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Talk Matters Evaluation: Interim report on emerging findings from year 1

March 2026

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Executive summary

Talk Matters is a pilot programme designed and funded by London's Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) to strengthen pupils' speech, language and communication skills (SLCN) as a pathway to improved learning, wellbeing, long-term life outcomes and violence prevention. The programme was delivered to two cohorts of schools across seven London boroughs (Bexley, Havering, Lambeth, Lewisham, Southwark, Sutton, and Waltham Forest). This report provides emerging findings focusing on the first cohort of 35 primary schools involved in *Talk Matters* between 2023 and 2025. A second cohort of schools started the programme in 2025.

The programme combines a whole-school oracy approach, a targeted oracy intervention and locally designed wellbeing and parental engagement activities. This interim evaluation report, produced by Ecorys UK, draws on extensive mixed-methods evidence gathered during the first phase of programme delivery (2023-2025). This includes surveys with over 550 school staff and 750 parents¹, interviews with borough leads and school leaders, classroom observations, case studies (comprising interviews with school staff, children and parents) and *Talk Boost* assessment data.

The evaluation seeks to understand 'what works, for whom, in what respects, to what extent, in what contexts, and how?'. The evaluation is underpinned by a theory of change that sets out the proposed mechanisms by which the programme activities are expected to lead to the intended benefits. The evaluation explored:

- ▶ To what extent were the proposed activities **delivered as intended**?
- ▶ How were these activities **adapted to fit the context** of each school or local authority?
- ▶ Is there evidence to show that the activities are **contributing to the intended outcomes**?
- ▶ What are the **barriers and facilitators** to achieving the intended outcomes?

Key audiences for this report are schools, local authorities and multi-academy trusts, the VRU and other funders/commissioners, and national policy makers. The report provides practical examples of how to implement oracy strategies and techniques in school, how to support schools to implement oracy strategies, learning on the challenges and benefits of implementation, and emerging outcomes for pupils.

Implementation and reach

Schools reported on numbers of staff, pupils and parents reached through the different activities included in the programme. The numbers of staff, pupils and parents in each school varied due to different approaches to delivery and different types of wellbeing and parental engagement activity. A summary of the reach data is provided below.

¹ The term 'parents' is used throughout to represent parents and carers.

7	Number of London boroughs taking part in <i>Talk Matters</i>
35	Number of schools taking part in <i>Talk Matters</i> (cohort 1, 2023 – 2025)
c. 13,900	Number of pupils reached through whole-school programme changes (based on numbers of pupils enrolled)
693	Number of pupils completing <i>Talk Boost</i> targeted oracy intervention (pupils completing pre- and post-assessment)
1,981	Number of staff upskilled in oracy through externally provided training or internal continuing professional development
4,019	Number of parents engaged in parent outreach activities funded through <i>Talk Matters</i>
11,540	Number of pupils taking part in at least one wellbeing activity session funded through <i>Talk Matters</i> (includes engagement in whole-school activities)

Participating boroughs were given flexibility to select oracy approaches to meet their local needs, supported by three partner organisations: Speech and Language UK, Voice 21 and Oracy Cambridge. Within boroughs, schools also had some flexibility in the selection and implementation of the wellbeing and parental engagement activities.

Key enablers for implementing oracy practice in schools included strong buy-in supported by senior leaders, borough-level coordination and the pivotal role of school-based Oracy Champions in helping to drive practice change. Training was also a key enabler for effective implementation across schools. Staff said they valued training and guidance on practical techniques, opportunities for collaboration and ongoing support for incorporating oracy in their work. However, time pressures and staff turnover posed challenges. Wellbeing and parental engagement activities were initially harder for schools and borough leads to conceptualise but, as time went on, schools demonstrated clear alignment between wellbeing aims and oracy developments.

Contribution to school-level change

The evaluation found consistent evidence that *Talk Matters* has helped to develop a culture of oracy in participating schools. School staff reported oracy increasingly being modelled across classrooms, that they had the tools and confidence to embed techniques and that they felt supported to experiment and adapt practice. During interviews with pupils, pupils demonstrated a clear understanding of oracy and its importance to learning, relationships and future careers. Classroom observations during case study visits showed wide use of structured oracy techniques embedded in teaching. Schools noted that these practices improved pupils' engagement in learning, reduced low-level disruption and helped teachers identify misconceptions among pupils earlier (for example, in understanding of how to read a bus timetable).

Outcomes for pupils

The evaluation found early evidence of positive change for pupils. Staff reported improvements in pupils' engagement, confidence, listening skills and enjoyment of school. Pupils described greater confidence and willingness in contributing to discussions, and staff observed stronger relationships between pupils and fewer behaviour incidents. Staff argued these changes were due to pupils' improved communication and self-regulation.

For pupils receiving *Talk Boost* (a small group targeted intervention), assessment data showed clear progress in speaking and listening skills: 93% of Early *Talk Boost* pupils and 96% of key stage 1 pupils narrowed the developmental gap, with over three-quarters making more than 50% improvement. Schools and parents also reported children having increased confidence, talking in fuller sentences, improved turn-taking and greater participation in class and social activities.

Outcomes for parents

The evaluation found some good evidence that parents had a greater awareness of oracy and how to support their children's talking and listening skills at home. The parent survey showed a positive shift in the proportion of parents who felt confident to help their child's speaking and listening development and a small increase in the proportion who said they talked to their children about their learning every day or most days.

Looking ahead

This interim evaluation report shows promising early evidence of change across participating schools. Participating schools are committed to sustaining oracy beyond the programme. Embedding oracy within school development plans, curriculum structures and resource sharing networks will be essential to ensuring long-term sustainability and improved pupil outcomes. The evaluation is ongoing and will continue to work with cohort 2 schools who are implementing *Talk Matters* in 2025/26. A final report will be published in 2027.

1.0 Background and Context

1.1 The importance of addressing oracy in schools

Oracy refers to the act and skill of speaking, listening and communicating. In schools, oracy focuses on strengthening children's ability to talk and listen effectively, to use these skills to deepen learning, and to develop a greater understanding of communication in different forms. This is sometimes referred to as *learning to talk*, *learning through talk* and *learning about talk* (Oracy Education Commission, 2024). Inclusion is central to this understanding of oracy. Oracy is not about promoting one language, accent or dialect over another. Oracy embraces different forms of communication, including sign language, non-verbal and forms of alternative or augmented communication.

Speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) are the most common identified primary need among children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) support.² SLCN includes a range of speech and communication difficulties such as delayed language development (where speech development follows a typical pattern but emerges later); social, comprehension or expression impairments that make some forms of communication difficult; physical difficulties with forming sounds or words; and speech and language impairments linked to other forms of SEND (e.g. cerebral palsy or autistic spectrum disorders). There is also a strong link between disadvantage - growing up in areas of deprivation or entitlement to free school meals - and higher rates of SLCN (Dockrell, et al, 2012).

Since the lockdowns during the Covid-19 pandemic, there have been increasing concerns about the growing gap in oracy and communication skills for children in the UK (Millard, *et al.*, 2021). Teachers report that worsening oracy skills have made teaching more difficult and that many communication problems are being mistaken for not meeting expected standards in maths and literacy or behavioural issues (GL Assessment, 2025).

Better language skills are associated with higher levels of academic attainment and greater employment outcomes (Oracy All-Party Parliamentary Group, 2020). They are also associated with improvements in a range of non-academic outcomes, including self-regulation and confidence (Education Endowment Fund, 2025). Schools that have adopted a focus on developing oracy skills report improvements in social communication and relationships which lead to fewer conflicts between pupils and behavioural concerns in schools (*Voice 21*).

Growing evidence shows that oracy has a positive impact on pupil engagement with learning, academic attainment, mental health, and future employability. The Education Endowment Fund (EEF) has assessed the impact of oral language interventions, including a focus on pupils' spoken vocabulary, use of structured questioning and purposeful talk in the classroom. They found an average of 6 months additional progress for pupils receiving these interventions (Education Endowment Fund, 2025). The EEF found oral language interventions to be particularly effective for disadvantaged students, suggesting a focus on oracy may help to narrow the disadvantage gap. Given the link between oracy skills and employment opportunities, effective oracy interventions can support social mobility for disadvantaged children.

² In 2024/25, a quarter of pupils with SEN support had SLCN identified as their primary need - [Special educational needs in England, Academic year 2024/25 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

1.2 The policy context for oracy in English schools

In October 2024, the Oracy Education Commission published a report reviewing the evidence and current practice around oracy (Oracy Education Commission, 2024). They highlighted the importance of a focus on oracy and recommended that oracy should be positioned as the fourth 'R' alongside reading, writing and arithmetic.

Recent changes in policy and practice in England reflect this growing focus on oracy in education. The 2025 Ofsted School Inspection Toolkit (Ofsted, 2025) made oracy an explicit element of key foundation skills for pupils. From November 2025, inspectors must consider the extent to which pupils are taught to effectively communicate through spoken language. The 2025 Curriculum and Assessment Review (Department for Education, 2025), published in November 2025 highlighted the need for further support and guidance around spoken language interventions. The Review recommended that an Oracy Framework should be introduced, similar to the existing reading and writing frameworks. The Government accepted this recommendation, stating that they would create a new oracy framework for use in primary education, as well as a framework combining oracy, reading and writing for use in secondary education.

1.3 About *Talk Matters*

London's Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) adopts a public health approach to preventing violence through early intervention and seeking to minimise risk factors that might lead a child or young person to be at increased risk of involvement in violence. These risk factors are varied and include children with SEN, particularly those who are neurodivergent, and children and young people who are not in full time education (e.g. through suspensions or exclusions) (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2024). Communication difficulties in children are also strongly associated with behavioural issues with children and young people being (mis)perceived as disruptive or displaying anti-social behaviour (Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, 2019).

Being in school is one of the most important protective factors for children and young people. As such, in 2024, the VRU launched London's Inclusion Charter. The Inclusion Charter sought to prevent all forms of lost learning by supporting schools to create inclusive and relational learning environments to meet children's needs and nurture their wellbeing. Through their efforts to improve schools' inclusivity, the VRU developed the *Talk Matters* programme as they became increasingly aware of SLCN as an under-identified learning need in school and a barrier to inclusion.

Talk Matters is a pilot programme funded by the London VRU to support London schools in seven boroughs to identify speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) in children, close gaps in their learning and support them to engage fully in the academic and social aspects of their education. *Talk Matters* has been introduced in Bexley, Havering, Lambeth, Lewisham, Southwark, Sutton and Waltham Forest. Each borough selected five schools to participate in cohort one of the programme, which started in spring/summer 2024, and was funded to the end of the summer term in 2025. A second cohort of schools in these boroughs joined *Talk Matters* in summer 2025 and will be funded to the end of summer 2026.

In each school, *Talk Matters* consists of three elements:

- ▶ A whole school approach to oracy

- ▶ A targeted intervention for pupils needing additional speech and language support
- ▶ Strategic initiatives to support social and emotional skills and wellbeing, including engagement with parents.

Whole school oracy

The VRU wanted schools to adopt a whole school strategy and pedagogy to embed and sustain oracy in practice. Boroughs were asked to commission an evidence-based whole school oracy approach, delivered by a credible external partner, to be implemented in their selected schools. In consultation with participating schools, borough leads considered prior experience with specific providers, cost and availability of resources, and reviewed the evidence on effectiveness. Borough leads highlighted key factors in provider selection, including: value for money, availability of training and resources, prior school involvement with the approaches, flexibility and adaptability, and sustainability (beyond this funding period). Across the seven boroughs, three providers were selected.

Provider	Boroughs	Description
Oracy Cambridge	Bexley, Southwark, Sutton	Dialogic Teaching (commissioned through Oracy Cambridge ³) is an approach developed by Robin Alexander (Alexander, 2004) which aims to improve pupil learning through quality classroom talk to encourage pupils to reason, discuss and justify responses to deepen thinking. It is a pedagogical approach which explicitly uses talk for learning across the curriculum.
<i>Primary Talk</i>	Lewisham, Lambeth	Primary Talk is a training and development programme supporting speech, language and communication of children aged 4-11. The programme aims to give staff the skills to create an oracy-focused environment. It develops spoken language skills and promotes social aspects of learning such as working in groups and building relationships. ⁴
<i>Voice 21</i>	Havering, Waltham Forest	Voice 21 works with schools to develop a whole school approach to oracy education. They support schools to build oracy into the curriculum, learning and wider school life. <i>Voice 21</i> works in partnership with teachers and schools through a membership model. ⁵

While these three organisations offer different packages of training and support to schools, there is a great deal of similarity in the oracy concepts and activities they promote. Dialogic teaching is distinct from teaching oracy skills in that it focuses on talk as pedagogy rather than as a separate ‘topic’ or skill. Nevertheless, there is cross-pollination in these different approaches – developing communication skills is an important element of dialogic teaching, and use of dialogue across different subjects in the classroom is a key feature of the other oracy approaches. Many of the classroom techniques observed and described in this interim evaluation report were similar across the different whole school approaches.

³ <https://oracycambridge.org/>

⁴ <https://speechandlanguage.org.uk/educators-and-professionals/programmes-for-nurseries-and-schools/primary-talk/>

⁵ <https://voice21.org/our-mission/>

This evaluation did not seek to compare the effectiveness of the different approaches selected. Instead, the programme set out to understand whether *different* evidence-based oracy interventions could be implemented to suit different school contexts and what were the key factors to effective implementation.

Targeted oracy support

Talk Matters required schools to deliver targeted support for pupils with SLCN. Through the targeted intervention, VRU wanted school staff to gain a better understanding of how to identify and support pupils who would benefit from additional work to develop their speaking and listening skills. This early intervention was intended to reduce the oracy skills gap observed for many pupils, and to reduce the need for more specialist support from speech and language therapy in the future.

The VRU allowed boroughs to select the specific, evidence-based intervention to be used. All seven boroughs selected [Talk Boost](#), a targeted intervention developed by Speech and Language UK.⁶ *Talk Boost* provides targeted support to pupils experiencing difficulties with spoken communication. The programme is designed for those who do not require specialist speech and language therapy, but who need extra help to reach expected standards in communication and language.

There are three different *Talk Boost* packages aimed at children of different ages: *Early Talk Boost* (for 3-4 year olds), *Talk Boost Key Stage 1* (for 4-7 year olds) and *Talk Boost Key Stage 2* (for 7-10 year olds). Each package is delivered by teachers or teaching assistants in small group sessions of four pupils over 8-10 weeks. Sessions include games and activities to boost language skills and accelerate pupils' progress.

Wellbeing and parental engagement

Following the Covid-19 pandemic, the VRU wanted to support pupil wellbeing and home-school relationships through the *Talk Matters* programme. The wellbeing and parental engagement strand was more flexibly defined by the VRU which gave schools a degree of autonomy to implement activities they felt would best meet the needs of their pupils and their school context. Boroughs were provided with a budget to distribute to schools to support the cost of activities. Activities had to be new or additional to business as usual. Schools submitted plans for using this resource to borough leads who approved or advised on them. Examples of wellbeing activities included professional therapeutic support for selected pupils, after-school activities, improved play facilities and creation of calm or sensory spaces. Parental engagement activities included oracy workshops, providing story sacks and other resources for parents to support oracy at home, and a range of supported parent-and-child activities like cooking and trips out.

⁶ https://speechandlanguage.org.uk/educators-and-professionals/programmes-for-nurseries-and-schools/?gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=21094500162&gclid=Cj0KCQiAosrJBhD0ARIsAHebCNpPHEP274It6cuRralYvi4S5AaNDT4Fn-86pctaXH420WtLaqeuUEAaAkkreALw_wcB

1.4 Scope of the evaluation

The VRU commissioned Ecorys UK, as Learning and Evaluation Partner, to carry out a process and impact evaluation for the *Talk Matters* programme. The process evaluation sought to provide key learning for the VRU, participating boroughs and schools about the implementation of oracy interventions. The evaluation sought to assess the contribution made by the programme to improvements in speaking and listening skills and other outcomes for pupils and schools, following the proposed mechanisms set out in the theory of change.

The evaluation sought to adopt a Realist Evaluation theory-based approach to assessing impact. This is well-suited to pilot programmes where the mechanisms for achieving outcomes are not yet well-understood and where the programme is expected to include a strong degree of adaptation to local contexts, as was the case for the *Talk Matters* programme. *Talk Matters* explicitly sought to provide a flexible approach for boroughs and schools and chose to work with schools that were seen to have the capacity and appetite for developing oracy teaching. As such, the programme design was not suitable for a quantitative impact evaluation. While a realist evaluation offers considerable strengths in developing an understanding of what works, where, for whom and how, it is not strong in establishing attribution or measuring the impact of the intervention in comparison to usual practice. To address the extent to which the programme may be viewed as contributing to the intended outcomes, the evaluation adopted a contribution analysis approach to map out causal claims and assess the evidence that the programme has contributed to the intended outcomes. At the start of the project, the research team held workshops with the VRU and participating boroughs to develop a theory of change which mapped activities and outputs to intended outcomes. The theory of change informed the causal claims laid out in this interim report and the data collected to assess contribution.

This interim report covers findings from evaluation activities undertaken with all 35 schools in the cohort one of *Talk Matters* to the end of 2025. Data collection began in the summer term of 2024 when schools were starting to engage in the programme. Due to differences in implementation design across the boroughs, some schools had begun training and other programme activity by that time and others had not. The evaluation is continuing with cohort 2 schools until the end of 2026.

1.5 Method

The evaluation uses a mixed methods approach combining survey and qualitative data.

Monitoring data: Schools submitted data on the numbers of staff, pupils and parents engaging in key activities each term. These activities included training sessions, wellbeing activities and parental engagement activities. Schools also shared a brief narrative of key contextual factors. This report presents descriptive data to show different approaches to implementation.

Survey of parents: The research team asked all schools to distribute a short online survey to parents in the summer term of 2024 and again in the summer term of 2025. The survey asked about awareness of oracy, involvement in oracy at home and engagement with the school in general. The survey received 767 responses from 28 schools in 2024 and 321 responses from 24 schools in 2025. Data was analysed using R (statistical analysis software) to compare the differences between the two waves.

Survey of school staff: Schools distributed a short online survey to staff in their schools in the autumn term of 2024 and again in the autumn term of 2025. The survey explored knowledge, confidence,

attitudes and practices around oracy. It also asked staff for their views on key school and pupil outcomes including engagement in learning and behaviour. The survey received 579 responses from 34 schools in 2024 and 440 responses from 32 schools (cohort 1) in 2025. Data was analysed using R to compare the differences between the two waves. Throughout the report, the parent and staff surveys are referred to as 'wave 1' (2024) and 'wave 2' (2025).

Telephone survey of school leaders: In autumn term 2024 and spring term 2025 the research team invited schools to take part in a short telephone interview to discuss approaches to implementation, challenges and perceived changes so far. Eighteen schools took part with at least two schools from each participating borough. This data is used descriptively to provide learning on implementation and perceived early changes at a school level.

Talk Boost data: *Talk Boost* data was collected through Speech and Language UK's own data dashboards which record assessments of pupils conducted by schools at the start and end of participation in the *Talk Boost* intervention.⁷ This report presents pre- and post-intervention data to show change in oracy skills for pupils completing participation in *Talk Boost*.

School case studies: Case study schools were selected to provide a range of school sizes and contexts. Borough leads recommended schools for case studies where schools were known to be engaged in innovative or good practice. Schools were invited to take part and visits were conducted in six schools from different participating boroughs in the summer and autumn terms of 2025. Two researchers visited the schools and collected a range of qualitative data through:

- ▶ interviews with school leaders, teachers, *Talk Boost* facilitators and parents
- ▶ group interviews with pupils from across key stage 1 and 2, including pupils receiving the *Talk Boost* intervention
- ▶ observations of classroom teaching, wellbeing and other oracy related activities.

Interviews with borough leads: In autumn term 2024 and spring term 2025, interviews were conducted with lead staff within participating boroughs. The interviews explored early experiences of implementation at a borough and school level, including challenges and solutions so far. Data was thematically analysed in relation to each of the areas covered in this report.

Analysis: Survey data was analysed descriptively and tested for statistical significance (t-test and ANOVA).⁸ Throughout the report summary statistics and findings from statistical testing is presented. The research team analysed the qualitative data thematically in relation to the key areas outlined in this report. The report also presents short, thematic case studies to show implementation and outcomes in context, guided by the intended outcomes stated in the theory of change (see Appendix, Figure 5).

Limitations

The inclusion of data from a wide range of stakeholders is a strength of the evaluation. However, a number of limitations of the evaluation should also be acknowledged:

⁷ <https://speechandlanguage.org.uk/educators-and-professionals/programmes-for-nurseries-and-schools/talk-boost/>

⁸ These statistical analyses compare the mean scores for different groups and test whether differences are meaningful. In this report, where differences are identified they have met a statistical significance threshold of $p < 0.05$. This means that there is a less than 5% chance of these results occurring if no real difference existed between the groups.

- ▶ Much of the in-depth qualitative data is drawn from a small number of case study schools which may differ from other participating schools
- ▶ Responses to surveys, while providing good numbers overall, represent a minority of parents in participating schools. These survey respondents are likely to be among the more engaged parents, and their responses may differ from wider cohorts of parents in these schools
- ▶ The study did not use a robust impact evaluation design (e.g. an experimental or quasi-experimental approach) meaning an estimate of the measurable impact of the programme is not possible. The evaluation team assessed the contribution claims presented in this report based on the level of agreement across stakeholders and different data sources. These rely primarily on the views and experience of those involved in delivering or receiving the programme.

2.0 *Talk Matters* reach at a glance

Data on the reach of *Talk Matters* implementation for cohort 1 schools was gathered through schools, via participating boroughs. An overview of reported reach is shown below.

7	Number of London boroughs taking part in <i>Talk Matters</i>
35	Number of schools taking part in <i>Talk Matters</i> (cohort 1, 2023 – 2025)
c. 13,900	Number of pupils reached through whole-school programme changes (based on numbers of pupils enrolled)
693	Number of pupils completing <i>Talk Boost</i> targeted oracy intervention (pupils completing pre- and post-assessment)
1,981	Number of staff upskilled in oracy through externally provided training or internal continuing professional development
4,019	Number of parents engaged in parent outreach activities funded through <i>Talk Matters</i>
11,540	Number of pupils taking part in at least one wellbeing activity session funded through <i>Talk Matters</i> (includes engagement in whole-school activities)

3.0 Programme Implementation

Emerging key messages

- ▶ Schools and boroughs had a lot of **flexibility around how *Talk Matters* was implemented**. As a result, there were many differences in programme delivery across schools, particularly for the wellbeing component.
- ▶ **Shared leadership of the programme was important** for effective implementation. This typically included senior leadership involvement, dedicated time from an Oracy Champion, middle leadership and curriculum lead support, and advice and co-ordination from a borough lead. Schools felt that without shared leadership, implementation would have been much more difficult.
- ▶ Feedback on **whole-school oracy training was positive**. Schools that provided training to all staff together were typically quicker at establishing a common vision and starting to implement oracy in the classroom. Schools that cascaded training throughout the year found this was easier to arrange around teaching time and helped to maintain oracy as a priority across the school.
- ▶ Schools reported **high levels of enthusiasm among staff but also acknowledged some concerns** about workload and the potential for disruption in lessons as a result of encouraging more pupil talk. Schools reported that providing space and support for staff to try out different approaches gradually helped provide reassurance.
- ▶ Schools recognised that it **takes time to embed oracy practices** across the school and emphasised the importance of establishing a culture where teachers could try out different techniques, adapt to the needs of each classroom and share ideas and learning across staff.
- ▶ ***Talk Boost* was highly valued by schools**, but many experienced **challenges with implementation**, including staff capacity to deliver all the sessions within a term. There were also concerns about the time required to complete pupil assessments and whether the intervention was reaching the pupils who most needed it.
- ▶ Schools found it **harder to develop a clear vision around the wellbeing strand of *Talk Matters*** compared to the oracy strand. Where boroughs gave a clearer steer or limited the options available to schools, schools often found this easier initially. That said, schools valued the flexibility and scope for creativity offered by the wellbeing strand, and by the end of the funding, they were able to articulate how the wellbeing work supported their oracy goals and vice versa.
- ▶ **Parental engagement was a struggle** for many schools, particularly reaching families who were not already typically engaged. Inviting targeted families to fun or wellbeing-focused activities was generally found to be more effective and allowed opportunities to model and encourage talk at home.
- ▶ Schools implemented *Talk Matters* with **strong consideration for future sustainability** and impact beyond the funded programme. Schools were keen to maintain the oracy-focus and wellbeing activities and aimed to embed these into ongoing practice. Nevertheless, being able to sustain key activity without resource was a concern for schools.

The programme offered boroughs and schools a great deal of flexibility in what was delivered within the overall structure of the *Talk Matters* programme. As a result, there were important differences between boroughs and schools. This section describes *what* was implemented, how schools approached implementation and draws out learning for implementation informed by the framework proposed in the EEF's implementation guide (Sharples et al, 2024). This framework emphasises the importance of collaboration, buy-in, reflection, leadership and structures.

3.1 Selection of participating schools

Borough leads selected schools for the programme by either inviting specific schools to take part or inviting all primary schools to apply and selecting them based on a range of self-prescribed criteria. Boroughs used different information to select schools, such as percentage of pupils who have special education needs; percentage of pupils meeting expected standards at Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS); low levels of attendance and high levels of deprivation. All borough leads emphasised the importance of schools' committing to the programme and having the capacity and willingness to deliver.⁹ The majority of participating schools had a high proportion of pupils for whom English was not their first language and over half had a high proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) compared to the average across primary schools nationally. Key characteristics of participating schools are shown in the Appendix, Table 7.

During interviews, school leaders gave various reasons for choosing to take part in *Talk Matters*. Many highlighted that pupils were increasingly starting school without the sentence structures or vocabulary to communicate effectively for their age, an experience that is reflected in data from national surveys of teachers.¹⁰ Several schools also highlighted a recent increase in the number of pupils with SEN (and a greater complexity in their needs) and wanting to support their participation and progress. They also observed an increased need in pupils' wellbeing and mental health following the 2020/21 Covid-19 lockdowns and welcomed the opportunity to provide support for wellbeing through *Talk Matters*.

3.2 Implementation approaches and activity

Talk Matters implementation typically involved multiple leadership and support roles:

- ▶ **Borough leads** generally focused on **accountability** to ensure schools' decisions and actions were in line with the aims and scope of *Talk Matters* with evidence-based practice; borough leads also facilitated **shared learning** between schools in their borough through coordinating meetings, joint training sessions and sharing resources.
- ▶ **School leaders** ensured *Talk Matters* was tailored to their **school context** by identifying **priority areas** and linking with wider **school systems and initiatives**.
- ▶ **Oracy Champions**, who were generally classroom teachers or (less often) senior leaders with an interest or prior experience in oracy, focused on the **day-to-day implementation** of *Talk Matters*

⁹ Characteristics of participating schools are shown in the Appendix Table 7.

¹⁰ A 2025 YouGov survey found that 9 in 10 primary teachers reported worsening speech and language skills among children starting school since 2020 - [Worsening speech and language skills are making teaching more difficult, study finds - GL Assessment](#)

activities across the three delivery strands (whole school, targeted and wellbeing activities). Oracy Champions supported staff to embed oracy in their work and oversaw how the programme was embedded in school. They often acted as ‘early adopters’ of oracy practice in their classrooms.

Sharing leadership of *Talk Matters* within schools helped make its implementation more manageable for schools. School leaders and teachers explained that implementing all the elements of *Talk Matters* required a lot of time. There was agreement among several teachers that having a senior member of staff who is not in lessons leading the project worked best. This helped ensure dedicated time for set up, collecting resources and supporting staff.

“There is quite a lot to it...I think it’s the initial set up, making sure we had the resources and then being available for staff” – school leader, interview

Oracy Champions were key to the practical implementation of *Talk Matters*, including supporting staff training and ongoing development. Several schools highlighted that the role worked well when shared across two people partly due to capacity and to facilitate building an oracy team. Some schools split the role so that one person led on oracy and another on wellbeing and parental engagement.

3.2.1 Whole school oracy approach

Most staff across participating schools received oracy training, either through whole day sessions with an external provider or through internally cascaded continuing professional development throughout the year.

Schools in different boroughs received initial training at different points, depending on availability of trainers. *Primary Talk* training was mostly delivered in summer term 2023/24. Dialogic teaching (through *Oracy Cambridge*) and some of the *Voice 21* training was delivered in the 2024/25 academic year.

- ▶ At wave 1 (autumn term, 2024) 55% of staff reported that they had received training on oracy practices in the past 12 months.
- ▶ By wave 2 (autumn term, 2025), 73% of staff responding to the survey reported that they had received oracy training in the past 12 months.
- ▶ As might be expected, a greater proportion of leaders and teachers received training compared to support staff. By wave 2, 91% of leaders and 76% of teachers had received training, compared with 35% of support staff (see Appendix, Table 10).

Training delivery varied by whole school approach provider:

- ▶ The training accessed through ***Primary Talk*** was a pre-existing package offering 1-day training for whole school staff, with further additional training available for selected staff to cover enhanced and specialist content if desired. Training was available to these schools quickly after the *Talk Matters* programme started with most schools arranging for staff to attend training during inset days in the summer term 2023/24.

- ▶ The **dialogic teaching training was developed as a bespoke training package by Oracy Cambridge**. The commissioning and development of the training took longer and training for these schools took place over a series of sessions during the 2024/2025 academic year. Schools typically sent two to four members of staff (often the Oracy Champion and a senior leader) to the face-to-face training sessions. Resources and videos from these sessions were made available to wider staff in the schools.
- ▶ *Voice 21* provided **training for two to four key staff, typically Oracy Champions and senior leaders, as part of the consultancy offered through Voice 21 membership**. They also provided online learning and resources for cascading training to all staff in the school. Timings for accessing initial training depended on the availability of trainers while the wider cascading was decided by each school (e.g. through staff meetings, inset days or other learning activities).

When cascading training, schools typically broke it down into short sessions focusing on one or two techniques which were identified as a priority for roll out in lessons. Over time, more techniques were introduced and embedded into teaching. Several schools explained that they got staff to take part in oracy activities during training and staff meetings, so that they experienced them as pupils would.

“We incorporate those [techniques] into the actual staff inset. So when we’re doing the staff inset, we’re expecting the staff to experience that, so we’ll say to them, ‘right we’re gonna nest’, and they get to experience it.” - school leader, interview ¹¹

The evaluation found advantages and disadvantages were reported to the approaches to training delivery:

- ▶ The whole school training (*Primary Talk*) enabled schools to provide a common base among staff from which to build on. However, in the telephone survey (spring term 2025), some school leaders suggested that more work was needed after the training to maintain consistency and a shared expectation. Several schools highlighted staff turnover as a challenge for using training to provide a common vision for oracy provision in the school – as staff left, new staff did not necessarily have access to the training.
- ▶ Schools that cascaded training (*Oracy Cambridge* and *Voice 21* schools) took longer to roll it out but evaluation participants emphasised the advantage of drip-feeding learning throughout the year. This approach made it easier to fit training in (often as part of regular staff meetings, rather than inset days) and kept a focus on oracy throughout the year. The cascaded training also ensured new staff were able to access training.

Including teachers and teaching assistants (and sometimes non-teaching staff) in training was identified as a strength by many schools. In interviews, several school leaders and teaching staff reflected that it is often difficult to resource training that included both teachers and teaching assistants. Including teaching assistants within the training and programme delivery supported a common whole school vision as all staff knew and understood the oracy focus and priorities being embedded in lessons.

¹¹ See Table 3 for description of nesting and other oracy techniques seen in practice in case study schools

Example: Approach to training and implementation

Voice 21 provided one-to-one meetings with School C each term to reflect on progress, share tailored resources and plan next steps. Two staff members received initial *Voice 21* training, covering oracy techniques in depth. Learning was then shared with the wider teaching staff via inset days and reinforced during staff meetings. In these sessions, staff were required to take part in oracy activities themselves to experience them as pupils would. Staff said this helped them to become familiar and comfortable with new techniques quickly. Separately, the curriculum team met to explore how oracy techniques could be embedded into different aspects of the school curriculum.

"We came back [from the training] feeling quite inspired and enthused by [Voice 21]. We really wanted to take it on, which we have done. We've done four staff sessions throughout the year [to] keep it relevant and in the forefront of staff minds" - school leader, interview

Training received positive feedback but building oracy skills took time as staff learned through adapting their own practice and sharing learning with colleagues.

In interviews, teachers were positive about the training they received, finding it high quality and informative, though they also emphasised that this was the starting point and learning continued through classroom practice and feedback. Training was often supported by access to further resources including books and videos and, as noted above, opportunities to practice techniques before implementing them with pupils was valued. Training offered across boroughs was valued as an opportunity to network and learn from each other.

"We appreciate the high-quality training sessions that are provided through this project and value the opportunities provided to work collaboratively with other schools and share ideas." – school leader, monitoring data

There was mixed feedback about the balance between theoretical and practical learning in the externally delivered training. Some schools suggested that there was too much focus on the concepts of oracy and that staff wanted more practical tools that they could implement. However, there was also positive feedback on the theoretical grounding provided and the focus on what good quality oracy work means.

Staff generally found training videos useful to see how oracy techniques were used in the classroom. However, some expressed reservations about their applicability in their own classrooms. This was linked to high rates of pupils with SEN or English as an additional language (EAL) in their classes, or to a more generalised view that oracy may be easier to use with some groups of children than others. In response, one oracy lead recorded their own lessons to demonstrate how oracy worked with their specific cohort of pupils.

Teachers were encouraged to observe one another's lessons and to openly discuss both effective practices and challenges encountered in implementing oracy techniques. Many teachers said they valued opportunities to observe colleagues' lessons and learn from one another, particularly noting the benefit of seeing Oracy Champions model effective strategies. Flexible timetables for Oracy Champions enabled them to observe lessons and provide targeted, one-to-one feedback, supporting teachers in refining their oracy practices.

Oracy Champions and senior leaders provided support for staff to implement oracy techniques, and a culture of trying new ideas.

Without exception, case study schools reported that the majority of their staff were enthusiastic about introducing or enhancing oracy practice. However, this sometimes took time and effort to achieve. Some schools reported that, initially, some staff expressed concerns about the impact of the programme on workload and the risk of additional disruption in lessons as pupils engaged in more talk. School leaders acknowledged these concerns. They presented the programme to staff as an opportunity to enhance existing practices rather than as an added requirement and sought to reassure staff that structured pupil talk should positively support both behaviour and learning.

Oracy Champions and senior leaders were pivotal in supporting teachers' understanding and implementation of oracy approaches. One case study school emphasised the importance of leaders having time to respond to staff questions and offer guidance as they were trying new things, including around delivery of *Talk Boost*.

“In the initial setting up [...] being available for the staff. So when they first started running the programme, there were quite a few questions: had they done it right? Could I pop in and see them and check if they were doing it right?” – school leader, interview

Some schools introduced oracy targets within staff appraisal processes to ensure that staff had a clear understanding of what an oracy focus meant in their own practice. Appraisals also provided an opportunity to monitor and share feedback on implementation at an individual level, in line with the school's approach.

“They all had an oracy target linked to their subject and in everyone's performance appraisals last year they had an oracy target [...] it just means that it's more embedded if everyone is considering it and thinking about it.” – school leader, interview

School leaders also emphasised the importance of teachers' autonomy and flexibility in tailoring approaches to their classroom context, resulting in more focused and responsive learning experiences for pupils. They highlighted the importance of creating a culture where staff could try things without pressure to get it right first time. Schools were clear that practice had to be adapted to each class, and to change throughout the year as pupils themselves became more confident in speaking and listening.

“We were very clear that this is not going to be perfect, it's not about being polished, and this is a long-term thing. No one's expecting you to be perfect already.” – school leader, interview

“It is overwhelming... There were so many different things, where do I start? ... I just took a couple [of techniques] and tried to do them as much as I can, and then slowly tried different strategies to see if they work.” – classroom teacher, interview

The implementation of oracy techniques required teachers to adapt their day-to-day classroom practices. Leaders acknowledged that some staff were more confident or more willing to try new oracy techniques, compared to others. In interviews, schools emphasised the importance of staff feeling that the focus on oracy was, as one school leader explained, a long-term change and not “*something we’re going to do for a couple of months, then move on.*”

Consistency was a problem throughout the school. I think it is improving, it is an area we’re still working on [...] like people buying into it at the beginning, but I feel like everyone’s so keen on it now. [...] when we’re doing the staff meetings, it feels completely different because people are into it and want to do it. – school leader, interview

School leaders described strategically identifying and encouraging more enthusiastic staff to try different techniques and share what they learned with other staff. Interviews with teaching staff showed that teachers found this approach to sharing ideas and learning as supportive.

There’s four [teachers] - they all have a different area of responsibility. So, the direction I’ve given them is incorporate [oracy training] into what you’re planning and then others will pick that up. – school leader, interview

Example: Permission to fail and shared learning

School B encouraged a “permission to fail” culture. This helped staff feel comfortable experimenting with new oracy techniques and learning from what did not work straight away. This approach meant teachers were open to reflecting on their practice and making small adjustments as they became familiar with the techniques. Staff regularly modelled activities for one another and shared classroom examples, which spread effective ideas across the school. Teachers were encouraged to observe each other’s lessons. This gave them the opportunity to observe how different approaches worked in real classrooms. This open, collaborative approach built staff confidence and fostered shared ownership of the school’s oracy development.

“Training combined with open discussion and a ‘permission to fail’ attitude has led to the implementation success.” - oracy lead, interview

Schools used school development plans, talk audits and curriculum reviews to focus whole-school activity and tailor implementation to the school context.

School development plans were widely used to recognise oracy as a priority. Fifteen of the 18 schools that took part in a telephone survey stated oracy was a priority in their school development plan.

“We wanted to put it in the school development plan because we knew that if we don’t then it possibly would fall off... we really wanted to make it a priority.” school leader, interview

Several schools following the dialogic teaching approach with *Oracy Cambridge* completed audits of oracy practice early in the programme implementation. Similarly, *Voice 21* schools worked with consultants to produce a review of their starting point in relation to oracy practice. Audits were often supported by either a consultant from the external oracy organisation or from the local authority. Some schools described how audits allowed them to make rapid, concrete changes that contributed to building the oracy culture across the school, as well as developing oracy in teaching practices. Audits also supported schools to feel ownership of their oracy programme and to ensure that activity was focused around the school's specific needs.

“We got Oracy Cambridge to come in and do talk audits with our five schools [...] and what came out of that's been really useful; spending time in the schools and really getting to know them and seeing what their oracy is really like, what starting point they're at.” – borough lead, Interview

In case study schools, curriculum leads helped ensure oracy was embedded into the curriculum rather than as add on. In one school, the oracy work coincided with an internal curriculum review, allowing oracy to be integrated in the overall curriculum planning. In other schools, curriculum leads looked at how oracy techniques could be linked to curriculum areas. This gave teaching staff a clear starting point to ensure that oracy techniques were being used purposefully in their teaching.

“Integrating Talk Matters activities into the existing curriculum takes careful planning and takes time. [...] The project takes time to set up in the first place as there is so many aspects to it.” – school leader, monitoring data

Schools also gave careful attention to how the oracy implementation fitted with other priorities and ways of working. The researchers observed how schools were integrating oracy with other initiatives, including the pupil voice work undertaken as part of the UNICEF Rights Respecting Schools awards and having Apple Accreditation.

Example: Integration with other initiatives

School B has integrated oracy with its status as an Apple Accredited school. This programme gives each student an iPad to enhance their learning. Building on this, the school focused on using iPads to support its implementation of *Talk Matters*. To further connect oracy with other areas, the school linked oracy to whole class reading by using digital books on iPads to prompt discussion. Additionally, teachers provided pupils with opportunities to record voice notes and videos. This helped pupils practise speaking and review their ideas. Pupils shared recordings with teachers and families, providing those who find writing difficult a different way to express their thoughts. As a result, parents noted that the Apple platform enabled them to view their child's learning in real time, which they valued. Ultimately, oracy became a normal part of how pupils use iPads to learn and share work.

3.2.2 Targeted oracy support - *Talk Boost*

Schools in all seven boroughs delivered *Talk Boost Key Stage 1*, and five boroughs also adopted *Early Talk Boost*.¹² *Talk Boost* was mostly delivered by a small group of teaching assistants who received training on the intervention. School leaders selected staff to deliver *Talk Boost* based on capacity, the year groups they were working with and interest in oracy.

Staff generally liked the *Talk Boost* training and the resources provided for sessions.

The number of staff who received *Talk Boost* training in each school varied. In some schools, only those delivering the intervention and oracy leads attended training. In other schools, the training was offered to some teachers as well to provide a wider understanding of the aims and approach of *Talk Boost*. Some classroom teachers who did not take part in *Talk Boost* training said they would have liked the opportunity to so they could incorporate what children had been taught into their lessons. Despite this, even where teaching staff were engaged in *Talk Boost* training, they explained that it was difficult to find time to integrate this into classroom teaching due to time pressures in covering the existing curriculum materials.

As with the training for the whole school approach, staff reported that the *Talk Boost* training was useful in providing an understanding of the purpose and concepts behind the intervention. However, staff also suggested that the best way to learn about the delivery was to get familiar with the resources and learn through doing the sessions.

“[Talk Boost training] was really good. It was informative, we could see the reason why it needed to be done... We can see where the gap is, and why it needed to be foundational and then incremented all the way up.” - Talk Boost delivery staff, interview

“I think for me [Talk Boost] just made more sense as I was doing it and going through it. So, the training, it was nice to have the time to look at everything and to see some videos and to talk to other practitioners. But the actual delivery of it, I think you've got to find your own... I don't think [the training] helped with the delivery of it, but the understanding of it and behind it, and looking at what's been done in the past.” – Talk Boost delivery staff, interview

As with the whole school approach, staff valued the opportunity to observe others' *Talk Boost* sessions, and to be observed and receive feedback. Staff praised the *Talk Boost* resources, with many saying they were clear and adaptable to suit their pupils' needs. *Talk Boost* staff fed back that having individual folders, rather than sharing resources across multiple staff, was helpful as it meant that they could annotate and spend time familiarising themselves with the sessions prior to running them.

Challenges associated with implementing *Talk Boost* included identifying the right pupils to benefit from the intervention and staff capacity to deliver all the sessions as intended.

Talk Boost assessments were reported to be time consuming, and staff and leaders expressed concerns that the assessment criteria did not always highlight the children they believed could most benefit from the intervention. There was some confusion among schools about the suitability of *Talk Boost* for pupils

¹² A few schools also used *Talk Boost Key Stage 2* but the numbers of these are low and have not been included in the evaluation findings presented here.

with SEN or EAL. Some schools understood that the green, amber, red scoring (see ‘*Talk Boost* eligibility criteria’ below) should be applied rigidly to include only pupils who fell within the amber category. One school explained that in following an evidence-based approach, they only wanted to include pupils where there was evidence that the intervention would be beneficial. However, leaders and staff in these schools felt that *Talk Boost* may also benefit children outside of this category. A few schools delivered the intervention to children who fell outside the amber category but did not formally track their progress or record outcomes in the online tracker. Other schools applied the scoring more flexibly and applied their own judgement as to which pupils should take part, in some cases adapting resources to work with pupils with SEN or higher support needs. As part of the evaluation, advice was sought from *Speech and Language UK* to clarify the eligibility criteria, and this suggested that a degree of flexibility is encouraged when applying the assessment score criteria.

Talk Boost eligibility criteria

Speech and Language UK describe *Talk Boost* as being designed for children with language delay. This means children who have intact language learning ability but have not developed age expected language skills. The initial assessment produces a score which places pupils in a one of three categories: green, amber or red. Pupils in the green category are working at age-expected levels and are not considered to need *Talk Boost* intervention. Pupils in the amber category are working towards age expected levels but not currently achieving them; this group is considered suitable for participation in *Talk Boost*. Pupils in the red category are working *below* age expected levels. The *Talk Boost* assessment manual suggests that this group *may* benefit from *Talk Boost* but require close monitoring and may need referral to a specialist speech and language therapist (SaLT). While *Talk Boost* says it is not intended for pupils with an identified SEN or those who need SaLT support, they also suggest that these pupils could benefit from *Talk Boost* if the pace and level of activity is adapted. However, they recommend seeking SaLT advice first.

The implementation of *Talk Boost* was more constrained than the whole school approach as it specified number of sessions and content to be delivered in detail. Schools reported trying to maintain fidelity with the programme delivery as far as possible. However, schools reported some challenges of implementing *Talk Boost* as intended.

Talk Boost was mostly delivered by teaching assistants who also had other responsibilities to deliver interventions and support classroom teaching (e.g. to provide cover for staff). Several schools were concerned that they could not ensure all the *Talk Boost* sessions were delivered to all targeted pupils within a school term due to staff and pupil absences and other commitments such as swimming lessons and school trips.

3.2.3 Wellbeing and parental engagement activities

The wellbeing and parental engagement activities were deliberately non-prescriptive in the programme design. Initially, schools reported that the aims and scope of this element of the programme were not clear and this caused challenges when identifying appropriate activities. However, by the end of the programme, schools had developed a clear vision and strong synergy between the aims of the wellbeing and oracy strands of the programme.

Schools mostly appreciated the flexibility of the *Talk Matters* programme in allowing schools to adapt the programme to their own contexts. However, initially, the broad scope of the wellbeing and parental

engagement strand made it difficult for some schools to develop a clear vision around how to best use the resource in line with the programme's aims. Some felt there was not enough guidance on what activities would be appropriate or impactful.

Borough leads either let schools identify wellbeing activities for themselves or gave schools a choice of interventions from a limited number of options. Where boroughs encouraged schools to identify the wellbeing activities, some struggled to make decisions and felt there was not sufficient guidance. In contrast, where boroughs steered schools towards a limited choice of activities, schools found this helpful.

“We allowed the schools to pick from three different providers for the wellbeing aspect and having that input from them has definitely allowed them to be much more engaged in that particular aspect.” – borough lead, interview

“We were asked to create an action plan around what we were going to do [for the wellbeing strand] but we had no idea...the wellbeing strand for us was way behind everything else”- school leader, interview

Some boroughs discussed preferences with schools before buying-in a borough-wide approach for *Talk Matters* schools. Two boroughs purchased *OPAL play*, and one purchased support through *Jigsaw4U*. In other boroughs, schools developed their own plans individually by either purchasing activities from outside or using the resource to fund staff time and buy resources. Schools implemented a wide array of wellbeing activities, adapting activities throughout the programme based on learning or availability of provision where support was bought in from other providers. Table 1 shows examples of the wellbeing activities delivered.

Table 1: Examples of wellbeing activities in schools

Wellbeing activities
Targeting professional therapeutic support for selected pupils, including through <i>Jigsaw4U</i> ¹³
After school clubs and extra-curricular activities, including sports, drama and art - schools in one borough participated in <i>Children's University</i> ¹⁴ to encourage and celebrate participation in extra-curricular activities
Improving play facilities and structures, particularly through <i>OPAL play</i> ¹⁵
Buying equipment to support oracy or wellbeing activities, including podcasting equipment and storytelling resources
Establishing pupil roles to support wellbeing in the school, including training and support for staff
Targeting language support for parents with EAL
Creating wellbeing, calm or sensory spaces

¹³ [Jigsaw4u | Helping Put the Pieces Back Together](#)

¹⁴ [Home | Children's University](#)

¹⁵ <https://outdoorplayandlearning.org.uk/opal-programme/introduction/>

Staff buy-in for the wellbeing strand varied depending on the type of activity. Some of the activities required support from only a small number of staff in specific roles. However, in some schools the wellbeing activities incorporated wider changes across the school. A key example of this was *OPAL play*, a school improvement programme focused on addressing the quality of play across the school with support from an externally provided mentor. *OPAL play* was adopted by several schools. One case study school explained that initially staff had concerns about risks in introducing some of the play activities and bringing together pupils across all age groups. In this instance, leaders explained that staff became more on board with *OPAL play* after seeing it in action.

The different types of wellbeing activities meant that the number pupils involved in these activities varied considerably from school to school. Monitoring data shows that, across different boroughs, when wellbeing activities were delivered, between 26 and 2,237 pupils per term were involved. The evaluation did not seek to assess the impact of these activities.

Case study schools demonstrated a clear synergy between the aims of the wellbeing activities and the wider oracy objectives for the school. They were able to clearly articulate how the wellbeing and oracy activities reinforced each other. For example, pupils were better able to engage with peers as their oracy skills improved, while more purposeful interaction between pupils supported their oracy skills.

Despite some schools having initial challenges implementing the wellbeing strand, by the end of the programme, schools feedback was overwhelmingly positive with several schools seeking to fund the activities beyond the *Talk Matters* programme.

Schools welcomed the opportunity to support parents into schools and learn more about oracy, but most schools found it difficult to engage a wide range of parents

School staff interviewed acknowledged the importance of language use at home and expressed a commitment to promoting oracy amongst parents as part of the *Talk Matters* programme. Across many participating schools, parental engagement in school life was a challenge (as is the case for many schools). *Talk Matters* schools cited barriers including a lack of available time for working parents, parents with limited English language, and parents' own negative experiences of going to school or attitude towards schooling. Breaking down these barriers was felt to be important for reaching those parents whose children could benefit most from greater parental engagement in school.

"I think some of our parents maybe didn't have a very positive experience of school themselves, so they come in with quite a negative attitude. We have to sort of break that down." – school leader, interview

"[It is a] challenge to reach those [parents] who don't naturally sign up or aren't available at after-school workshop times." – school leader, monitoring data

Schools implemented a range of activities to engage parents as part of the *Talk Matters* programme (see Table 2).

Table 2: Parental engagement activities

Parental engagement activities
Oracy focused workshops, coffee mornings and demonstrations
Parent and child activities in school, e.g. gardening projects, cooking classes, craft activities and yoga
School performances, oracy showcases and events delivered to parents
Trips out for parents and children, including to theatre, cinema and parks

Several schools experimented with different approaches to try and engage more parents, often seeking advice and ideas from other participating schools. Schools typically found that, unless they already had high levels of engagement with parents, oracy focused workshops were not effective at reaching parents. Some schools did report good engagement with ‘talk cafes’ and coffee mornings. Others found that inviting parents to come in and see their child’s progress (e.g. through reading together and oracy showcases) were more successful. Several schools said that focusing on activities that offered parents fun and wellbeing-focused activities (such as cinema trips, something to take home such as cooking classes) were well received. Opportunities for talk could then be integrated into these activities without oracy being the explicit focus.

“We’ve got cooking facilities, so started a cooking club...we’ve done four sessions with about ten parents. They have to bring their child, and only one child, because it’s that one-to-one [time] with their child. And it’s been great. They [parents] really made the effort...they took some food home, gave them the recipes, there was a little bit of talk and then there was a bit of discussion. We did different cultures and they really enjoyed it.” – school leader, interview

“Schools have engaged parents through trips and visits to local parks, feeding the deer, going to the theatre and cinema... Lots of fun and talk going on after the visits with follow up sessions. Parents have had the opportunity to understand the importance of Oracy through staff providing opportunities of modelling good communication.” – school leader, monitoring data

Targeting parents with invites to an activity was felt to be more effective than a general notice of an event. One school said that they were able to have their school inclusion lead successfully target some families, for example, they hosted a movie night for families with EAL which was very successful. Schools also highlighted the importance of making any parent activities culturally inclusive and removing barriers where possible, including language barriers.

“Even hard-to-reach parents are attending sessions with greater confidence, a testament to the inclusive and supportive approach of these initiatives.” – school leader, monitoring data

“The Family Garden project will be open to all and inclusive of all families within our school community. We believe this is an accessible activity even for parents with more limited use of English and allows families to work together in English in a non-threatening and practical activity.” – school leader, monitoring data

3.3 Planning for sustainability

Boroughs and schools were keen to continue to develop oracy beyond the funded programme.

Throughout the programme, boroughs and school leads were considering how they could sustain a focus on oracy and wellbeing activities after the programme funding ended. To achieve this, some schools were looking at how they could share learning and develop their own resources to support new staff on an ongoing basis. However, schools did identify cost (particularly the loss of dedicated staff time) as a barrier to continuing the programme in the same form post funding.

“Sustainability has always been key. So, we don’t really want to, you know, keep launching new initiative after new initiative without a focus on sustainability” - borough lead, Interview

“There is no budget elsewhere. I think it’s really important that we do continue it and I think we need to look at ways in which we can continue it in a low-cost way.” - school leader, interview

Borough leads were actively working with schools to identify how the oracy work could be sustained, including through continued networking across the schools within boroughs and with the cohort 2 schools that started delivery in 2025. In some boroughs, funding was stretched to allow cohort 1 schools to continue some elements into the 2025/26 academic year, including ongoing delivery of *Talk Boost* in some schools and access to additional training where a need was identified (e.g. in relation to oracy and SEN). One borough had established a relationship with a local university to embed SaLT students in schools to support oracy practice and interventions.

Several boroughs initiated collaborative efforts amongst *Talk Matters* schools to share resources including workbooks, videos, and newsletters, with the objective of developing a comprehensive resource bank for schools. Schools following the dialogic teaching model had access to recorded training which could be accessed by staff as needed. In one borough, membership of *Voice 21* was extended to provide ongoing access to resources.

Several boroughs are planning to develop a network of wider schools engaged in oracy work through a local oracy hub and were looking at how this could be resourced. Developing this long-term vision will require dedicated oracy leads within schools to further implement oracy initiatives.

“I want us to have a huge resource bank that is available to schools, I think that’s the beginning of the hub...look at how we can help you be ahead of the game.” - borough lead, interview

Most interviewees felt it was difficult to predict how their oracy journey would continue but including oracy in the school development plan and embedding strategies into the curriculum was noted as a priority. One Oracy Champion explained that by embedding oracy in school systems, they hoped to be able to continue this focus without additional planning and investment.

“If we were to walk out of that door tomorrow, what would be left? We’ve talked about what we want it to look like... the next step is for curriculum leads to become trained up

in some way and think about how oracy looks in their subject. Next year is gonna be our big drive to move that forward and make sure it's still happening in the classrooms."

- Oracy Champion, interview

"Hopefully, [Oracy Champions] have embedded it so much that all the subject leaders will just be doing it, and it will be something that doesn't need all of the specific input, it just needs the monitoring." - school leader, interview

4.0 Contribution analysis findings

Emerging evidence on outcomes

- ▶ There was good evidence that schools were implementing a range of oracy practices in the classroom on a regular basis, that teachers were clear on the purpose of these practices, and that pupils understood how and why they were part of their classroom learning.
- ▶ There was consistent evidence from the staff survey and interviews in case study schools, showing that school leaders created a school environment that encourages and supports oracy practices.
- ▶ Interview data indicated that most staff need time to adopt oracy techniques, and schools expect ongoing learning after the funded programme.
- ▶ Data from staff survey and interviews showed an increase in knowledge about oracy and confidence to apply this knowledge in teaching practice.
- ▶ The evaluation found early indications to suggest that teachers enjoy applying oracy within their work, citing both engagement in the classroom and reduced workload.
- ▶ Feedback from school leaders and teachers provides good evidence of improvements in pupils' engagement with their learning. Staff feedback also showed early indications of improvements in the quality of pupils' written work.
- ▶ Survey and interview data show that the Talk Matters programme raised pupil confidence to speak. Staff and pupils report more peer-to-peer talk, better communication skills, and greater confidence, which have led to improved relationships and fewer behaviour incidents.
- ▶ Staff taking part in the survey and interviews believed that pupils were enjoying school more because of the Talk Matters programme. A small number of schools linked this to improved pupils' attendance.
- ▶ Talk Boost assessments were useful for identifying pupils with SLCN and offering support but, overall, schools did not report any change in the amount or quality of referrals to specialist speech and language therapy services as a result. More evidence is necessary to assess this intended outcome.
- ▶ Assessment scores for Talk Boost pupils showed strong improvements in oracy skills. Without a comparison group, we cannot determine how much progress would have occurred without the intervention.
- ▶ Feedback from schools on the impact for Talk Boost pupils suggested that pupil confidence and classroom engagement improved as a result of the intervention.
- ▶ Survey results indicated increased parental awareness of oracy and ways to support it at home, including confidence in helping their children to develop speaking and listening skills.
- ▶ Parents and pupils who participated in engagement activities reported that these experiences encouraged additional oracy-related activities at home.

This section presents findings from the evaluation in relation to each of the key contribution claims based on the theory of change (see Appendix, Figure 5). The theory of change sets out the anticipated causal pathways between the programme's planned activities and the intended outcomes. Contribution claims review the evidence to assess how far it supports or refutes this causal pathway in practice (see Table 3). Findings are grouped by outcomes for schools and school staff, for pupils and for parents. Under each contribution claim, the research team summarised the findings to date and the extent to which they supported the claim, before briefly presenting the findings from each evaluation component in relation that claim.

Table 3: Contribution claims: evidence descriptors

Evidence rating	Description
Strong, consistent evidence	This applies where multiple sources provide evidence, with a strong degree of confidence, in supporting the claim. No significant counter evidence is observed.
Consistent evidence	This applies where all the evidence collected supports the claim, but there may be significant limitations in the evidence (e.g. lack of comparative data or low response rates)
Some good evidence	This applies where evidence from multiple sources support the claim, but there is some opposing evidence, or sources suggest caveats and limitations on their evidence.
Limited evidence	This applies where a few sources provide evidence to support the claim, but this is a minority or heavily caveated.
Little or no evidence to date	This applies primarily where the outcomes are expected to be longer-term and unlikely to manifest in observable ways within the period covered, or where the evidence has not yet been systematically gathered. In some cases, this may be addressed in the final evaluation report.

Unless otherwise stated, all changes reported in the survey data are statistically significant at $p < 0.05$.

4.1 Outcomes for schools

4.1.1 A positive culture for oracy

Contribution claim: School leaders create a school environment that encourages and supports oracy practices.

There is a **strong, consistent evidence** from the staff survey and case study interview data to show school leaders in participating schools created a school environment that encourages and supports oracy practices.

Over time, staff reported a greater commitment to delivering oracy-focused practice

Responses to the staff survey show that most teaching staff and school leaders already believed oracy to be important at the start of the programme, even if they were not yet using oracy practices explicitly or consistently in their day-to-day work.

- ▶ At wave 1 (autumn term, 2024), 84% of staff surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that oracy is an important part of their job. There was no statistically significant increase by wave 2 (autumn term, 2025) (87% agreed or strongly agreed)
- ▶ Similarly, no change was seen in the proportion of staff agreeing that learning about oracy could improve their performance (86% agreed or strongly agreed at wave 1; 89% at wave 2).

In interviews, school leaders reported that most teachers were enthusiastic about a greater focus on oracy and this was supported in interview with teachers.

Although staff attitudes to oracy did not change much over time, the staff survey found an increase in schools prioritising and embedding oracy practices.

- ▶ The proportion of staff agreeing that 'My school places a high priority on oracy' rose from 77% in wave 1 to 89% in wave 2, a statistically significant 12-percentage point increase.¹⁶
- ▶ Staff agreement with the statement 'I see oracy practices modelled across the school' increased from 62% in wave 1 to 82% in wave 2 (a statistically significant 20-percentage point increase).

The survey also showed that staff felt more supported by their schools to implement oracy practices as the programme progressed.

- ▶ The proportion of staff who agreed to the statement 'I have access to the resources I need to use oracy practices in my work' increased from 63% at wave 1 to 77% at wave 2 – a statistically significant 14-percentage point increase.
- ▶ At wave 1, 72% of staff respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they 'feel supported to use oracy practices in my work' increasing to 80% at wave 2 – a statistically significant eight per cent change.

Pupils have a good understanding of what oracy means, how pupil talking and listening is encouraged across the school, and why it is important.

In interviews, staff described a culture of oracy developing in their school over the course of the programme with expectations of more pupils talking in and out of the classroom, improved listening and respect for what others say, and a greater sense of collaboration across the school.

“Now that oracy is embedded across the school, it has created a culture of talk. Everyone contributes without judgement. It’s a collaborative environment.” – classroom teacher, interview

During case study visits, researchers interviewed pupils about speaking and listening in school, including what talk-based classroom activities they do. Pupils of all ages recognised a focus on speaking and

¹⁶ Unless otherwise stated, all changes reported in the survey data are statistically significant at $p < 0.05$.

listening in their learning and described its role in their education. They noted that oracy skills are valuable for future careers, support learning, and improve relationships.

Beyond classroom-based learning, pupils said they had a range of different opportunities to develop and use oracy skills. These included assemblies which incorporated pupil talk and presentations, debate clubs, school council and other pupil voice roles and various extra-curricular activities that incorporated a focus on peer-to-peer talk outside of the classroom. These opportunities, as well as greater pupil participation in classes, led to a stronger culture of listening and respect, with pupils reporting that they felt their voice was valued in the school (see Section 4.2.2). In group discussions, pupils were able to explain why pupil voice and developing oracy skills were important.

[On speaking in assembly] “It’s scary when you first do it, but then you do it every single week and it becomes normal.” – pupil, focus group

4.1.2 Knowledge and confidence in oracy practices and identifying SLCN

Contribution claim: School staff receive training in oracy practices which increases their knowledge and confidence around oracy practices in school.

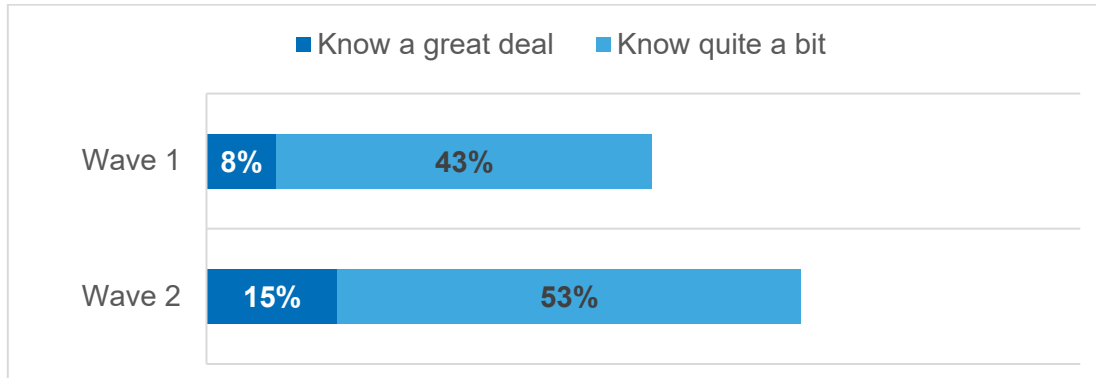
There is **strong, consistent evidence**, primarily from the staff survey and interviews in case study schools, to show an increase in knowledge about oracy and confidence to apply this knowledge in teaching practice.

Qualitative data suggests it takes time for most staff to feel comfortable embedding oracy techniques. Schools emphasised that they expected learning to continue to develop in the years following the programme’s implementation.

Staff at *Talk Matters* schools reported increased knowledge and confidence around oracy by the end of the programme.

- ▶ The staff survey showed staff knowledge of oracy was high before the programme commenced, with 88% of respondents reporting any knowledge in wave 1 (autumn term, 2024) and increasing to 95% at wave 2 (autumn term, 2025) – a seven-percentage point increase. Analysis found a statistically significant increase among teachers but no change among school leaders.
- ▶ A greater increase was seen in the proportion of staff rating their knowledge at the higher end of the scale. At wave 2, 15% said they know a great deal (compared with 8% at wave 1) and 53% said they know quite a bit (compared with 43% at wave 1 (see Figure 1), this was a statistically significant difference.

Figure 1: Staff rated knowledge about oracy



- ▶ At wave 1, 72% of staff reported increased knowledge about oracy in the past year, rising to 86% at wave 2 – a statistically significant 14-percentage point increase. (see Appendix, Table 13).
- ▶ The proportion of staff who stated they were fairly or very confident using oracy practices increased from 89% in wave 1 to 95% in wave 2 - a statistically significant six-percentage point increase.
- ▶ The proportion of staff who felt very confident using oracy practices rose from 35% at wave 1 to 54% at wave 2 – a statistically significant increase of 19-percentage points.
- ▶ At wave 2, 82% of staff said their confidence in using oracy techniques had increased over the last 12 months, compared to 67% at wave 1 – this was a statistically significant 15-percentage point increase.

Figure 2: Staff rated confidence using oracy practice

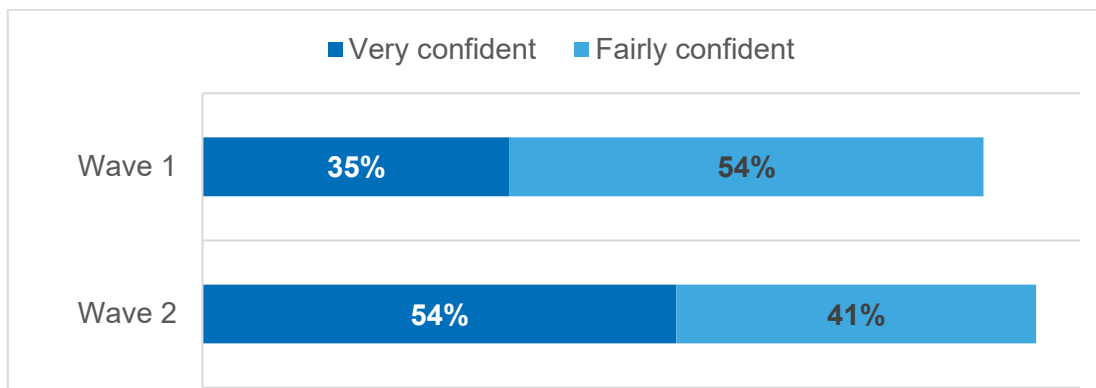
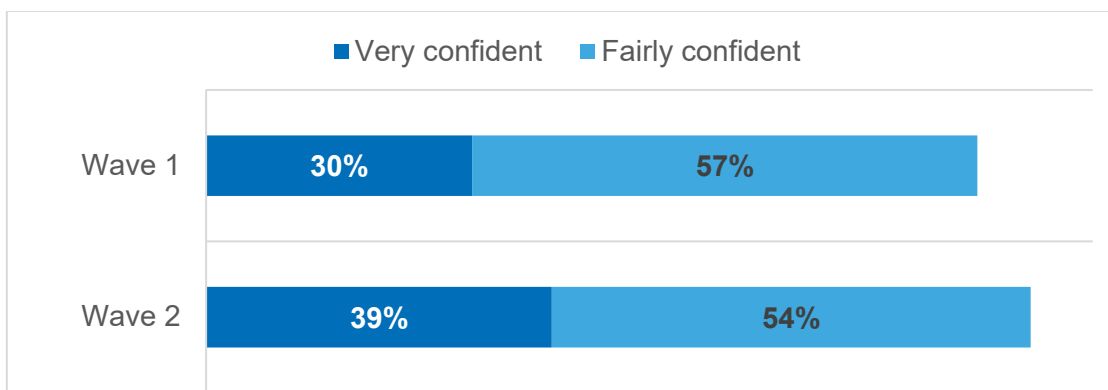


Figure 3: Staff rated confidence supporting children with SLCN



The staff survey asked about staff confidence in supporting pupils with SLCN.

- ▶ Staff confidence in identifying pupils needing specialist speech and language support increased from 90% at wave 1 (autumn term, 2024) to 94% at wave 2 (autumn term, 2025) – this was a statistically significant four-percentage point increase.
- ▶ At wave 2, a greater proportion of staff reported that their confidence in identifying pupils with SLCN had shifted over the past year, increasing from 60% at wave 1 to 69% at wave 2 – a statistically significant nine-percentage point increase.
- ▶ A greater proportion of staff expressed confidence in supporting pupils with SLCN by wave 2; 93% said they felt fairly or very confident, an increase from 87% at wave 1. This was a statistically significant six-percentage point increase.
- ▶ In wave 2, 39% of respondents reported being 'very confident,' an increase from 30% in wave 1 (a statistically significant nine-percentage point difference).
- ▶ In wave 2, 73% of staff indicated that their confidence in supporting pupils with SLCN had increased over the past 12 months, compared to 65% in wave 1 – a statistically significant eight-percentage point increase.

The increase in knowledge and confidence at wave 2 may reflect both the higher proportion of staff who had received training and the ongoing work in schools to embed oracy practices. The qualitative data collected through the case studies suggested that training was effective in increasing knowledge, and that knowledge and confidence both continued to increase as staff tried different oracy techniques and embedded them in their work. Staff also continued to learn from each other through ongoing training and collaboration throughout the academic year. School leaders felt that staff would continue to learn and gain confidence in oracy practices after the *Talk Matters* programme ended.

“We had several sessions where we explored what oracy means and why it’s important. We looked at how we could make changes to improve classroom success, shared techniques and examples, tested them on each other to see what worked, and revisited in later sessions with more ideas.” – school leader, interview

4.1.3 Improved oracy-related teaching practices

Contribution claim: As a result of the improved knowledge and confidence around oracy, teachers are delivering high quality oracy practice in the classroom and across the school.

There was **some good evidence**, through the case study visits and staff survey, that schools were implementing a range of oracy practices in the classroom on a regular basis, that teachers were clear on the purpose of these practices, and that pupils understood how and why they were part of their classroom learning.

There is also evidence that practice is not yet consistent. While school survey findings suggest widespread changes in practice, observed practice is limited to case study schools. Findings suggest that this had increased throughout the academic year, and that school leaders and staff expected it to continue to grow and improve.

- ▶ Of the 316 staff trained in oracy at wave 1 (autumn term, 2024), 47% changed their practice quite a lot or to a great extent following the training. At wave 2 (autumn term, 2025), among 322 trained staff, this increased to 66% (see Appendix, Table 11), this was a statistically significant difference.
- ▶ Among teaching staff specifically, the proportion who had changed their practice quite a lot or to a great extent rose from 44% to 65% - this was a statistically significant 21-percentage point increase. Only 1% of teaching staff said they had not changed their practice at all.

The telephone survey of school leaders (autumn term 2024 and spring term 2025) suggested early movement towards experimenting with oracy practices. At that point, most schools were focusing on increasing familiarity with oracy techniques and phrases and ensuring oracy was included in lesson plans. Throughout the year, schools reported that staff were experimenting with using more oracy techniques.

“Using the signals and the agreeing/disagreeing sentences stems provided children in key stage 2 especially are starting to articulate their ideas more clearly and are using conjunctions to justify them. Children and teachers have trialled and are enjoying four of the Voice 21 activities. We are gradually introducing and trying them out.” – school leader, monitoring data

Teachers typically started with a few classroom oracy techniques and built on them gradually.

Schools acknowledged that it took time to develop quality oracy practice and confidence. Schools often started with a focus on one or two year groups or curriculum areas. This enabled schools to reflect and adapt teaching strategies based on what they found successful. Some teachers reflected that oracy had been harder to embed in some lessons than others (for example, a few felt maths and science were more challenging), however this was not consistent across schools. Some schools reported that focusing on one technique also meant children quickly got used to the activity and were able to use it more frequently, rather than trying to learn lots of techniques at once.

“We have started to have a small integrated approach to incorporate techniques for speech in classes. We have mainly focused on year 5 [...]. There have been some successes with the way in which partner talk has improved in the class. The aim is to move forward and have other groups start incorporating spoken strategies more within their lessons.” – school leader, monitoring data

By the summer term 2024/25, when case study visits took place, researchers could see a wide range of oracy techniques used in classrooms (see Table 4). While there were some common techniques used across all year groups, there was also evidence of adaptation to different age groups. For example, Reception pupils were using thumbs up or thumbs down to show they agreed or disagreed with a statement, while key stage 2 pupils were expected to explain their views, give their reasoning, and respond to each other in greater depth.

Feedback from teachers and pupils showed that these activities were in widespread and regular use in lessons. Pupils' familiarity with oracy techniques was clearly seen in classroom visits. Teachers gave minimal instruction to move between tasks and pupils responded quickly and confidently to shift between nesting, paired talk, group discussion and focus on the teacher's talk (see Table 4). In one school, oracy practices were described as 'second nature' to most pupils.

"It started off using symbols... but as the children became more comfortable, we switched to talking about partners and trios... it's kind of become second nature to the kids as well." – classroom teacher, interview

During group discussions, pupils described the oracy techniques that were regularly used in their classroom. They were able to discuss the purpose of these and express their views about what they felt worked well. In one group, an impromptu debate emerged about the merits of cold-calling, with pupils agreeing and disagreeing with each other giving justifications and responding to each other's points:

"In the class I'm in, the teacher uses a variety of cold calling and hands up."

"If the teacher is asking for an idea, she should pick people with their hands up because others might not have their ideas yet."

"I don't think cold calling is fair because they might pick someone who is confused."

"Cold calling is fair because it can make people pay more attention."

"If you're not sure about the answer, the teacher might call you and might be right."

Selected quotes from group discussion with pupils

While these techniques were seen in practice, and pupils were able to identify and describe them, schools acknowledged that good oracy practice was not necessarily consistent across all classes yet. Some teachers found adapting to using more oracy techniques easier than others. Schools were continuing to monitor and develop the use of oracy across teaching staff and to encourage all staff to keep building on the techniques already in use.

Table 4: Oracy techniques seen and discussed during classroom visits with case study schools

Generating and sharing ideas through peer-to-peer pupil talk	
	A range of techniques were seen in action that sought to elicit ideas through discussion and oral contributions from pupils in the class.
'Magnet hands'	Pupils find a partner from across the class to discuss with, ensuring each pupil has a range of different partners. For example, one school used the idea that opposites attract (like a magnet) so pupils had to find someone different from them on a specified characteristic (e.g. hair colour).
Talk trios	In groups of three, two pupils discuss while the third listens and then summarises key points back to the class.
'Rally robin'	Pupils take turns to give rapid responses to a theme or question where there are many potential answers. For example, a list of adjectives appropriate to a writing task. Pupils need to listen so they do not repeat suggestions already given.

[For magnet hands] "It's better to have different partners to get a bunch of different ideas, and I get to know people better." – pupil, focus group

Ensuring wider participation of pupils	
	Teachers were seen to be using different techniques to widen participation in the classroom, ensuring that contributions were not dominated by a smaller number of highly engaged pupils.
Cold calling	Teachers select pupils without asking pupils to raise their hands or volunteer a response.
Thumbs-to-chest	Instead of raising hands, pupils subtly indicate when they have an answer by placing their thumb to their chest. Once enough pupils are considered to have an answer the teacher selects one pupil to give a response.

Phone-a-friend

Pupils bounce questions to other pupils, either to help them reach an answer or to build on their answer.

Random selections

Teachers use computerised or physical randomisers (e.g. names pulled from a cup) to give all pupils an equal chance of being called on to speak.

Teachers were seen to be using different techniques to widen participation in the classroom, ensuring that contributions were not dominated by a smaller number of highly engaged pupils.

[On the use of thumbs to chest] “Some people think more slowly, so they don’t all have to be ready at the same time.” – pupil, focus group

“I pick randomly so everyone has to be ready with an answer... it gives the children who do not necessarily speak as much, the opportunity to speak.” – classroom teacher, interview

Building vocabulary and talk structure

Several approaches were observed to encourage pupils to strengthen their communication skills through the use of wider vocabulary and more structured sentences.

‘Bonus word’ or ‘word of the day’

Key terminology that pupils are encouraged to use in their answers, often technical terms relating to the topic.

Sentence stems

Pupils are given the opening to a sentence and have to continue it with their response. This is used to encourage full sentence responses and courteous, respectful exchanges. For example, “I would like to disagree with X because...”. Sentence stems were seen on classroom walls and some teachers asked pupils to use specific stems in a discussion.

“Sentence stems are good because if you don’t know how to start – it happens to me a lot – they give a guide for how to get started. It gives students the upper hand.” – pupil, focus group

Deeper engagement and reflective talk

These talk-based activities were used to encourage deeper reflection on topics, including through pupils exploring what they think, exchanging ideas and responding to their peers' reflections.

Nesting

Pupils speak quietly into their hands to practice articulating their ideas before sharing them with others.

'Think, Pair, Share'

Pupils first think about an answer individually, then discuss it with a partner and finally share with the class.

'Agree, Build, Challenge'

Pupils respond to each other by either agreeing, developing or challenging each others' ideas, and state why.

Responding to each other [pupil-to-pupil] is now part of our practice, but we're more aware of including it intentionally. We make sure to leave time for this and for discussion...it draws out deeper thinking." – classroom teacher, interview

Feedback on oracy skills

Teachers were seen to provide explicit guidance and feedback on pupils' developing oracy skills, including around use of particular terms or structures and the physical delivery of talk. In classroom visits, teacher-to-pupil *and* pupil-to-pupil feedback was seen.

"After pupils speak, teacher asks classmates whether they can hear and understand; asks pupil to repeat if others haven't understood. Teacher challenges pupils to speak without using 'um'. Praise and feedback is given after each pupil contribution. ... when pupils read out section of the book, teacher gives advice and feedback on posture and projecting their voice." – researcher notes from classroom visit

4.1.4 Improved support for speech, language and communication needs (SLCN)

Contribution claims: As a result of upskilling staff on interventions for children with SLCN, more appropriate use is made of specialist Speech and Language Therapy (SaLT).

There is **little or no evidence** to support or refute this claim to date.

Talk Boost assessments helped to identify pupils with language delay and provide support through the intervention. While there may be longer-term impact on the need for specialist SaLT by addressing needs earlier, no evidence has been found of a change in SaLT referrals to date.

Teachers and leaders felt that *Talk Boost* was a positive intervention for pupils who are often missed by targeted interventions because they are not among those with the highest support needs, but who still struggled with language and communication. Oracy leads felt that *Talk Boost* filled this gap.

“I was looking for something for those ‘middle children’, those children on the cusp that sometimes get missed out because they’re not quite low enough, but they actually need the boost. That’s where Talk Boost comes in.” - Oracy Champion, interview

It is possible that through identifying children with lower-level needs earlier, and providing targeted support, there may be a longer-term impact on the use of SaLT, as was postulated in the theory change. There was also some suggestion, however, that children who need specialist SaLT support may have received less support in school as a result of focusing on this ‘middle’ category of children. One school argued that by targeting other children, time and resource was being diverted away from pupils with higher levels of need.

“We have a large number of children with speech and language challenges. The Talk Boost interventions do not target the children with more advanced speech and language needs i.e. scoring “red.” It would be very helpful for our school if there was specialised support and training to cater to the needs of these children.” – school leader, monitoring data

Understanding the longer-term impact on SaLT referrals is outside the scope of this evaluation.

4.1.5 Teacher job satisfaction and wellbeing

Contribution claim: Through a focus on oracy activities and improved pupil engagement, school staff experience greater job satisfaction and wellbeing, leading to greater staff retention.

There is **some good evidence** to support staff reporting improved job satisfaction. To date, there is **little or no evidence** to support or refute the claim about staff wellbeing or retention.

Through the case studies and survey there are some early indications to suggest that teachers enjoy applying oracy within their work, citing both engagement in the classroom and reduced workload. However, the evaluation has not gathered evidence about the impact on teacher retention.

- ▶ Staff agreement with enjoying oracy practices increased by 13 percentage points, from 70% at wave 1 (autumn term, 2024) to 83% at wave 2 (autumn term, 2025), this was a statistically significant difference.
- ▶ At wave 1, 75% of staff agreed or strongly agreed that they like working at a school that prioritises oracy, increasing to 86% at wave 2 – a statistically significant 11-percentage point increase.

In interviews, many teachers praised the collaborative nature of implementing *Talk Matters*, highlighting how working together as a team with the support of Oracy Champions had fostered a strong sense of shared purpose and professional support.

A few teachers also pointed to a reduced workload as beneficial for their teaching and for their own wellbeing. One teacher explained that since more lessons were focused on talk in the classroom, rather than on producing written work, the amount of marking and review had reduced. Though the amount time spent on lesson planning had increased, once lessons are planned, they can be reused again or shared with other teachers, which, some teachers argued, reduced workload over time.

“You’re spending a bit more time planning, but when it comes to afterwards, the workload is reduced as you are not having to sift through papers and reams of writing. You kind of got the evidence in the lesson.” - classroom teacher, interview

“All the energy you are putting in the lesson is happening in the lessons rather than happening afterwards.” - classroom teacher, interview

“I think there’s an enjoyment of specific lessons and making them more interesting, and then it being less stressful because you’ve not got so much marking or you’re not trying to get around to check everyone knows what they’re doing because actually everyone’s feeding back at those points.” – school leader, interview

Teachers also reported that *Talk Matters* had contributed to greater engagement with learning and improved behaviour amongst pupils (see Section 4.2.2). As a result, staff were enjoying teaching more, spending less time resolving conflicts and more time in discussions which they, and pupils, found engaging.

“I love it, it’s one thing standing there droning on reading through presentations, but when the kids take control it is quite nice, I can get involved and see what level they are at.” – classroom teacher, interview

4.2 Outcomes for pupils

4.2.1 Engagement with learning and progress in oracy

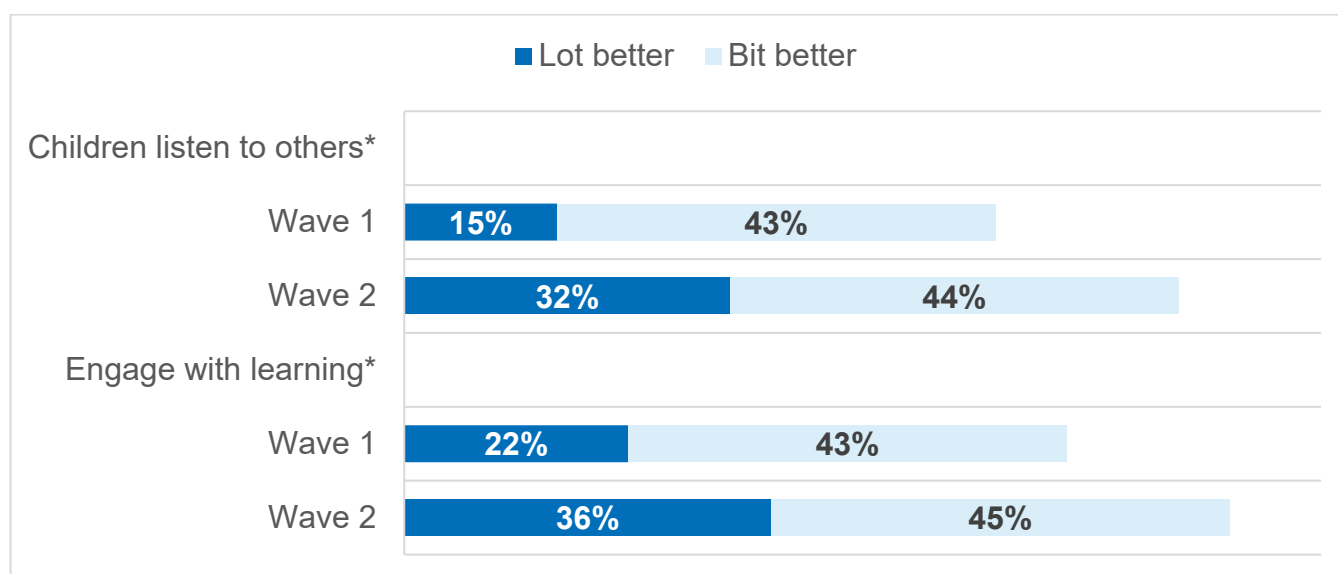
Contribution claim: Improved oracy practices in the classroom are leading to greater engagement with learning and good progress in oracy for pupils.

There is **strong, consistent evidence** of improved engagement where quality oracy practices are in place. This is supported by feedback from school leaders, teachers and pupils.

Evidence from teachers' feedback suggests that *Talk Matters* may have contributed to pupils engaging more with their learning in the classroom and improvements in their listening to others.

- ▶ At wave 1 (autumn term, 2024), 65% of staff indicated that pupils' engagement in their learning had got a bit or a lot better over the last 12 months, increasing to 81% at wave 2 (autumn term, 2025). This is a 16-percentage point increase and is statistically significant.
- ▶ At wave 1, 58% of staff indicated pupils' listening skills had improved over the previous 12 months. By wave 2, this increased to 76% - a statistically significant 18-percentage point increase (see Figure 3).

Figure 4: Staff reported improvements in pupils' engagement in learning and listening over the past 12 months



Teachers report better engagement with learning as a result of higher expectations of active participation in class.

The oracy techniques seen during case study visits (described in Section 4.1.3) required most or all pupils to participate in talk during lessons. Teachers explained that this meant pupils were less likely to disengage in the lesson as they were aware that they might be called on to participate at any point. As pupils were encouraged to respond to each other, they also had to listen to their peers' contributions in class. Several schools emphasised the benefits of oracy-focused work on pupils' listening, as well as speaking skills. Many of the oracy techniques implemented required pupils to actively listen to adults and peers and to respond to each other.

“They’re more engaged because they know they won’t just be sitting and listening. They’ll have opportunities to talk, which helps reduce low-level disruption.” – classroom teacher, interview

Teachers reported that changes to lesson structures, such as partner talk and random selection, helped quieter pupils contribute more and supported more vocal pupils to take a minute to think before speaking. Classroom teachers also reported that pupils have become more confident in speaking and expressing themselves, for example, many pupils who struggled to stand and speak in front of others now do so. In general, teachers reflected that conversations between teachers and pupils and between peers are becoming more structured, with pupils being able to articulate their views more clearly.

“Developing oracy as a school gives us the opportunity to help pupils reinforce their learning and share with others, especially for those who are shy. Their feelings and attitudes towards learning have improved.” - classroom teacher, interview

“Because we’re doing more strategies, they are way more confident to speak in the classroom [...] All abilities and all needs are wanting to contribute to discussion more, which is really nice.” – classroom teacher, interview

Teachers reported that improvements in pupil engagement led to improved learning behaviours. One teacher gave the example of a pupil with dyslexia who found written assessments difficult but was more engaged and less frustrated by having more opportunities to show progress through talk.

Teachers said that pupils engaged more deeply with learning through discussion, resulting in a better understanding of the curriculum content and opportunities to correct misapprehensions.

Teachers identified other benefits for learning by using more oracy activities. Some felt that using discussions in class was helping children to explore ideas in greater depth, including benefiting from hearing other pupils’ thoughts, and having to articulate their own ideas. This allowed them to engage more effectively with the concepts and content of the curriculum. Several schools saw this deeper engagement reflected in pupils’ written work as well as in classroom talk.

“I’ve found since we have started using it, their quality of work has improved massively because... by letting them hear it via audio... it might open up new ideas to them... by having that chat what they are able to put down on paper, they are going into more depth.” – classroom teacher, interview

Teachers reported that more verbal contributions in class allowed them to identify and explore misapprehensions among pupils and to address them quickly, rather than waiting to pick up on any mistakes in later written work. This was also observed during a case study visit in one school where think, pair, share was used in a maths lesson. Through pupil feedback on their paired discussion, the teacher picked up a misunderstanding about how a data table should be read and was able to clarify this to the whole class and check their understanding before moving on.

Contribution claim: Targeted *Talk Boost* interventions for pupils are leading to greater progress in oracy, improved confidence and greater engagement in class among children with SLCN.

There is **consistent evidence** of improved progress around oracy through the pre- and post-assessment for *Talk Boost* pupils, but the lack of a comparison group means it is not possible to say what progress would have been made without the intervention.

Feedback from schools on the impact for pupils strongly indicated that many pupils benefited from the intervention and that the confidence pupils gained allowed them to engage better with learning in the classroom.

The *Talk Boost* interventions include a pre- and post-assessment, allowing a measure of pupil progress. Assessments covered different areas of language and communication skills, including attention and listening; understanding; speaking and personal, social and emotional skills. Aggregated pre- and post-scores were shared with the researchers as part of the evaluation.¹⁷

Although *Talk Boost* is intended to be completed within a school term, many schools needed to extend delivery over a longer period due to staff capacity, pupil absence and other activities taking place in the school. By August 2025, around three-quarters of pupils that had a baseline score also had a second assessment score recorded. It is not clear why there is not data for the remaining 25% of pupil assessments. Pupils may not have completed the intervention, or the assessment may not have been completed or submitted by the end of the school year.

Schools in five participating boroughs used *Early Talk Boost*. A total of 230 pupils had a baseline assessment recorded and 172 had a second assessment score recorded. Schools in all seven London boroughs used *Talk Boost Key Stage 1*. A total of 702 pupils completed a baseline assessment, and 521 also completed a second assessment (see Table 5). A breakdown of scores by borough is provided in the Appendix Table 18 and Table 19.

Table 5: Pre- and post-intervention assessment scores, *Early Talk Boost* and *KS1 Talk Boost*

	<i>EARLY TALK BOOST</i> (ages 3-4)	<i>KEY STAGE 1 TALK BOOST</i> (ages 4-7)
One assessment	230	702
Two assessments	172	521
% of pupils with baseline and second assessment recorded	75%	74%
% Narrowing the gap	93%	96%
% narrowing the gap by 50%+	78%	82%
% Widening the gap	7%	1%

¹⁷ Since this aggregated data does not include underlying data through which to assess variance, we cannot test for statistical significance for these changes in score.

Over three-quarters (78%) of pupils receiving Early *Talk Boost* narrowed the gap between current and expected standards in communication skills by more than 50%. A small proportion widened the gap.

- ▶ Across all schools, 93% of pupils were assessed as having narrowed the gap with their peers to some extent. Over three-quarters (78%) had narrowed the gap by 50% or more. Seven percent were assessed as having widened the gap with their peers.
- ▶ Eleven percent of pupils met the expected standard in **understanding words and sentences** at baseline, rising to 38% at second assessment, **an increase of 27 percentage points**.
- ▶ Seven percent of pupils met the expected standard in **attention and listening** at baseline, rising to 31% by the second assessment, **an increase of 24 percentage points**.
- ▶ Pupils meeting the expected standards in **speaking skills rose by 21 percentage points**, from 3% to 24%.
- ▶ Pupils meeting the expected standards in **personal, social and emotional skills rose by 13 percentage points**, from 7% to 20%.

Over 80% of pupils receiving Key Stage 1 *Talk Boost* closed the gap between current and expected standard by more than 50%, with only 1% assessed as widening the gap in this period.

- ▶ Overall, 96% of pupils were recorded as narrowing the gap with their peers to some extent and 82% narrowed the gap by more than 50%. Only 1% were recorded as widening the gap.
- ▶ Sixty-three percent of pupils reached the expected standard in **understanding spoken language** compared with 17% at baseline, **an increase of 46 percentage points**.
- ▶ Sixty-three percent of pupils reached the expected standard in **understanding and using vocabulary**, compared with 21% at baseline, **an increase of 42 percentage points**.
- ▶ Seventy-one percent of pupils reached the expected standard in **use of sentences**, compared with 36% at baseline, **an increase of 35 percentage points**.
- ▶ Forty-three percent of pupils reached the expected standard in **storytelling and narrative**, compared with 8% at baseline, **an increase of 35 percentage points**.
- ▶ Fifty-nine percent of pupils reached the expected standard in **social interaction**, compared with 18% at baseline, **an increase of 41 percentage points**.

Pupils and staff reported that *Talk Boost* sessions were enjoyable. In interviews, nearly all pupils said that they enjoyed taking part, highlighting games, such as Simon Says and Bingo. They also liked the praise and positive reinforcement received for their contributions.

Feedback from school leaders, teachers, pupils and parents in case study schools was overwhelmingly positive in relation to the benefits of *Talk Boost*. In addition to the evidence from the *Talk Boost* assessments, staff feedback suggests that there were improvements in pupils' listening and turn-taking for pupils receiving the intervention.

“They know they need to wait, they’re going to have a chance [to speak].” – Talk Boost delivery staff, interview

Staff and parents also observed improvements in pupils’ ability to articulate, use full sentences and feel confident to engage in classroom activities. Pupils said that the *Talk Boost* sessions made them feel more comfortable speaking in class as well as within the *Talk Boost* sessions. In some cases, activities in the targeted sessions were repeated or linked to whole-class sessions. This gave pupils more confidence that they had a contribution to make in the whole-class discussions. Not all schools had been able to do this linking however, due to pressure on classroom time.

“I would say as well to add, that it does boost their confidence to speak up, I’ve seen progress with the last cohort who have now gone to year one. I had parents feeding back saying ‘oh he or she is doing well, they’re speaking up, they’re using more words, they’re putting 5 or 6 words together to create a sentence, they’re speaking up in playing together with their friends and being a bit more vocal than they were before’.” – Talk Boost delivery staff, interview

“It’s boosted my confidence talking in class.” – pupil interview

One case study school described the impact of *Talk Boost* for a pupil who had been reluctant to speak at school but had later won a story-telling competition. Both staff and pupil felt that *Talk Boost* had helped build their confidence and speaking abilities.

“For example, we’ve had an EAL pupil in year 1 who didn’t want to talk at all. And we had a storytelling competition where they had to record themselves retelling a story. And [pupil] retold this story with such confidence, and was one of the children who made a comment and said how Talk Boost really helped with their confidence to speak.” – school leader interview

“From the quiet child that I had at the beginning... to be recorded telling all this story... it was nice to see.” – Talk Boost delivery staff, interview

Improved speaking and listening schools were also observed by parents who said that children were talking more, were using full sentences and articulating their own thoughts and ideas to a greater extent than prior to the intervention.

“In Reception he didn’t have any words at all or he would only repeat the last word that you would say to him. [...] Oracy training [Talk Boost] has really grown his confidence... he’s very well spoken, he’s speaking in full sentences.” – parent, interview

A few schools highlighted that pupils selected for *Talk Boost* were often pupils who struggled to engage with classroom learning and who had lower school attendance. Improvements in communication and engagement through *Talk Boost* were also felt by some schools to be having a positive impact on pupils’

learning behaviours. One school described how *Talk Boost* was helping targeted pupils to self-regulate and to reduce disruptive behaviour by improving their ability to articulate their needs.

A key outcome of the oracy interventions has been improved self-regulation and a reduction in disruptive behaviours. Students involved in interventions are increasingly able to communicate effectively without resorting to behaviours that challenge or disrupt learning. – school leader, monitoring data

Some schools did express a view that some of the pupils receiving *Talk Boost* may have made strong progress even without the intervention. While the evidence collected for this evaluation does not address this, previous evaluations of *Early Talk Boost* that did include a control group found that the progress is greater among children receiving the intervention (Reeves, *et al*, 2018).

The *Talk Boost* intervention took place alongside the whole school oracy programme, meaning that pupils were also experiencing more oracy-focused support in the classroom as well as the targeted intervention. Based on feedback from schools, it is likely that there was an interaction between these two components of the *Talk Matters* programme. Teachers and teaching assistants who delivered *Talk Boost* reported that children receiving the targeted intervention were showing more confidence to engage in talk in the classroom.

As highlighted in Section 3.2.2, schools did have concerns about whether they were selecting the right children for participation in *Talk Boost*, and whether the intervention was aimed at the pupils who most needed this support. Nevertheless, for those pupils who were receiving it, feedback suggests positive change in confidence and engagement with learning.

4.2.2 Pupil confidence, behaviour and relationships

Contribution claim: More opportunities for engaging in oracy in the classroom, and in wellbeing activities, leads to greater confidence among pupils and improves pupil behaviours.

There is **strong, consistent evidence** to support the claim that pupil confidence to speak has improved through the programme.

In interviews, staff and pupils report that increased opportunities for peer-to-peer talk, stronger communication skills and greater confidence to interact have improved relationships between pupils and reduced poor behaviour incidents.

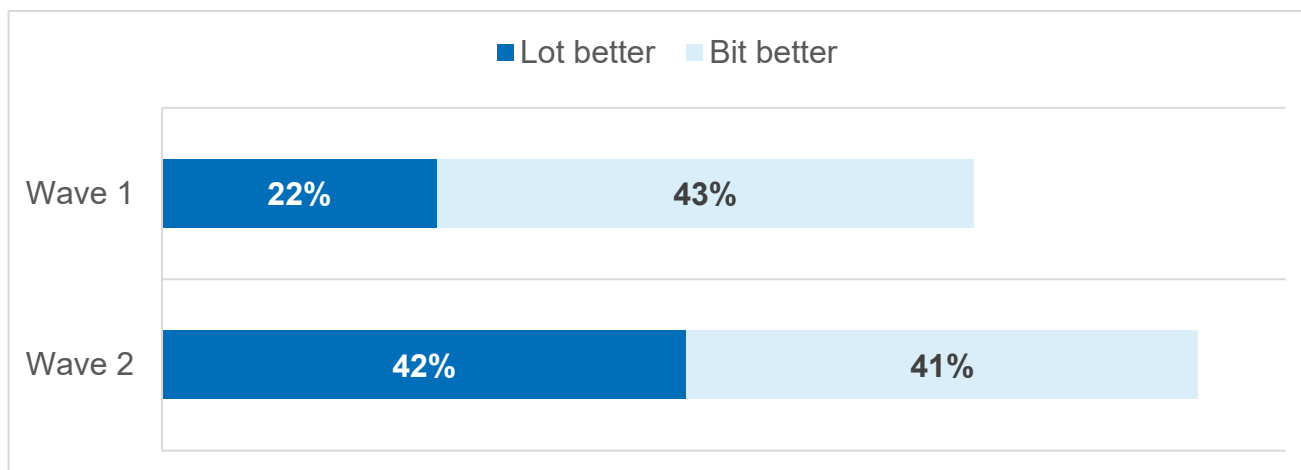
The theory of change initially drew distinct links from the wellbeing and whole school oracy approaches to impacts on children's confidence, relationships and behaviours. However, feedback from the schools suggests that the wellbeing and whole school approaches were mutually reinforcing. These two contribution claims are considered together in this section.

Survey responses and interviews suggest that *Talk Matters* has contributed to improved pupil confidence to speak, both within and outside the classroom.

- ▶ At wave 1 (autumn term, 2024) 65% of staff said that **pupils' confidence to speak to others** had improved in the previous 12 months. At wave 2 (autumn term, 2025), this had increased to 83%, **an increase of 18 percentage points; this was a statistically significant difference.**

- ▶ The proportion of staff who said that pupils' **confidence had got a 'lot better'** nearly doubled, from 22% to 42%, **a statistically significant increase of 20 percentage points** (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Staff reported outcomes for pupils: Pupils have confidence to speak



In case study visits, staff and pupils both reported that pupils had gained confidence, both in and outside of the classroom. This was observed through more social interaction with peers and with adults and more willingness to participate in both classroom activity and play.

“They’ve become more confident... before some of them couldn’t even stand up and speak, but most of them can now... They are definitely more confident and expressing themselves.” - classroom teacher, interview

“[One child] was really shy, she wouldn’t really speak to anybody. Now I see her laughing and giggling and starting to talk to people more.” – school leader, interview

Several staff, pupils and parents explained that confidence had been improved through explicitly teaching children that their voice and contribution was valued. Through classroom activities where more pupils were encouraged to participate and through general improvements in peer-to-peer listening and respectful ways of interacting, staff and parents explained that pupils had a greater belief that others wanted to hear what they had to say.

“Now he knows his voice is valued.” – parent, interview

“It’s setting ourselves up for the future... speaking gains us confidence.” – pupil, focus group

While some pupils did not enjoy speaking in class, all agreed everyone had the chance to speak and was listened to respectfully. In discussion groups, pupils described how random selection in class had developed confidence by encouraging pupils to try an answer and not be put off by the possibility of getting an answer wrong.

“If you get called, you get called. You just have to say it.”

“Instead of the usual person answering, the teacher picks a number and you have to say [your answer], even if it’s wrong.”

“Making mistakes helps you learn. The school encourages you to learn from your mistakes.”

“Teachers encourage people to speak up and just to try.”

“If you think you’ll be wrong, you just won’t say, and you’ll never find out.”

- selected quotes from a group discussion with pupils from years 5 and 6

Case study schools reported that greater confidence and communication skills had led to improved relationships between pupils, fewer conflicts and more interaction between wider groups of pupils.

In interviews, several pupils explained that because they spoke to more of their classmates during lessons, they were building better relationships with their peers, outside their close friendship group. These improved relationships carried on outside of the classroom. Staff and parents also mentioned that pupils in *Talk Boost* sessions had more opportunities to interact with other pupils and build new friendships.

“If you’re not good at making friends, talking to others is good as you can hear about them. If you start learning together you get to know them better.” – pupil, focus group

“He wasn’t able to, kind of, interact with his friends through a lack of speaking... Now he’s got a couple of friends that they swapped numbers... it’s amazing.” – parent, interview

Staff also reported that relationships had improved through the play-based wellbeing activities, like *OPAL play*, because these were encouraging pupils to play with a wider range of their peers, including across year groups more than they previously had. Schools explicitly linked these opportunities and the improved oracy skills of pupils as contributing to better relationships between pupils.

“They’re having to adapt their talk as well, depending on who they’re playing with, to different ages, and they’re just not used to playing with outside their friendship groups...you’ve got a couple of children who would never normally play with them but they want to go and build that den as well, so then their interaction spreads.” – school leader, interview

Several schools mentioned that pupils were better able to negotiate play effectively and respectfully, without requiring intervention from adults. Staff attributed this to pupils having better terminology and talk structures to express themselves.

“Before, there would be a lot of telltales but now they can solve their problems between themselves and if it’s something they cannot solve then they come to us... they are

more secure and able to communicate with themselves... and that goes back to them speaking and being able to go back to each other to have those conversations.” – classroom teacher, interview

Parents and staff highlighted that pupils with SLCN sometimes struggled with friendships and interactions with their peers. Parents of pupils taking part in *Talk Boost* observed improvements in social skills and in the confidence to make friends. One parent felt that the biggest impact for her son had been improvements in emotional self-regulation through being better able to express themselves. Staff also pointed out that the *Talk Boost* sessions allowed pupils time for small group interactions with pupils across their year group and that this helped establish new friendships.

“I’ve seen an improvement in speech, but it’s more about emotional regulation and I’ve seen improvement there.” – parent, interview

Schools felt that improved relationships and communication skills led to improvements in behaviour and a reduction in behaviour-related incidents.

In the case study visits and the narratives submitted by other schools as part of their monitoring data, schools reported that improvements in oracy skills and relationships between pupils were impacting on the number of behaviour incidents seen. For example, in one case study school had surveyed their staff and explained that virtually all staff reported observing improvements in behaviours around the school. This was attributed to improvements in pupils’ ability to articulate what they needed and to better resolve conflicts with peers.

“We’re dealing with less behaviour issues on the playground ... it feels like they’re starting to be able to resolve those issues a bit better themselves compared to this time last year... that’s obviously anecdotal, but putting that down to the fact that children are able to communicate better and that they’re working on that in class or when they do go into the playground.” – school leader, interview

“There’s been incidents I’ve seen where they’ve actually had a discussion themselves and they’ve managed to sort it, and yeah I see more of that; it becomes their daily toolkit.” – school leader, interview

Improvements in play structure and facilities were also identified as important to improvements in pupil behaviour outside of the classroom. Schools that implemented *OPAL play* or other changes to play facilities reported that interactions were more purposeful and better regulated as a result. Staff linked improved behaviour in the playground to improvements in oracy skills, suggesting that the two approaches together were important for achieving impacts on behaviour.

*“Behaviour wasn’t terrible on the playground, but we had quite a lot of children falling out. And sometimes that would escalate either into inappropriate language or sometimes into physical altercations. You know, it did happen. And I think through the introduction of *OPAL play*, that has really brought the level of those incidents down.*

Those and first aid incidents. So, I think children are much better placed at being able to just navigate their way through playtime. Whether that's about who's holding the spade while we're making a sandcastle together, or whether that's about 'I don't actually want to play that game. I'm going to go and play somewhere else'. There's much more opportunity, I think, for children to be able to use their words. To sort things out, rather than things escalating.” – school leader, interview

Integrating oracy and wellbeing

School E implemented *OPAL play* as part of the wellbeing component of *Talk Matters*. Previously, areas of the playground tended to be quite gendered, with boys doing sports and girls doing the quieter activities. Staff reported that that has changed dramatically. There are a larger variety of activities to do now including new structures such as a sandpit and mud cafe. All year groups now play together, encouraging interaction beyond classroom friendships. Consideration of diversity of needs and interests has helped SEN children to be more engaged in play with their peers.

Staff felt that *OPAL play*, alongside improving communication skills through *Talk Matters*, had impacted positively on children's behaviour and their socialisation skills. School leaders reported that the introduction of *OPAL play* had reduced behaviour and first aid incidents in the playground. Staff had also observed greater confidence in communication during play and children were reported as being better at “*navigating their way through playtime*” and expressing preferences effectively.

“We were looking at developing positive relationships on the playground and giving children the opportunities to play. That was a light bulb moment for me, when I looked at the development of OPAL play being fundamental to underpinning what's going on here in terms of oracy.” - school leader, interview

4.2.3 Attendance, attainment and exclusions

The programme theory of change posited that through the softer outcomes described above (engagement in learning, confidence, relationships and behaviours) *Talk Matters* would contribute to outcomes in relation to pupil attainment, attendance and exclusions. These metrics are key to school performance and to pupils' long-term outcomes. However, these metrics are influenced by a range of factors, both within and outside of the school, such as quality teaching, policies and procedures, family circumstances, and a range of support mechanisms. *Talk Matters* can only *contribute* to any change in these outcomes. It is important to note that this evaluation was not designed to assess the attribution of change for these outcomes. With that caveat, we have explored *early* indications of change in these outcomes so far, recognising that the programme has been implemented for a short period of time.

Contribution claim: Through greater enjoyment and improved relationships, school attendance improves.

There is **limited evidence** that staff believed pupils were enjoying school more as a result of the *Talk Matters* programme.

There is **little or no evidence** to support or refute the claim that this leads to improved school attendance, though a small number of schools indicated that there may be a link.

The staff survey results show that a greater number of staff felt pupil enjoyment of school had improved by wave 2 (autumn term, 2025) compared to wave 1 (autumn term, 2024). There was a 10-percentage point increase (from 62% to 72%) between staff reporting that pupils were enjoying school 'somewhat' or 'much more' in the last 12 months between waves 1 and wave 2. This was a statistically significant difference.

Through telephone interviews, monitoring data and case study visits, several schools reported that *Talk Matters* was having a positive impact on pupil attendance. By spring 2025, four schools taking part in telephone interviews reported an increase in attendance since starting *Talk Matters*; of these, two said there had been a general improvement, and one said there had been an improvement among *Talk Boost* pupils specifically. In interviews, staff reported that pupils were happier at school as a result of the focus on oracy, and that this resulted in improved attendance.

"[Talk Matters] makes them enjoy [school] a lot more, they want to come to school." - classroom teacher, interview

Based on attendance data from five boroughs, there is no evidence that *Talk Matters* has had an impact on attendance overall.

Contribution claim: Through improved engagement in the classroom, pupil attainment starts to improve.

There is **limited evidence** to support the link between oracy, engagement and attainment. Staff feedback suggests some early indications of improvements in pupils' learning and the quality of written work.

Several schools reported an improvement in Good Level of Development (GLD) Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) assessments scores following the implementation of *Talk Matters*. In particular, schools identified a shift in the GLD score for communication and language. Despite this, there is no consistent improvement in GLD scores for participating schools when compared to data for schools across the seven boroughs. Furthermore, many *Talk Matters* schools saw a decrease in GLD scores. These differences may reflect where schools targeted their oracy activity because GLD relates only to children in EYFS; schools that targeted nursery or reception children may be more likely to see an impact here compared with schools that initially focused on key stage 1 or key stage 2 classes.¹⁸

“Last year, all five cohort 1 schools’ Early Years GLD went up for communication and language and their overall GLD also increased.” – borough lead, monitoring data

The evaluation is unable to conclude that there is good evidence to support that *Talk Matters* has had an impact on attainment at this stage. However, In the case studies, teachers reported improvements in oracy skills and in writing through greater use of vocabulary and sentence structure. They attributed these improvements to having more opportunities to apply these through talk in the classroom, and to benefit from sharing ideas between pupils.

“I’ve seen a positive impact in writing, the build-up through oracy has helped children with ideas and things to write about.” – classroom teacher, interview

“There’s been a pick-up in their writing... using sentence structure a bit better.” - classroom teacher, interview

Contribution claim: Through improved engagement and relationships, pupil behavioural issues are reduced, leading to fewer sanctions, including exclusions.

There is **strong, consistent evidence** from schools that *Talk Matters* is contributing to observed improvements in pupil behaviour both in and outside of the classroom.

There is **little or no evidence to date** to support that *Talk Matters* is having an impact on exclusions.

As described in Section 4.2.2, school leaders and staff reported that pupil behaviour improved since *Talk Matters* was implemented. They linked this, at least in part, to the oracy and wellbeing activities delivered through the programme. While exclusion data is an important metric for the London VRU (because school exclusion is strongly associated with a higher risk of involvement in violence later in life), exclusions in primary schools are rare – including across *Talk Matters* schools. The final report for this evaluation will seek to explore whether there have been changes in permanent and temporary exclusions across schools.

¹⁸ Other researchers have noted challenges in comparing GLD data over time as it tends to be heavily influenced by the proportion of autumn- vs summer-born children in each year group. [DfE will need to take account of age when comparing schools’ rates of pupils achieving a good level of development - FFT Education Datalab](#)

4.3 Impact for parents

4.3.1 Parents understanding of oracy

Contribution claim: Through parent engagement activities, more parents have a good understanding of the importance of oracy and how to support it at home.

There is **some good evidence**, through a survey of parents at participating schools, to suggest a greater awareness of oracy and how this can be supported at home. There was a positive shift in the proportion of parents who feel confident to help their child's speaking and listening skills.

The evaluation's parent survey sought to assess changes in parents' awareness of oracy and how to support oracy skills at home:

- ▶ In wave 2 (autumn term, 2025), 68% of parents responded that they had seen information about oracy from their child's school, a statistically significant 21-percentage point increase from wave 1 (autumn term, 2024).
- ▶ The proportion of parents who said they knew a lot or a bit about how the school supported their child's speaking and listening skills, increased by 16-percentage points from 52% at wave 1 to 68% at wave 2, this was a statistically significant difference.
- ▶ At wave 1, 85% of parents agreed or strongly agreed that they knew how to support their child to develop speaking and listening skills at home. The proportion of parents agreeing increased to 92% by wave 2 (a 7-percentage point increase), this difference was statistically significant.
- ▶ At wave 1, 79% agreed or strongly agreed that they felt confident supporting their child's oracy skills at home, increasing to 87% by wave 2 (an eight-percentage point increase which was a statistically significant difference).

Despite some challenges engaging a wide group of parents, schools reported a positive impact on parents who attended *Talk Matter* activities in terms of their understanding of oracy and their support for their child's development of oracy skills.

"Parent workshops have been instrumental in highlighting the importance of oracy to families, fostering a better understanding of how strong communication skills can benefit their children academically and socially. [...] Feedback from parents indicates growing enthusiasm for oracy-focused initiatives, with some families beginning to implement support strategies at home." – school leader, monitoring data

Several schools shared positive feedback from parents who attended workshops and oracy showcases.

"I found all the information very useful. Even though I am an adult, I found it difficult to speak in public sometimes, so learning about oracy has giving me information to help my children to improve their speaking and listening skills so they feel confident and in a safe environment to always be able to communicate and also listen to others. It was a topic I had never heard of before, but it was immediately obvious how important and beneficial it is." – parent feedback, shared by school in monitoring data

Though these findings provide evidence of a positive change in parental awareness of oracy, a small minority of parents in each school responded to the survey. It is likely that the parents who responded were more engaged in and more likely to read school communications which may have positively skewed the sample.

4.3.2 Oracy support at home

Contribution claim: Through this improved understanding of oracy, parents provide more oracy support at home.

There is **limited evidence** to support the claim that parents provided more oracy support at home. Recognising the limitations of the parent survey, analysis shows an increase in parents talking with their child about their learning. Feedback from parents and pupils who took part in the evaluation suggests that *Talk Matters*-funded engagement activities led to more oracy-supporting activities at home.

In the survey, parents were asked how frequently, in the past week, they engaged in activities at home that helped develop their child's speaking and listening skills. The survey listed four activities to select: speaking to children about something that interests them; speaking to children about their learning; reading together; singing or listening to music together.

- ▶ At wave 1 (autumn term, 2024), a high proportion of parents reported that they did these activities either every day or most days, ranging from 92% of parents talking to their child about something that interests them to 75% of parents singing or listening to music with their child.
- ▶ Only one of the four activities increased by wave 2; the proportion of parents who said they speak to their child about their learning every day or most days increased from 89% to 94% (a 5-percentage point increase); this was a statistically significant difference.

Interviews with pupils and parents who took part in the parental engagement activities suggest that parents were encouraged to try activities at home to support their child's oracy skills. For example, in one school, parents and children who engaged in cooking sessions said that this had encouraged them to do more cooking together at home.

"It's really inspired him to do more cooking and a lot more talking as well...We've done quite a bit of cooking at home since." – parent, interview

"I like spending time with mum and cooking with her." – pupil, focus group

Some schools shared resources with the parents of children who participated in *Talk Boost* to encourage them to support the oracy skills development at home. There was mixed feedback about the success of engaging parents with these activities. Parents interviewed during the case study visits had used these activities and found them helpful, but staff said other parents had been less responsive.

5.0 Discussion

The emerging evidence from this interim evaluation report suggests that *Talk Matters* is making a meaningful contribution to strengthening oracy practice, improving children's communication skills, and enhancing school cultures of talk across participating schools. The findings highlight substantial progress in implementation, positive shifts in staff knowledge and confidence, and show encouraging early outcomes for pupils.

Key Findings

A consistent theme across survey and interview data and classroom observations was the strong progress schools have made in embedding oracy as a whole-school priority. Most staff reported seeing oracy practices modelled across classrooms and felt equipped and supported to use them in their teaching. The role of school and borough leadership, including the dedicated role undertaken by Oracy Champions, appears central to this progress by providing strategic vision, coordination and practical support.

The evaluation finds early, positive indications of change for pupils. Staff and pupils described increased engagement in learning, greater confidence to speak, improved listening, and stronger peer relationships. Classroom observations showed a range of oracy techniques being used flexibly and purposefully. *Talk Boost* assessment data demonstrated substantial progress among pupils receiving targeted support. Many schools reported reductions in low-level behaviour incidents which they attributed to pupils having improved communication and self-regulation.

The wellbeing and parental engagement strand evolved considerably during the programme's implementation. Although initially challenging for schools to conceptualise, by the end of the programme, many schools articulated clearer links between wellbeing, oracy and positive relationships. Parents who engaged in *Talk Matters*-funded activities reported improved understanding of oracy and greater confidence in supporting their children's oracy at home.

Learning for implementing oracy approaches in schools

For schools, the findings highlight the critical importance of leadership, whole-staff training, and sustained opportunities for reflection, experimentation and collaborative learning. Embedding oracy within school development plans and curriculum design appears vital to sustaining momentum. The positive effects of combining whole school oracy work with targeted support and wellbeing activities suggest that integrated approaches can be powerful.

For the VRU and boroughs, the evaluation highlights the value of flexibility but also the need for clear early guidance, particularly around the wellbeing strand, and on-going support for onboarding new staff who join schools. Investment in school networks and resource-sharing platforms appears essential for sustaining gains beyond the funding period.

6.0 Recommendations

Recommendations for schools

- ▶ Prioritise **whole staff training** at the outset and supplement it with **ongoing, bite-sized continuing professional development to maintain momentum**, support new staff, and strengthen consistency across classrooms.
- ▶ Ensure **oracy is part of school development plans, curriculum maps and subject leadership structures** to embed oracy consistently across the school.
- ▶ Establish **strong internal leadership structures**, such as Oracy Champions or small oracy teams, **with time allocated** for modelling techniques, coaching colleagues, observing lessons and supporting implementation.
- ▶ Start with a small number of agreed oracy techniques and **build gradually**, allowing staff to **experiment, adapt and share learning** in a supportive environment.
- ▶ Ensure **targeted interventions** such as *Talk Boost* are closely **linked with class teaching** by creating opportunities for classroom teachers and intervention staff to collaborate, share strategies and reinforce skills.
- ▶ For **wellbeing and parental engagement** activities, offer **structured, enjoyable and culturally inclusive sessions** that encourage participation from harder-to-reach families, **integrating oracy into activities without making it the explicit** focus to reach families.

Recommendations for boroughs/local authorities

- ▶ Provide **early and clear guidance** on all programme strands, especially open-ended areas such as wellbeing, to help schools plan confidently and avoid initial uncertainty.
- ▶ Facilitate **cross-school collaboration** by coordinating networks, peer learning opportunities, sharing resources and joint training sessions to reduce duplication and enhance collective expertise.
- ▶ Support consistent onboarding for new staff by **developing shared resources, templates and induction materials** for oracy and wellbeing activities.
- ▶ Promote sustainability by **helping schools explore lower-cost or scalable models**, such as oracy hubs and pooled resources.

Recommendations for funders/commissioners and policy makers

- ▶ Continue investing in integrated approaches that **combine whole school culture change with targeted interventions and extra-curricular activity**, as the evidence suggests these elements reinforce each other effectively.
- ▶ Provide **clear programme expectations** and **structured guidance** from the outset, while retaining **flexibility for local adaptation**.
- ▶ Invest in the development of **sustainable, cross-borough resource sharing models**, such as oracy hubs, shared training banks or digital resource libraries, to maintain progress after funding ends.

- ▶ Use **learning from *Talk Matters*** to further shape policy relevant insights on how communication skills development contributes to prevention outcomes, supporting evidence informed decision making for future VRU funded programmes.

Next steps for the evaluation

This interim report shows findings from the first cohort of schools participating in *Talk Matters*. The evaluation will continue to explore implementation and outcomes through the second cohort of schools, delivering the programme in 2025/26.

The final evaluation report will generate learning for policymakers, local authorities and schools who are seeking to implement a stronger oracy focus. It will be accompanied by a toolkit aimed at schools and other stakeholders engaged in schools-based implementation of oracy approaches.

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8.0 Appendices

Case study schools' data collection

Table 6: Data collection in case schools, overview

	School A	School B	School C	School D	School E	School F
Interviews with SLT / oracy leads	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Interviews with classroom teachers	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Interviews with <i>Talk Boost</i> delivery staff	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Interviews with parents		✓		✓	✓	
Classroom visits	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Talk Boost</i> session visit			✓	✓	✓	✓
Wellbeing activities seen	Play activities; Chatter Box	Wellbeing Warriors	OPAL play	Jigsaw 4 U	1 OPAL play	Art activities; Place2Be counselling
Discussion with pupils	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Participating schools: characteristics

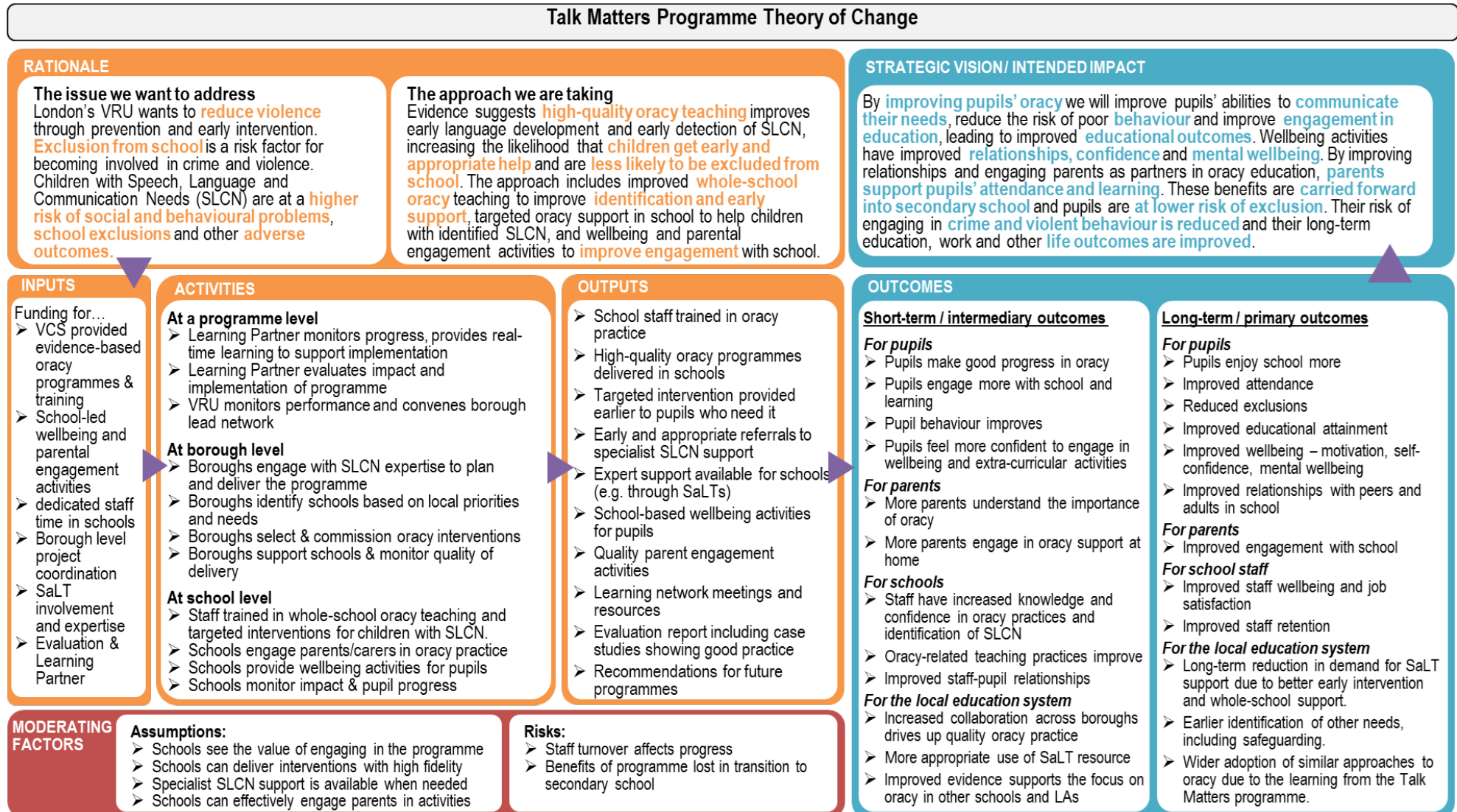
Table 7: Characteristics of schools taking part in *Talk Matters*

Borough	Bexley	Havering	Lambeth	Lewisham	Southwark	Sutton	Waltham Forest	England primary average
Pupils on roll (2024-25)	1,601	2,067	1,388	1,833	1,623	2,324	c. 3000 ¹⁹	
Total (range)	(111–473)	(231 – 669)	(208–375)	(156–632)	(183–434)	(161–824)	(460– 756)	
% pupils with EHCP	4.6% - 9.0%	3.5% - 8.4%	2.9% - 20.5%	2.8% - 6.4%	2.2% - 7.7%	1.3% - 8.7%	3.7% - 6.1%	3.5%
% pupils with SEN support	15.4% - 28.1%	4.0% - 15.2%	13.8% - 31.6%	13.9% - 27.8%	18.9% - 24.5%	13.1% - 16.7%	12.5% - 16.6%	15%
Pupils whose first language is not English (EAL)	27.9% - 62.9%	29% - 44%	41.0% - 78.8%	46.0% - 70.7%	16.9% - 61.3%	44.7% - 59.9%	19.7% - 63.0%	23.4%
Persistent absence	15.5% - 24.3%	10.9% - 17.5%	9.9% - 29.2%	9.2% - 18.0%	13.9% - 30.7%	9.5% - 31.0%	7.1% - 26.5%	14.6%
% eligible for free school meals (any point in last 6 years)	27.9% - 62.9%	14.0% - 23.6%	37.7% - 62.7%	29.6% - 42.7%	28.2% - 72.9%	5.9% - 47%	14.3% - 40.1%	26.3%
% reaching expected standard in reading, writing and maths	50% - 85%	52% - 80%	56% - 79%	49% - 83%	66% - 70%	31% - 79%	69% - 90%	62%

¹⁹ One participating school is an all-through school – primary-only pupil numbers are not available for this school. The overall figure is therefore an estimate, not based on published figures.

Talk Matters theory of change

Figure 5: Theory of change diagram



Findings from staff survey

Table 8: Staff survey: Characteristics of participating staff

Characteristics	Wave 1 (2024)	Wave 2 (2025)
	N (%)	N (%)
Job role:		
Senior leader	84 (15%)	53 (12%)
Middle leader	76 (13%)	56 (13%)
Classroom teacher	221 (38%)	179 (41%)
Support staff (teaching)	155 (27%)	116 (26%)
Support staff (other)	71 (12%)	54 (12%)
Other role	14 (2%)	18 (4)
Length of time working in schools:		
Less than a year	16 (3%)	12 (3%)
1-4 years	95 (16%)	78 (18%)
5-10 years	132 (23%)	90 (20%)
More than 10 years	336 (58%)	260 (59%)

Table 9: Staff survey: Have you heard of the *Talk Matters* programme?

	Wave 1 (n=579)	Wave 2 (n=440)
Yes	69%	84%
No	24%	12%
Not sure	7%	5%

Table 10: Staff survey: In the last 12 months, have you received any training on oracy practices?

Wave 1 (autumn 2024)

Wave 2 (autumn 2025)

	Leadership (n=125)	Teachers (n=376)	Support staff (n=78)	Leadership (n=85)	Teachers (n=295)	Support staff (n=60)
Yes	74%	57%	10%	91%	76%	35%
No	22%	33%	82%	9%	19%	50%
Not sure	3%	10%	8%	0%	5%	15%

Table 11: Staff survey: To what extent have you changed your practice at work following oracy training?

	Wave 1 (n=316)	Wave 2 (n=322)
Not at all	2%	2%
A little	52%	31%
Quite a lot	40%	48%
To a great extent	7%	18%

Table 12: Staff survey: How would you rate your knowledge of oracy?

	Wave 1 (n=579)	Wave 2 (n=440)
I don't know much at all	12%	5%
I know a little	37%	27%
I know quite a bit	43%	53%
I know a great deal	8%	15%

Table 13: Staff survey: Over the last 12 months, has your knowledge of Oracy changed?

	Wave 1 (n=579)	Wave 2 (n=440)
No change	28%	14%
I have a bit more knowledge	54%	51%
I have a lot more knowledge	18%	35%

Table 14: How confident do you feel in the following aspects of your work

	Using oracy practices in your work	Using oracy practices in your work	Supporting pupils with speech, language and communication needs	Supporting pupils with speech, language and communication needs	Identifying pupils who need specialist speech and language support	Identifying pupils who need specialist speech and language support
	Wave 1 (n=501)	Wave 2 (n=380)	Wave 1 (n=501)	Wave 2 (n=380)	Wave 1 (n=501)	Wave 2 (n=380)
Not at all confident	9%	4%	11%	7%	9%	6%
Fairly confident	54%	41%	57%	54%	51%	48%
Very confident	35%	54%	30%	39%	39%	45%
Not relevant to my role	1%	1%	1%	0%	2%	2%

Table 15: Staff survey: In the last 12 months, has your confidence in the following changed?

	Using oracy practices in your work	Using oracy practices in your work	Supporting pupils with SLCN	Supporting pupils with SLCN	Identifying pupils who need specialist SLCN support	Identifying pupils who need specialist SLCN support
	Wave 1 (n=501)	Wave 2 (n=380)	Wave 1 (n=501)	Wave 2 (n=380)	Wave 1 (n=501)	Wave 2 (n=380)
I feel a lot less confident	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%
I feel a bit less confident	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	3%
No change	28%	14%	29%	23%	33%	26%
I feel a bit more confident	42%	43%	48%	45%	43%	42%
I feel a lot more confident	25%	39%	17%	28%	18%	27%
Not relevant to my role	2%	1%	3%	1%	3%	2%

Table 16: Staff survey: In the last 12 months, have you noticed any changes in the following...

	How well children listen to others	How well children listen to others	Pupils' confidence to speak to others	Pupils' confidence to speak to others	How well children engage with their learning	How well children engage with their learning	How much pupils enjoy being at school	How much pupils enjoy being at school
	Wave 1 (n=501)	Wave 2 (n=380)	Wave 1 (n=501)	Wave 2 (n=380)	Wave 1 (n=501)	Wave 2 (n=380)	Wave 1 (n=501)	Wave 2 (n=380)
A lot worse	4%	1%	2%	0%	2%	1%	0%	0%
A bit worse	9%	4%	6%	2%	9%	3%	4%	2%
No change	21%	12%	21%	8%	19%	9%	27%	16%
A bit better	43%	44%	43%	41%	43%	45%	37%	35%
A lot better	15%	32%	22%	42%	22%	36%	25%	38%
Not sure	8%	7%	8%	7%	5%	7%	6%	8%

Table 17: Staff survey: How far do you agree with the following statements?

	Oracy practices are an important part of my job	Oracy practices are an important part of my job	In a role like mine, learning about oracy can improve my performance	In a role like mine, learning about oracy can improve my performance	My school places a high priority on oracy	My school places a high priority on oracy	I see oracy practices modelled across the school	I see oracy practices modelled across the school
	Wave 1 (n=579)	Wave 2 (n=440)	Wave 1 (n=579)	Wave 2 (n=440)	Wave 1 (n=579)	Wave 2 (n=440)	Wave 1 (n=579)	Wave 2 (n=440)
Strongly disagree	2%	2%	2%	2%	1%	1%	2%	0%
Disagree	1%	0%	1%	1%	2%	1%	5%	1%
Neither	13%	11%	11%	8%	20%	10%	31%	16%
Agree	47%	49%	47%	51%	46%	48%	46%	53%
Strongly agree	37%	37%	39%	38%	31%	40%	16%	30%

Talk Boost assessment data

Table 18: Assessment scores for *Early Talk Boost*, by London borough

EARLY TALK BOOST	Overall numbers	Lewisham	Bexley	Lambeth	Southwark	Havering
One assessment	230	32	58	51	20	69
Two assessments	172	18	58	34	13	49
% of pupils with a baseline and second assessment	75%	56%	100%	67%	65%	71%
% Narrowing the gap	93%	90%	95%	90%	91%	100%
% narrowing the gap by 50%+	78%	70%	83%	65%	72%	100%
% Widening the gap	7%	10%	5%	10%	9%	0%

Table 19: Assessment scores for *Talk Boost Key Stage 1*, by London borough

KS1 TALK BOOST	Overall numbers	Lewisham	Bexley	Lambeth	Waltham Forest	Southwark	Sutton	Havering
One assessment	702	78	51	106	143	24	66	234
Two assessments	521	50	51	56	107	23	51	183
% of those with a baseline and second assessment	74%	64%	100%	53%	75%	96%	77%	78%
% Narrowing the gap	96%	98%	94%	96%	98%	96%	93%	98%
% narrowing the gap by 50%+	82%	83%	78%	90%	90%	69%	74%	91%
% Widening the gap	1%	0%	4%	0%	1%	0%	0%	1%