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**DIANE DIXON
ASSOCIATES**

The London Mayor's Early Years Hubs Programme Evaluation

FINAL REPORT 2021

DIANE DIXON ASSOCIATES

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1. Executive Summary

The Mayor's Early Years Hubs Programme, launched in January 2018, formed part of the Mayor's wider work supporting early years education in the capital. More information about the Mayor's early years activities can be found at www.london.gov.uk/early-years

Three hubs were selected through a competitive tender process, each receiving £175,000 from the Greater London Authority (GLA):

- **Barnet Early Years Alliance (BEYA)** Early Years Hub focussed on a single locality within the London Borough of Barnet.
- **Wandle Early Years Hub (WEYH)** worked across Wandsworth and Merton local authorities.
- **Working Together Early Years Hub** operated across the whole of the London Borough of Newham.

The hubs set out to achieve four aims:

- **Aim 1:** Improve take-up of early years education.
- **Aim 2:** Improve quality of early years education through collaboration.
- **Aim 3:** Promote early years education as a career choice.
- **Aim 4:** Support local parents into employment.

The Early Years Hubs programme ran from January 2018 to December 2020, and was adversely impacted by Covid-19. The hubs were independently evaluated by an external evaluator Diane Dixon Associates.

During the national lockdown from March 2020 to June 2020, national government instructed all early years provision to close to all children, apart from those that were vulnerable and those whose parents were key workers. This, together with the closure of training provision and schools, meant that the hubs had to stop the delivery of all face-to-face activities aimed at increasing take-up of funded early education and at promoting early education as a career choice.

The collaborative relationships built up during the first two years of the hubs became a huge bonus in 2020 and these continued to thrive during lockdown, through online networking and training. Hubs were able to continue to work with their further and higher education providers to deliver training in early years and employment-related courses for local parents, albeit on a reduced scale. However, most early years providers were not recruiting new staff and were unable to offer work experience.

1.1 Building collaboration

Early Years Hubs were intended to bring partners together, creating a synergy that would improve quality and ultimately achieve better outcomes for children.

Hubs successfully developed relationships and partnerships with their local authorities, early years providers, schools and post-16 education providers and with health colleagues. These relationships enabled hubs to:

- embed their work at a strategic level within the wider early years work of the local authority. Hubs' activities were both complementary and additional to local authority services, which encouraged early years providers to turn to the hubs during challenging times
- facilitate collaborative working between early education providers (nursery schools, nurseries and childminders) and between early education providers and other providers working with families (such as early help services, Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) professionals and health visitors)
- engender trust between providers where traditionally there had been a history of working in isolation.

**Hub membership increased
from 55 to 501**

“I feel more connected and less isolated. I can't praise it highly enough – it's been a real support especially during Covid-19. Having someone to go to, to talk to on a business level as well as a day-to-day level and who really understands what I'm going through has helped me get through this.”

PVI nursery owner

1.2 Improve take up of Early Years Education

In January 2018, at the start of the programme, take-up of funded two-year-old early education places was low in the capital, at 61 per cent compared to 72 per cent across England. Whilst increasing take up was impossible during the Covid-19 lockdown, activities undertaken pre-pandemic showed promise in improving take-up.

Hubs understood the importance of up-to-date early years data. They were able to interpret data and trends in take up, thus enabling local authorities to improve how they identified and targeted eligible families.


Hubs delivered promotional campaigns including through birthday cards, leaflets, banners, videos and social media to promote funded early years education. This was supported by active brokerage and outreach to identify eligible children and support their parents to choose a suitable early years provider. Much of this work was undertaken in close collaboration with the local authorities since the aim of improving take-up was a shared one.

Targeted transitional parent-child sessions and extended settling-in approaches helped parents become more trusting of early education providers.

“My child used to get upset when I left, but staff took time to engage, play and distract him while I disappeared for a while. He eventually learned that I’d come back so was ok with me leaving.”

Parent of a two-year-old

In addition hubs worked with primary schools to help them adapt their provision and premises to accommodate two-year-olds.




24 primary schools started to offer two-year-old funded places

1.3 Improve quality of early years education through collaboration

The hubs successfully brought partners together, particularly early years providers who have a history of working in isolation. Hubs delivered a range of activities aimed at improving quality of early years education through collaboration including:

- Continuous Professional Development (CPD) opportunities, delivered free of charge to enable providers to take advantage of them.
- family learning activities and structured courses to improve the home learning environment, support parental engagement with learning and facilitate early years transition. During the Covid-19 pandemic hubs, rapidly adapted their CPD and family learning activities from face-to-face to on-line
- networking and other activities such as conferences, visits to outstanding settings and providing access to specialist staff and
- participation in the [Healthy Early Years London](#) (HEYL) awards scheme funded by the Mayor of London.



3852 practitioners took part in 234 training courses; 995 practitioners accessed on-line CPD

“The way that you improve outcomes for children is by upskilling the practitioners.”

Teaching School Deputy Director

Whilst Ofsted inspection grades are generally used as a measure of quality, it was recognised that there would not be enough inspections during the project for this data to be useful. One hub used the Improved Infant Toddler Environment Rating

Scale (ITERS¹) system and this showed improvements in quality. Across all hubs both parents and providers reported improvements in aspects of provision such as better access to support services, increased parental confidence in supporting their child's learning and greater willingness to share good practice.

1.4 Promote early years education as a career choice and support local parents into employment

A baseline survey of providers across the hubs, undertaken in 2018, found that over 80 per cent struggled to recruit high quality staff. Hubs worked with local education providers to make available a range of courses from pre-employment through to level 3 apprenticeships. They also organised visits to early years settings and delivered talks to young people at school and college to promote early years as a career. One hub produced a bespoke film about early years as a career that helped young people understand the career paths and qualification routes available in the sector.



449 participants took part in employment-related programmes

1.5 Sustainability

Each of the hubs has steps in place to continue some of the work they started through the Mayor's Early Years Hubs programme.

BEYA Hub is working with the local authority to roll out the hub approach across the other areas of Barnet.

WEYH plan to continue and build on early years CPD and targeted teacher-led support to the sector as part of the teaching school.

Working Together Hub has been invited by the Froebel Trust to bid for continued funding for the hub from September 2021.

"This feels like new beginnings rather than the hub ending"

Hub lead

¹ <https://ers.fpg.unc.edu/development-iters-3%E2%84%A2>

2. Introduction

The Mayor's Early Years Hubs Programme was launched in January 2018. The programme formed part of the Mayor's wider work supporting early years education in the capital.

The Mayor's 2016 manifesto pledged to make childcare more affordable and accessible, with "a strategy that delivers for business and workers". It set out two overall outcomes for early years:

- Children have better outcomes.
- Childcare is not a barrier to work.

This was in recognition of the importance of early childhood experiences and the impact of early years education on future success and well-being.

More information about the Mayor's early years activities can be found at www.london.gov.uk/early-years

The Theory for Change that underpins City Hall's early years work can be found in Annexe 1.

2.1 Aims of the Mayor's Early Years Hubs Programme

The overall aim of the Early Years Hubs programme was to improve access to high-quality early education for London's less advantaged families². The hubs provided an opportunity for schools, childminders, Private Voluntary and Independent (PVI) nurseries and others to work together towards this common aim.

All three hubs were also committed to achieving the [Health Early Years London](#) (HEYL) award and to working to improve routes into careers in early education. Over the three-year period from January 2018 to December 2020, the hubs implemented collaborative approaches to achieve the specific aims of the programme:

Table 1 Early Years Hub Programme Aims

Aim 1: Improve take-up of early years education
Aim 2: Improve quality of early years education through collaboration
Aim 3: Promote early years education as a career choice
Aim 4: Support local parents into employment

² <https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/education-and-youth/support-families-and-early-years/early-years-and-childcare/early-years-hubs#:~:text=The%20Mayor's%20three%20Early%20Years,Barnet>

2.2 The hubs

Three hubs were selected through a competitive tender process, each receiving £175,000 from the Greater London Authority (GLA):

- **Barnet Early Years Alliance (BEYA)** Early Years Hub focussed on a single locality within the London Borough of Barnet.
- **Wandle Early Years Hub (WEYH)** worked across Wandsworth and Merton local authorities.
- **Working Together Early Years Hub** operated across the whole of the London Borough of Newham.

See Annexe 2 for a summary of each of the hubs.

A toolkit that contains best practice examples drawn from this evaluation work will be made available at www.london.gov.uk/early-years. The toolkit comprises case studies, presentations and other tools produced by DDA and individual hubs.

2.3 Impact of Covid-19

Covid-19 and the related national lockdown in March 2020, had a major impact on the activities the hubs could deliver. This has been addressed in each section of the report.

3. The Evaluation

Diane Dixon Associates (DDA) was commissioned by the GLA in April 2018 to undertake an evaluation of the Mayor's Early Years Hubs Programme. The evaluation ended in December 2020.

3.1 The aim of the evaluation

The evaluation aimed to identify the success of the collaborative hub model in terms of its impact on:

- increased take up of early years education
- improved quality of early years provision
- improved perception of childcare/early years as a career and
- supporting local parents into employment.

Initially, the evaluation design had planned a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. However, due to constraints largely imposed by Covid-19 and subsequent lockdown, the evaluation used mainly qualitative methods, as a number of the planned quantitative methods were not possible.

For the purposes of this report, the impact on improved perception of childcare/early years as a career and supporting local parents into employment has been brought together in one section.

Details of the evaluation methodology and the impact of Covid-19 on the evaluation are contained in Annexe 3.

3.2 Structure of the report

The report is structured in sections beginning with setting up and managing an early years hub, progress towards the four aims, and finally the appendices. Each section presents a summary of key findings followed by activities undertaken by the hubs and achievements realised. The impact of Covid-19 on hub activities is woven throughout each section.

4. Building Collaboration: Setting up and managing an Early Years Hub

Summary of key findings

- Over the three years of the programme, the number of settings engaged in the hubs increased from 55 to 501.
- 3,949 practitioners directly participated in hub activities.
- All the hubs created mini-hubs to deliver activities at a local level.
- Sustaining and further developing a positive relationship with the local authority was a key success factor.
- The hubs:
 - created trusting and effective working relationships between providers³
 - developed a collaborative relationship with the GLA which facilitated best practice showcasing and mutual learning
 - improved providers' knowledge of local provision and services and
 - successfully engaged childminders and empowered them to be more pro-active as providers of early education.

The three Early Years Hubs were each led by a teaching school that had some previous experience of developing collaborative approaches.

- **BEYA Hub** was built on an existing alliance of maintained nursery schools, PVI's and childminders.
- **WEYH** built the Early Years Hub on the teaching school alliance which already had a structure, systems and networks that formed the basis of the new collaboration.
- **Working Together Hub** was built on the success of Learning Without Limits, a collaborative network that created hubs of excellence around maintained nursery schools.

The hubs initially identified a number of key strategic players who formed their core membership, including the local authority, health, early years education settings, schools and further education providers. Over time, the hubs built a wider membership that consisted of a substantial network of engaged settings and practitioners who were directly involved in the project.

The GLA provided opportunities for hub leads and partners to meet to share progress and development.

³ The term providers is used in this report to refer to all service providers involved in the programme. Where the report refers to specific types of providers, the appropriate descriptive term is used, for example early years or training providers.

4.1 Activities to build collaboration

4.1.1 Mini-hubs

Whilst coordinating activities at hub level, all hubs delivered activities at a more local level, so as to tailor responses to geographical needs. Qualitative data would suggest that this approach worked well.

BEYA Hub set up four mini-hubs, each coordinated by a maintained sector nursery school and children's centre. Each mini-hub coordinator made contact with providers in their area, coordinated networking meetings and training and helped providers build mutually beneficial relationships.

WEYH created three clusters based around maintained sector nursery schools. This enabled sharing of good practice between the nursery schools and the PVI's, and delivery of bespoke sessions, such as SEND. They also worked very closely with the already established children's centres localities.

Working Together Hub developed four networks, each led by maintained sector nursery schools. Within each network 'Early Years Mentors⁴' supported a group of providers.

"It has been good to build clusters in localised areas, particularly since small providers find it very hard and tend to have only a small number of staff and, therefore, expecting people to be there on the other side of the borough for something is unlikely to happen. So having things as much as possible on the ground allowed [the nursery headteachers] to start building those relationships more intimately in those areas."

Hub lead

4.2 Bringing providers together and building trust

At the start of the programme, the hubs found that they had underestimated the extent to which providers were working in isolation and in competition and how little they knew about each other and other services for families.

"Before we started there was anonymity between people in the early years sector. Settings felt very disconnected and in competition with each other. They were working in isolation. They didn't know the other nurseries or anything about their community – children's centres, GPs, parent and toddler groups etc. We felt there was something to do to bring people together and the hub was the catalyst to make this happen – to break down the anonymity and build relationships."

Hub lead

Hubs therefore invested a considerable amount of time at the outset and throughout the programme getting to know their providers and building their trust. This involved

⁴ Mentors were senior practitioners from outstanding nursery schools and PVI settings. They were funded for half a day a week to support hub activity through networking meetings, training and quality audits.

making direct contact with managers, visiting settings, explaining the role and purpose of the hub and encouraging the settings to attend network meetings.

“I had some local knowledge of the area. I visited nurseries, PVI, church groups, parent and toddler groups and contacted childminders to introduce myself and the role of the hub. I set up a meeting for local providers and invited speakers on hot topics like special educational needs. When childminders said they felt left out we set up an area so they could attend meetings and bring their children.”

Mini-hub lead

“We had a really good network in schools but the involvement of the local authority quality lead, who was in and out of settings all the time, meant that he could take the offer to providers outside our network and build the trust and relationship with us to secure their involvement.”

Hub lead

4.2.1 Networking across the hubs

The hubs had a close collaboration with the GLA throughout the programme and were able to benefit from regular hubs’ leads meetings and wider networking events to which their partners were also invited. These activities allowed the hubs and their members to showcase examples of best practice and learn from each other’s experience. The hubs reported that they found this very positive and beneficial.

“The GLA networking events and meetings are really helpful and informative. It’s great to know what the others are doing and get ideas about what works and what we might try out in our area. Without them it would feel like we were working all alone but this gives us a sense of common purpose.”

Hub lead

4.3 Achievements

4.3.1 Successful engagement of settings and practitioners

Over the three years of the programme, hub membership increased from 55 to 501 and, by the end of the project, 3,949 practitioners had directly participated in hub activities.

4.3.2 Improved local knowledge

Working in mini-hubs/clusters developed relationships between providers working with the same families and, hence, improved early years providers’ knowledge of other services available to support families.

“I have learnt a lot about what is happening in the area, training, and support, (including) building the links between the local children’s centre.”

PVI nursery manager

“I have attended many network meetings and have been part of the hub for over a year and have learnt a lot about what is happening in the area, training, and support. The hub coordinator helped us build the links between the local

children’s centre and gave support with information on Fee 2 and spreading the word to our parents.”

PVI nursery manager

The relationships developed between childminders and other service providers were an important part of enabling childminders to access additional support for children:

“When you get to know someone it’s much easier to talk to them. To pick up the phone. Good relationships help your confidence. I find it easier now to get support from SENCOs and Early Help.”

Childminder

4.3.3 Productive relationships with the local authority

Hubs identified the relationship with the local authority, which provides the strategic context in which hubs operate, as being essential to the success of a hub.

The relationships set up at the start grew and developed over time, with new partnerships forming, leading to a more strategic overview of early years within the local authority agenda. These relationships proved to be mutually beneficial for the hubs, for providers and for the local authority.

“An Early Years Hub cannot exist without the support of the local authority.”

Hub lead

“The Early Years Hub helps to keep early years on the agenda – it’s a constant reminder and we need people who are selling and promoting that.”

Children’s Centre Manager

“Being part of the hub helped me with my own targets on take-up on behalf of the local authority. Presenting reports to the hub on take-up focussed the mind on getting the data right and thinking about ways we could improve take-up through working strategically.”

Local Authority Early Education and Childcare Places Service Lead

“The link with the local authority was there at the beginning but, as that grew over the years, we started doing a lot more joined up work with their teams. We started to meet new colleagues and partners who we hadn’t worked with before, so the funding allowed us to form some of those networks that didn’t exist. We started to have different conversations with different levels of people.”

Hub lead

4.3.4 More trusting and effective working relationships

By creating opportunities for providers to meet and talk, the hubs were largely successful in breaking down barriers and helping to engender trusting relationships built around a learning together philosophy.

“Collaborative working has been really valuable. If you start from ‘I don’t know everything’ you really learn from each other.”

PVI nursery manager and Early Years Mentor

PVI providers reported strong mutually supportive relationships that have helped them manage and sustain their nurseries. PVI owners and managers feel more connected, more confident at picking up the phone and asking for advice, more willing to support each other and more likely to believe that their business is sustainable.

“It’s a lonely and difficult world. Since the hub has come in I’ve felt like there is someone here for me. It’s not just the hub but through the network, it’s also the other people who are going through the same pain and challenges. It’s saved my business and been the most important thing that’s happened to me since I started my business.”

PVI nursery owner

4.3.5 Empowering childminders

Hubs successfully engaged and sustained the involvement of 70 childminders. Childminders described a greater feeling of professionalism and of ‘being part of the whole early years system’.

“Hearing about other types of childcare made me more professional. It gave me new ideas and new ways to get involved. It was a great support and a good challenge for me.”

Childminder

“Parents don’t always understand that childminders are professional and have to follow the same rules as nurseries and schools. They [the hub] promote us as professional educators.”

Childminder

Childminders also report benefits to them as a business.

“Being part of the hub has helped me financially too. They helped me become part of a blended⁵ approach trial. I now market myself to new parents.”

Childminder

4.3.6 Hubs provided effective support during Covid-19

Hubs were found to have been highly valued by providers during the Covid-19 pandemic, playing a critical role in supporting the sector. They maintained regular telephone and email communication and used online meetings to hold networking events that supported providers to operate in a Covid-19 safe environment.

“I feel more connected and less isolated. I can’t praise it highly enough – it’s been a real support especially during Covid-19. Having someone to go to, to talk to on a business level as well as a day-to-day level and who really understands what I’m going through has helped me get through this.”

PVI nursery owner

⁵ A blended approach involves children receiving some of their early education with a nursery and some with a childminder

5. Aim 1 Improve Take-up of Early Years Education

Summary of key findings

- The hubs tackled take-up of funded two-year-old early education at both demand and supply levels.
- Improved data led to more accurate targeting.
- 24 primary schools began to offer funded two-year-old early education places.
- Activities to increase demand included outreach, brokerage and awareness raising.
- Activities such as stay and play and structured joint sessions for parents and children helped to allay parents' fears that their child wasn't ready for nursery.
- Over the three years of the hub activities, 660 children attended the WEYH Fantastic Twos⁶ programmes and in 2019 80 per cent of the children attending went on to take up a funded place.

In January 2018 at the start of the programme, take-up of funded two-year-old early education places was low in the capital, at 61 per cent compared to 72 per cent across England.⁷ The Mayor's Early Years Hubs programme had aimed to address this by increasing take-up by less advantaged families, with the ultimate aim of improving outcomes for children and giving them a better start in life.

Of the four aims of the hubs, improving take-up was the most adversely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. In March 2020 there was a national directive from Government to close nurseries to all but vulnerable children and those of key workers. The national policy changed in June 2020 but the ongoing pandemic led to a significant drop in the numbers of two-year-olds taking up or being able to take up their funded place. This was due to low demand from parents, nurseries having to operate in bubbles (and hence taking in fewer children) and self-isolation amongst practitioners and families.

For this reason it has not been possible to evaluate progress of the hubs on improving take-up over the full three-year period. What the evaluation is able to do is to highlight activities that were showing areas of promise before Covid-19 impacted.

⁶ Fantastic Twos is a six-week structured programme focussing on learning and development that supports to take up a funded place with a local early years provider.

⁷

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/811683/Provision_for_children_under_5_2019_-_text.pdf

5.1 Activities undertaken to achieve the aim

Hub activity involved identification and further development of approaches to both boost demand, and ensure sufficient high quality places to meet increased demand.

5.1.1 Improving data

The hubs acknowledged a need for accurate data that would help them to understand the early years market and to target activity to improve take-up effectively.

WEYH was particularly pro-active in this area of work. Wandsworth's Early Years and Childcare Places lead was a member of the WEYH Partnership Board. This collaboration led to the local authority reviewing the data it held, so as to produce a data led strategy for identifying where eligible children lived in the borough and where additional places might be needed. The Wandsworth officer provided regular reports to the WEYH Partnership Board and went on to develop an interactive mapped system that could generate detailed local data.

The Working Together Hub identified that take-up was peaking and troughing at different times of the year. The hub brought contextual intelligence to the data such as why parents take up a place and then subsequently drop out. This is helping the local authority to improve its understanding of take-up ebbs and flows.

5.1.2 Activities to increase supply of places

The hubs worked together with the local authorities, using their Childcare Sufficiency Assessments and other data, to assess the extent to which supply was an issue. They used this information to identify areas of insufficiency and where support for additional places would be beneficial.

A key strand of this work involved working with and supporting local primary schools to take two-year-olds. An important motivation for the primary schools in one hub was the drop in the number of three-year-olds attending nursery, leading to unused places that could be re-designated for two-year-olds. This drop in numbers was largely the result of changing demographics in the local population with young parents moving out of the area because they could no longer afford rented accommodation there. The schools also saw an opportunity to tackle developmental delays in three-year-olds by taking them a year earlier.

Hubs also worked with childminders to maximise the availability of flexible places and 'blended' provision.

5.1.3 Activities to increase demand for places

Not all parents of eligible two-year-olds wish to take up the offer of a funded early years education place. This can be for a number of reasons:

- Some parents worry that their child may be too young to be in a nursery environment and/or lack trust in the ability or capacity of providers to look after their child.

“I thought he was too young to go the nursery because I thought it would be like a school.”

Parent of two-year-old

- Some parents feel uncomfortable about formal childcare before their children are toilet-trained or have sufficient language to talk about their experiences.
- Some parents express a preference for nursery schools, rather than PVI's or childminders and would remain on waiting lists rather than take up a place elsewhere.

The hubs' activities to overcome this resistance and increase demand focussed on promoting early education for two-year-olds, on brokerage and on allaying parents' fears about their child's readiness for nursery.

- (i) **Promotional campaigns:** Hubs supported local authority-run promotional campaigns and worked with them to produce new marketing material. The materials, some of which were distributed by hub members including health visitors, 0-19 family support workers and children's centre staff etc. included:
- a birthday card sent out to children coming up to their second birthday
 - a new leaflet and postcard using marketing material from the Mayor's London Early Years Campaign
 - banners on school and community centre fences
 - a 'golden ticket' sent out to parents on the DWP eligibility list. This golden ticket enabled all two-year-olds to access a place without additional eligibility checks
 - using social media such as Twitter, Facebook Instagram and WhatsApp and
 - a video: The Working Together Hub helped to develop a video shown on 'Bangla TV' aimed at Bengali parents. The video featured local families talking about the benefits of early education and gave information on how children could access a place.

- (ii) **Outreach and brokerage** helped to identify eligible children and support their parents to choose a suitable early years provider. Local authority and hub staff had stands at supermarkets and visited parent and toddler groups and children's centres.

“At the end of the [joint parent-child transitional] programme one of my outreach staff would go to the final session to promote the offer. They would take parents to a local nursery and make a real push to get them in. It was really working in the area it was piloted in.”

Early Education and Childcare Places Service Lead

- (iii) **Transitional parent-child sessions** were delivered to encourage parents to bring their child to a nursery or children's centre as a pre-cursor to them taking up their funded place. Sessions included:
- traditional stay and plays

- targeted programmes structured around the EYFS primary learning goals and
 - opportunities for children to play without their parent in sight.
- (iv) An **extended settling-in approach** during which parents were encouraged to stay with their children initially, gradually leaving them for longer periods of time until the children had fully settled in. As part of this extended settling in approach staff from one hub also visited the children at home prior to them starting at the nursery. The hub believes that this reduced the level of early ‘drop-out’.

5.2 Achievements

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic there were indications that activities undertaken by the hubs were likely to be effective at increasing the demand for, and supply of, funded two-year-old early education places.

5.2.1 Increased demand and greater trust

Adopting a strategic approach of identifying and targeting eligible children, following these up with brokerage and offering introductory, stay and play and structured sessions for eligible families was largely successful. For example, over the three years of the hub activities, 660 children attended the WEYH Fantastic Twos programmes and in 2019 80 per cent of the children attending went on to take up a funded place.

“We were working very closely with the children’s centres instead of us doing all the work. We had the outreach workers involved and we gave them access to our system where the DWP list is held. They did targeted door knocking and referral to Fantastic Twos to encourage the parents to then access a two-year-old place for their child.”

Early Education and Childcare Places Service Lead

Parental trust was particularly important, with parents expressing confidence that their child would be happy at, and benefit from, nursery education.

“They came to visit at home and she [the child] say (sic) ‘my teacher came to my home’. The home visit really helped my child settle.”

Parent of a two-year-old

“My child used to get upset when I left but staff took time to engage, play and distract him while I disappeared for a while. He eventually learned that I’d come back so was ok with me leaving.”

Parent of a two-year-old

5.2.2 Additional providers

Across two of the hubs an additional 24 primary schools began to offer funded two-year-old places.

5.2.3 Better data

All local authorities now have improved data systems in place. In Wandsworth for example the local authority is now able to pinpoint the whereabouts of children who are not accessing their entitlement.

“Getting data for myself was really important and building a new system. We started looking at historical data and analysing that and when all the data was put to use, applications went up dramatically. Take-up was also moving in the right direction. We moved to a cluster model and then to ward and then by Idaci code⁸. We were doing very well.”

Early Education and Childcare Places Service Lead

⁸ Income deprivation affecting children index

6. Aim 2 Improve quality of early years education through collaboration

Summary of key findings

- The hub model improved collaboration, leading to better quality of early years provision for children.
- Continuous professional development (CPD) played a major part in the hubs' work to improve early years education and showed signs of positive impact.
- CPD in the areas of SEND and EYFS was the most commonly delivered.
- Covid-19 encouraged hubs to explore online delivery, which has been welcomed by many practitioners and families.

Early Years Hubs were intended to bring partners together, creating a synergy that would improve quality and ultimately achieve better outcomes for children. The relationship between the Early Years Hubs and their respective local authorities has been key to the success of building collaboration across early years education settings and with other key partners.

Collaboration was also identified as key to supporting children's transition to, from and between early years settings

"When we work closely together it really helps children's transition from home to childminder to nursery. We can share information on children's development."

Childminder

6.1 Activities undertaken to achieve the aim

6.1.1 Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

CPD was identified by the hubs as key to improving quality and outcomes for children.

"The way that you improve outcomes for children is by upskilling the practitioners."

Teaching School Deputy Director

Using funding from the Mayor's Early Years Hubs programme, hubs provided free-of-charge CPD training for practitioners who would not otherwise have been able to benefit.

"Without the Early Years Hub, the Early Words Together (EWT) work would not have happened. There is already Early Talkers in Barnet but settings have to pay for this whereas EWT is free and funded from the GLA."

Hub Partner

"Training has given us all an increased sense of professionalism. We've learned that increasingly we need to rely on our own resources and we have so much of

that locally. By doing it this way the hub has tailored training to meet our specific local needs and this has enabled us to increase the quality of our work quickly.”

Childminder

A total of 234 training courses were delivered reaching 3,852 practitioners, of whom 995 practitioners accessed the training online after March 2020.

26 per cent of all courses (61 courses, reaching 848 practitioners) focussed on delivering the Early Years Foundation Stage, including the development of children’s maths, language and communication skills.

Table 2 Type of courses provided and number of courses and participants

Area of learning	Number of courses	Number of participants
EYFS	61	848
Safeguarding	43	596
SEND	37	999
Paediatric first aid	25	222
Social, Emotional and Mental Health	18	272
Leadership	15	264
Childminder support	8	97
Child development	3	32
Transition	2	55
GDPR	2	49
Developing training skills	2	13
ITERS	1	169
Family learning	17	236
Total	234	3852

Some examples of CPD programmes delivered are:

- **Inclusion Expert:** BEYA Hub funded access to this on-line EYFS training programme, delivered through eight modules.

“We signed up for this but didn’t do anything for a while – now we’re flying through it. Staff have really embraced it. You think you know it all but it gives you some great ideas.”

PVI nursery manager

- **Good to Great:** A leadership programme, delivered over four sessions by Working Together Hub, for managers and owners of settings that had

achieved a 'good' Ofsted judgement to help them improve their practice and move from good to outstanding.

- **Special Education Needs and Disability (SEND)**

BEYA Hub ran SEND workshops for practitioners through their mini-hubs utilising local expertise.

"We've discovered there is a lot of expertise in the local early years community. We asked for training in identifying autism and the hub brought in the local SENCo. It was phenomenal, It was very practical – things you could put into practice immediately – and there were free resources."

Childminder

WEYH developed a close working relationship with Wandsworth local authority from the outset and collaborated with Merton local authority Early Years Team to improve the quality of early education for children with SEND. This was through the delivery of a bespoke, Open College Network (OCN) accredited training course.

"I found the ABCC chart – Antecedent, Behaviour, Communication and Consequence - that we worked with on the course a very useful tool that has helped me to step back, look at the triggers for behaviour, analyse what that is telling me and then put appropriate support in place."

PVI nursery manager

Working Together Hub was able to benefit from training funded by the Department for Education (DfE) for SENCo staff in PVI settings. The funding had originally been designated for another local authority but there were insufficient numbers. The early years hub lead organisation was able to very quickly identify sufficient practitioners to take part which persuaded the DfE to include Newham in the programme.

- **Training to support Social and Emotional Well-Being**

Working Together Hub trained practitioners in the use of Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being (SSTEW), an assessment tool to measure children's language for thinking and social and emotional well-being. This training was delivered following a request from practitioners for support in managing children's emotional well-being when they were returning to nursery following the national lockdown.

Risk, Resilience and Relationships CPD was delivered on behalf of WEYH to increase knowledge and understanding of factors which impact on young children's social, emotional well-being and mental health.

"I understood that all things are behaviour and there is a chain reaction on everyone of your behaviour. It supports me to implement the learning. We really know our children. I have taken time out to understand them as individuals. [The trainer] promoted that."

PVI nursery manager

- **Effective Transitions**

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, WEYH commissioned training for practitioners on how to support children's transition between nurseries or to return to nursery after a long absence. All hubs played an active role in the GLA facilitated SEND task and finish group, which looked to support children with SEND with transition between early years settings and to school.

6.1.2 Family Learning

Hubs delivered 17 courses to improve the home learning environment, support parental engagement with learning and facilitate early years transition. Home learning programmes included:

- **Early Words Together at Two:** BEYA Hub used this National Literacy Trust programme that is aimed at improving the home learning environments of families of two-year-olds. It is a practitioner-led programme designed for Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) early years providers, schools and children's centres. Both parents and children attended up to five activity sessions. Parents were supported to work on seven different activities that are known to have a positive impact on later educational attainment.

"Early Words Together at Two was great for us as a nursery. We've worked with parents to help them with lots of ideas to use at home. It's great for second language children."

PVI nursery manager

"We started Early Words Together at Two with parents just before lockdown. It's having a lasting impact. Feedback from parents is really positive and they say they have learned a lot. I couldn't possibly have done this myself without the support of hub."

PVI nursery manager

- **Easy Peasy:** Working Together Hub deployed this mobile phone and on-line application that sends game ideas to parents of pre-school children to encourage play-based learning at home. Parents receive a weekly text message directly from Easy Peasy which links to videos of games that they can play with their child. They also get tips and advice about learning through play. The games target skills within the Early Years Foundation Stage areas of learning.

- **Fantastic Twos:** WEYH introduced a six-week tailor-made programme aimed at improving both take-up of funded two-year-old early years education and outcomes for children. Parents and children work together on a range of EYFS-focussed activities at a children's centre and at home.

"It really helped me. I saw 'A' develop more; she became more confident. At home I didn't do all those activities before but then I saw what she did [at the session] so I did at home."

Parent of a two-year-old

- **Good Start Great Start:** A six-week programme developed by Middlesex University that supports parents to help with their child's learning and supports transition to school.

6.1.3 Online delivery of CPD and family learning

Covid-19 and the related national lockdown in March 2020 affected training and networking events for practitioners and stakeholders and services for families. The hubs were successful at adapting quickly from face-to-face to online delivery of both activities for families and of CPD for practitioners, delivering online training to 995 practitioners between March and November 2020.

“We’ve learned we can deliver CPD on-line – we wouldn’t have got there that quickly without the pressure of the pandemic.”

Hub lead

The hubs had built strong relationships with partners which made it easier to adapt quickly from face-to-face to online delivery of training. WEYH reported that the process was made much easier for them because the teaching school already had the technical infrastructure and booking systems in place. A number of benefits of on-line delivery were identified:

- Hubs were able to support providers, partners and families through the pandemic.
- Practitioners were more easily able to access training at a time when it was suitable to them instead of having to be in a particular place at a given time.

“Online CPD is better. Easier to access whenever I can. Online communication keeps me going and improving”

Practitioner

Working Together Hub developed a ‘Padlet’ as an online resource that practitioners use to share their knowledge and experience.

“The Padlet helps to bridge the gap between live learning and catch-up learning.”

Practitioner

The Covid-19 lockdown also provided an opportunity for the hubs to explore new ways to work with families using social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook and WhatsApp. Once engaged, parents were supported to use online learning resources including videos and bespoke software. Where relevant, materials used in online sessions were supplemented by physical resources which parents were able to collect from children’s centres.

Feedback from parents was very positive and staff report that the children adapted to this medium and enjoyed the sessions.

“The staff planned a 20 minute session for under threes and thought that longer would mean that the children would lose concentration. In the event, the children didn’t want it to end!”

Locality teacher

6.1.4 Healthy Early Years London

All the hubs participated in the [Health Early Years London](#) (HEYL) awards scheme funded by the Mayor of London. The scheme supports and recognises quality in children's health, wellbeing and development in early years settings. It aims to reduce health inequalities by supporting a healthy start to life across themes that include healthy eating, oral and physical health and early cognitive development. There are four levels of HEYL awards - First Steps, Bronze, Silver and Gold.

BEYA Hub worked with the HEYL Co-ordinator at Barnet Health Education Partnership to map providers so that they could coordinate contacts. When hub staff visited a provider, they promoted HEYL alongside the work of the hub and vice versa.

During the last year of the programme WEYH allocated two people to a dedicated role to support providers in applying for the different levels of HEYL. They worked with providers through all levels of the applications, helped identify existing practice that would contribute to a successful application and brought in local authority specialist staff, such as dieticians, where their input would assist, for instance with case studies.

“It was great to have the support of the two ladies from the hub and the dietician from the local authority when I was doing the Silver award.”

PVI nursery manager

6.1.5 Other activities

A number of other activities were delivered that aimed to improve quality through increased collaboration, increased knowledge of the range of services available and better information sharing. These included:

- **Practitioners from outstanding providers visiting other providers** to help them identify and implement areas for improvement. Examples of improvements made to settings include implementation of new routines, improved sensory areas and better use of outdoor space.
- **Specialist teaching staff** working with providers to upskill staff and improve the early education offer in children's centres.

“[The locality teacher] has been really important in terms of early identification of need and planning really enriching activities without becoming overly bogged down in paperwork and assessment. This has been instrumental in ensuring that practitioners are thinking about the purpose of early education.”

Teaching School Strategic Lead Early Years.

- **Local authority and hub staff meeting with providers' staff** to raise awareness of the wider children's services available to families. This gave providers a better understanding of the family support referral process,

enabling them to ensure earlier interventions and support families to access additional services, such as SENCos and speech and language specialists.

- **Building a bank of specialists:** One hub brought schools together and built a bank of leading teachers and Specialist Leaders of Education (SLE) and now have a pool that they can draw on to support other schools.
- **Conferences:** The hubs delivered large-scale conferences attracting in total around 3,000 delegates over the lifetime of the programme. WEYH gave a new focus to a standing annual conference by introducing early years as a central theme in 2019. Prior to this the conference had had a more generic education focus.

“[At our annual conference] we had a third of workshops and two keynote speakers with a focus on early years and that would never have happened without this piece of work. We are still benefitting from that.”

Hub lead

6.2 Achievements

Hub activities achieved improved collaboration, leading to improved quality and outcomes for children:

6.2.1 Improved collaboration and information sharing

As a result of hub activities, providers were found to have built better personal relationships, developed a stronger understanding and appreciation of different types of settings, improved their skills and shared resources and good practice.

“The personal relationships that have been built between school early years leads and managers of PVI through the network mean that people now pick up the phone, ask for advice and share information more readily than they ever used to.”

Early Years Mentor

6.2.2 Improved Ofsted judgement

Prior to Covid-19 there was some emerging evidence that Ofsted was reflecting collaborative working as a strength during inspections.

One nursery with a ‘chequered history’ in respect of quality, was graded ‘good with outstanding features’ during its Ofsted re-inspection. The Ofsted inspection report mentioned positive links with other provision, which had been developed through hub membership, as a strength.

6.2.3 Improved Infant Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS)⁹

The Working Together Hub believes that scores from annual ITERS audits provide a more accurate and up-to-date picture of quality than the less regular Ofsted inspections, and for this reason made it an important focus of quality improvement work in the hub.

⁹ <https://ers.fpg.unc.edu/development-iters-3%E2%84%A2>

In December 2018, Working Together mentors undertook an ITERS audit of 40 early years education settings that provided a baseline from which to measure progress in December 2019. The baseline showed that providers had an average score of 3.9 at the start. The lowest score of any provider was 1.6¹⁰

The audit in December 2019 showed real progress. The average score had increased to 4.8, and the lowest score was 3.2.

6.2.4 Healthier start to life

In December 2018, a total of 124 settings from the four boroughs were registered with HEYL, of whom 88 (71%) had achieved First Steps. By December 2020, a further 129 settings were registered of whom 246 (97%) had achieved first steps or higher.

Table 3 HEYL awards broken down by type and hub¹¹

December 2020	Total registered	Total achieving First Steps	Total achieving Bronze	Total achieving Silver
Barnet	94	85	33	9
Merton	75	51	6	0
Newham	27	14	0	0
Wandsworth	57	42	5	1
Total	253	192	44	10

Table 4 Summary of increased in awards

Summary	Dec-18	Dec-20	Increase	% of total registered
Total number registered	124	253	129	100%
Number achieving First steps	88	192	104	76%
Number achieving Bronze		44	44	17%
Number achieving Silver		10	10	4%

Whilst still in the early days, there is evidence that HEYL is beginning to impact on healthy choices.

“For us, healthy eating is very important. It is about children making good life choices from nursery. And [with everything we already had in place] it was just a win-win situation.”

PVI nursery manager

¹⁰ where 1 is the lowest score, and 7 the highest

¹¹ Data only available by borough. Source : <https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/health/healthy-early-years-london/about-healthy-early-years-london>

“I had one parent come to me last week and she told me that at Halloween she had offered her child some sweets but that she wanted a radish from the fruit box instead.”

PVI nursery manager

6.2.5 Improved family learning

Qualitative evidence demonstrates that home learning had improved parents' confidence, knowledge and skills in supporting their child's learning. Parents reported that they had a better understanding of their child's language development needs, were more creative when talking and reading to their child and had the confidence to ask for support and further advice.

“As a parent I have a better understanding of how the activities can help my child's development.”

Parent who attended Early Words Together at Two

“I feel more confident and know how to make story sessions more interesting.”

Parent who attended Early Words Together at Two

“I gave my child lots of toys but didn't realise I had to play with them with her, that I had to get her to choose what to drink, I just gave her everything. I did the housework and the cleaning but they [staff at the nursery] told me, the child is the most important and now I leave my house messy and play with my children so I have happy children.”

Parent of a two-year-old

Practitioners reported improvements in the confidence of parents to support their child's learning and both parents and practitioners reported improvements in children's confidence, independence and creativity .

“It was good for giving me ideas to do at home. I liked the activities. My child became more independent and more confident and he could ask other adults for help. It helped him to sit for stories and songs which I learnt that they'd do at nursery.”

Parent of a two-year-old

“Parents were really positive about how much it [Early Words Together at Two] helped them to get creative with their child; it gave them ideas of how to talk with their child, encouraging language development; it gave them ideas of how to chat with their child when they were walking down the road with them; and they talked about how their child responded well by talking more themselves.”

Nursery manager

7. Aims 3 & 4 Promote early years education as a career choice and support local parents into employment

Summary of key findings

- Local education and training providers were engaged to deliver a range of accredited employment and pre-employment learning opportunities.
- Inviting school and college students to visit high quality provision inspired some to consider a career in the sector.
- Video and film were useful in promoting early years as a career. 75 per cent of students in WEYH who watched a promotional film said they would consider early years as a career.
- 449 people benefited from pre-employment training, events/careers talks, placements and apprenticeships during the programme.
- Covid-19 put many activities on hold but some providers continued with online learning.

The hubs were charged with developing a programme of activities to promote early years as a career and support local parents into employment.

A baseline survey of providers across the hubs, undertaken in 2018, found that over 80 per cent struggled to recruit high quality staff. One nursery owner reported spending ‘thousands of pounds each year on recruiting staff and filling vacancies with agency workers.’

7.1 Activities undertaken to achieve the aim

Activities in support of this aim were intended to help providers recruit and retain high quality staff, as well as to encourage local parents to access employment opportunities.

Prior to Covid-19, hubs delivered a range of activities that were starting to show promise in improving employment in the sector.

7.1.1 Developing local partnerships

All three Early Years Hubs developed partnerships with local education and training providers.

BEYA Hub worked with three different providers - the local university, the local College of Further Education and a private training provider – to make a wide range of training options available. These included pre-vocational courses through to level 3 apprenticeships and a graduate teaching programme.

WEYH worked with a local further education college. The college was able to secure work placements for students through its relationship with a local nursery. The hub also developed a partnership with London Borough of Wandsworth’s Life Long Learning service to deliver employability training,

Working Together Hub initially worked with a single London-wide private sector training provider. They later engaged Newham Adult Learning Service (NALS) which delivered a number of pre-employment programmes, functional skills training and the Supporting Teaching and Learning course.

7.1.2 Training courses

Working closely with their training partners, the hubs supported a range of training courses in early years education and employment skills including:

- Level 1 'Introduction to Work in Early Years Settings'¹²
- Level 2 'Supporting Teaching and Learning'¹³
- Levels 2 and 3 CACHE children and young people's workforce¹⁴
- Level 3 apprenticeships
- Basic skills - English and Maths
- Employability Skills.

7.1.3 Conferences and events

Both the BEYA and the Working Together Hubs arranged conferences to raise awareness of being an early years educator as a career option. These included:

- an apprentice event at a local university and
- conferences for early years education providers to explore how best to recruit new employees into the sector.

7.1.4 Visits and talks

All the hubs organised visits to settings and delivered talks to young people to promote early years as a career. Activities included:

- inviting nursery managers to give careers talks and presentations and lead discussions about the early years education sector to students from year 7 to year 13
- organising structured visits for school pupils to outstanding nursery schools
- arranging work experience.

7.1.5 Presentations

WEYH collaborated with the University of Roehampton to produce a film that promoted early years as a career. The film, through interviews with students/graduates from early years degree-level courses, introduced the wide range of early years qualifications and demonstrated the career pathway in the field.

12 The title given by the hubs to the courses.

13 Supporting Teaching and Learning' prepares participants to become a Teaching Assistant. It lasts for a year with weekly classroom sessions and a six-hour a week placement.

14 The CACHE children and young people's workforce prepares participants to become an Early Year's Educator. It lasts for a year with monthly workshops and a weekly placement.

BEYA Hub produced a comprehensive presentation on early years education as a career choice. The presentation summarises the different qualification routes and careers in early years.

7.2.Achievements

Table 6 Numbers of participants on employment programmes

Summary	Total participants
Pre employment training: English and Maths for working in early years	180
Events/careers talks	219
Placements	43
Apprenticeships	7
	449

7.2.1 Improved awareness of early years as a career

Students who had visited maintained nurseries said that they had learned a lot about career and employment options in early years and education.

“ I didn’t know a lot about early years before I went on the visit. I didn’t realise that you could become like a teacher with proper qualifications to work there. The visit taught me a lot.”

School student

Nurseries found the visits positive in terms of establishing interest in the profession from young people.

“We work with some secondary school students. Two young boys .. wanted to come back and do their work experience. We have some visits from PRUs¹⁵ and that was really positive.”

Maintained Nursery Headteacher

75 per cent of students who had seen the WEYH promotional film stated that they would consider a career in early years.

They had assumed that working in early years required dedication, but few qualifications and no career path.

“I didn’t know you needed a lot of qualifications and I didn’t know you could work your way up. I thought you were just looking after them.”

Student

150 students attended employment careers events at schools in Barnet. 60 school students attended taster days at nurseries across the BEYA Hub.

¹⁵ Pupil Referral Units

7.2.2 Improved relationships with local training providers

All the hubs made successful collaborative relationships with local providers, who had existing relationships with employers, and experience of arranging local work placements. This collaboration improved the ability to:

- recruit local parents through, and deliver courses from, a range of venues including children's centres
- understand and respond to employers' needs
- arrange work experience placements and
- assist parents with gaining employment.

7.3 Impact of Covid-19

Covid-19 had a significant impact on activities to support employment:

All face-to-face careers activity was put on hold during the 2020 lockdown. Many early education providers and all schools and colleges were closed during this time.

Reopening of early education provision in June 2020 was slow and many providers were not operating at full capacity. This meant that they were not recruiting new staff. Furthermore, they were unable to provide work experience for students due to social distancing requirements.

Schools and colleges did not reopen until September and they severely restricted visits to sites. As a result, careers fairs and events were no longer possible.

Colleges that delivered early education courses responded to the pandemic arrangements by delivering online courses. This went some way towards mitigating the impact of their inability to undertake face-to-face teaching.

8. Sustainability

Each of the hubs has steps in place to continue some of the work they started through the Mayor's Early Years Hubs programme.

BEYA Hub is working with the local authority to roll out the hub approach across the South and West localities. The mini-hub approach is expected to continue to support providers at a local level. Going forward, the local authority has invested in a Parent Champion programme¹⁶ and has trained some BEYA staff to support this initiative. This would not have happened without the Early Years Hub. BEYA is also continuing to support providers to implement the Observation of Play and Learning (OPAL) approach to assessing young children's learning. Some of the local authority match funding allocated for the early years hub is being utilised to give providers free access to OPAL.

"This feels like new beginnings rather than the hub ending"

Hub lead

WEYH plan to continue and build on early years CPD and targeted teacher-led support to the sector as part of the teaching school. There may be a charge for some of that offer, but WEYH believes that they have established good relationships and a reputation for quality that will obtain buy-in. They have also held discussions with partners about work around SEND and have put together a transitions project as a result. They are very confident that the relationship with the local authority will remain going forward and that they will continue with the quality assurance of early education in children's centres. The teaching school have applied to become a teaching school hub under the new arrangement for teaching schools and this covers the area of Kingston, Richmond, Merton and Wandsworth. They are very keen to maintain an early years element to that work. The hub does not have the capacity to lead on HEYL work in the future but, in recognition of its importance, they have persuaded the local authority to take the lead with input from the hub.

"Part of this project right from the very beginning was to build something that would continue after the life of the programme and we have been able to do that very well by securing a tranche of money from Wandsworth that will cover quality assurance. It will give us the capacity to build a CPD programme and start to get a real understanding of what is happening in early years across the immediate locality."

Hub lead

¹⁶ This is a national programme set up by Coram Family and Childcare <https://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/parent-champions-national-network>

Working Together Hub received funding from the Froebel Trust¹⁷ to train 27 staff as Froebel practitioners. They have also been invited to bid for continued funding for the hub from September 2021. Across the hub, there is a commitment to utilising a network approach with Early Years Mentors supporting providers and maximising online networking and CPD. The hub plans to continue to enhance its relationship with the local authority to ensure that an Early Years Hub remains an integral part of the local authority's strategy.

“We are confident that our work will continue. The hub project has shown that, for not a vast amount of money, you can lead to a significant change in quality and take-up.”

Hub lead

¹⁷ The Froebel Trust is a grant making charity in England which specialises in funding early childhood research, promoting early education and developing Froebelian practice. <https://www.froebel.org.uk>

9. Conclusions

The Early Years Hubs programme demonstrated considerable success in achieving its aims of improving the quality of, and access to, early years education.

The impact of Covid-19, and the subsequent closure of nurseries and cessation of all face-to-face activities in the final year of the programme, limited achievement and meant that the evaluation used largely qualitative indicators. However, a number of successes and achievements were noted.

9.1 Local solutions/local knowledge

Two of the hubs operated at a borough level, whilst one focussed on a specific locality within a borough. All hubs delivered activities at a more local level, using mini-hubs or clusters, that promoted geographically local support, and tailored responses to geographical needs.

The mini-hub/cluster approach gave the hubs the ability to be flexible, listen to the needs of providers in different locations, and respond accordingly. For example:

- providing activities free of charge
- delivering a range of activities to test whether or not something worked and
- changing or dropping activities found not to be effective.

9.2 Increased take-up of two-year-old early education

Take-up of funded two-year-old early education is lower in London and in each of the boroughs delivering Early Years Hubs, than in England. Research¹⁸ has identified parental preference, frequently based on lack of parental trust in the ability or capacity of providers to look after their child, as an important factor in low take-up.

Whilst nursery closure from March 2020 to June 2020¹⁹ meant that increased take-up could not be achieved, prior to this date, hubs achieved a level of success in encouraging parental preference, leading to:

- improved parental trust in providers and
- improved understanding of the benefits of childcare for non-working parents.

Key to the achievement of in the first period of operation of the hubs was a strategic approach of identifying and targeting eligible children, followed up with brokerage and offering introductory, stay and play and structured sessions for eligible families.

In addition work was undertaken to create new places in locations where demand outstripped supply and 24 primary schools in two of the hubs started to offer two-year old places.

¹⁸ A lack of trust in early years providers was a concern touched on by many parents in London as a reason for preferring not to take up childcare (DfE, [Take-up of free early education entitlements](#), Sept 2018)

¹⁹ The programme ran from January 2018 to December 2020, with its final year in the shadow of the Covid-19, and the national directive In March 2020 to close nurseries to all but vulnerable children and those of key workers.

9.3 Improved quality through collaboration

The hubs were successful in their aim of bringing partners together to improve the quality of early years education and ultimately to achieve better outcomes for children.

Establishing a collaborative approach was pivotal from the outset. Each hub was led by a teaching school, working initially with a small group of core partners. Throughout the programme, the hubs successfully involved a range of key stakeholders in regular steering group/board meetings, leading to improved relationships and understanding. The stakeholders spanned the early years, health, education and training sectors, along with the local authority as a critical partner.

The hubs also engaged a wider group of childcare providers, including childminders, who benefited both from training and support opportunities. There was a particular emphasis on CPD in the areas of SEND and the EYFS.

Hubs were successful in encouraging providers to work collaboratively, to learn from each other, share information about children's development and make referrals where necessary, supporting them to achieve improved outcomes for children. This was achieved through networking events, shared training and visits.

Critical to the development of collaborative partnerships, was the ongoing commitment from the local authorities to work with and support the hubs, both strategically and operationally.

In addition, the continued partnership between the GLA and the three hubs was a notable strength. Prior to lockdown, GLA held regular networking meetings, which enabled the hubs to exchange ideas and good practice. These meetings continued to take place online every month during lockdown.

The hubs also played an important role in supporting early years providers to operate in a Covid-19 safe environment, through telephone, email communication and online networking events. This was made possible by maximising relationships built up prior to the pandemic.

9.4 Improved perception of early years education as a career and supporting local parents into employment

An integral part of the hubs' work in driving high quality provision was supporting the development of a well-qualified workforce, not only through effective CPD, but also by working with further and higher education providers to ensure training meets the needs of employers.

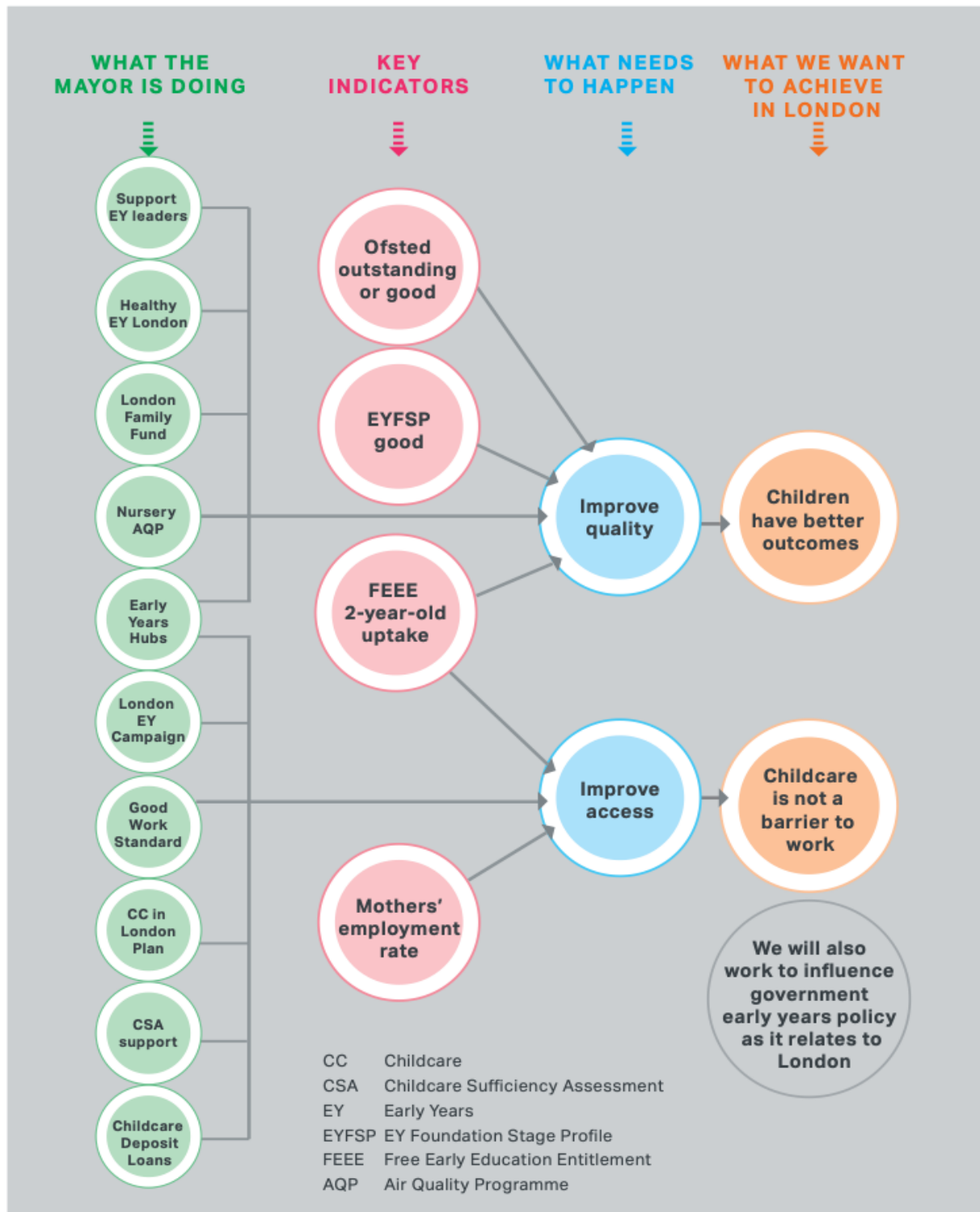
By boosting the take-up of early years education, the hubs expected to enable more parents to seek work.

Whilst cancellation of all face-to-face activities, including careers advice, training and work experience, from March until December 2020, prevented real progress in this area, work undertaken by the hubs in the first two years of the programme

demonstrated some early successes. Activities showing promise included careers fairs, conferences and events on early years as a career, organised visits to settings and the use of a promotional film in talks to school students.

10. Annexe 1 The London Mayor's Theory of Change

Theory of change: How the Mayor can contribute to improving early years outcomes



11. Annex 2 Overview of the three Early Years Hubs

Hub Name	Location	Lead setting	Short description	Additional area(s) of focus
Barnet Early Years Alliance²⁰ (BEYA) Early Years Hub	Barnet – East Central locality	Barnet Early Years Alliance (BEYA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raise parents' and practitioners' understanding of the benefits of early years education • Improve collaboration between schools, settings and practitioners to improve communication and quality. • Improve the perception of early years education as a career choice. 	Work with the borough's 0-19 Family Hub to raise awareness of early education and build relationships and collaborative working through four mini-hubs.
Working Together Early Years Hub	Newham	Sheringham Nursery School and Children's Centre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop four mini networks, one in each of the borough's four quadrants. • Increase take-up of funded early years education places for two-year-olds in Newham. • Improve the quality of early years education settings. 	Improving quality.
Wandle Early Years Hub	Wandsworth and Merton	Chesterton Primary School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase take-up of funded early years education places for two-year-olds. • Improve quality. • Promote early years education as a career and support parents into employment 	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

²⁰ BEYA is a federation of three maintained nursery schools (two of which are a joint Teaching School) and a children's centre

12. Annex 3 Evaluation Methodology

12.1 Evaluation question and design

The key evaluation question was “does a collaboration model of working contribute to improving the quality of, and access to, early years education?”

The evaluation is summative, aiming to identify the success of the collaborative hub model in terms of its impact on:

- increased take up of funded two-year-old early years education
- improved quality of early years provision
- improved perception of childcare/early years as a career and
- supporting local parents into employment.

12.2 Methods and justification

Initially, the evaluation design had planned a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. However, due to constraints imposed by Covid-19 and subsequent lockdown, the evaluation used largely qualitative methods, as a number of the planned quantitative methods were not possible:

- **Ofsted judgements:** Ofsted judgements on the quality of early years education provision are carried out within a four-year cycle. The current cycle runs from 1 August 2016 to 31 July 2020. Providers on the Early Years Register²¹ will usually be inspected within the first 30 months of registration, and then at least once in every inspection cycle. From the outset, we therefore did not expect improvements in Ofsted judgements over the lifetime of the project.
- **Early years education take-up data:** The evaluation team used Department for Education (DfE) published data²² to establish a baseline for take-up of funded early years education for two-year-olds in January 2017 in the four wards. This was to have been compared with January 2020 data. Closure of nurseries following Covid-19 made this aim unachievable. Impact of activities on improved take up therefore was assessed purely by primary data from stakeholders.
- **Survey of early years providers:** The evaluators developed a questionnaire sent to providers in October 2018, covering issues such as opening hours, delivery of funded early years education, collaboration and engagement, quality and staffing. The results were to have acted as a baseline for a further survey. Following the closure of nurseries due to Covid-19, the follow-up survey was not practical, so the results of the survey have not been included.

²¹ The Early Years Register is for all providers working with children aged from birth to five. Providers must deliver the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) which brings together care and learning.

²² <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/education-provision-children-under-5>

- **Focus groups and case study interviews:** Discussions and interviews were held with parents in 2018/2019 to explore parental needs and how project activities were meeting those needs. Case study interview participants were to have been followed up to see how they had progressed and focus groups were to have been repeated. Following the closure of nurseries due to Covid-19, follow-up interviews were not undertaken as the experiences of many of the interviewees would have changed dramatically and, therefore, not comparable with the pre-Covid-19 experiences.

12.3 Data gathering

The period of data gathering ran from the start of the programme in January 2018 to November 2020, and included the following data sources.

12.3.1 Secondary data

Secondary data was collected to establish clear, quantitative, information to act as a baseline, from which to assess any improved outcomes. Sources used for the final report were:

- **Healthy Early Years:** GLA Healthy Early Years London²³ data was used to identify settings' progress and achievements in supporting child health, wellbeing and development.
- **Collaboration:** Project records of provider engagement were supplied by the hub leads and the GLA.
- **Hub activities:** Records of activities and participant feedback were provided by the hub leads to the evaluators.

12.3.2 Primary data

Primary data was collected from parents, providers and stakeholders, to identify their needs and involvement in hub activities.

Hub partners

Individual interviews were conducted between October 2018 and November 2020 with stakeholders from each hub to establish their views on challenges and successes. Interviewees were selected by the hubs to ensure a cross-section of views through a coverage of different roles and levels of involvement with the hub.

Parents

Case study interviews were held with parents accessing funded early years education and parents participating in employment and training programmes. Individuals interviewed were selected by the evaluators from the focus group

²³ <https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/health/healthy-early-years-london/about-healthy-early-years-london>

participants, based on their personal journey towards employment or use of funded early years education and on their willingness to be a case study participant.

Data gathered in the process has been used in the report where appropriate to demonstrate impact.

Table 1 Individual and focus group interviews

Individual interviews	Focus groups
75	17

In addition to conducting interviews and focus groups, the evaluators regularly attended hub steering group and partnership board meetings and held other meetings with hub leads, partners, practitioners and specialist staff.

Conducting the interviews

Preparation for the interviews involved developing semi-structured topic guides, based on knowledge of the local authorities' published data in relation to demographics, health, employment and childcare quality/sufficiency.

Interviews lasted for up to an hour, and consisted of the stages of introductions, information gathering, questions, checking information and 'wrapping up'. Full notes were taken of individual interviews to ensure that all responses were accurately reflected, and content was checked for accuracy with hub respondents.

Analysis of interviews and focus groups

The evaluators undertook thematic analysis of the qualitative data, an iterative process designed to produce a picture of the most important themes. Preliminary codes were assigned to the data, based on the key outcomes of the programme, to organise the data into meaningful groups. Subsequently, the themes identified were reviewed and refined, to ensure coherent data within themes.

The evaluators have, throughout, based their work on the importance of respecting the data, and representing the interviewee as honestly as possible.

Ethics

The research was conducted according to the recommendations of the British Sociological Association (BSA), including:

Informed Consent

The purpose, dissemination and use of the research was explained to participants at the start of the session. Additionally, all participants were given an information sheet and consent form, which they signed and returned.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality and its limitations were explained to participants. It was explained that, whilst no names would be used in the research, there was a possibility that individuals would be recognised from descriptions of the venues and participants.

Generalisability and Replicability

As the purpose of this study was to assess the impact of the three Mayor's Early Years Hubs in four boroughs of London, the findings were only expected to be generalisable in the areas where they were conducted.

The replicability of the study - i.e. the degree to which another researcher would produce the same results if they studied the same phenomenon - was enhanced through an attitude of self-criticism and evidence checking procedures.

Availability of evaluation tools

Topic guides, questionnaires, information sheets and consent forms can be obtained from Diane Dixon Associates on request to: Diane Dixon at ddixonassociates@btinternet.com