

# Exploring the Wider World: Independent Evaluation

## March 2020

### Executive Summary

This report is based on a project conducted by Early Education for the Stoke-on-Trent Opportunity Area (OA).

Background: The OA commissioned Early Education to design and deliver a project to boost the knowledge and confidence of early years practitioners in private, voluntary and independent (PVI) settings in relation to the *Understanding the World* area of learning of the Early Years Foundation Stage. The focus of the project was encouraging practitioners to take children out into the locality to develop the children's sense of community and widen their experiences. This was intended to impact on the outcomes for children in the *Understanding the World* strands of 'People and Community' and 'The World'. The project ran from April 2019 to March 2020.

This report is based on evidence gained from a number of sources, namely feedback questionnaires from individual practitioners, end of project reports from settings, feedback from the staff working as part of the Opportunity Area (OA), parental feedback and case studies.

Feedback was received from:

- 40 settings
- with 319 practitioners
- and 1000 pupils involved

The overall findings suggest that the project was well received by practitioners, parents and pupils across settings in Stoke-on-Trent, and impacted positively on confidence, knowledge and engagement of participants.

The feedback suggest that the majority (87%) of participants felt that the project had improved their knowledge of delivery of aspects of the 'Understanding the World' area of provision. The majority (89%) of respondents also felt more confident in taking their children out of the setting to enjoy a variety of learning experiences. This confidence often related to practical matters such as more confidence in managing a trip that involved public transport, whilst the knowledge tended to relate to better awareness of both possible experiences and the learning that might develop as a result of this.

The majority (83%) of settings also reported an increase in the *frequency* of outings during the project, and also in an increase in the *variety* of outings provided for children. A wider range of outings within the locality was frequently mentioned, for example care homes, allotments, libraries and farms. Many (60%) of the settings declared an increase in children's outcomes against at least one area of the curriculum. This was particularly true of elements of 'Understanding the World', and least frequently related to mathematical outcomes. Practitioners commented on children's engagement in learning and increased confidence during the project, due to the increase in opportunities and experiences offered to children. However, many settings reported that it was 'too early' to comment on the full impact that the project would have on children's outcomes and no specific outcome data was analysed.

Feedback from two senior members of the Opportunity Area team indicated that they had seen improvements in several priority areas. For example, the project had supported the development of a more confident early years workforce, better able to provide engaging opportunities to extend pupil imagination and knowledge. The feedback also indicated that there was evidence of better parental and family engagement taking place across settings as a result of the project.

Only one response was received from the parental survey. This response indicated that the project had been positive from both their perspective and that of their child.

Twelve settings were included as case studies. From these, five key themes emerged as commonly perceived benefits or impact of the project. The themes are

- Pupil engagement in learning
- Training and resources for practitioners
- Family engagement
- Community engagement
- Planning, preparation and practice

The report concludes with a brief summary.

## Detailed evaluation

### *Feedback Source 1: End of Project Report*

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The end of project reports reflect feedback from 40 settings, 319 practitioners who either engaged directly with the training or had it cascaded to them, and who worked with over 1000 children who were involved in one or more of the experiences offered.

Settings reported on the experiences undertaken, and in total 84 experiences were completed as part of the project. These ranged in nature and scope but a key positive was on the increased awareness of the learning potential of the local area. Settings were asked to comment on the frequency of outings undertaken during the project.

- 83% of settings reported an increase in frequency of outings
- 17% of settings reported it had stayed the same
- No settings reported a decrease in frequency of outings

Comments about why there had been an increase in frequency generally centred around an improvement in staff confidence and knowledge. Feedback noted for example, practitioners becoming ‘more aware’ of opportunities in the local community. The project allowed them to ‘think outside the box’ when planning opportunities, and gave them the chance to try outings that involved experiences like public transport that they ‘would never have done otherwise.’

For those settings who said the frequency had stayed the same, they often commented it was because they already took children out frequently before the project. Detailed feedback from the questionnaire also considered the following four areas: training; pupil and family engagement; children’s outcomes; and staff knowledge and confidence.

### *Training*

From the 40 settings who took part, **77%** (31 settings) ensured **all staff** within the setting engaged with some form of **training**. The range of training support is shown in the table below.

Type of support engaged with during the project (participants could tick more than one response)					
Whole Staff Training	General Training	Room Training	Individual Coaching	Visit Accompaniment	No response
9	12	5	18	2	4

Comments surrounding the impact of training covered three main areas and appeared irrespective of the type of training given:

- Increased staff confidence, for example by ‘*helping us to see a clear focus for an outing, and then know we can do it*’
- Helped staff to develop a greater knowledge and awareness of learning opportunities
- Allowed for discussion of ideas and helped to overcome barriers
- Allowed experiences to be ‘embedded into practice’

## Pupil and Family Engagement

Settings reported just over 1000 pupils taking part with one or more experience. Family involvement sits at about 10% with 99 families having been involved. The number of families involved within each setting varied widely. Some settings had no families taking part and said that parents worked and some were hard to engage. Other settings had 25 children involved and 25 families. The feedback surrounding impact on families is varied and some settings have reported no impact.

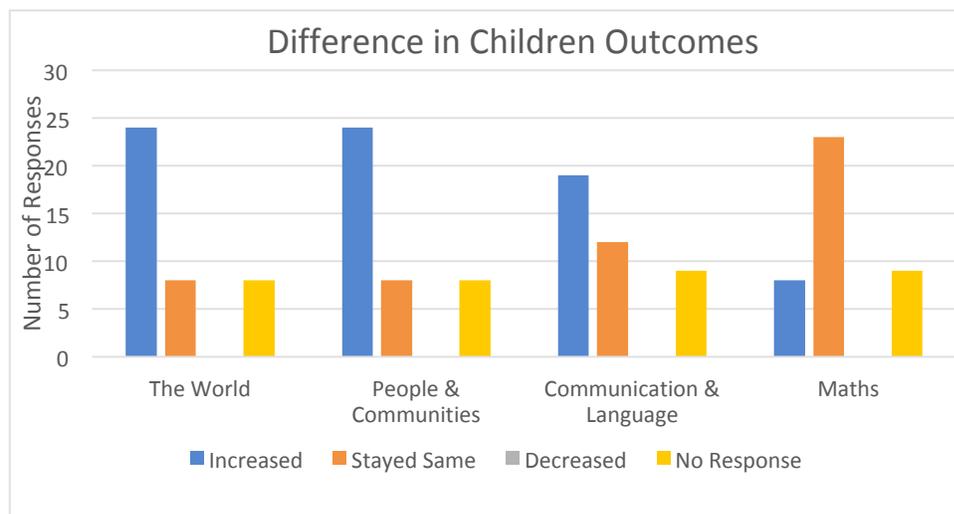
From the settings that have reported a positive impact on families, comments centred around:

- Families have taken additional family trips to some of the places visited because the children have talked about them so much
- Families have been engaged with seeing pictures from the trips and the displays which have been made, and have been excited to discuss these with practitioners as well as their children
- Families have offered suggestions on where they think the school should take children next
- Families have contributed to online setting systems eg uploading photos after they have re-visited the Farm on Wheels

As one practitioner summarised, the project allowed them to experience a ‘shared excitement’ with parents about the learning opportunities the project facilitated.

## Children’s Outcomes

Settings were asked if they had seen a difference in outcomes for children in: ‘Understanding The World: The World’, ‘Understanding the World: People & Communities’, Communication & Language and Maths. The results of this can be seen in the graph below.



‘Understanding the World: The World’ and ‘Understanding the World: People & Communities’ showed the greatest improvement in pupil outcomes. As shown in the figure below, 60% of settings reported that pupil outcomes had increased within these areas. Comments regarding the improvements centred around the increase in experiences and outings being offered to children.

	The World	People & Communities	Communication & Language	Maths
Increased	60%	60%	48%	20%
Stayed Same	20%	20%	30%	58%
Decreased	0	0	0	0
No Response	20%	20%	22%	22%

48% of settings reported an improvement in children outcomes for communication & language. Comments surrounded practitioners having more knowledge of the types of questions to ask children and things to focus on that could promote learning whilst on outings. Maths was the lowest aspect of improvement and there were no specific comments made in the feedback in relation to the mathematical development of children.

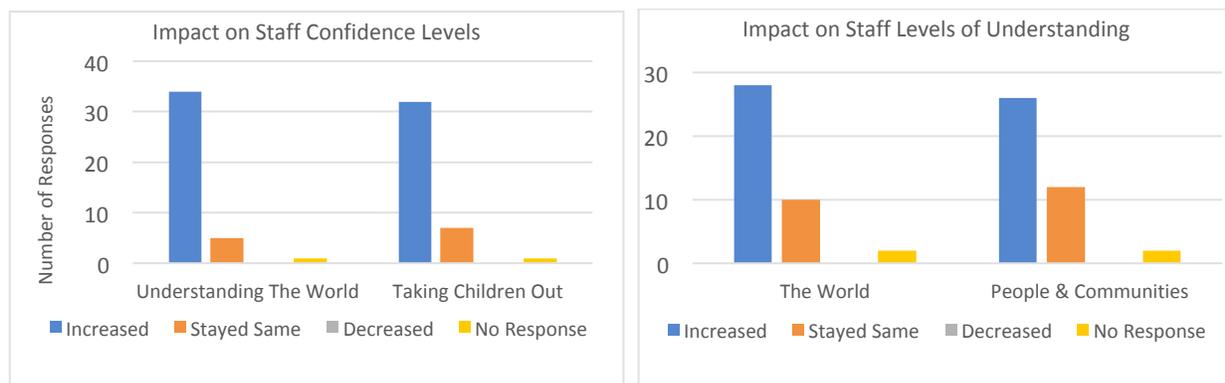
Settings which reported that pupil outcomes had stayed the same, often commented one of two things:

- Too early to make judgements but they were hoping for improvements
- They did a lot of outdoor activities and trips before the project started

**Caveat:** Only 4 schools provided (some form of) pupil data. The data provided and small sample size did not make analysis possible.

### Staff Knowledge & Confidence

Settings were asked about staff confidence levels level of understanding surrounding Understanding the World strands. Responses can be seen in the graphs below.



A significant increase in staff confidence has been reported. 85% of settings reported an increase in staff levels of confidence surrounding the ‘Understanding the World’ strands and 80% of settings reported an increase in staff confidence in taking children out. The impact on staff levels of understanding is slightly lower but still significant. 70% of settings reported an increase in staff levels of ‘Understanding The World: The World’ and 65% of settings reported an increase in staff levels of ‘Understanding The World: People and Communities’.

	Impact on Staff Levels of Confidence		Impact on Staff Levels of Understanding	
	Understanding The World	Taking Children Out	The World	People & Communities
Increased	85%	80%	70%	65%
Stayed Same	13%	18%	25%	30%
Decreased	0	0	0	0
No Response	2%	2%	5%	5%

**Caveat:**

The source of data for this part of the evaluation was gathered from questionnaire responses. As such, there are associated limitations (for example, based on perceptions and beliefs, sampling bias etc). We would recommend that future projects pilot the questionnaire and also consider gathering eg observational data; pupil voice etc, and consider moving to online questionnaires to facilitate data analysis. It would also be worth considering gathering eg observational data; pupil voice etc,

**Feedback Source 2: End of project individual practitioner feedback questionnaire:**

Feedback was received from a total of 47 managers and practitioners regarding the impact of the project on their practice, knowledge and understanding.

Number of responses			
Site Manager	13	Practitioner	34

The majority of participants declared an increase in knowledge and confidence after the project (see table below). 87% of participants said that the project had improved their knowledge of aspects of the 'Understanding the World: People and Communities' strand and the 'Understanding the World: The World' strand. Overall, 89% of participants felt more confident in delivering in these areas as a result of the project.

		Site Manager (13)			Practitioner (34)		
		Yes	No	No Difference	Yes	No	No Difference
Q2	Have you developed your knowledge of any aspects of the 'Understanding the World: People and Communities' strand of the EYFS as a result of the project?	10 (77%)	0	3 (23%)	31 (91%)	2 (6%)	1 (3%)
Q3	Have you developed your knowledge of any aspects of the 'Understanding the World: The World' strand as a result of the project?	10 (77%)	0	3 (23%)	31 (91%)	2 (6%)	1 (3%)
Q4	Do you feel more confident in delivering activities in these areas as a result of the project?	11 (85%)	0	2 (15%)	31 (91%)	2 (6%)	1 (3%)

As with the mid-project evaluation, site managers showed the highest percentage of 'no difference' responses. 23% of managers and 9% of practitioners stated there was no difference in their knowledge of the 'People and Communities' and 'The World' strands by the end of the project. Prior qualitative comments (from previous questionnaires) all centred around participants already having 'strong knowledge' in this area. A small number of the participants who declared 'no difference' in their knowledge did still feel that their confidence in delivering these areas had increased. It is important to note the small sample size here (23% of managers is 3 individual respondents).

Participants were also asked if they had developed any particular areas of knowledge and expertise. 57% of participants (see table below) declared that involvement in the project had led to them developing knowledge and expertise.

Q5	Are there any particular areas of 'People & Communities' and 'The World' where you feel you have developed your knowledge and expertise in as a result of the project?	
	Line through box or No	14 (30%)
	Blank	6 (13%)
	Response given	27 (57%)

Of those who made a positive response, there were three main areas where they felt that they had developed their knowledge:

- Developed use and knowledge of the local community
- Developed in every area or developed knowledge of each strand of the project
- Developed knowledge of 'The World' strand in particular

Participants received training in a number of formats (see tables below). The participant responses do not reflect any particular correlation between the type of training received and development of knowledge or confidence.

How was your setting's training delivered during the project?	
One member of staff had training and fed back to others	16
Several members of staff had training and fed back to others	12
All members of staff had training	7
I didn't receive any direct training	6
Telephone conversation	3
Blank	3

Did you receive training that was	
With an Associate in-house	11
Part of a group training course	13
Both	12
Joined after training	4
Blank	4

Participants were asked how the participation in the programme of outings and experiences had affected their knowledge and confidence. There was an overwhelmingly positive response from participants who answered this question. Almost all participants spoke about increased confidence in one of more of the following areas:

- An increased confidence in taking groups of children outside
- Children showed an increase in confidence in being outside and in the local community
- Increased confidence in planning for outdoor activities that extend and develop pupils
- An increased confidence in letting pupils explore

Participants described their experience of working with an Early Education Associate as being extremely positive. The three main areas that feedback revealed to be useful were:

- Good advice and support was given
- Expertise of the associate
- Enthusiasm of associate

Respondents were asked whether the experience of the project made a difference to their actual practice and pedagogy. Responses indicated that impact mainly centred around three aspects:

- An increase in the number of outdoor activities and outings being made, even after the project had finished.
- Participants felt more confident and willing to take children outside.
- Involvement helped to develop new ways of thinking about outdoor activities and trips.
- Increased variety of places to visit
- Increased knowledge of what to look out for and question pupils on

Participants were asked if they had ‘any other comments’, and responses included:

*“It has been very nice to see our local community in a new way and to rediscover it with our children”*

*“Think it’s an amazing project”*

*“What a lovely project. It’s opened up some many learning opportunities for our children.”*

*“Training inspired us to get the project up and running. Children are loving the new experiences.”*

**Caveat:** The source of data for this part of the evaluation was gathered from questionnaire responses. Given the size of the project the response rate is low. As such, there are associated limitations (for example, based on perceptions and beliefs, sampling bias etc). We would recommend that future projects also consider gathering eg observational data; interviews with practitioners, pupil voice etc.

The feedback from the 40 settings reported involvement with 319 practitioners and over 1000 pupils. There were 47 responses from individual practitioners. It is unclear if some individuals completed a setting report and practitioner questionnaire.

### *Feedback Source 3: OA feedback*

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Feedback from the two senior members of the Opportunity Area (OA Programme Manager: Stoke-on-Trent and the OA Programme Commissioning Officer) was positive. They reported seeing an improvement in practitioner's planning and preparation for visits and for follow up activities post-visit. They felt that the majority of settings had been engaged, and that the overall benefit was a better-trained and confident early years workforce. They reported that the particular strengths of the project were:

- Skills (presumably in terms of practitioner pedagogy)
- Enhanced capacity (presumably in terms of workforce development)
- Resources (presumably related to provision for first-hand experiences)
- Local working amongst Private Voluntary and Independent (PVI) settings
- Good working relationships with Early Year Advisors.
- Strengthened relationships with parents

The feedback indicated that the Early Education Associates were valued as very knowledgeable and responsive. The OA group recognise that the local authority now needs to continue to build and develop the messages from the project.

They suggest three areas that could be improved in future projects:

- Earlier engagement with the project
- Closer working with Early Years Advisors from the Start (costed in from the start of the project)
- PVI settings seemed to have a focus on "spend"

**Caveat:** There is no further information about the strengths/ possible improvements – it would have been useful to explore these in more depth. We would recommend that this type of feedback be gathered via interview in future projects.

### *Feedback Source 4: Parental Survey*

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An online survey was designed. This sought to ascertain parental perceptions of the project, and to explore whether there had been any impact on how they viewed and undertook visits with their own children. Unfortunately only one response was obtained. Whilst this was positive, with the parent reporting that their child had become safer in and around the local community – for example when crossing roads, with an impact on making the parent enjoy trips out more, the **caveat** is clear - little more can be implied from this data source and we would recommend reviewing data capture approaches for this group of respondents in future

*Source 5: Case Study Material.*

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Five common themes and strands, which emerged across the case studies, were related to benefits/impact arising from:



Pupil engagement in learning, primarily through new first-hand experiences in the local community allowed children to look with ‘fresh eyes’ at the wider world around them. This contributed to building vocabulary and conversation, to making connections in learning, to providing authentic contexts for learning and to contributing to the overall health and wellbeing of the children. This was true of both the built and natural environment, with children becoming excited about spotting everyday things such as lampposts and letter-boxes as well as delighting in the natural world.

The opportunity to engage in training and have access to resources such as the ‘Big Maps’ was well received. Practitioners commented that the training enabled them to prepare, undertake and reflect upon outings and experiences more rigorously. They felt better able to make connections between learning opportunities – such as exploring wood working activities in the setting before taking children out to a DIY shop. They also felt that their confidence and knowledge of helping children to learn about the wider world had improved as a result of the project. One setting appointed staff as ‘Lead Person for Going Out’ to ensure that these practices would remain a priority.

The case studies also revealed some approaches settings used to successfully engage parents.

A popular strategy was to use photos of the children, to engage and to inform parents about the kinds of valuable learning activities that could be undertaken. One setting created 'Treasure Hunts' for parents to do with their children, with clues ranging from simple –such as 'find 3 brown things' to more complicated challenges.

The project also brought benefits to the local community. The case study settings recorded how local residents enjoyed seeing the children out and about, and genuine relationships between settings and the community developed. Examples included how children and locals benefited when they visited local care homes, and shops. One setting deliberately sought out such opportunities, sending letters to local residents saying that they were keen to foster relationships. This led to invitations from a window cleaner to see him at work, and from a home owner to see a large bag of gravel being delivered onto his drive.

In terms of planning, preparation and practice, all of the case studies revealed that the project enabled practitioners to improve the provision for learning. They felt increasing confidence in terms of planning for learning, with one setting sharing that they had moved 'beyond just planning for risk assessment' when they made visits – they now considered and planned for the learning experiences that would be possible on the visit. There were also examples of how the practitioners felt that they now thought more carefully about the preparation that they made with children before an outing through for example conversations and stories to provide some prior knowledge. Others explained how the learning no longer ends when the visit finishes, practitioners felt better able to think about post-visit activities to ensure that they brought 'the outside back in with them'.

**Caveat:** A richer range of evidence would have strengthened the data. The case studies could be useful to disseminate across other settings, particularly if additional information eg setting size, type of training, examples of pupil outcomes etc were included.

## Summary

As an Opportunity Area, Stoke-on-Trent has a clear delivery plan in which it identifies key priorities<sup>1</sup>. For early years this includes a particular focus on communication and language, literacy and understanding the world as well as building pupil's understanding of the world. The delivery plan also makes reference to the aim of ensuring that all early years practitioners are well equipped when they start work and have continuing access to quality CPD throughout their careers.

The data gathered indicates a positive impact on these areas of priority after involvement in the project. The majority of responses, from all evidence sources indicate that practitioner confidence, knowledge and practice has improved as a result of involvement in the project. In particular:

- Confidence often related to practical matters such as more confidence in managing a trip that involved public transport.
- Knowledge often related to better awareness of both possible experiences and the learning that might develop as a result of this.
- The majority of settings also reported an increase in the *frequency* of outings during the project, and also in an increase in the *variety* of outings provided for children.

Many of the settings declared an increase in children's outcomes against at least one area of the curriculum, although it was sometimes felt that it was too early in the project to comment in any depth on specific outcomes. 'The World' strand followed by the 'People & Communities' strand represented the greatest area of declared improvement in pupil outcomes. More general areas such as communication & language showed lower levels of improvement with maths being the area showing least improvement. Engagement in learning was reported by many as showing improvement as a result of the project, and this is true of pupils, practitioners and parents, many of whom comment on a shared excitement about learning as a result of the opportunities provided by the project. Parental and family engagement, as well as engagement with the local community was seen to have improved, with settings using innovative methods to involve different individuals.

The overall findings suggest that the project was well received by practitioners, parents and pupils across settings in Stoke-on-Trent, and impacted positively on confidence, knowledge and engagement of participants as well as pupil outcomes.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-mobility-and-opportunity-areas>