and the cultural shift in the school identified by the head teacher in the interview were clear indications that the project had met its aims and enabled long-lasting change around the expectations of children around their own abilities.

## Legacy

The legacy of Ready to Learn was captured in interviews by head teachers suggesting in many instances that they would be able to continue to implement their projects, either through internal funding or by accessing other resources, where this was relevant to the setting. Reflecting responses in their case study returns, half of the interviewed head teachers noted that they would take on broad lessons learned from the current year of implementation into future delivery of their respective projects.

A key legacy from Ready to Learn may rest beyond the specific projects implemented in schools and early years settings and instead focuses on the development of the case studies themselves, which encouraged settings to engage with notions of evidence building in an applied and contextualised manner. The potential inclusion of these case studies in a publicly available Learning Hub, as illustrations of what is possible to achieve but also of what the challenges around this are, may provide inputs into the establishment of a community of practice. We return to this when we present results around the formation of a community of practice from the staff survey.

## Community Support

The Community Support theme encompassed a substantial amount of activity under the *Beyond School Gates* banner, looking to engage with young people, their parents, and other stakeholders, and to create opportunities for young people to engage with issues they deemed critical to their own lives.

### Projects

#### Youth Advisory Boards

The flagship project under this theme consisted of the setting up (earlier in the lifetime of FECOA, just ahead of the start of the COVID-19 pandemic) of Youth Advisory Boards (YABs). Over time, and despite challenges with engagement, which in Year 5 centred on schools being less supportive in disseminating information on behalf of YABs to other students, overall levels of engagement with YABs have been high. This includes young people becoming members of the YABs, and non-members responding to consultations or engaging in events or conferences organised by the YABs. The case study of YABs identified these challenges and emphasised the scale of engagement as an indication of the necessary conditions for impact to occur, but specific impacts on the engaged young people could not be generated.

An associated case study, around the #MakeADifference campaign and event organised by the YABs as a mechanism to preserve their influence and ensure their longevity saw very positive feedback from the young people engaged (68 individuals). Staff and educational practitioners also attending the event were noted to have remarked on the depth of engagement and understanding by young people of a series of complex societal problems that were specific to the Fenland and East Cambridgeshire area.

The general level of engagement and the positioning of the YABs as a key conduit for broad social and community engagement by young people has resulted in the YABs continuing to be supported beyond the life of the FECOA, to at least December 2022.

#### Employment-related event by the Careers & Enterprise Company

This one-off event sought to raise awareness amongst young people of the variety of employers available in the region and of the variety of employment opportunities also available to them. A before-and-after evaluation using a survey of participating young people identified an increase the proportions of attendees who could identify relevant employers and an improvement in their knowledge about available employment opportunities. Additional feedback from educational practitioners (specifically head teachers) focused on how participating students had been seen to be inspired by the event.

#### Detached Youth Work

In addition to employment and community engagement related activity as above, further provision under the Community Support theme saw the delivery of Detached Youth Work (DYW). This project aimed to support young people to address the issues that they faced which may be causing a barrier to their social, emotional, educational development and wellbeing and by doing so prevent escalation of need.



An evaluation report against a pre-defined set of KPIs saw progress towards all KPIs to the expected level. While many of the KPIs centred around the level of engagement and feedback from young people, an important KPI looked specifically at the numbers of antisocial behaviour incidents (ASB) reported in areas covered by the DYW work. The evaluation report showed how reports of ASB had fallen “dramatically” in one specific area, with this impact partly attributed to high levels of engagement with the local youth club, supported by the development of a deep and nuanced understanding of the circumstances which would have otherwise prompted antisocial behaviour (including gang issues, etc.). This highlighted the importance of a good understanding of the local context as a necessary (but potentially not sufficient) condition of impact and illustrated the importance of the place-based approach that FECOA had implemented. While difficult to completely attribute change to this strand of activity, the FECOA team noted that local councils and local agencies exhibited a better understanding and higher levels of engagement with young people’s perspectives, including through engagement with the Regional Detached Youth Work Group, where best practice and ways of working across the county and beyond are shared.

#### Healthy Mind, Healthy Body, Cooking at Home.

This project emerged partly in response to issues identified earlier in the FECOA programme, but also as one of the ways in which a sustained emphasis on mental health and wellbeing (e.g., from the YABs) would be translated into practical support. The project provided opportunities for a relatively a group of 240 young people to learn to cook and make meals.

The evaluation of the project took the form of a case study relying on feedback from participants and their parents and also resulted in the production of video illustrating participant testimony. All pieces of feedback were positive and suggested very good experiences as part of the project and robust participant insights into them building practical sustainable skills including cooking, healthy eating, understanding food groups and budgeting. While the longer-term impact remained difficult to ascertain, these insights point towards positive outcomes from the project.

#### Parent Power

The above provision under Community Support was primarily focused on young people. Alongside this, a key direction of travel for year 5 of FECOA consisted of engaging more widely with the community and other relevant stakeholders. Parent Power represents the key mechanisms for this engagement.

Parent Power was delivered by the developing charity organisation (The Brilliant Club) in partnership with Trinity College part of the University of Cambridge and FECOA, and targeted four secondary schools in Fenland, with 43 parents participating in a range of six meetings or university visits. Project engagement from the parents included them providing input and identification of the barriers to higher education access specific to their local area, in addition to insights into their own educational backgrounds and attitudes.

The evaluation of the programme was summarised in two reports. First, a project-specific report synthesising feedback from parents and change before-and-after the programme in parental attitudes and self-reported knowledge of higher education and support to young people around higher education; this report outlined clear progress against a set of pre-defined KPIs, though not all aspects of parental attitude and knowledge had been fully captured. Second, a reflective report around the challenges of rural organising from one of the key members of staff delivering Parent

Power in Fenland. The reflective piece was comprehensive and provided an in-depth perspective on the implementation (challenges) of Parent Power and identified a series of barriers and issues which resonated closely with those highlighted by parents themselves in the first report.

Parent Power also represents one of the specific project legacies for FECOA, with the project continuing beyond the end of FECOA funding in August 2022. Specifically, Anglia Ruskin University and the University of Cambridge have agreed to fund Fenland Parent Power until December 2024. This will ensure that parents have the opportunity to continue to develop their leadership and build long-term campaigns around issues such as public transport. A new Parent Power group will be established in Peterborough in early 2023 as well as the model being replicated in other areas across the UK.

## SEND/SEMH

### Projects

The FECOA Inclusion offer was launched in 2019 and included a range of several specific projects: a SEND Review; needs specific training (fully funded Steps training and NASENCO award); outreach support; the offer of a SEND Toolkit; and advanced nurture support (opportunity for schools and educational settings to access further funding).

Schools receiving high levels of support before Year 5 of FECOA via the School Improvement Programme were not invited to take part in the SEND+SEMH programme. A total of around 50 schools took part in the SEND review across the 3 years (with a decline from 53 schools in Year 1 to 42 in the final year, as outlined clearly in this report, partly due to the impact of the pandemic, with a particularly acute situation in special schools).

The programme elements related to SEND and SEMH had got to a good start in Years 1-4, with impact reported on time spent supporting parents, reduced exclusions in some participating settings and positive perceptions from practitioners. The pandemic also had a very disruptive impact on this priority's activities. Especially the goals involving contributions and participation from the health service have been disrupted due to the pandemic's impact on health services. However, changes necessitated by the pandemic have also offered new learning opportunities and led to the introduction of some practices that were found successful and are being maintained going forward. Funding was dedicated to this priority in Year 5, with a variety of partners involved. SENDIASS and Pinpoint delivered services across the FECOA, CCC delivered Steps training and YMCA mental health training.

Overall, more staff across the OA have been trained in SEND and SEMH, with a clear focus on a whole-school approach that includes a consideration of staff own wellbeing needs in order to effectively support pupils. An increased number of schools have a named Mental Health Lead and a clear policy. Staff qualifications, awareness and clear responsibility roles and policies are strong elements of supporting sustainability of the whole-school approach beyond the programme.

### Support to families: SENDIASS and Pinpoint

The SENDIASS programme aimed to strengthen the effectiveness of support for children and young people with special educational needs and their carers. It provided impartial and confidential information, advice and support to parents and carers in the OA area who have children, 0 to 25 years old, with SEND. Over the course of the programme, attendance data demonstrated a 15% increase in attendance at parent support meetings and a 15% increase in families participating in the programme. This is important since there is a recognised problem with poor parental engagement with their children's education in the Fenland and East Cambridgeshire Opportunity Area. Reports about SENDIASS and Pinpoint also evidence an increase in new referrals – while this can be seen as a positive impact of these projects, the increase may have also occurred due to increasing need from pandemic-driven changes to the experiences of children and their families.

Pinpoint Cambridgeshire worked directly with parents and carers of children with disabilities and additional needs offering weekly interactions with families with SEND children. A key learning opportunity arose in this work from the pandemic. While earlier meetings and drop-ins had been

planned based on parent feedback as face to face, attendance had been low. When the pandemic necessitated moving the sessions online, attendance significantly increased. Online provision of drop-in sessions and meetings is continuing beyond the pandemic to build on this success. Parent-led commissioning is being continued to support engagement as a key legacy of this project.

However, a challenge was identified in the OA SEND workshops and drop-ins that recruiting parent champions has been difficult. This is understandable in the context of the huge additional burden placed on families with children with additional needs by the pandemic, well documented throughout the reports reviewed. However, given the successes of parent-led commissioning, this would be an important area for further work beyond the pandemic.

#### Support to settings: YMCA mental health training and STEPS

YMCA work aimed to increase the confidence of staff in educational settings to identify and respond to children's social, emotional and mental health needs. It also aimed to help create a positive well-being culture in schools to improve outcomes, whilst making sure provision meets the needs of CYP in terms of mental health as foreseen by the Green Paper. Partly due to the pandemic, settings struggled to release staff to attend training. However, participant feedback and surveys show that 90% or more of participants who did attend reported increased knowledge and confidence.

Steps is a whole-school approach to positive behaviour management which draws on understandings from therapeutic expertise and work on trauma which has been rolled out across Fenland and East Cambridgeshire. The training includes insights and planning tools to support settings and individuals. In January 2022 the project was also rolled out to childminders and early years settings across Cambridgeshire. The Early Years programme focuses particularly on de-escalation.

For Steps training as well, pandemic necessitated a move online; much of the training has been face-to-face again since Spring 2022. By Summer 2022, 142 STEPS tutors have been trained, a significant increase in Year 5, demonstrating a continued success of the programme, and to ensure sustainability, 148 tutors have attended refresher training. The sustainable impact is seen in continued accreditation: 94% of the 77 target schools within FEC have taken part in Steps training and while some have since lapsed, over 90% of schools have maintained their accredited status suggesting the programme is becoming well embedded in the area. It is notable that to aid the embedding of the training, the FECOA offered further funding for refresher training. This has enabled the creation of a network of Steps tutors and practitioners across the county. Further evidence of sustained improved practice is the evidence that the approach is now firmly embedded in many schools' policies and practice.

The case studies offer further illustration of this. Case studies suggest that some of the changes in schools' practices are also evidenced by Ofsted inspections: the May 2022 Ofsted inspection report of a case study school which moved from a 'Requires Improvement' grading to 'Good' explicitly mentions the nurturing ethos of the school as a key strength.

Education settings' ability to support both students and staff seems to be improving. In terms of exclusions, this data has been hugely impacted by pandemic. With this caveat in mind, data shows an overall reduction in exclusions across the OA over the past five years from 495 distinct students to 222. Fixed-term exclusions have dropped from 1031 to 429. Participant feedback from the OA Educational Psychologists pilot project in Year 5, which brought staff from primary schools together

to discuss to talk about challenges they faced, showed these sessions were also positively received as a space for reflection on teachers' own well-being.

One challenge identified in the evaluation report relates to situations where the staff member trained was not in a position of authority to deliver changes in their setting. In such cases changes were more rarely implemented in the setting. Such insights are particularly valuable as they provide indications of the mechanisms that would allow impact from this, and other FECOA projects, to manifest.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> SEND review

Over 70% of SENDCOs in these schools took part in the 3<sup>rd</sup> SEND review training, a quarter of heads and 3% of governors, from over half of the OA schools. 7 participants who took the feedback survey all reported very high levels of satisfaction, identifying the training as very useful, and commented that they had used or planned to use the outcomes of the SEND Review to inform the School Development Plan/SEND Action Plan for their school.

41 settings completed SEND reviews with funding bids by the deadline in June 2022. The third SEND review shows overall that staff in FECOA education settings are now more confident to work with CYP experiencing SEMH issues. Signposting to support services is seen as improved and working across partner agencies as more joined up. A local evaluation suggested a significant trend of settings reporting on robust tracking systems which enable sharing of information for pupils with SEND. All this is seen to have increased capacity within schools to support early intervention.

Heads/Leads also described work around SEND/SEMH support as more fundamentally integrated into their planning and practice. Key areas visible in feedback from participants highlight improved wellbeing based on participation in the programme, developments in curricula promoting inclusion and increased staff knowledge of SEND. Local evaluation outcomes show that the proportion of schools with positive self-assessments in all areas of the review has increased, for example in the final time period, the number of schools who felt positive about the SEND pupil experience in their school rose from 10 to 24. The number of schools perceiving their SEND provision as effective doubled from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 3<sup>rd</sup> SEND review from 7 to 14. The targeted approach allowing schools to follow their local needs was seen by programme participants as key to its success. Qualitative feedback from participating schools suggests CPD has been effective in developing capacity and relationships with parents have been consolidated to address what have been further growing needs in this area. A key factor in achieving this was described by many as the opportunity to stop, reflect and take stock of current practice and identify needs and strengths. This resonates with the approach taken within this priority to start by listening, before planning, implementing and evaluating new approaches.

## Twinning

### Overall approach

A specific feature of Year 5 for FECOA (and for all other Opportunity Areas) was a focus on sharing practice with other, relatively similar, local areas, which may take lessons learned during the first four years of activity and apply them in their own contexts.

FECOA was twinned with Peterborough, and provision was supported on two specific axes that were well aligned with FECOA's own priorities, both during the early years of the programme and during Year 5. Specifically, a SEMH training offer was put in place (delivered by YMCA), Cambridgeshire Steps tutor training for schools/early years settings; and a phonics-focused project saw a set of primary schools in Peterborough implemented a phonics intervention (Little Wandle) which benefited from prior evidence derived from the EEF, with a view to improving phonics results and therefore contributing to better reading outcomes for pupils in the medium-term.

### Projects

#### YMCA SEMH training offer

A substantial training offer was made available to schools in Peterborough, initially with a very wide reach (all schools invited to make use of the offer). Due to COVID-19 and associated capacity constraints for schools, the shape of the provision underwent repeated changes and extensions. Despite these challenges of engagement on behalf of the schools, the training offer is being continued beyond the lifetime of FECOA, until December 2022, with a view to offering as many schools as possible the opportunity to engage.

Impacts from the training offer, and in particular engagement from the training offer, have not been fully derived yet, though the addition of webinars for parents and carers proved popular. This feedback also suggested that 100% of participants felt more confident after their SEMH training, which is an indication of good later outcomes.

#### Phonics improvement project

To address an area of specific need identified in Peterborough while remaining consistent with the focus of FECOA, a phonics improvement project was devised, working with six Peterborough schools which, at the time of the project starting, were working well below the national average in terms of phonics check results. All schools implemented, in slightly different configurations, and with various degrees of success, the same project (Little Wandle).

With one exception, all participating schools produced comprehensive case study reports: in total, eight such case studies were generated. Most of these case studies offered good insights into the enablers and barriers to the implementation of the project, and most relied on clear data emerging from the phonics skills check (with the relevant year groups – Early Years Foundation Stage and Year 1 pupils) showing, in most participating schools, improvements in the proportion of pupils achieving expected levels in the phonics check. This was despite a national-level decrease in these levels, likely prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic which has been seen to negatively affect early childhood outcomes. Where these improvements in the phonics skills check were not forthcoming, the case studies were able to identify the likely reasons: these included staff illness brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic that were compounded by challenging leadership circumstances.

These case studies demonstrated a high level of consistency, all but one using the template developed specifically for Year 5 of FECOA. They were systematic in the use of data in relation to evidencing the impact of the project on phonics outcome and offered a good level of insight into the implementation challenges. On this latter matter, two school case studies noted the importance of the fidelity of implementation; more identified improvements to staff levels of knowledge around phonics and literacy, but also in relation to the implementation of the project.

Overall, therefore, there is sufficient evidence in relation to this project to support, even though not directly with causal evidence, a likely good level of impact on pupil (phonics) outcomes.

### Cambridgeshire Steps - Step On Tutor Training

This project focused on the delivery of Steps training in the form of refreshers and Step On tutor training for Peterborough school staff, to improve the effectiveness of support for children and young people across the areas by implementing the Steps therapeutic approach. As with all Twinning activity, this project closely reflected the approach by FECOA overall, with Steps part of the core Early Years provision (with clear links to SEND/SEMH).

The evaluation of this project in relation to Peterborough schools took the form of seeking feedback from participants, monitoring levels of engagement, self-reported change, with all Early Years module participants reporting that their settings had made changes to their approaches as a result of the training. More importantly, the evaluation also included the tracing of the number of exclusions around the introduction of the project, with clear reductions observed in case study schools. While from a strictly methodological perspective, this evaluation would be of a fair-to-good standard, the insights captured overall from three case study schools where the data analysis has been carried out, are powerful and the positive direction change very clear.

## Programme-wide change and perceived impacts

In this section we first synthesise evidence derived from the staff survey outlined above about specific theme activities, looking across the themes to understand the broad patterns at the start and end of the fifth year of FECOA activities.

We supplement this with evidence from existing documents that refer to educational setting engagement with FECOA, not as indication of impact, but rather as indication of the scope of programming delivered during this single year of activity. We further draw on a synthesis of impacts that we have summarised in the preceding sections at the level of the theme.

We then return to our earlier report focusing on the first four years of the activity to compare impacts and findings in the final year. We combine all these sources of evidence to offer a set of programme-wide insights, going back to the start of the FECOA programme in 2017.

### Expected and realised perceptions of impact

The staff survey carried out at the start of Year 5 of FECOA activity and then again at the end of the programme captured expected and respectively realised perceptions of impact on a range of relevant dimensions of change, including: the opportunity for participants to take part in projects otherwise not available; becoming part of a professional community of practice; an assessment of

impact on own practice; and an assessment of impact on the outcomes of the children with whom the individual respondents would be working.

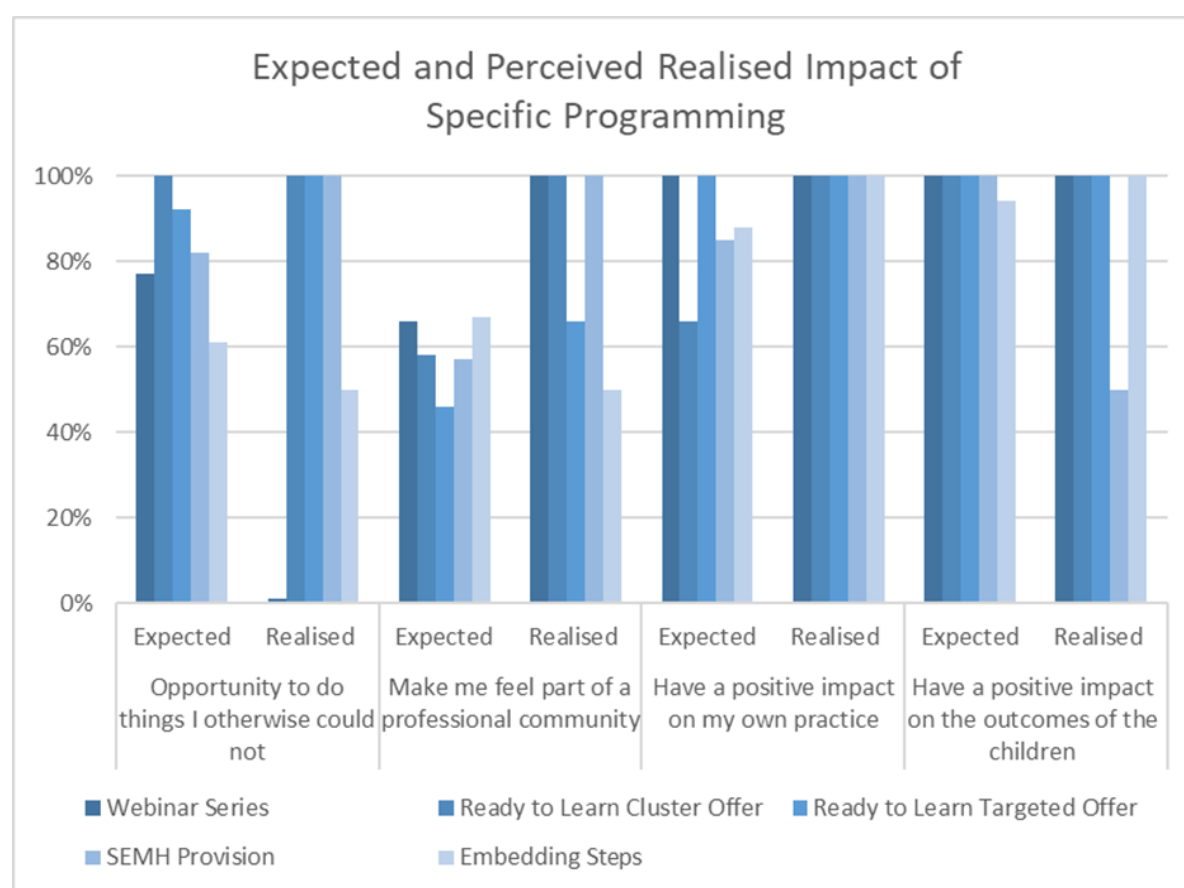
Figure 1 below illustrates the responses, at both Baseline and Endline, for those aspects of FECOA provision where more than 3 individual members of staff provided an answer. One key limitation of the small sample sizes for these two surveys, as outlined previously, is that Baseline and Endline responses do not come from the same individuals. Instead, Figure 1 provides the overall levels of response at each of the two time points, regardless of the individuals who provided an answer. A further limitation stemming from the small sample size is that not all aspects of FECOA provision were selected by staff members as projects they would be engaging with (or had engaged with) and therefore Figure 1 does not capture the totality of activity as we have outlined above in preceding sections.

Despite these limitations, several interesting findings emerge from the comparison of responses at Baseline and at Endline, both for specific projects, and overall.

First, in terms of the range and reach of provision, respondents are more likely to indicate at Endline that FECOA projects had offered them the opportunity to engage with activity that otherwise would not have been possible. The only slight exception to that is the Steps programme, whereby 60% of Baseline respondents suggest it would be new, but 50% of respondents identify this as new with hindsight. Together, these results suggest, on the one hand, that staff members may not have been as well informed as possible about the content of the specific projects they would be engaging with; but on the other hand, and even if this is the case, that their experiences had turned out to be better than initially envisioned in terms of the ability to engage in distinct and otherwise unavailable activity.



Figure 1 Responses to Staff Survey



Secondly, respondents also generally underestimated the extent to which participation in FECOA projects would make them feel part of a professional community of practice. We cannot exclude the possibility that the small Endline sample (providing insights into realised expectations) is self-selected and therefore more likely to offer a positive assessment of their experience. Despite this, however, the results are clear that for most projects where data was available, staff members were more likely to have had more positive experiences by the Endline compared to what staff had reported at Baseline.

Thirdly, expected levels of positive impact on own practice emerging from project engagement were all high at Baseline, ranging from 65% for Ready to Learn, the Cluster Offer, and 100% for the Webinar Series and Ready to Learn the Targeted Offer, respectively. At Endline, these were unanimously positive, with 100% of respondents for each respective activity suggesting these had had a positive impact on their practice.

Interestingly, at Baseline, responding staff had higher expectations with respect to impact on the outcomes of pupils with whom they would be working, with all but Steps (at 95%) at 100%, compared to impact on their own practice. Results at Endline in relation to realised positive impacts on pupils were also positive, with all but SEMH Provision (at 50%) at the 100% maximum.

Overall, therefore, responding staff offered reports of high levels of perceived impact. This reflects the evidence as outline for specific priorities and projects above, whereby a consistent theme around positive perceived impacts was clearly evidenced.

## Insights into changing professional communities of practice

As outlined above, Year 5 of FECOA activity was rich in the range of activities and projects being implemented. These activities drew on earlier lessons learned but also retained a key focus on evidence use and evidence development and the generation, through its emerging convening power, of a place-based community of practice made up of the educational practitioners in the schools, early years settings and other organisations engaging with FECOA.

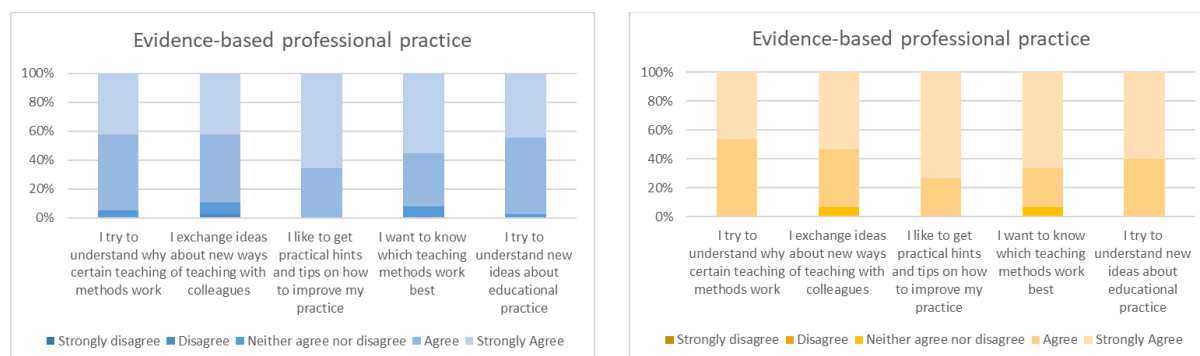
As such, our staff survey focused on elements of professional learning, evidence use and other related aspects, using a range of validated measures. These questions were repeated at Baseline and at Endline and responses are outlined below. These results suffer from the same caveat at the above analysis, namely relatively low levels of response overall (and particularly at Endline) and the inability to track respondents across the two surveys (which would have made the sample unworkably small).

### Evidence-based professional practice

The first set of five questions focused on evidence-based practice and asked about the extent to which respondents attempted to understand if specific teaching methods or other educational practice would work better, and how they engaged with others in relation to this.

Responses were broadly positive both at Baseline (Figure 2 below, in blue) and at Endline (Figure 2 below, in yellow). For each of the five questions, though, respondents were more likely to offer positive answers at Endline than at Baseline. This is particularly the case in relation to statements around certain teaching methods or educational practice working (the first and last questions, respectively). At Endline, 100% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with these statements.

Figure 2 Evidence-based professional practice. Baseline (blue) and Endline (yellow)



### Professional practice and development

The questions around professional practice invited respondents to reflect on how they think about their professional practice and what they may do in support of their development.

At Baseline, respondents were broadly positive, though there were some respondents (small proportions, between 0 and 5% respectively) who disagreed with, for instance, a statement around liking to experiment with new ways of teaching or wanting to develop themselves as teacher (these questions were only asked of those respondents who had indicated that they had teaching duties). By Endline, responses to these specific statements were more positive. For the former, all respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they liked experimentation with new ways of teaching;

and for the latter, while a small 5% proportion still disagreed, most respondents (90%) strongly agreed that they wanted to develop themselves as teachers.

Similarly at Baseline, a sizeable proportion, around 20% of respondents, were ambiguous (responding “neither agree nor disagree”) in relation to liking to experiment with new ways of teaching, learning most from their own practical experiences, and respectively wanting to develop themselves as teachers. At Endline these responses had been transformed into broad agreement.

Overall, therefore by the Endline survey, responses to these questions were either stable or indicative of slightly more positive attitudes. As above, these results do not imply that participating in FECOA activity led, or even was associated with these changes. But given the challenges faced by staff as a result of enduring COVID-19 disruption, so clearly emerging from all other evidence reviewed above, these results are arguably an indication of a situation on a course of slight improvement.

Figure 3 Professional practice and development. Baseline (blue) and Endline (yellow)

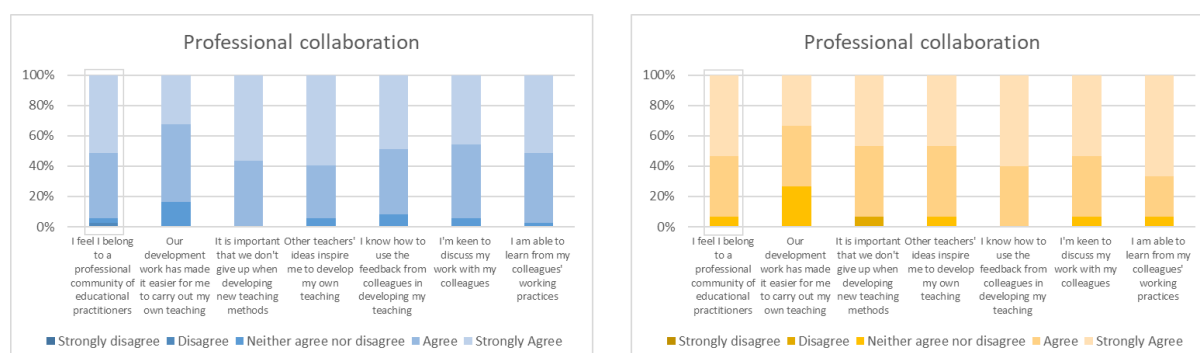


## Professional community: collaboration

All respondents to both Baseline and Endline surveys were asked to report whether they felt, at the time of answering the survey, as part of a professional community of practice. Those who did (97% at Baseline and respectively 96% at Endline; grey-highlighted question in Figure 4 below), were then asked a series of questions specifically regarding the nature of their professional community.

The first of these sets of questions related to collaboration or working with others, and the influence of this on respondents’ own practice. When asked whether work in the professional community they felt they belonged to had made it easier for them to carry out their own teaching, 82% of respondents at Baseline and 74% of respondents at Endline respectively agreed or strongly agreed.

Figure 4 Professional community: collaboration. Baseline (blue) and Endline (yellow)



In relation to it being important not to give up when developing new teaching methods, all respondents agreed or strongly agreed at Baseline, reducing slightly to 94% at Endline, with a high preponderance of agreement rather than strong agreement at Endline (compared to Baseline). A similar pattern was observed for the statement around other teachers' ideas inspiring the development of own's work: strong agreement was exhibited by 60% of respondents at Baseline and by 42% of respondents at Endline, although overall the levels of at least agreement were stable (at 96% each time).

Given the prevalence of feedback in the above synthesis of impact at theme and project level, it was interesting to see that with reference to feedback from own peers in terms of adapting educational approaches, levels at Endline (100% agreed or strongly agreed) slightly more positive than at Baseline (92% agreed or strongly agreed).

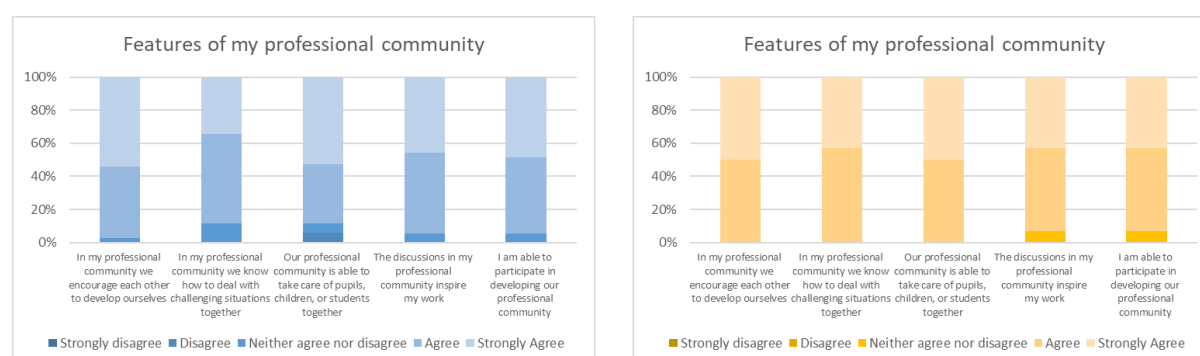
This mixed pattern of change, while potentially affected by the nature of the self-selected sample at both Baseline and Endline, does in fact resonate with the challenges identified by educational practitioners engaging with the range of FECOA projects and activities above, whereby practitioners had identified disruption to their own work, high levels of staff turn-over, and high levels of illness (partly due to COVID-19) amongst their colleagues.

### Features of the professional community

Further questions around the professional community (Figures 5 and 6 below) attempted to explore how educational practitioners responded to challenging circumstances, engaged in difficult conversations, asking for help, and generally contributing to the professional community of practice.

Responses to statements around mutual encouragement to develop, knowing how to deal with challenging situation, being able to take care of children together, not being afraid to ask for help, and encouraging collaboration within the professional community all showed a higher proportion of positive answers (strong agreement or agreement) at Endline compared to the Baseline.

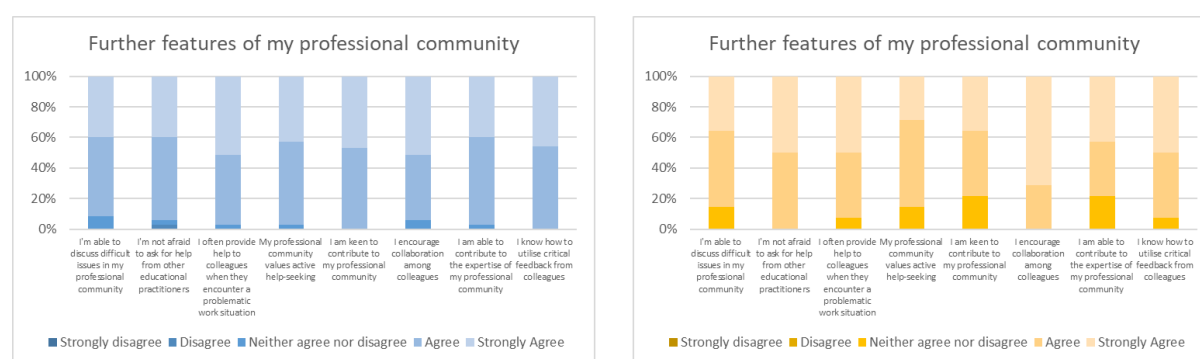
Figure 5 Features of the professional community. Baseline (blue) and Endline (yellow)



Statements around discussions within the professional community inspiring own's work, the ability to discuss difficult issues, providing help to others, valuing help-seeking, and the ability to contribute to the overall expertise of the professional community all exhibited slightly lower proportions of positive answers (strong agreement or agreement) at Endline compared to the Baseline.

All other statements illustrated in Figures 5 and 6 remained broadly stable between the two points in time.

Figure 6 Further features of the professional community. Baseline (blue) and Endline (yellow)



This mixed pattern of overall change suggests a complex professional circumstances. While we cannot infer impact from FECOA activity from this before-and-after Year 5 survey, the results paint a picture that is consistent with a year marked by challenging situations and likely influences that are unrelated to FECOA programming. Overall, though, and to the extent to which these results, based on small, self-selected samples, are indicative of the overall situation in Fenland and East Cambridgeshire schools and early years settings, they suggest that the new Baseline, as at the end of the FECOA programme, is broadly positive, with educational practitioners ready to work with each other, and emphasising the use and development of evidence more than they would have in the past.

### Key mechanisms of achieving impact:

In this section we offer our reflections, based on our analysis of the FECOA programming and the wider literature, on the key mechanisms that supported positive developments in the FECOA during the programme, and particularly its final year.

The evaluation suggests that evidence-based interventions (such as the Twinning activity around phonics support) are the ones that are often the most effective: they are seen to be most impactful and are also often where the evidence of impact is stronger. This observation may have several possible explanations. Those interventions have been developed, trialled and evaluated and having evidence behind them that suggest their potential impacts. Where developed and evaluated carefully, with stakeholders' perspective forming part of the process, those may also be interventions which have been tested to be fit for purpose in the professional practices of real settings. Finally, such interventions may already have built-in tried and tested strategies and tools for locally evaluating impact which can act as a scaffold for settings and practitioners to monitor and evidence impact. (Identified as useful features in earlier research in the FECOA, see Hofmann & Ilie, 2022.)

This does not mean that interventions can and should not be tailored to individual settings. The evaluation suggests, in line with the wider literature (Hofmann & Ilie, 2022; Edwards, 2010), that the identification of local needs and the perceptions of participants of their local needs is central for effective implementation of new practices and policies. Local knowledge is key to programmes like this, whether of the nature of local EY settings, or achieved via the Youth Advisory Boards, with parents on Parent Power. The evaluation further suggests that it is important that identifying local needs and adapting provision to those is systematic and strategic. Strategically adapting provision to tailored interventions is helpful but it is important to develop critical mass to allow for the creation of communities of practice and the networks that are likely to persist beyond programme end.

This leads to our third observed key mechanism. The evaluation suggests that building communities of practice around schools with similar needs, implementing similar approaches and evidencing their impacts in similar ways, could provide additional benefits in terms of impact and sustainability. This also applies beyond schools, to community engagement and support. The evaluation suggests that it is important to create networks of stakeholders to support impact. However, there is a need to develop and implement new approaches to evaluate impact at this wider level and to ensure engagement in evidence-generation.

Finally, in line with earlier evaluations (Hofmann & Ilie, 2022), the evaluation clearly shows that Senior Leadership support in settings is key to making change happen. In several parts of the programme, such as SEND/SEMH or the Twinning activities, where SLT support was absent or staff taking part in interventions were not in leadership roles, implementation suffered.

## The FECOA legacy: lessons learned and recommendations

### Programme legacy

From a programmatic perspective, the legacy of the FECOA programme rests in three key elements. Firstly, the convening power of the Opportunity Area has meant that key stakeholders in education from the region are now more likely to engage with each other, to share practice, and potentially co-run or co-commission activity. As already discussed in the Evaluation of the first four years of FECOA, this illustrates the impact of the place-based approach that informed the FECOA programme, which enabled the connecting of its work strongly to locally identified challenges and needs that mattered to local stakeholders and the development of local relationships which are now forming and informing the legacy of the programme. The Youth Advisory Boards represent one example of this legacy, continuing beyond the life of the programme, as do the links generated through the Twinning Activity, even if these links did not represent the aims of this activity, but rather the mechanisms through which this was delivered.

Secondly, the continued support for specific projects beyond the lifetime of FECOA means that the programme will have a longer-term influence on educational practice. The extension of Parent Power with existing partners continuing its delivery, the support towards the specific interventions undertaken in particular schools and early years settings from these settings themselves, the embedding of Steps across Cambridgeshire including through the training offer, the raising of the importance of SEND/SEMH on the local agenda, the continuation of the Webinar Series (as a small but easily accessible element of Ready to Learn), and the contribution from across FECOA programming to case studies and examples on the new Eastern OA Sharing Learning Hub (an online repository of lessons learned, case studies, and examples from schools in the region to schools in the region) all represent clear lines of continuation of FECOA activity beyond its funded life, in a way that responds to locally-identified needs.

Thirdly, and at a more fundamental level, the establishment of new policies within specific educational settings, and more broadly in the Local Authority in relation to specific approaches or interventions, is also likely to represent a lasting impact from the full FECOA programme. At setting levels, the evidence above suggests that there are some elements (especially around the Early Years provision and Ready to Learn supported activity) that are seen to be embedded or in the processing of embedding within local practices in ways that allow for change resulting from activity initially supported by FECOA to be sustained.

There continue to be, of course, challenges to this legacy, partly due to occasional difficulties in engaging target audiences and beneficiaries in the existing (or expanding) activity. While the Year 5 of FECOA delivery occurred within a context of enduring COVID-19 negative impacts, the current economic situation seeing a deterioration of living standards, increased poverty, and more challenging socio-economic situations for the local communities FECOA served are likely to also pose challenges to embedded activity.

### Evidence building legacy

The evaluation suggests that the legacy in terms of evidence building practice of the FECOA programming is mixed. Partly this is will due to the challenging impact of the pandemic, which has

led to disrupted implementation, absence of usual data stream and repeated adaptations to provision itself. Partly this is likely to reflect the challenging nature of an evidence building approach itself: rather than simply something practitioners may opt to do, the evaluation suggests that an evidence building way of working and developing local practice should in itself be the target of development work.

One of the goals expressed in our previous report (Hofmann et al., 2022), was to harness existing data streams to better understand and evidence what progress has been made in the FECOA participating schools and how this progress can be attributed specifically to FECOA activity. As mentioned in this report, some of the intended data streams were not available due to the pandemic, while others did not materialise while staff were challenged by the pandemic. However, the evaluation also suggests that even where data collection tools were made available to settings (such as is the case with the Leuven scales in EY settings), these were often not utilised and reported systematically. This suggests that a change in the norms of practice may be necessary, as well as in the training of practitioners, to facilitate further development of evidence building approaches in the FECOA. Where progress has been made towards this goal is in the use of the revised reporting tools, developed based on the Y1-4 evaluation, which have produced rich case studies of local practice and demonstrate increasingly systematic efforts in design, though not yet often evaluation, of interventions.

### Further lessons learned

Indicative of clear additional development from the earlier evaluation of Years 1-4, this evaluation suggests that it is possible to generate sustained changes in staff knowledge and institutional policies in areas like the FECOA when training is made relevant to local settings and settings are supported to have capacity to take part. The evaluation also suggests significant agency on the part of many local practitioners and settings, including Early Years settings, in leading change efforts in their own contexts when local support is available to guide such work. Similarly, the evaluation suggests that it is possible to better engage parents even in challenging circumstances if the opportunity is taken to explore and try out different ways and modes of engaging with parents to make such engagement truly accessible. However, it also highlights that engaging parents as champions and not only recipients of support, remains a challenge. Finally, the evaluation is a reminder that change takes time. In the fifth year of the programme, it is visible that many projects – such as the Library project, for example – which had had a slow start are continuing to grow at a steady pace. This sustained continuing growth would not have been visible in a shorter programme evaluation.

The totality of the evidence reviewed systematically supports the importance of a place-based approach in achieving these impacts. This involves drawing on locally perceived and relevant challenges and needs as the starting point of change efforts, facilitating intra- and inter-setting collaboration and building trusting, lasting relationships with and between local stakeholders. Further, what is of significance is ensuring that change efforts are operationalised into concrete ‘tools’, such as school-based practical approaches that can be implemented by a range of practitioners, staff training models and/or school policies to carry the innovations over time in a sustained manner.



In terms of evidence-generation and ascertaining impacts on children and young people, we offer two key observations. Firstly, it was observable in the documents, when compared across the five years of the programme, that developing 'educative' application and reporting templates for setting-based projects can help facilitate busy practitioners to focus on articulating and justifying desired outcomes and developing and capturing change efforts. These can scaffold planning and produce rich descriptions of work done on the ground. Secondly, it was also observable that developing evidence-generating approaches to improvement efforts and locally evaluating those remains a challenging task. Partly this is a matter of capacity in busy settings; however, we suggest that it is also partly a case of this being a genuinely challenging task. If capacity to generate evidence is to be further improved, it will necessitate systematic practitioner-oriented professional development efforts, time and resource to develop such knowledge and skills and systematic place-based support to facilitate such work and its perceived relevance.

## Whole Programme: The Direction of Travel from Years 1-4 to Year 5 and Beyond

Where the Year 1-4 evaluation suggested a high level of support for the programme from local stakeholders, this evaluation of Year 5 suggests this is a sustained trend. Moreover, the Year 5 evaluation paints a picture of continued development and embedding of the programme into local policies and practices, visible for example in continuously growing numbers of families joining library schemes and support networks or of school training staff and developing policies in mental health issues.

Another key finding from the previous evaluation related to the enabling role of collaboration. This evaluation suggests further increased and more effective collaboration not only within themes and settings, but across themes, settings and stakeholders, through the approach of addressing locally identified and owned challenges across a number of similar settings. Leadership by the local team of experts in FECOA and the sustained relationship this leadership approach had made possible have played a key role in supporting such collaboration.

The previous report called for a more systematic cross-fertilisation across projects, themes and priorities. This evaluation suggests that significant advances have been achieved in relation to this in Year 5. This is evident, for example in introducing Steps into EY settings, and the SEMH and early literacy work being spread across the wider region in the Twinning projects. In this sense the FECOA programming has at least in part achieved what was called for in the Year 1-4 evaluation: being more than a sum of its parts.

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