



# Evaluation to measure and understand in greater depth the efficacy and impact of the Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) Improvement Programme

Care Inspectorate

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## Executive Summary

The Care Inspectorate is the independent scrutiny and improvement body for care, social work and child protection services and has a significant part to play in improving services for adults and children across Scotland. As part of this remit, the Care Inspectorate delivers the Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) improvement programme.

The overarching aim of the ELC improvement programme is to support funded ELC settings across Scotland to improve the quality of ELC provision and meet the National Standard. The programme focuses on providing targeted support for those settings currently or at risk of, not meeting the National Standard. In addition to this the programme provides a range of universal resources to support all settings with improving quality.

The ELC improvement programme supports settings to meet the national standards and build their capacity for continual improvement through:

- targeted support to ELC settings who offer funded childcare places and who do not meet the national standard – including learning sessions, learning networks, individual improvement support and good practice resources
- universal quality improvement support to all settings via online self-evaluation and improvement resources
- support to local authorities to improve early years settings in their area.

The Care Inspectorate, on behalf of Scottish Government, commissioned Blake Stevenson Ltd. to conduct an evaluation of the ELC Quality Improvement Programme. The evaluation explored the efficacy and impact the programme is having on improving outcomes and experiences for children, their families and the settings they attend. The findings from this evaluation will inform future decisions about the value and future potential of the programme.

## Evaluation methodology

Blake Stevenson employed a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods in undertaking the evaluation. Two surveys were conducted – one survey was issued to all ELC settings in receipt of targeted support through the programme. 73 settings responded to this survey which constitutes around a third of those settings that accessed support. A second survey was conducted of ELC settings that accessed universal support available through the programme. 60 responses were received to this survey. In addition, the research involved an in-depth meeting with the ELC Improvement Team; focus groups discussions with seven inspectors, and five representatives of local authorities; and series of interviews with service managers and staff, local authority representatives and inspectors involved with the setting to inform the development of case studies.

While the findings outlined in this report cannot be taken as fully representative of the sector as a whole, the high participation rate in the evaluation gives a robust snapshot of current views of the ELC Improvement Programme.

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### Experiences of taking part in the ELC Improvement Programme

Feedback from settings indicates that the programme is highly accessible to a wide range of settings, across a wide range of geographical areas and the ELC Improvement Team continues to act on feedback to develop its introductory materials to ensure that this is the case.

Feedback about the format of the programme was generally positive. Settings welcomed the opportunity to participate in (web-based) external training and have the time to reflect on changes and developments needed. They appreciated the opportunity to interact with other settings, with some noting that the benefit of web-based training was that it enabled them to interact with settings across the country, not just in their local area (as would usually be the case).

Settings liked the structured nature of the support and the “hand-holding” approach taken.

Overall, settings rated the quality of the programme resources such as the one-to-one support, project clinics and Bitesize Sessions very highly. They found the resources available through the Care Inspectorate’s hub informative in relation to good practice and legislative requirements, and are making clear use of them in practice. This is really positive, and a clear endorsement of the time and effort put into creating these resources by the ELC improvement team. A minority reported finding many of the resources too wordy or overwhelming, and noted concerns about the time available to implement changes. These settings may require additional support to make best use of the available resources.

In relation to a few of the resources, there is a relatively high number of settings that have not yet made use of them. This may be because settings are unaware of the resources, in which case this is something to take into account when considering options for promotion of the resources. However, the usage rates do suggest that usage is relatively high so it may be that settings are simply choosing not to access these resources (either because they do not require them, or do not have the time to do so).

Research participants were keen to see the ongoing production of new resources, including training sessions on the Early Years Quality Framework, more real-life examples of good practice, more support for risk assessment in settings, and more training on record keeping.

### Impact of the ELC Improvement Programme

The ELC Improvement Programme is still in the early stages of implementation. Settings are operating within a complex wider context in this post-Covid period and in the midst of the implementation of the Government’s extension to the provision of nursery hours. These factors will inevitably have affected the extent of change that has been possible. Nevertheless, substantive impact has already been delivered despite these contextual challenges.

Research participants indicated that they have found it relatively easy to use learning from the programme in their ELC setting. This is really positive and suggests that learning is practical and applicable across settings. The culture of continuous improvement to programme content and delivery have undoubtedly contributed to this being the case.

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There is clear evidence of increased understanding of Quality Improvement methodology across a high percentage of participating settings; a significant impact on the quality of care being delivered to children; positive improvements to staff confidence and skills; and clear improvements in the relationships between settings and inspectors, and on inspection activities.

While only a partial picture of changes to gradings is available since some settings have not yet been re-inspected since taking part in the programme, progress here has also been very positive, with 33 settings improving their grades to date and further settings expected to do so in future.

Levels of Open Badge accreditation following participation in the programme are low currently, and the ELC Improvement Team is taking action to encourage more settings to seek accreditation for their participation.

**Key success factors**

In conducting this evaluation, we identified a range of factors which affect the likelihood of settings maximising benefit from the ELC Improvement Programme. These are illustrated below:



**Conclusions and recommendations**

The programme has been delivered through targeted support to selected settings, and universal support (through the provision of resources) to all settings in Scotland. Feedback on both programmes has been overwhelmingly positive – settings, inspectors and local authorities have all welcomed the programme and are keen to see it continue. There is widespread praise for the work of the ELC Improvement Team who were described by research participants as highly responsive and supportive.

Demand for support amongst eligible settings (those not currently meeting the National Standard) exceeds the number of places available on each cohort and there is therefore a barrier to some settings taking part. In addition, only those settings not meeting the National Standard are eligible currently, however it is clear from this research that a wider group of settings would also benefit from additional improvement support – for example settings that have variable

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grades, settings that meet the National Standard but still have the potential to improve from good to excellent grades, and settings that are not currently eligible for support. Ensuring high quality care for all children, and not just those being cared for in funded settings, was highlighted as an important reason for expansion and extension of the programme.

The evaluation has clearly demonstrated that there is continuing, and potentially even growing, demand for the support provided by the ELC Improvement Team. However, the ELC Improvement Programme is currently only funded until March 2023. Without continuation of funding, it is likely that many settings will struggle to make the level of improvements to the quality of care that has been possible while the programme has been ongoing. Settings have very little spare capacity to devote to substantive improvement already, and settings achieving the lowest grades struggle to make improvements without external support. In order to continue to provide support to settings to drive up the quality of care for children, and to enable the programme to work with a wider spectrum of settings, additional capacity and longevity of support through an extension to the current programme will be essential.

Below, we set out strategic and operational recommendations that will help to ensure that the programme continues to build on the success it has to date:

### Strategic recommendations

**Recommendation 1:** Grow the capacity of the ELC Improvement Team to enable it to meet existing and future anticipated demand for support for eligible settings. Assurances with regards to longevity of funding will be important to enabling the programme to develop effectively.

**Recommendation 2:** Consider expansion of current provision of support through the ELC Improvement Programme to include settings not currently eligible for support, including settings achieving the National Standard but with potential to improve the quality of their services; childminders; and out of school childcare provision.

**Recommendation 3:** Continue to develop relationships between settings, inspectors, the Improvement Team and local authorities, exploring opportunities to ensure a seamless package of support is available to settings.

### Operational recommendations

**Recommendation 4:** Explore opportunities to collect more data in relation to the impact of universal support. This could take the form of an annual survey of all settings.

**Recommendation 5:** ELC Improvement Team to work with local authorities to ensure that settings are clear about the reasons for their referrals ahead of taking part in the programme. Local authorities have an important role to play in ensuring that they adequately brief settings about the reason for their referral and what they should expect from taking part in the programme. This may encourage settings to take part and address any reticence to engage with the programme.

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**Recommendation 6:** The peer support groups facilitated through Yammer have the potential to be a useful and sustainable forum for exchange of good practice but settings are not yet fully engaged with them. Explore further with settings how these could become more valuable, and what is required to make them sustainable in the longer term.

**Recommendation 7:** Continue to develop the programme, adding to resources by building on feedback from participant settings, including suggestions indicated earlier in this report.

**Recommendation 8:** Continue to raise awareness of resources available, particularly the universal resources that are available to all settings and ensure that these continue to be easily accessible.

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## 1. Introduction and context

### Introduction

- 1.1 The Care Inspectorate is the independent scrutiny and improvement body for care, social work and child protection services and has a significant part to play in improving services for adults and children across Scotland. It regulates and inspects care services and carries out joint inspections of adults' and children's services delivered by health and social care partnerships across local authority areas. As part of this remit, the Care Inspectorate delivers the Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) improvement programme.
- 1.2 The overarching aim of the ELC improvement programme is to support funded ELC settings across Scotland to improve the quality of ELC provision and meet the National Standard. The programme focuses on providing targeted support for those settings currently or at risk of, not meeting the National Standard. In addition to this the programme provides a range of universal resources to support all settings with improving quality.
- 1.3 The Care Inspectorate, on behalf of Scottish Government, commissioned Blake Stevenson Ltd. to conduct an evaluation of the ELC Quality Improvement Programme. The evaluation required to measure and understand in greater depth the efficacy and impact the programme is having on improving outcomes and experiences for children, their families and the settings they attend. The findings from this evaluation will inform future decisions about the value and future potential of the programme.

### Policy context for the ELC Improvement Programme

- 1.4 The ambition of the Scottish Government is to close the poverty-attainment gap and enable all children to fulfil their potential. The link between high quality early learning and care, and positive outcomes is well evidenced (as is the detrimental effect of poor- quality early learning and care). To support this ambition, the Scottish Government has funded the Care Inspectorate to improve early learning and childcare (ELC) to ensure that all ELC settings provide high quality provision through meeting 'the national standard'.
- 1.5 The new national standard for ELC settings comprises eight quality criteria that ELC settings that offer funded childcare places are required to meet (including a minimum of a grade of good from their Care Inspectorate Inspection). Achieving these standards is particularly important in the context of Funding Following the Child and the expansion of funded hours, to promote consistent quality across all setting types and therefore enable families to have a genuine choice of high-quality settings for their children.



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- 1.6 The ELC improvement programme supports settings to meet the national standards and build their capacity for continual improvement through:
- targeted support to ELC settings who offer funded childcare places and who do not meet the national standard – including learning sessions, learning networks, individual improvement support and good practice resources
  - universal quality improvement support to all settings via online self-evaluation and improvement resources
  - support to local authorities to improve early years settings in their area.
- 1.7 The Covid-19 Pandemic has affected key ELC policy implementation including delaying the expansion of the funded hours of ELC entitlement and affecting expectations of the delivery of the national standards. The impact of Covid has inevitably affected implementation of the programme itself.
- 1.8 The evaluation considered to what extent the programme activities are enabling funded settings to make the improvements required to meet the quality criteria and collect evidence of impact of improvements on outcomes and family experiences. In summary the evaluation focused on:
- impact on outcomes for children and their families
  - accessibility and ease of following the programme
  - barriers to engaging in the work of the programme
  - change in understanding of QI methodology (as a result of the programme) and ease of implementation
  - perspectives on the value/synergy gained through closer working between scrutiny and assurance and improvement functions
  - most useful elements of the programme
  - impact on inspection activity and CI evaluations
  - engagement and appropriateness of the programme offer with out of school and childminding services
  - overall impact of the resources
  - sustainability of improvements and added value; impact if programme were to end.

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Evaluation methodology

1.9 The following diagram illustrates the 3-stage approach we applied to conduct the evaluation.



1.10 We received 73 responses to the survey of ELC settings in receipt of targeted support through the programme. This constitutes around a third of those settings that accessed support, which gives reassurance that the survey findings are robust.

1.11 We received 61 responses to the survey of ELC settings that accessed the universal support available through the programme.

1.12 In addition, we conducted an in-depth meeting with the ELC Improvement Team; conducted a focus group with seven inspectors, and a focus group discussion with five representatives from local authorities.

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- 1.13 We conducted a series of interviews in three areas to develop case studies of involvement in the programme. These included interviews with service managers and staff, local authority representatives and inspectors involved with the setting.
- 1.14 While the findings outlined in this report cannot be taken as fully representative of the sector as a whole, the high participation rate in the evaluation gives a robust snapshot of current views of the ELC Improvement Programme.
- 1.15 The remainder of the report is set out as follows:
- Chapter 2 – Programme overview
  - Chapter 3 – Experiences of participating in the programme
  - Chapter 4 – Impact of the Improvement Programme
  - Chapter 5 – Key factors for success
  - Chapter 6 – Conclusions and recommendations

## 2. Programme overview

- 2.1 The ELC Improvement Programme is delivered through two key strands – targeted support and universal support. Each of these is described further below.

### Targeted support

- 2.2 The ELC Improvement Programme was set up to support early learning and childcare settings that offer funded places and are not currently meeting the quality criteria of the [National Standard](#). The programme is delivered through facilitating learning events, providing individual improvement support and the sharing of good practice resources.
- 2.3 Settings are referred to the ELC Improvement Programme by their local authority with final selection for each cohort being undertaken by the Care Inspectorate ELC Improvement Programme team.
- 2.4 To date, three cohorts of ELC settings have been supported, with preparations for Cohort 4 currently underway.
- 2.5 Settings participate in six sessions – with content progressing from identifying need for change, implementation of those changes right through to scaling up changes. Each setting chooses a priority area of focus, based on improvements identified in their most recent Care Inspectorate report or through their own self-evaluation. The ELC Improvement team supports them to build QI capacity and capability and provides additional peer supports through a range of project clinics (one after each of the six sessions) which they attend with other settings in their cohort. Peer support is an important component of the package of support.
- 2.6 Information sessions are also delivered for local authority staff supporting the nominated setting, to make them aware of what services have been asked to do.

### Universal support

- 2.7 Through the Universal Support programme, the Care Inspectorate provides a range of universal resources to support all early learning settings across Scotland with improving quality. Resources are made available through the ELC Improvement section of the [Care Inspectorate's Hub](#) which can be accessed via the Care Inspectorate's website. These resources include:
- “Quick Win” Bite Size Sessions
  - Talking Heads Videos
  - Improvement guidance, advice and resources
  - Care Inspectorate practice resources
  - Improvement methodology resources

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- National policy and legislation resources

### Selection criteria

- 2.8 Services are nominated for the ELC Improvement Programme by their local authority. They are eligible to be nominated if they have failed to meet the National Standard at a recent inspection. Local authorities refer settings that they believe will benefit from the support available. With input from inspectors, the Care Inspectorate Improvement Team makes final selection of those settings to be invited to take part, based on need. Settings not invited to take part are placed on a waiting list and may be invited to take part in future cohorts.
- 2.9 Cohort 1 had capacity for 110 settings, however the ELC Improvement learned from this cohort that having fewer participant settings would enable them to improve the quality of the experience for participating settings with the limited resources they had. As a result, 65 settings were invited to take part in Cohorts 2 and 3.
- 2.10 To date, demand has exceeded the number of places available. For Cohort 4, which is currently in the preparatory stages, some 107 settings were nominated for support by their local authorities, with only 65 places available on the programme. Settings can potentially be on the waiting list for quite a long time – and newer referrals that are higher priority may be invited to take part ahead of them if their need is great. These decisions are taken based on feedback from inspectors and local authority representatives.
- 2.11 Some research participants also noted that there may be services that are not currently eligible for support that would nevertheless benefit from the programme – for example settings with fluctuating grades, and others suggested that there could also be a case for referral by inspectors based on other criteria.
- 2.12 There is no capacity to grow the size of the programme currently. The ELC Improvement Team is small (four members of staff) and their capacity is therefore limited. The ongoing waiting lists, coupled with feedback received during this evaluation, suggest that additional capacity and reassurances around longevity of funding for the Improvement Programme will be needed to meet demand.

### Participation in the Targeted Programme

- 2.13 Table 2.1 shows the number of settings that were invited to take part and the number of settings that have completed the programme of support to date. The number of settings completing is lower than the number invited to take part for a variety of reasons, including settings having to drop out due to staff changes, capacity issues and a range of other factors.

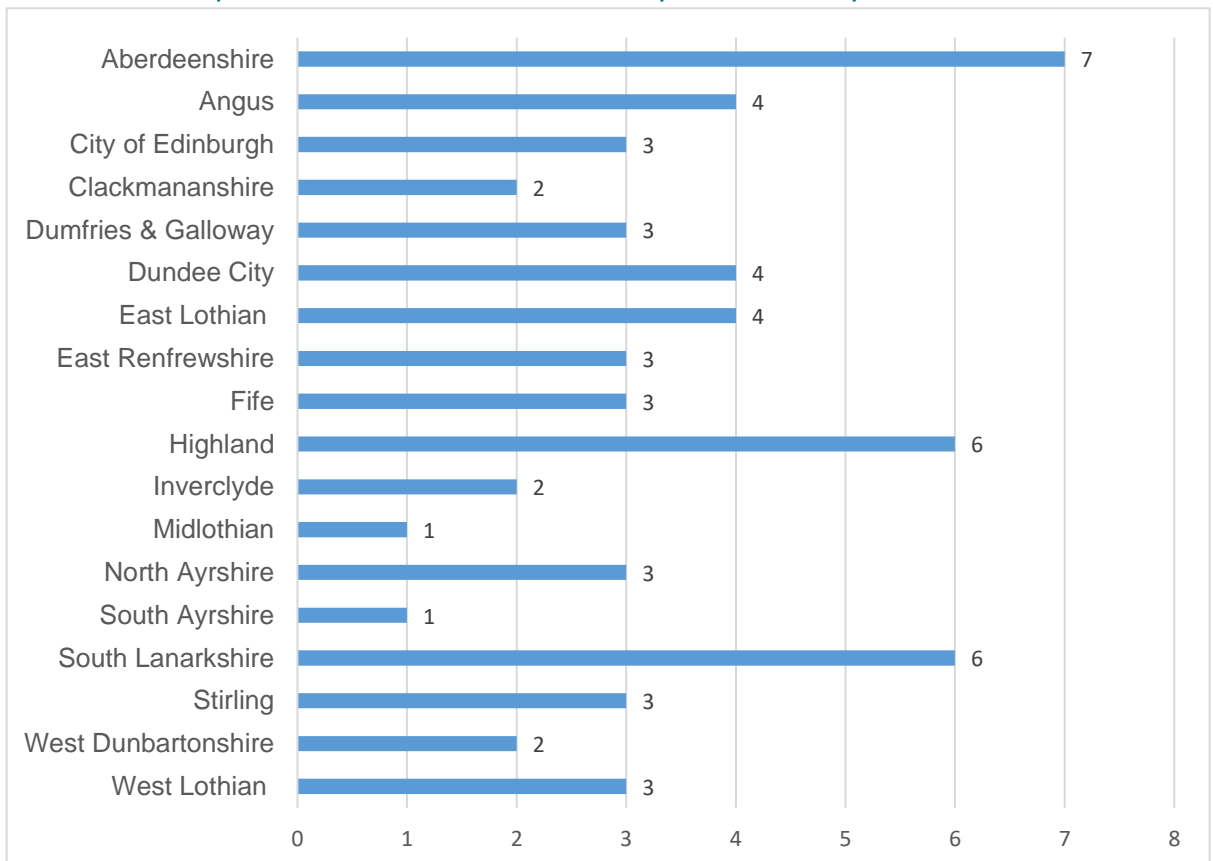
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Table 2.1 Participation numbers by cohort

Cohort	Number of settings invited to take part	Number of settings that completed the programme
Cohort 1	110	91
Cohort 2	65	63
Cohort 3	65	60
Total to date		214

2.14 Table 2.2 shows the geographical locations of settings on the most recent cohort, Cohort 3. Tables showing participation broken down by geography for Cohorts 1 and 2 are included in Appendix 3. This shows that settings have taken part from across Scotland.

Table 2.2 Participation in Cohort 3 broken down by local authority area.



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- 2.15 When settings are selected to take part, they are advised by email and invited to attend an initial Q&A session. They are also provided with a link to a “terms of engagement” video clip which describes the process of taking part and what the expectations of participants are. A shorter version of the video is also sent to the local authority and they are asked to liaise with services to ensure that settings understand what is involved in taking part.
- 2.16 A few settings reported that they had felt unclear about why they had been selected or what would be involved in taking part. All should have received the clarification outlined above, but occasionally emails may get lost in the system, or changes in management occur, and this would account for the small number that noted they had not received adequate briefing. Anything local authorities can do to ensure that settings are clear about what is involved in taking part would be welcomed.

### Take-up of Universal services

- 2.17 Universal support is available to childcare settings across Scotland, including childminders and out of school services. The resources are openly available through the Care Inspectorate’s hub and so in practice can be accessed by anyone. Usually, services opt to access these resources themselves, but some local authorities do refer services specifically to them. Inspectors also widely refer settings to these resources.
- 2.18 It is far more complicated to establish take-up rates in relation to the support provided through the provision of resources, since these are accessed remotely by settings and there is currently no means of recording numbers of settings using each resource. However, we can gain some sense of this through examining usage rates in relation to each of the resources, as shown in Table 2.3.
- 2.19 While this data does show us that the resources available are being extensively used, it is not currently possible to know how many (or how frequently) organisations are accessing these resources. We examine settings’ views on the quality and usefulness of these resources in Chapter 3 of this report.

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Table 2.3 Usage rates of universal resources

Resource	Number of visits to this resource on the hub (at 23/9/22)
Key Question 5 Bitesize	72,895
Quick Wins Bitesize	46,938
Introducing Quality Improvement Bitesize	59,787
Scrutiny and Assurance during COVID Bitesize	1,359
Quality Inspection Framework Bitesize	9,955
Covid-19 Bitesize	2,732
Personal Planning Bitesize	4,275
Talking Heads video	1,467
ELC Quality Framework	8,135



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### 3. Experiences of taking part in the ELC Improvement programme

3.1 In this chapter, we provide an overview of the experiences of settings, local authority representatives, and inspectors in taking part in the ELC Improvement Programme. This analysis is based on feedback received through surveys of settings receiving both targeted and universal support, and through interviews and focus groups with settings, inspectors and local authority representatives conducted as part of this research.

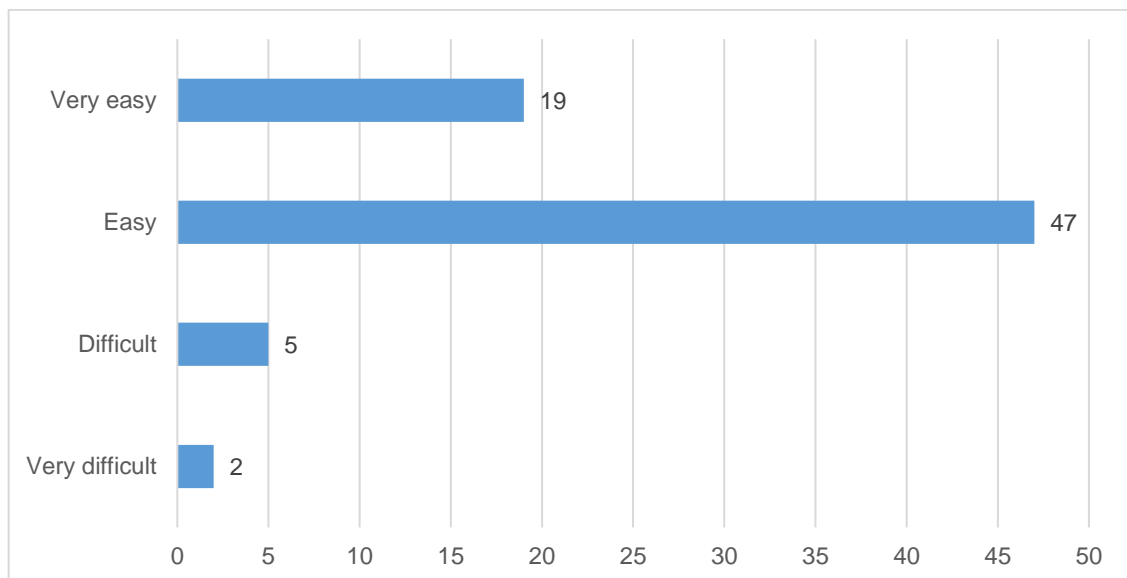
3.2 Where appropriate, we have presented information according to whether it relates to targeted or universal support.

#### Accessibility of the programme

3.3 We have already described the criteria for accessing the targeted support available through the ELC Improvement Programme in Chapter 2 which appear to be straightforward and clear to those involved.

3.4 Table 3.1 below shows the extent to which settings in receipt of targeted support found the services available through the programme easy to access. This shows that 19 (26%) found it very easy, a further 47 (64%) found it easy, 5 (7%) found it difficult, and 2 (3%) found it very difficult.

Table 3.1 On a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 being very easy and 4 being very difficult, how easy have you found it to access the services available through the programme? (n=73)



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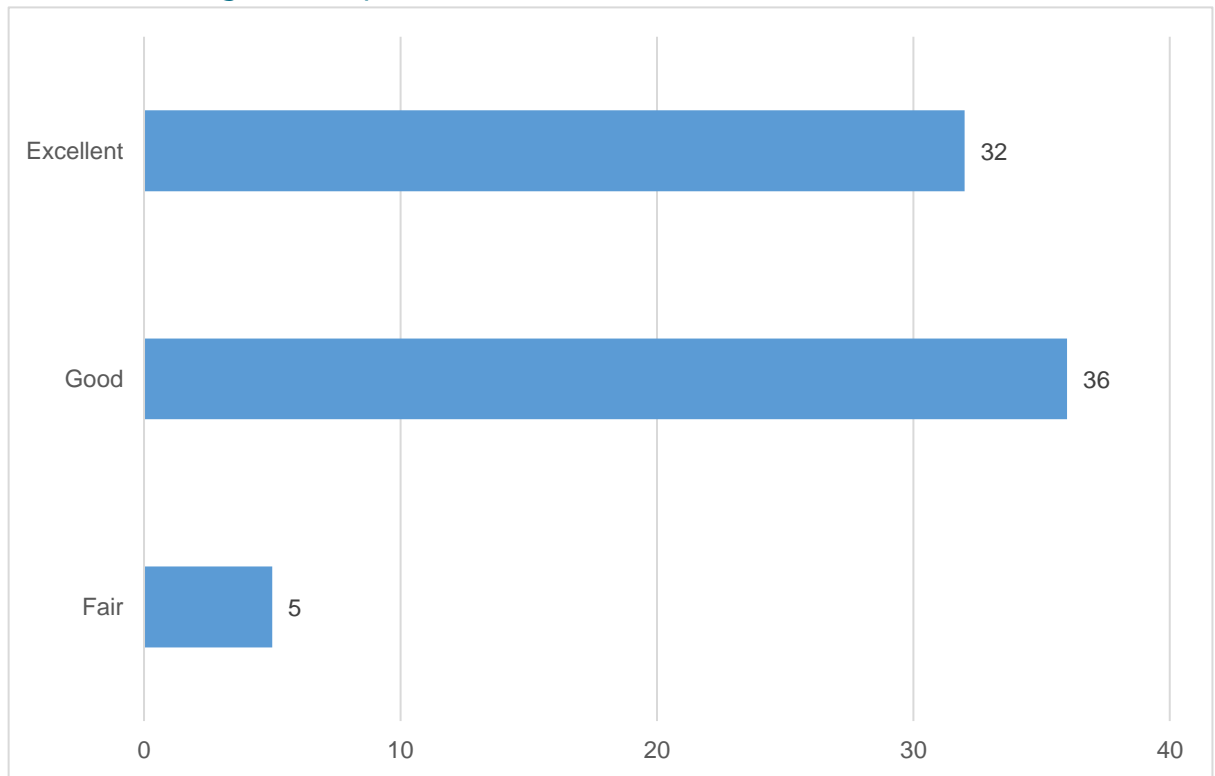
3.5 This suggests that the programme is very accessible across a range of settings, and the ELC Improvement Team continues to act on feedback to develop its introductory materials to ensure that this is the case.

**Experiences of receiving targeted programme support**

3.6 Overall, feedback about the quality of the targeted support provided through the ELC Improvement Programme was overwhelmingly positive, with the vast majority of research participants welcoming the programme and the additional support that it can provide.

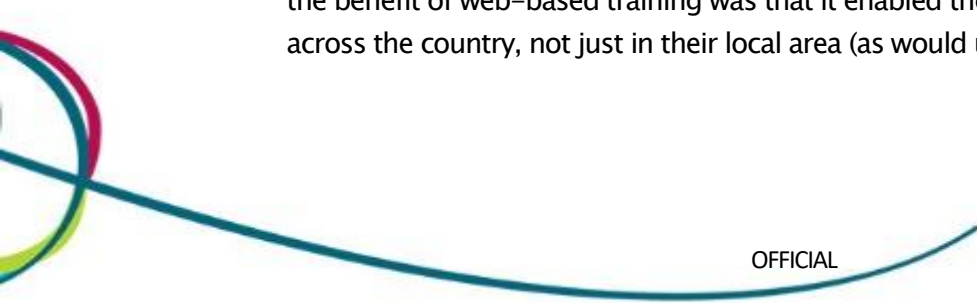
3.7 As Table 3.2 shows, 93% of respondents to the survey on targeted support rated the programme as excellent or good, with the remaining 7% rating it fair.

**Table 3.2 How would you rate the quality of the programme overall? 1–4 Ratings scale (Excellent, good, fair, poor) (n=73)**



3.8 Feedback about the format of the programme, as described in Chapter 2, was generally positive. Settings welcomed the opportunity to participate in (web-based) external training and have the time to reflect on changes and developments needed.

3.9 They appreciated the opportunity to interact with other settings, with some noting that the benefit of web-based training was that it enabled them to interact with settings across the country, not just in their local area (as would usually be the case).



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- 3.10 Settings liked the structured nature of the support and the “hand-holding” approach taken.
- 3.11 One survey respondent suggested that it may be beneficial for participants to be given a choice of the session that they attend on a session-by-session basis *“to ensure that management who aren’t supernumerary can access the sessions which are most easiest to access for them. As mentioned previously, sessions could also be recorded to enable staff to access at a later date or review.”*

#### Break-out rooms

- 3.12 The ELC Improvement Team constantly makes improvements to the structure of the programme in response to feedback. For example, a few research participants from early cohorts noted that some of the “break-out rooms” were unfacilitated and felt that this was less valuable than facilitated sessions, as some settings were unwilling to share their experiences, and the sessions were less productive as a result.

*“These can be great for networking but there is also a danger that they can just become waffle. A facilitator might help.” (Local authority representative)*

- 3.13 In response to this type of feedback, the ELC Improvement team amended its approach to the break-out sessions and for Cohort 3 they provided facilitation for these sessions. The team plans to evolve this approach further and in future are going to attend break-out sessions but encourage settings to note-take and feedback to the wider group, placing ownership of the discussion back with the participants. In addition, they stay online at the end of sessions so that settings can speak to them about individual issues.
- 3.14 One survey respondent suggested that there may be benefit in participants anonymously submitting information about any challenges with their current practice, so that these issues could be discussed more, as some settings to date had been reluctant to discuss challenges openly during sessions.
- 3.15 Some research participants indicated that they would like less emphasis on breakout rooms and more direct delivery of information by the Improvement Team.

#### Identification of priority areas for support

- 3.16 When they join the programme, settings must select one priority area to address through the targeted support sessions. Some stakeholders suggested that settings may need help to identify what their biggest priority issue should be:

*“They might not be able or best placed to do that themselves. This shouldn’t perhaps be service led.”*

- 3.17 In the following sections we give an overview of feedback relating to specific elements of the targeted support.

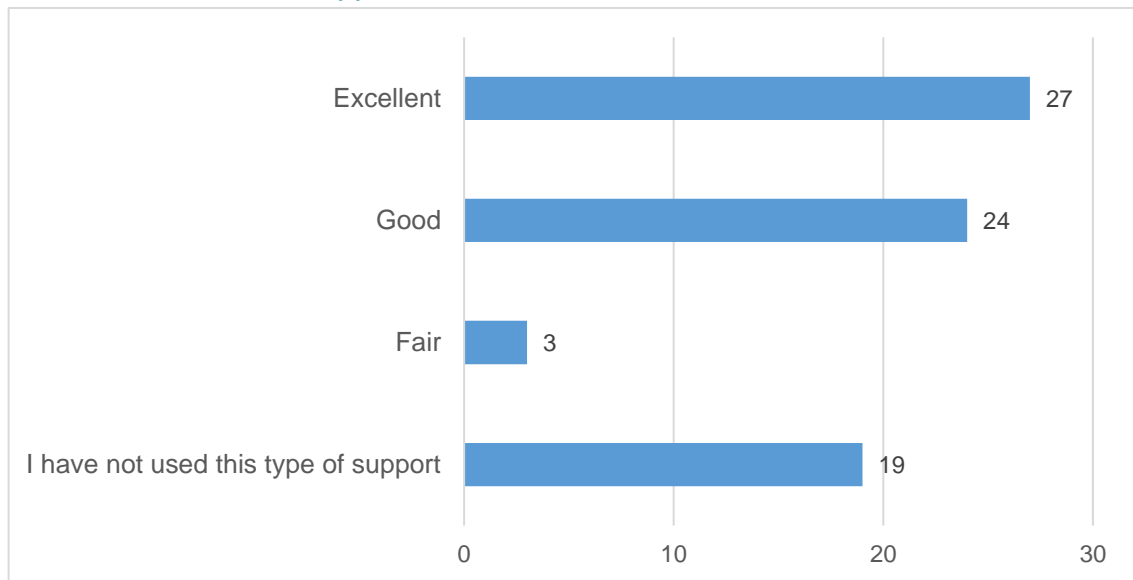
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Targeted support

One-to-one Support

3.18 One-to-one support, in the form of email and telephone advice, was available on an ongoing basis throughout the programme to settings receiving targeted support. As Table 3.3 shows, feedback in relation to this support was excellent, with 94% of respondents to the survey on targeted support who had received one-to-one support rating it as good or excellent and the remaining 6% rating it as fair. 19 respondents indicated that they had not used this type of support. This is likely to be because they did not require this support.

Table 3.3 One-to-one support (n=73)



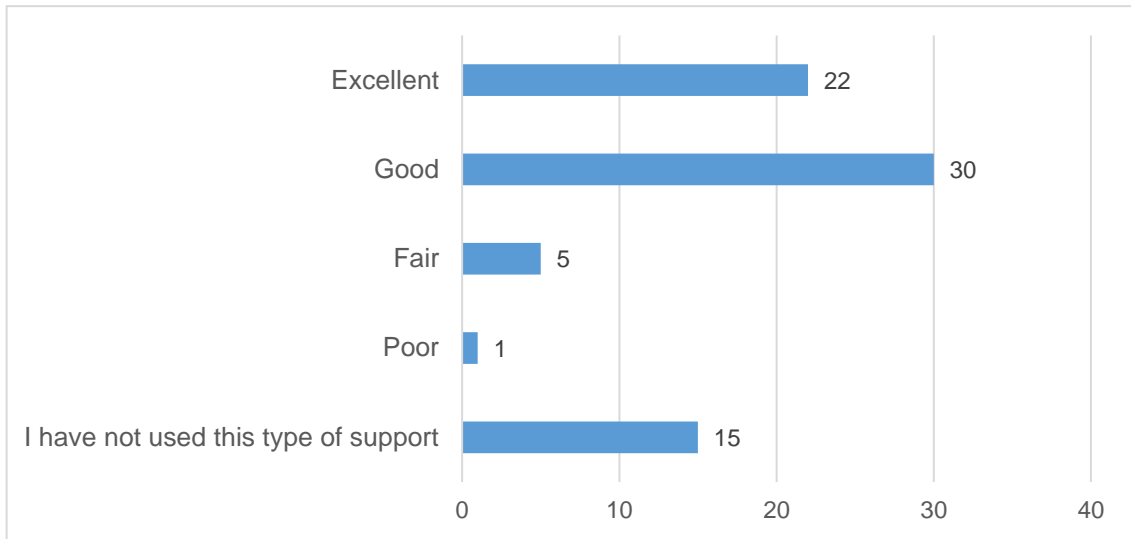
Project clinics

3.19 Project clinics were run in between the six Improvement Programme sessions – usually running a week after each session. As Table 3.4 shows, 52 respondents to the survey on targeted support who had taken part in project clinics (90%) rated the clinics as good or excellent, 9% rated it fair and the remainder rated it poor. 15 settings had not attended clinics.



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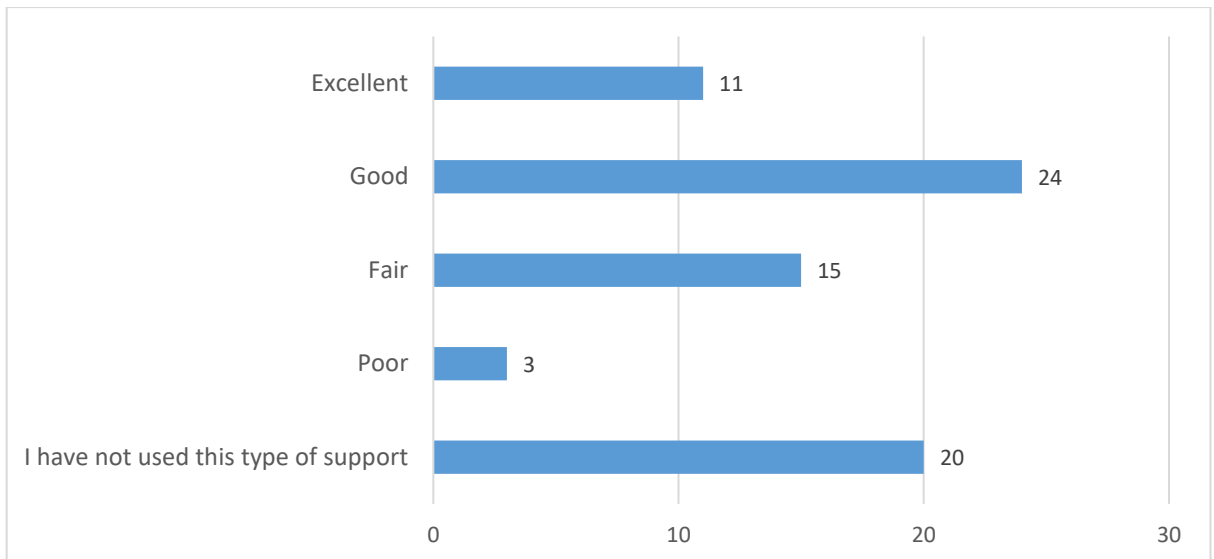
Table 3.4 Project clinics (n=73)



Peer support groups through Yammer

3.20 Feedback on the peer support groups available through Yammer was more mixed. 66% of survey respondents who had used peer support groups rated them as good or excellent, 28% rated it fair, and 6% rated it poor. 20 settings had not used this support mechanism to date.

Table 3.5 Peer Support Groups (n=73)



3.21 Interviewees were also mixed in their feedback about the peer support groups on Yammer. Some of those who had used Yammer were not particularly positive about its functionality compared with other online forums they had used and did not rate it as highly as other resources available through the programme.

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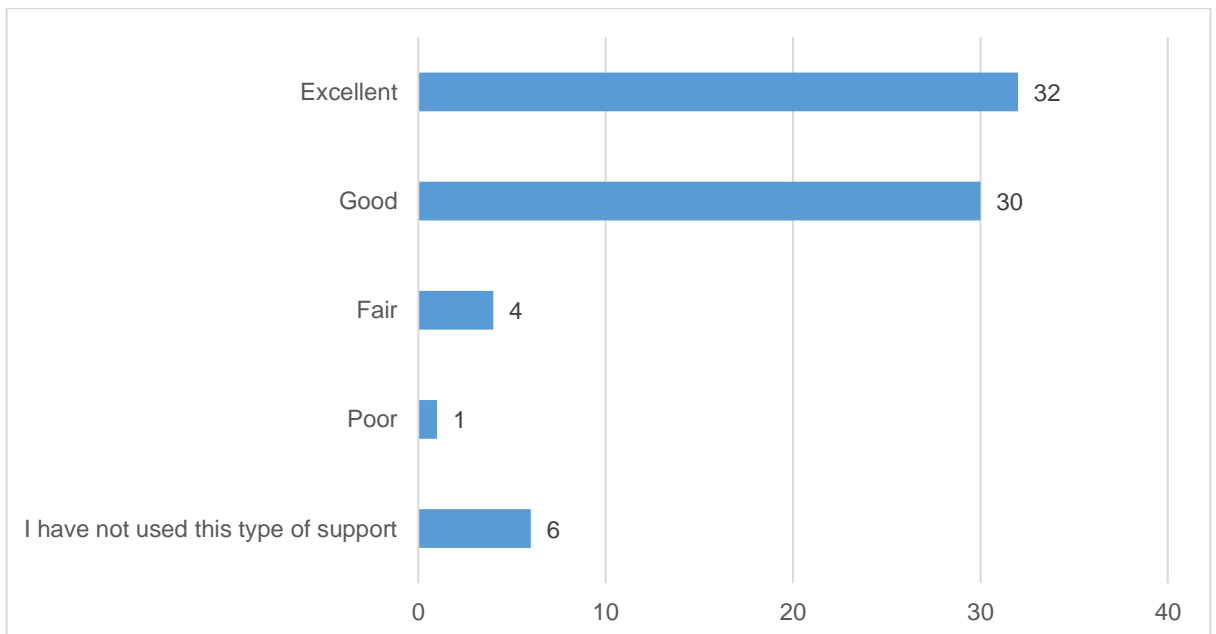
*“Yammer isn’t used enough by those taking part in the session, it would have been nice to form business friendships for more support when taking part in these sessions, which I know isn’t down to the improvement programme but the people taking part.”*

- 3.22 Other settings valued it as a forum for engaging with other settings and sharing practice.
- 3.23 While it has the potential to be a useful forum for settings to engage with one another about practice (and something that could become self-sustaining beyond the lifetime of the programme), online forums often struggle to survive without meaningful facilitation. Even with this, there can be reluctance to participate in forums of this type. It may be useful for the ELC Improvement Team to explore with settings what would make the peer support groups more engaging and useful.

**‘Quick win’ bitesize sessions for the ELC sector**

- 3.24 The ELC Improvement Team have created a series of “Quick Win Bitesize sessions” which are available to all through the Care Inspectorate’s hub. They are available on a range of topics including Quality Improvement, Personal Planning, Scrutiny and Assurance during Covid-19 and Quick Wins.
- 3.25 As Table 3.6 shows, 62 respondents to the survey on targeted support (93% of those who had used bitesize sessions) rated them as good or excellent, 4 (6%) rated them as fair and the remainder rated them poor. Six settings had not used the bitesize sessions.

**Table 3.6 Bitesize Sessions (n=73)**



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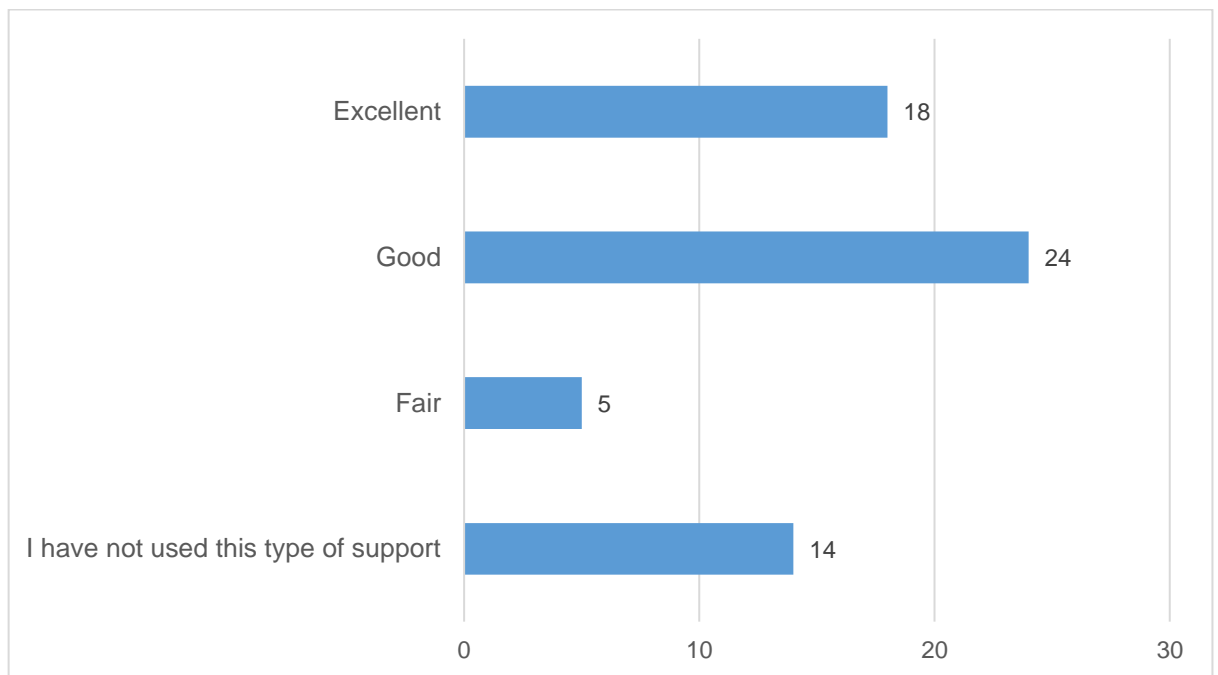
3.26 This positive feedback was echoed by other participants in the research, including inspectors who refer settings to these resources when they are conducting inspections.

*“Bitesize sessions have been great for quick wins – they are great for inspectors to refer to.” (Inspector)*

*“Bitesize videos are so useful for inspectors for signposting.” (Inspector)*

3.27 Table 3.7 shows that 42 respondents to the survey of settings accessing universal support (89% of those that had used Bitesize sessions) rated them as excellent or good, and only 5 settings (11% of those that had used Bitesize sessions) rated it fair. No settings rated these poor, but 23% of all respondents to the universal survey had not ever used Bitesize sessions. This is a higher proportion than targeted services and suggests that more awareness raising may need to be undertaken to ensure that the wider community of ELC settings accesses the resources available.

Table 3.7 Rate the quality of the Quick Win Bitesize sessions for the ELC Sector (n=61)



3.28 Universal survey respondents indicated that the ‘Quick win’ bitesize sessions were user friendly, short, and easy to understand. For example, one setting described using the bitesize sessions to help improve their setting to *“allow independence at eating times and to promote the curiosity approach.”* Another setting described using them for *“double checking practice and instant changes to ensure quality for children and learners.”*

3.29 Some settings indicated that they are useful in building consistency of approach across the sector. One respondent also noted their value in providing useful learning for staff with literacy challenges. Another setting described the value of the bitesize sessions in

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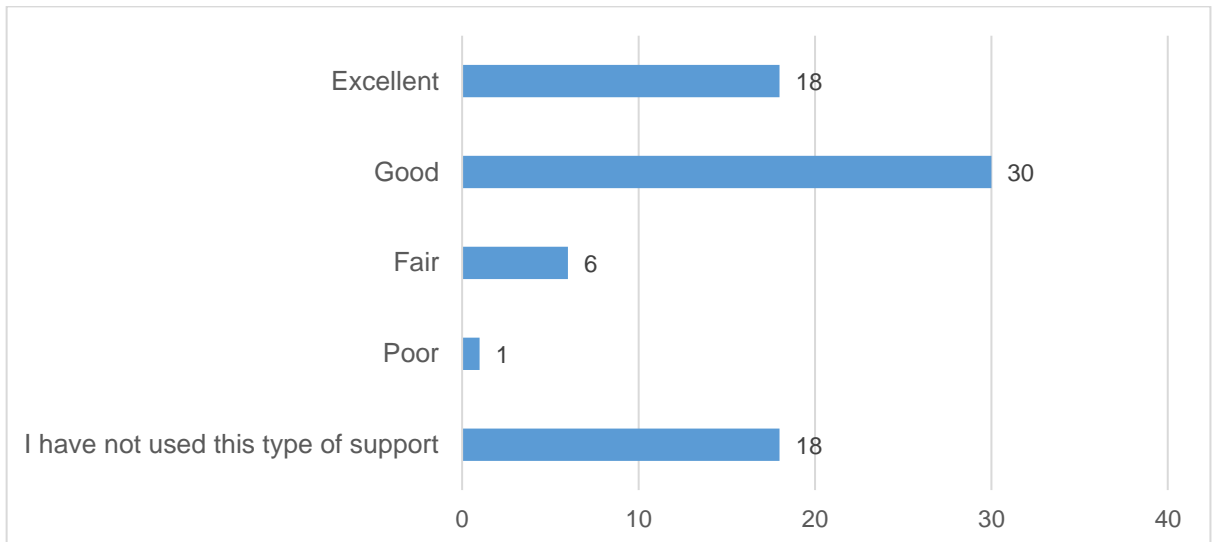
offering learning which is *“not only informative but it’s not overwhelming or too lengthy for staff to lose interest.”*

- 3.30 One research participant commented that they are useful because they *“enable all staff to watch in their own time and keep up to date with current recommendations”*.

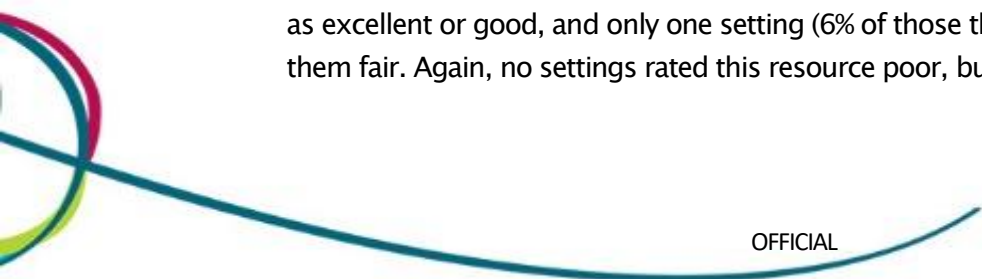
Talking Heads video

- 3.31 This year, the ELC Improvement Team took the decision to produce a series of “Talking Heads” videos which involve an interview with someone involved in early learning and childcare and can provide insight on particular issues. The Talking Heads videos are available through the Care Inspectorate Hub. To date, one video has been created – it features an ELC inspector and a service from Cohort one of the programme. It shares the experience and impact the programme has had on the service and the evidence seen by the inspector. The intention is to produce further videos in due course.
- 3.32 As shown in Table 3.8 below, 87% of survey respondents to the targeted survey who had watched the Talking Heads video rated it good or excellent, a further 11% rated it fair, and one setting rated it poor. 18 settings had not used the Talking Heads video. Given the relative newness of the Talking Heads video resource, it is not surprising that the number of settings that had not used it was relatively high. We would expect this number to drop in future as settings become more familiar with this new resource.

Table 3.8 Talking Heads Video–Targeted Settings’ Views (n=73)



- 3.33 Feedback from respondents to the universal survey was similar. Table 3.9 shows that 17 respondent settings (94% of those that had viewed the Talking Heads videos) rated them as excellent or good, and only one setting (6% of those that had viewed the videos) rated them fair. Again, no settings rated this resource poor, but 70% of all respondents had not

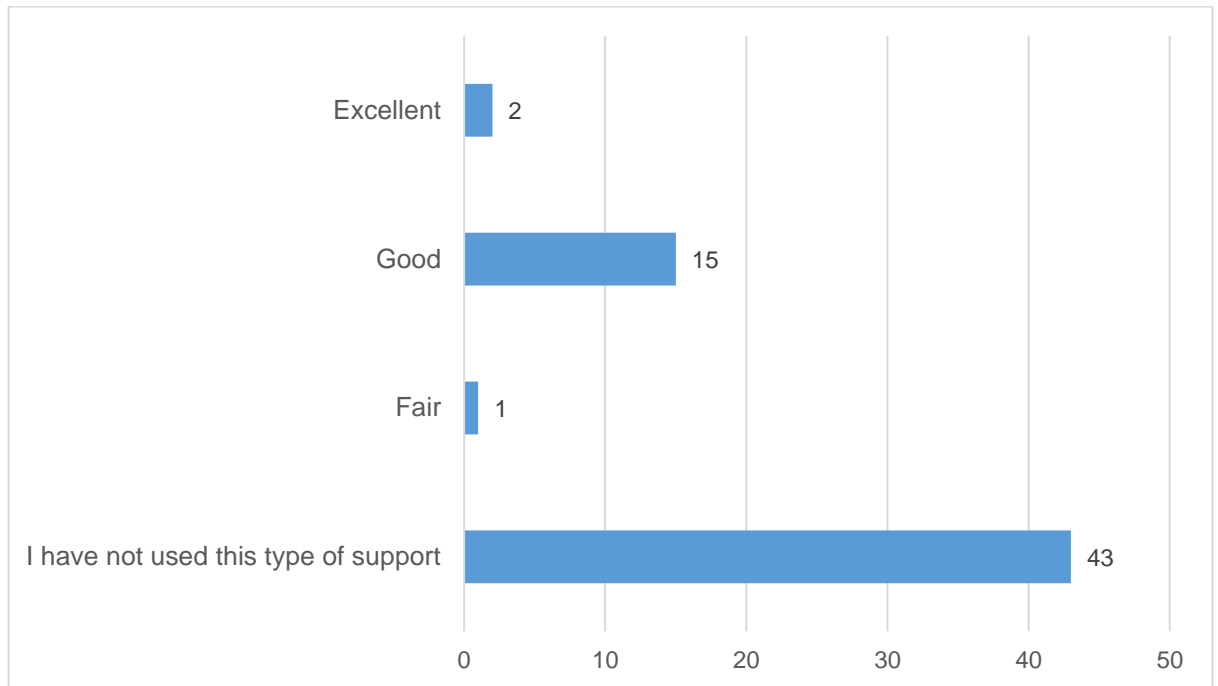




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ever used the Talking Heads Videos, reinforcing the point that the newness of this resource means that further awareness raising in future will be required to maximise use.

**Table 3.9 Talking Heads Videos – Views of settings receiving Universal Support (n=61)**



3.34 The Talking Heads videos are relatively new and there was no substantive feedback on them during the research. Generally, they were welcomed as an additional tool. One survey respondent described their value in hearing others’ point of view:

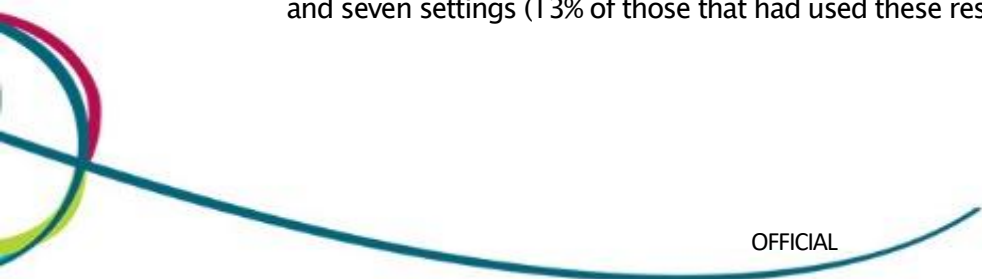
*“Good to hear others’ opinions and point of view on how they have changed/implemented new practice and systems”*

**Universal support**

3.35 In the sections below we present feedback relating to resources that are available to all settings through the Improvement Programme section of the Care Inspectorate’s hub.

**Improvement guidance, advice and resources**

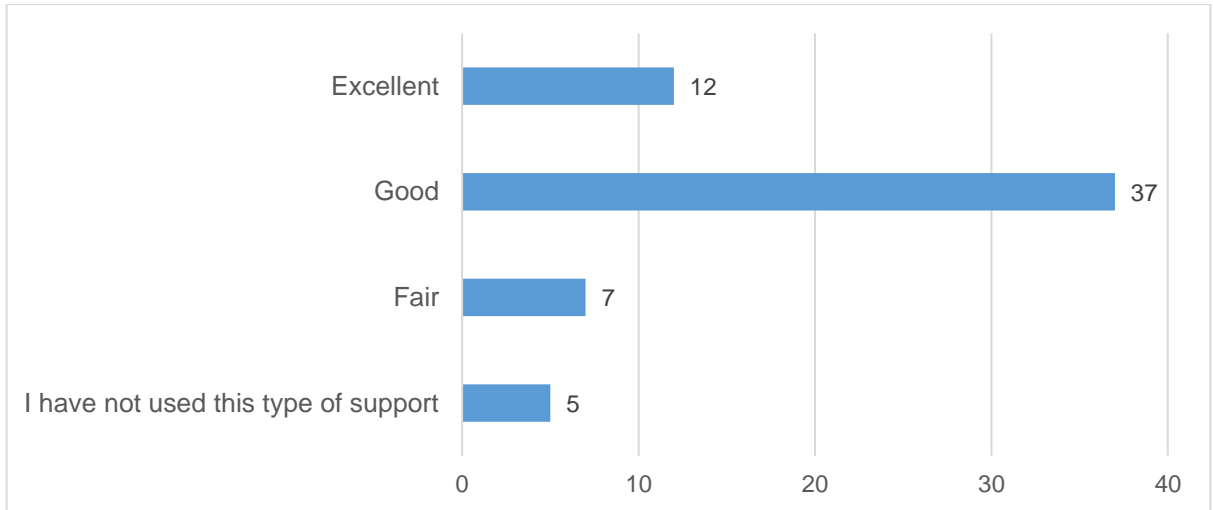
3.36 Table 3.10 shows that 49 respondents to the universal survey (88% of those that had accessed improvement guidance, advice and resources) rated them as excellent or good, and seven settings (13% of those that had used these resources) rated them fair. No



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settings rated them poor, and only 8% of all respondents had not used these resources, suggesting that these have a wide reach and applicability.

Table 3.10 Rate the quality of the improvement guidance, advice and resources (n=61)



3.37 Settings described a number of impacts of using the improvement guidance advice and resources including helping them to ensure they deliver best practice, supporting them with self-evaluation and improvement, supporting the development of their workforce, keeping them abreast of changes to guidance, supporting revisions to policies, consolidating and developing knowledge and understanding, and supporting improvement to the way in which learning was planned and delivered.

*“We are using these to audit our environment and spaces to improve the childrens experiences and outcomes.”*

3.38 However, some settings found the guidance to be too detailed and complex. For example, one setting felt that the guidance is not always clear and that it is too wordy. They felt that including more visuals would be helpful. Another described the information as overwhelming.

*“They are useful but lengthy, hard to access and process and pick apart Also feel like you have to put together different resources and guidance to get the whole picture. This is time consuming, stressful and feels like others must be having to do the same. There's sometimes a delay in guidance coming and you have to piece together the guidance that you can find.*

*“The guidance is helpful but there is an information overload issue that makes it hard to keep up with the constant flow of information.”*

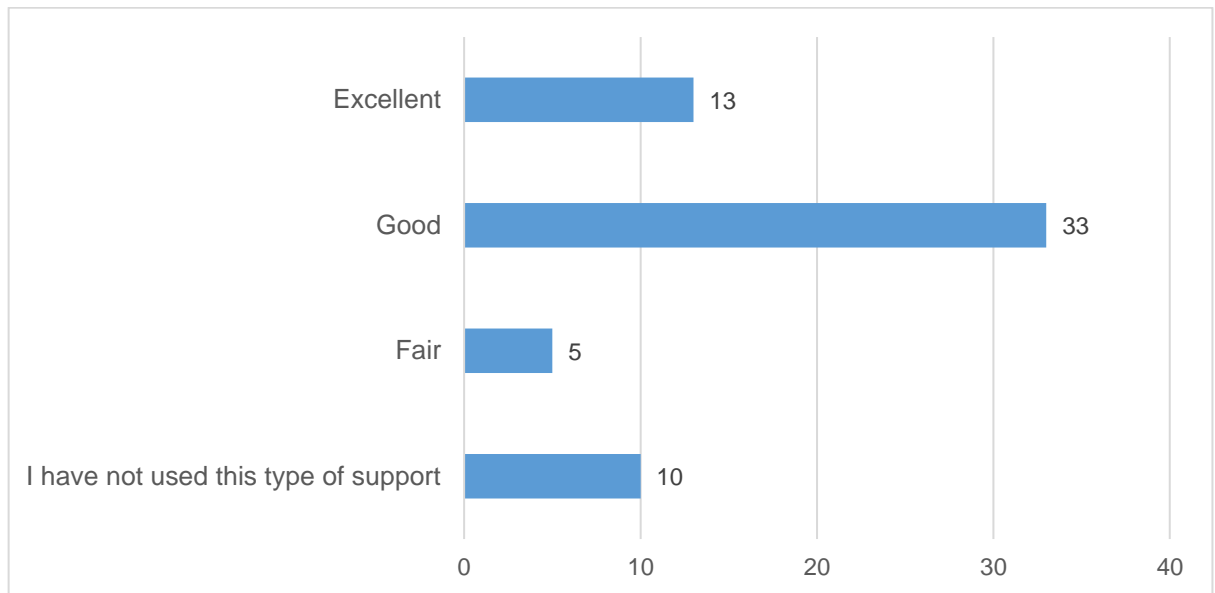


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Care Inspectorate practice resources

- 3.39 The Improvement Programme is the conduit through which a range of resources are shared with childcare settings. Some of these, such as the Care Inspectorate’s practice resources have not been created by them but are shared and promoted by them as part of the programme.
- 3.40 Table 3.11 shows that 46 respondents to the universal survey (90% of those that had used Care Inspectorate practice resources) rated them as excellent or good, and five settings (10% of those that had used these resources) rated them fair. No settings rated them poor, and only 16% of all respondents had not used these resources

Table 3.11 Rate the quality of the Care Inspectorate’s practice resources (n=61)



- 3.41 Settings reported finding the practice resources informative and relevant. Settings described the resources as being useful for training and updating good practices and policies; and for helping to ensure that all practice is current and meets regulatory requirements.

*“Recent publications supported our work in looking at holistic approach in childcare using wellbeing indicators and gave us some good example of practical implementation.”*

- 3.42 Some felt the practice resources would benefit from being more detailed:

*“There is not enough detail given to help me.”*

*“Helpful guidance but it is clear that staff need more ‘time’ to be able to read, reflect and improve service delivery. They have very little time off the floor and this will impact improvements.”*

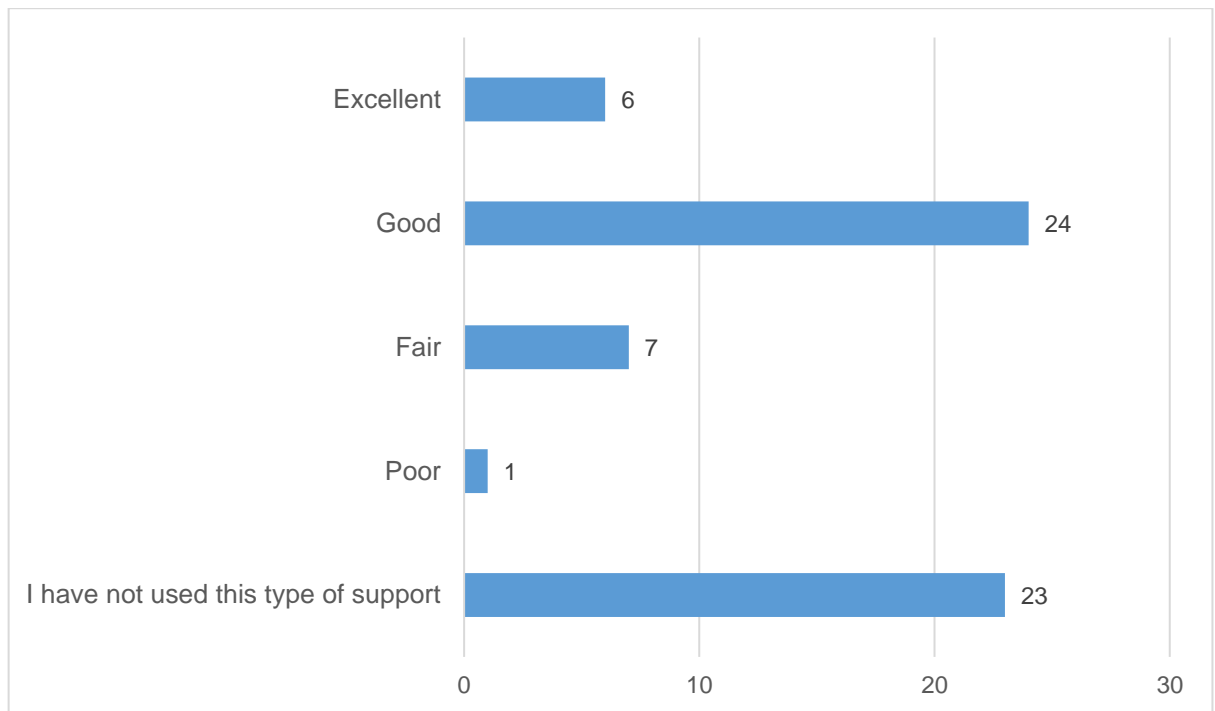
*“Small amount – too often aimed at preschool aged children so less relevant.”*

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Improvement methodology resources

3.43 Table 3.12 shows that 30 respondents to the universal survey (79% of those that had used improvement methodology resources) rated them as excellent or good, seven settings (18% of those that had used these resources) rated them fair. One setting rated these resources as poor. 38% of all respondents had not used these resources to date.

Table 3.12 Rate the quality of Improvement Methodology Resources (n=61)



3.44 The improvement methodology resources were generally well received by many settings with settings describing them as useful for good practice and ideas; supporting the updating and refreshing of staff skills, knowledge and understanding; helpful in giving focus to discussion and planning; and a helpful tool in making improvements within settings to promote independence and choice.

3.45 However, again a minority of settings reported being overwhelmed by the resources on offer:

*“Don’t feel trained in this. Feels like we are just expected to pick it up and run with it alongside everything else.”*

*“I find these overwhelming at times as there are so many.”*

*“Find these hard to use due to their length, the language used, repetition and cross over with other services (HGIOELC) They can be very daunting. Some sort of flow chart, visual representation may help? Also feel very unsupported using these. Work done on them is*

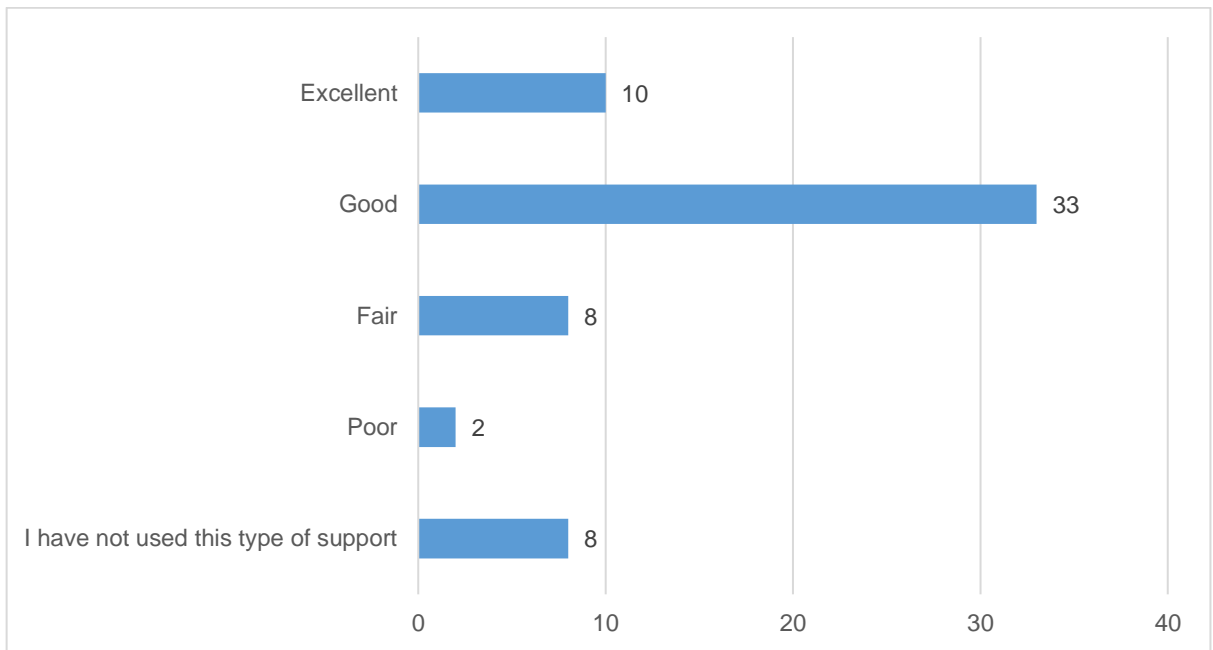
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*generally in your own time and on your own. With the worry that if you miss something or don't do a good job you are letting your service down"*

National policy and legislation resources

- 3.46 As noted earlier in this chapter, some of the resources available through the Improvement Programme were not created by the Improvement Team but are shared and promoted by them as part of the programme. This includes the national policy and legislation resources.
- 3.47 Table 3.13 shows that 43 respondents to the universal survey (81% of those that had used national policy and legislation resources) rated them as excellent or good, eight settings (15% of those that had used these resources) rated them fair. Two settings rated these resources as poor. Only eight settings (13% of all respondents) had not used these resources to date.

Table 3.13 Rate the national policy and legislation resources (n=61)



- 3.48 A majority of settings found these resources useful in ensuring that they are up to date with any legislative changes:

*"It helps to know that we are working within a framework by being clear about what must be done and what is expected."*

*"Useful bank? of resources. I really wish I had enough time to access and develop effectively."*

*"These kept me up to date during Covid-19 pandemic with the requirements of my service."*

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- 3.49 A few settings again raised concerns about the large volume of guidance that was made available, and the lack of time to implement changes:

*“There are too many changes given and not enough time given to implement them as constantly updating.”*

*“Hard to keep up to date with most recent guidance and easy to get bogged down in them.”*

### Follow-up support after participating in the ELC Improvement Programme

- 3.50 A number of settings that had received support through the targeted part of the programme fed back through the research that they were keen to receive follow-up support afterwards.

*“They have been very supportive and very approachable. They have been great! Maybe after the programme has finished and we have embedded the improvements it would be nice for them to check in and see if there are any follow-up questions or support needed.”*

- 3.51 Another setting suggested that continued access to drop-in or open sessions would be valuable for professional discussion and ideas exchange.
- 3.52 To date, following the end of the programme, settings that had received targeted support were invited to take part in project clinics that took place monthly. However, these tended to have low attendance rates, and attendees tended to be largely settings that had had a follow-up inspection that had been positive and wished to share this news. As a result, the ELC Improvement Team has revised its approach to follow-up support and this is now taking the form of peer support sessions which will be run on an ad hoc basis as and when common areas for support are identified. In July this year, the first of these sessions took place (with a focus on inspection confidence), and all settings that took part in Cohorts 1 and 2 were invited to take part. The themes for these sessions were agreed following consultation with settings via a short questionnaire.
- 3.53 A further session is taking place in November this year and participants in Cohort 3 will be invited to take part. The Scottish Social Services Council has been invited to deliver a presentation on leadership.
- 3.54 These peer support sessions are intended to be a sustainable form of support which can continue even if the ELC Improvement Programme does not continue in future. These could potentially be “owned” and facilitated by the sector themselves should the programme end.

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### Other support that settings would like to receive through the programme

- 3.55 Respondents to both surveys, and interview participants identified a range of additional support that they would welcome. These included:

#### More Bitesize sessions

- 3.56 Many research participants noted the value of the Bitesize sessions and requested more of these. Most did not specify any particular topics, however one respondent would value some around planning, observations and devolved leadership, and another suggested Bitesize sessions for all aspects of quality improvement. Research participants noted how useful they were due to their brevity, and how easy they were to share with staff.

*“The Bitesize videos are good and more of them would be useful to share with staff as they are not too long.”*

#### More opportunities for practitioners to take part in training (not just managers)

- 3.57 A few participants were keen to see more training and support available to practitioners, and not just to managers.

*“I think the peer support group was good and this would benefit staff teams if they could also be involved in some way to help ease their concerns about inspections.”*

#### More support in relation to a “post-Covid” world

- 3.58 A number of settings requested more support for issues arising as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, one setting requested more information around what to expect from an inspection post-Covid and another requested information about how to address gaps in children’s learning that had occurred as a result of the pandemic.

#### Simplification in relation to documentation

- 3.59 A number of research participants highlighted the challenges they had faced in finding time to complete all of the necessary paperwork and requested templates to make this easier, for example templates for personal support plans and child protection.

*“While I understand settings have autonomy over paperwork it would be helpful to have approved templates to ensure information is captured accurately and fully.”*

*“More short practical guidance. Quick wins are the way to go for me personally.”*

*“Simplified improvement planning, notifications and policy writing support, individualised, clearer signposting.”*

*“While I find all documentation and resources are really good in themselves, as a whole I can find the quantity of documentation overwhelming. I would appreciate an overview*

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*grid or something that would give a holistic overview which also helps to retrieve or signpost users to information and the correct documentation/resource advice as it is needed and for reference. Perhaps this exists but I have not yet found it. Retrievability is really important."*

- 3.60 Research participants suggested a range of other support that they would value in future including:
- Training sessions on the Early Years ELC Quality Framework.
  - More advice in relation to what to expect from inspections.
  - More sharing of good practice, and more adaptation of best practice documentation to suit day-to-day practice.
  - More real-life examples of practice.
  - Copies of the powerpoint presentations from programme sessions.
  - More support for risk assessment in settings.
  - More face-to-face support now that Covid restrictions have been lifted.
  - Specific training on children's records – what information is need, layout and the best place to record Chronology's personnel support plans IEP etc.

### Summary findings

- 3.61 Overall, settings rated the quality of all of the resources described here very highly. They welcome them, find them informative in relation to good practice and legislative requirements, and are making clear use of them in practice. This is really positive, and a clear endorsement of the time and effort put into creating these resources by the ELC improvement team.
- 3.62 A minority reported finding many of the resources too wordy or overwhelming, and noted concerns about the time available to implement changes. These settings may require additional support to make best use of the available resources.
- 3.63 In relation to some of the resources, there is a relatively high number of settings that have not used the resources. This may be because settings are unaware of the resources in which case this is something to take into account when considering options for promotion of the resources. However, the usage rates outlined in Chapter 2 do suggest that usage is relatively high so it may be that settings are simply choosing not to access these resources (either because they do not require them, or do not have the time to do so).



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## 4. Impact of the ELC Improvement Programme

- 4.1 One of the key aims of the evaluation was to determine the impact of the ELC Improvement Programme on a range of factors including;
- Quality improvement methodology
  - Quality of care
  - Staff
  - Relationships with inspectors and inspection activities
  - Care Inspectorate gradings and Open Badge accreditation
- 4.2 We explore the ease of application of learning from the programme, along with these impacts in the section below.
- 4.3 In reading this section, it is important to note that the programme is still in the early stages of development. Settings are operating within a complex wider context in this post-Covid period and in the midst of the implementation of the Government's extension to the provision of nursery hours. These factors will inevitably have affected the extent of change that has been possible. Nevertheless, as the next sections show, substantive impact has already been delivered despite these contextual challenges.

*"Improvement takes time – it is still early days for outcomes. The challenge will be sustaining changes, especially if there are staff capacity issues." (Inspector)*

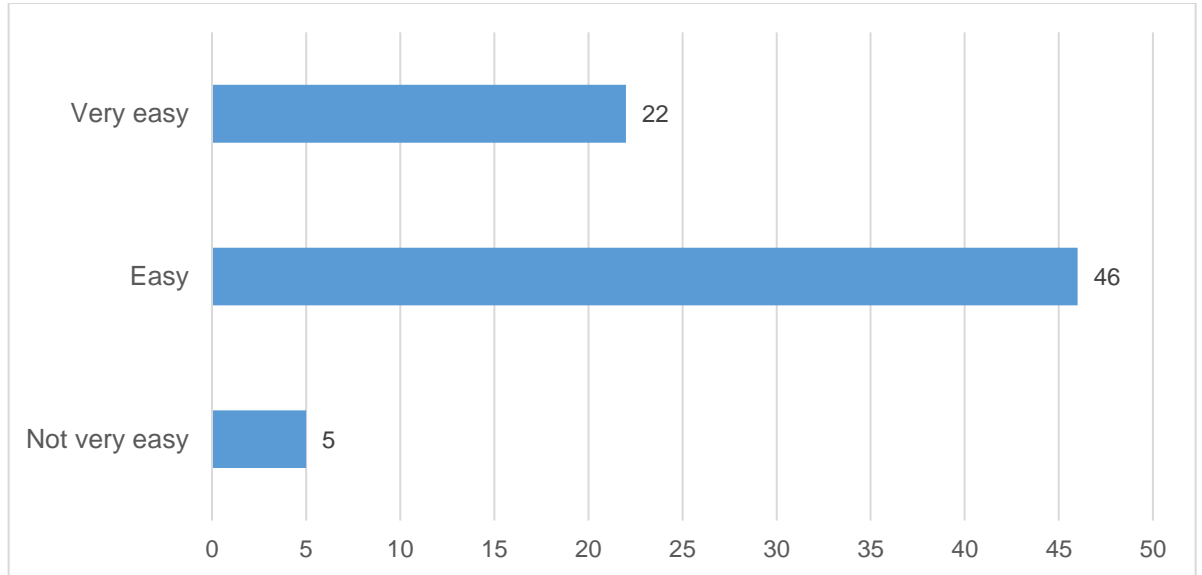
- 4.4 The case studies in Appendix 4 further illustrate the experiences of three settings in taking part in the ELC Improvement Programme. These give a strong sense of the significant impact that the programme can have.

### Ease of application of learning in ELC settings

- 4.5 Through our survey of targeted settings, we asked respondents to rate how easy they have found it to use learning from the programme in their ELC setting? As Table 4.1 shows, 30% of respondents found it very easy, a further 63% found it easy, and 7% found it not very easy.

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Table 4.1 How easy have you found it to apply user learning from the programme in your ELC setting? (n=73)

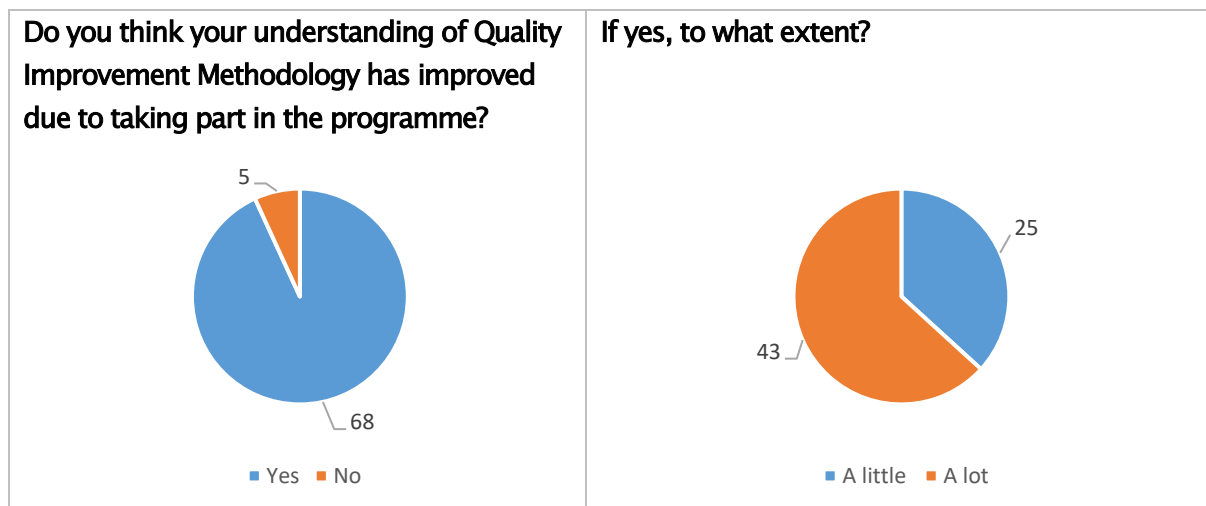


4.6 This is really positive and suggests that learning is practical and applicable across settings. The culture of continuous improvement to programme content and delivery have undoubtedly contributed to this being the case.

**Impact on understanding of Quality Improvement Methodology**

4.7 Through our survey of settings receiving targeted support, we also explored with them the extent to which the programme has improved their understanding of quality improvement methodology. As Table 4.2 indicates, the vast majority, 68 settings (93%), confirmed that their understanding had improved. Of these, 43 (63%) stated that it had improved a lot, and 25 (37%) indicated that it had improved a little.

Table 4.2 Impact on understanding of Quality Improvement methodology (n= 73)



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- 4.8 This is very positive feedback and suggests that the programme is having a substantive impact in this regard.

#### Impact on quality of care

- 4.9 To date, the programme has provided targeted support to 214 ELC settings. These settings provide care for 13,006 children. The potential, therefore, for the programme to impact on the quality of care being provided is substantial. Early findings suggest that positive impact is being delivered.
- 4.10 75% of respondents to our survey of targeted settings reported that the programme has had a positive impact on the quality of care they deliver to children. 16% also reported that families are more positive about the services they provide (it is likely that this is not something being formally measured by settings and may be higher if that was the case).
- 4.11 This was confirmed by local authority representatives and inspectors who participated in the research. All commented on the positive impact of the programme on the quality of care being delivered by settings that have received support.

*“There has been a significant difference in how improvements could be identified.”  
(Inspector)*

*“Quality improvement approaches are now much better and swifter action is taken to address them.” (Inspector)*

*“In the majority of participating settings the grades are going up.” (Local authority)*

- 4.12 There is currently no data available to enable us to quantify the impact on the quality of care for those settings accessing universal resources and given that the main support they receive is in the form of resources, any changes would be challenging to attribute directly to the improvement programme. However, it is likely that there has indeed been a positive impact, given responses to our questions about the impact of these resources in our survey of settings receiving universal support outlined in the previous chapter.
- 4.13 If there is a desire to try to understand better the impact of the programme on settings receiving universal support, there may be merit in considering implementing an annual survey of all of these settings and asking them to report against a series of key potential impacts.

#### Impact on staff

- 4.14 Overall, settings reported a positive impact on staff. Our survey of targeted settings showed that 30% of settings indicated that staff feel more confident during inspections, and that staff are more confident in talking about their service.

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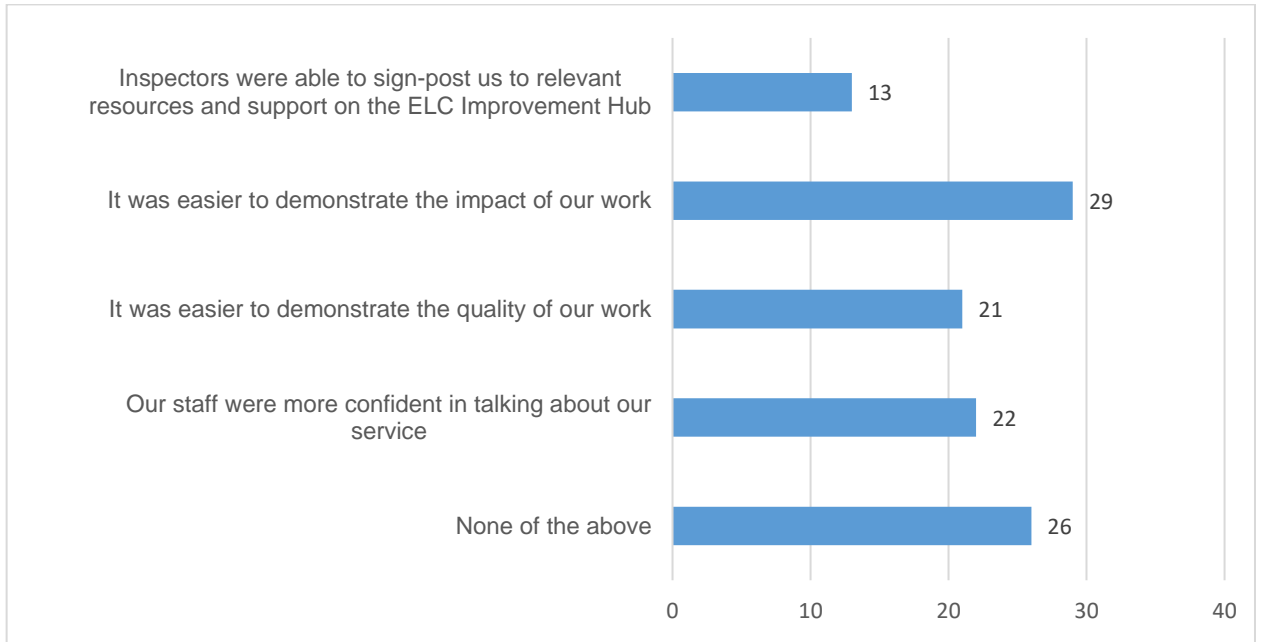
- 4.15 Stakeholders and settings interviewed during the research also commented positively about the impact on staff. For example, one setting described how taking part in the programme had *“given staff a clear voice and given them reassurance that their ideas and suggestions were being taken on board.”*
- 4.16 Other settings described a range of impacts on their staff including:
- Improvements in staff confidence and their ability to take part on professional dialogue
  - Staff have the confidence to initiate change
  - Improved morale
  - Improved engagement in professional development
  - Staff feeling more involved in decision-making

#### Impact on relationship with inspectors and inspection activities

- 4.17 The programme has had a very positive impact on the relationship between settings and inspectors, and on inspection activities.
- 4.18 As shown in Table 4.3, respondents to our survey of settings receiving targeted support indicated that 13 (18%) responding to this question had been signposted to resources on the ELC Improvement hub by inspectors; 29 (40%) had found it easier to demonstrate the impact of their work during inspection since taking part in the programme; 21 (29%) had found it easier to demonstrate the quality of their work during inspection since taking part in the programme; and 22 (30%) reported that their staff were more confident talking about their service during inspection visits. 26 (36%) had not experienced any of these impacts to date.

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Table 4.3 If you have had an inspection since taking part in the programme, to what extent has the programme impacted positively on inspection activity? (n=73)



4.19 Interviews also reported a positive impact on the relationships between settings and inspectors. Inspectors described how there is now a more “*collective responsibility*” – services now expect support if they are given a low grading, and inspectors have tools and resources to refer them to.

4.20 The increased emphasis on the improvement element of inspectors’ role is reported to have improved relationships, and importantly was also described as having improved the outcomes for children.

*“Inspectors were always seen as “scrutiny” and so there was a power imbalance historically which has now changed.” (Inspector)*

*“There are still barriers between inspectors and ELC settings but the programme has helped to break these down. People are realising inspectors can also provide support.”*

4.21 Research participants were keen to see the relationships between settings, their local authority and inspectors improve further:

*“I feel there could be input from Local Authority Early Years staff and they could be part of a joint quality assurance process of this programme alongside the CI team. This would support joined up /collaborative and professional working.”*

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- 4.22 One inspector referred to a previously “sensitive” relationship with one local authority area which they described as having improved significantly as a result of taking part in the programme.
- 4.23 One local authority manager also described how settings “*are now much clearer about why they have had a poor inspection, it was much vaguer previously*”.
- 4.24 Inspectors welcomed the communication between the ELC Improvement Team and inspectors. For example, they spoke positively of the ELC Improvement Team attending one of their Inspectors’ team meetings and would welcome more input such as this. They are of the view that it would enable inspectors to add to the support being provided by the Improvement Team. Inspectors also emphasised the importance of the Improvement Team being independent of inspectors.
- 4.25 Some inspectors would like a joint database with the ELC Improvement Team so that they have more access to information about the outcomes of the ELC programme. Currently, the information sits on Sharepoint but inspectors do not have access to the ELC improvement programme data.

#### Impact on Care Inspectorate gradings and Open Badge accreditation

- 4.26 Care Inspectorate gradings, awarded by inspectors following inspection of a setting, are one of the key indicators of the quality of care provided by a setting. As noted earlier in the report, one of the eligibility criteria for the ELC Improvement Programme is that settings failed to meet the National Standard at a recent inspection.
- 4.27 The most recent Care Inspectorate Work Plan Update submitted to Scottish Government shows the following in relation to changes to gradings:

Table 4.4 Change in gradings of settings participating in the ELC Improvement Programme

Increased	33
Unchanged	31
Decreased	9

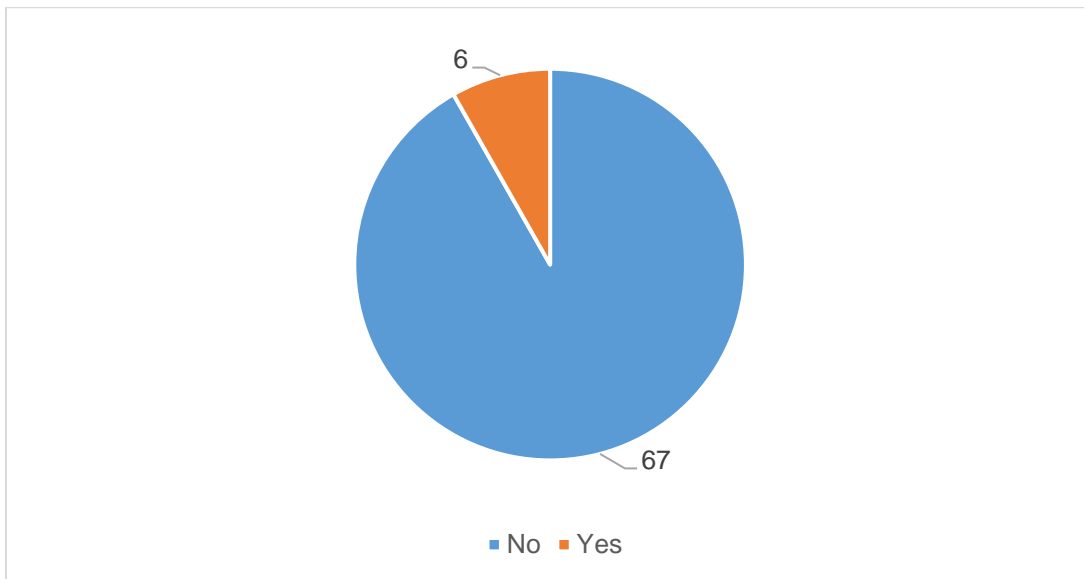
- 4.28 These are very positive results and show positive change in grading in 33 settings, with only 9 settings experiencing a decrease in their grade. It is not possible to fully attribute these changes in grades to the Improvement Programme, as a range of other factors – both positive and negative – may impact grades, including things like changes in staff, policy changes, and external factors (such as the Covid-19 pandemic). However, it seems

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fair to conclude that the Improvement Programme has contributed towards the positive change to gradings.

- 4.29 Inspectors were also positive about the impact on the quality of care. One, for example, indicated that there are good early indications that the ELC Improvement Programme is resulting in more stable grades – stopping services “yo-yoing” between grades. Local authority staff also reported improvements to grades for many of the services referred to the programme.
- 4.30 Measuring change in inspection gradings is one measure of the success of the ELC Improvement Programme, however it is important to recognise that it is not the only measure of success since some settings have not been re-inspected since they took part in the programme; and some settings have been inspected as part of the new Quality Inspection Framework trial therefore no grading data is available. Any changes in grading should be examined alongside the other factors that demonstrate positive impact, including those outlined earlier in this chapter.

Table 4.5 Have you applied for the ELC open badge since taking part in the programme? (N=73)



- 4.31 The ELC Open Badge is a digital certificate which recognises learning and achievement. To date, the number of settings applying for the ELC Open Badge has been very low. As shown above, the most recent Care Inspectorate Work Plan Update submitted to Scottish Government shows that only five settings have applied to date. Our survey actually suggests a slightly higher number, with six settings reporting they had applied for the badge.
- 4.32 While not an essential component of taking part in the programme, the ELC Open Badge provides accreditation of learning and is a positive recognition of the effort that the

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setting has put into training. The Open Badge logo can be applied to materials created by settings and is a good way for the settings to evidence their commitment to learning and improvement. The ELC Improvement Team is working to encourage more settings to apply for the Open Badge, in particular the Cohort 3 settings that completed the programme most recently.

### Summary findings

- 4.33 Despite challenging external factors, including the pandemic and the implementation of the Scottish Government's extension to the provision of nursery hours, the programme has had a substantial impact on those settings in receipt of targeted support.
- 4.34 There is clear evidence of increased understanding of Quality Improvement methodology across a high percentage of participating settings; a significant impact on the quality of care being delivered to children; positive improvements to staff confidence and skills; and clear improvements in the relationships between settings and inspectors, and on inspection activities.
- 4.35 While only a partial picture of changes to gradings is available since some settings have not yet been re-inspected since taking part in the programme, progress here has also been very positive, with 33 settings improving their grades to date and further settings expected to do so in future.
- 4.36 Levels of Open Badge accreditation following participation in the programme are low currently, and the ELC Improvement Team is taking action to encourage more settings to seek accreditation for their participation.



## 5. Key factors of success

### Key success factors

- 5.1 In conducting this evaluation, we identified a range of factors which affect settings likelihood of maximising benefit from the ELC Improvement Programme. These are illustrated below and described further in the next section.



### Participant readiness

- 5.2 One of the key enablers highlighted by research participants was readiness on the part of the setting taking part. Discussions with local authority representatives highlighted that some settings engage better with the programme than others, and their perception was that some settings were more open to learning than others, and in a better place to take forward change.
- 5.3 Since local authorities nominate services for support, it will be important going forward that this factor is taken into account in the selection process. It could also potentially mean that settings with higher grades could be nominated ahead of a setting with lower grades if local authorities are of the view that they are more “ready” to take part, and that greater impact is likely.

*“The same level of support does not always effect the same level of change. It is the people involved who are key. Those who embrace it get most out of it.” (Local authority)*

- 5.4 Related to readiness, some research participants highlighted the importance of settings being willing to be open and share their experiences when taking part in Improvement Programme sessions. Many research participants highlighted the value of sharing experiences with other settings, and in order to gain most out of taking part, a willingness to share openly their experiences is an important factor of success.

Evaluation to measure and understand in greater depth the efficacy and impact of the Early Learning and Childcare Improvement Programme

### Ensuring capacity to take part

- 5.5 Many participants in the research raised concerns about settings having the capacity to take part in the programme. Settings are still recovering from the Covid-19 pandemic, and in addition are in the process of increasing capacity in line with the government's extension of provision of nursery hours. Both of these factors combined, alongside usual staffing constraints are meaning that it is increasingly difficult for settings to release staff to take part in training. It is vital that this barrier is removed, to ensure that settings have the opportunities to improve the quality of their service delivery.

### Ensuring capacity to provide support

- 5.6 There is no doubt that the support provided by the ELC Improvement Programme has been highly valued, and that it is delivering impact. Inspectors were clear that they do not have the time or resource to provide the level of support that the Improvement Team does, and that if they were to cease to be funded, a significant reduction in support would occur. In addition, they were clear about the importance of inspection activities remaining clearly separate from improvement activities.

*"It really supports us as inspectors and provides us with resources to signpost to. We can't give the same level of intensity of support. I haven't had a service involved in the programme that hasn't found it really beneficial."*

- 5.7 There is widespread recognition, however, that the capacity of the current Improvement Team to deliver support is limited, and there is an ongoing waiting list of settings that are eligible to take part and in need of support. Waiting times could potentially be quite long, especially if other settings require support more urgently than others and "leapfrog" settings that are already on the waiting list.

*"To be fair to children, we need a quicker process. The Improvement Team is small and so the number on a cohort is limited. This needs addressed." (Inspector)*

- 5.8 In addition, participants in this research believe that there is the potential for the programme to benefit a wider group of settings than currently. Those settings not eligible for support currently – including, for example, those achieving higher grades but with the potential to improve further, child minders, or settings not currently in receipt of funding – could also benefit from the improvements the programme can deliver to quality of care.
- 5.9 Ensuring that sufficient capacity is available within the sector to support settings that need it is vital. This research has shown that the Improvement Programme has had a positive impact on the vast majority of settings that have participated. By continuing to fund the programme beyond March 2023 (when the current funding expires) and by increasing its capacity and reach, many more settings could benefit, resulting in positive change for many children being cared for through these settings.

Evaluation to measure and understand in greater depth the efficacy and impact of the Early Learning and Childcare Improvement Programme

### Effective involvement of inspectors and local authority staff

- 5.10 Many research participants highlighted the role the ELC Improvement Programme has played in breaking down barriers between inspectors and ELC settings. Inspectors also emphasised the value of communication between the Improvement Team and themselves and the positive impact this can have on the support they provide to settings under their care. This is really positive, and something which should continue to be built on.

### Providing a structure for improvement

- 5.11 For settings struggling to make change, providing a structure within which change can happen is really valuable. The resources and tools available through the programme have been an important way of doing this, alongside the hand-holding support that has been provided by the Improvement Team.

### Taking small steps

- 5.12 Settings, inspectors and local authorities all emphasised the importance of focusing support on a small number of key issues, and the success that the programme has had as a result of doing so. They emphasised the competing priorities facing ELC settings and breaking change down into bite-size chunks was seen to be key to making progress.

## 6. Conclusions and recommendations

- 6.1 The Early Learning and Childcare Improvement Programme is supporting funded ELC settings across Scotland to improve the quality of their provision and meet the National Standard.
- 6.2 This has taken place against the backdrop of a post-Covid era, and a period in which ELC settings are adjusting to meet the requirements of the Scottish Government's expansion of provision of nursery hours. These issues are resulting in ELC settings facing challenges with a lack of capacity, frequent changes to staffing and management, and a need to upskill staff at pace. The Improvement Programme has been timely and is an important component of the wider drive to improve the quality of childcare in Scotland.
- 6.3 The programme has been delivered through targeted support to selected settings, and universal support (through the provision of resources) to all settings in Scotland. Feedback on both programmes has been overwhelmingly positive – settings, inspectors and local authorities have all welcomed the programme and are keen to see it continue. There is widespread praise for the work of the ELC Improvement Team who were described by research participants as highly responsive and supportive.

### Ease of access to the programme

- 6.4 Settings indicated that the ELC Improvement Programme has been easy to access, with the support of the ELC Improvement Team. However, demand for support amongst eligible settings (those not currently meeting the National Standard) exceeds the number of places available on each cohort (there is a permanent waiting list), meaning that there is a barrier to some settings taking part. The current ELC Improvement Team is currently working at capacity and there is no scope for them to support a higher number of organisations with the time and resources that they currently have available to them.
- 6.5 In addition, the selection criteria mean that only those settings not meeting the National Standard are eligible currently. It is clear from discussions during this research, however, that a wider group of settings would also benefit from additional improvement support – for example settings that have variable grades, settings that meet the National Standard but still have the potential to improve from good to excellent grades, and settings that are not currently eligible for support.
- 6.6 The programme is currently only available to funded day care settings, however inspectors and local authority representatives participating in the research were of the view that the programme could benefit a wider spectrum of organisations – including, for example, childminders and out of school care settings – and they could see the value of the resources already available and the potential for further, targeted support to these settings to have a significant impact. Ensuring high quality care for all children, and not just those being cared for in funded settings, was highlighted as an important reason for expansion and extension of the programme.

## Quality of support

- 6.7 Research participants rated the quality of support provided through the programme very highly, with only a minority indicating any concerns about the quality of provision. Settings across Scotland value the resources that have been developed through the programme. Resources such as the Bitesize Sessions, Improvement Guidance, Advice and Resources, and the Care Inspectorate Practice Resources have been welcomed and are being used regularly by settings to improve practice and approaches to quality improvement. Some of the available resources are being more widely used than others – this may be due to need but may also be an indication that further awareness raising of the universal resources available is required. Significant promotional activity has already taken place but more may be required in future.
- 6.8 Some settings report being overwhelmed by the volume of resources available and the speed at which these are issued, which emphasises the need for more support for some settings that are struggling with capacity to engage effectively with the improvement agenda.
- 6.9 Given the relative youth of the programme, there have inevitably been some elements of the support delivery mechanisms which have worked better than others. The programme team has evolved the programme in response to feedback received after each cohort, with the aim of ensuring that it meets the needs of the settings in receipt of support and is committed to continuing to do so in future.

## Impact

- 6.10 The programme is still in the early stages of implementation, and settings are operating within the context of recent Covid-19 restrictions, the implementation of the Government's extension to the provision of nursery hours, and a shortfall in qualified staff. These factors will inevitably have affected the extent of change that has been possible to date. However, despite this, the programme has managed to successfully impact on children, staff, and inspections.
- 6.11 Participating settings described how the programme has supported them to make key changes to their delivery, as well as providing them with a solid understanding of Quality Improvement methodology. Many intend continuing to use the knowledge and approaches acquired through the programme to make ongoing changes to their provision.
- 6.12 Settings report clear improvements to the quality of service they deliver, resulting in a direct impact on the quality of care being received by children in their care. Some settings reported having already received positive feedback from parents about these changes. Improvements to gradings at re-inspections for many participating settings back this up, although these should not be taken as the only marker of improvement. Some settings will continue to require support to ensure that gradings improve.

- 6.13 Inspectors and settings both confirmed that the programme has impacted positively on the relationships between inspectors and settings. There seems to be a clearer understanding of expectations, and staff in settings have improved confidence to take part in inspections. Inspectors welcome the close links between themselves and the ELC Improvement Programme team, while highlighting the value and importance of the team's independence from inspectors.
- 6.14 There is significant evidence of impact to draw on for the targeted support being provided. It is more challenging to identify the impact on settings that are only accessing universal support. This evaluation has gathered some data to demonstrate this impact, however there are few mechanisms in place to do this on an ongoing basis. It is important that this is considered in future in order for the Improvement Team to better understand where best to target resources, and what these should look like.

### Key Factors for Success

- 6.15 In undertaking this evaluation, we identified a number of key factors which appear to be critical to successfully delivering impact through the programme. These are:
- Participant readiness
  - Ensuring capacity to take part
  - **Ensuring capacity for support**
  - Effective involvement of inspectors and local authority staff
  - **Providing a structure for improvement**
  - Taking small steps
- 6.16 These factors were described in the previous chapter and have been at the heart of the programme. They are key to the programme continuing to deliver impact. The ELC Improvement Programme is key to delivering on two of these – ensuring capacity for support and providing a structure for improvement. While some of the resources which have been developed through the programme will continue to have application in future, without the wider programme of support available through the ELC Improvement Programme (and the targeted support in particular), the ability of the sector to deliver improvement to services would be significantly diminished.

### Future delivery of the programme

- 6.17 The evaluation has highlighted the scale of support required and the demand for this kind of programme. There has consistently been more demand for places than the number available and there is evidence that this demand amongst settings currently eligible for support is likely to continue to grow. In addition, as noted above, there is potential for the programme to expand to support a wider range of settings in future. The current ELC Improvement Team does not have the capacity to support substantially more

settings with the same level of support as it stands currently. The evaluation has clearly demonstrated that there is continuing, and potentially even growing, demand for the support provided by the ELC Improvement Team. However, the ELC Improvement Programme is currently only funded until March 2023. Without continuation of funding, it is likely that many settings will struggle to make the level of improvements to the quality of care that has been possible while the programme has been ongoing. Settings have very little spare capacity to devote to substantive improvement already, and settings achieving the lowest grades struggle to make improvements without external support.

- 6.18 While both local authorities and inspectors have an improvement remit, their capacity to provide the level of support needed is limited. In the case of inspectors, it is also critical that they maintain an independence that may be compromised were they to become further involved in improvement than they are currently.
- 6.19 In order to continue to provide support to settings to drive up the quality of care for children, and to enable the programme to work with a wider spectrum of settings, additional capacity and longevity of support through an extension to the current programme will be essential.
- 6.20 Below, we set out strategic and operational recommendations that will help to ensure that the programme continues to build on the success it has to date. These are based directly on feedback received through the evaluation:

### Strategic recommendations

**Recommendation 1:** Grow the capacity of the ELC Improvement Team to enable it to meet existing and future anticipated demand for support for eligible settings. Assurances with regards to longevity of funding will be important to enabling the programme to develop effectively.

**Recommendation 2:** Consider expansion of current provision of support through the ELC Improvement Programme to include settings not currently eligible for support, including settings achieving the National Standard but with potential to improve the quality of their services; childminders; and out of school childcare provision.

**Recommendation 3:** Continue to develop relationships between settings, inspectors, the Improvement Team and local authorities, exploring opportunities to ensure a seamless package of support is available to settings.

## Operational recommendations

**Recommendation 4:** Explore opportunities to collect more data in relation to the impact of universal support. This could take the form of an annual survey of all settings.

**Recommendation 5:** ELC Improvement Team to work with local authorities to ensure that settings are clear about the reasons for their referrals ahead of taking part in the programme. Local authorities have an important role to play in ensuring that they adequately brief settings about the reason for their referral and what they should expect from taking part in the programme. This may encourage settings to take part and address any reticence to engage with the programme.

**Recommendation 6:** The peer support groups facilitated through Yammer have the potential to be a useful and sustainable forum for exchange of good practice but settings are not yet fully engaged with them. Explore further with settings how these could become more valuable, and what is required to make them sustainable in the longer term.

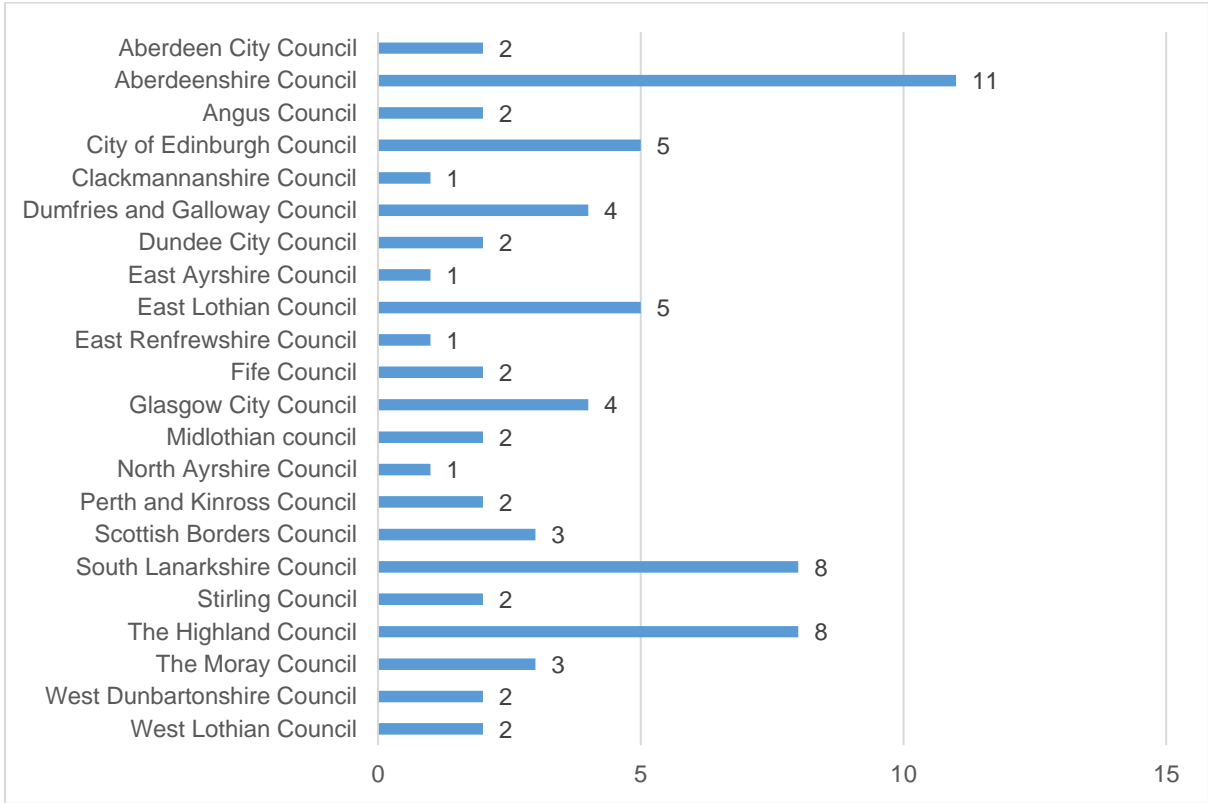
**Recommendation 7:** Continue to develop the programme, adding to resources by building on feedback from participant settings, including suggestions indicated earlier in this report.

**Recommendation 8:** Continue to raise awareness of resources available, particularly the universal resources that are available to all settings and ensure that these continue to be easily accessible.

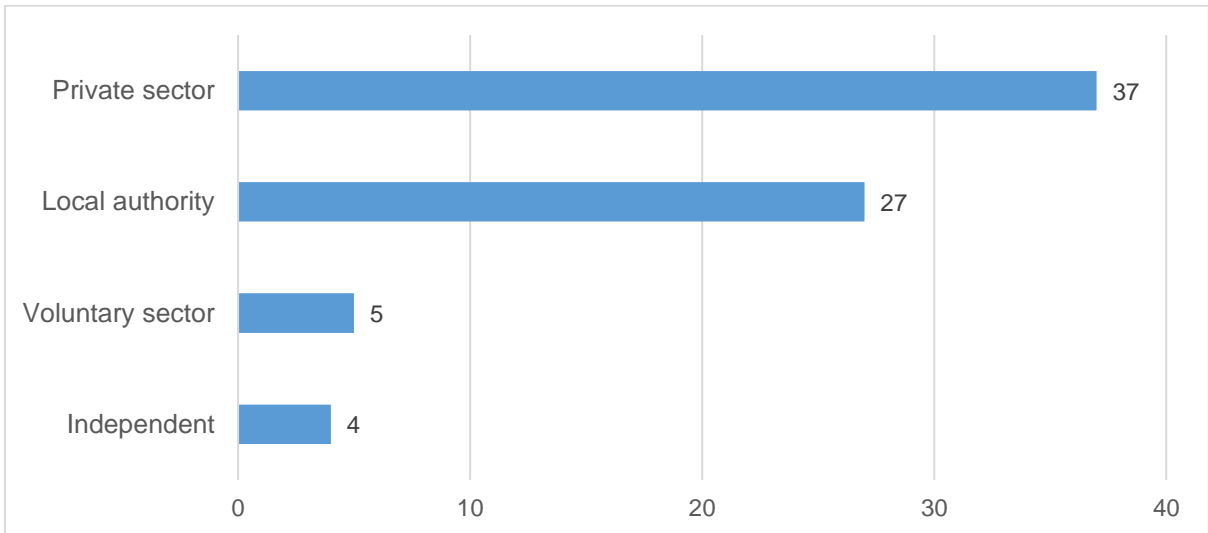


## APPENDIX 1 PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS TO THE SURVEY OF SETTINGS RECEIVING TARGETED SUPPORT

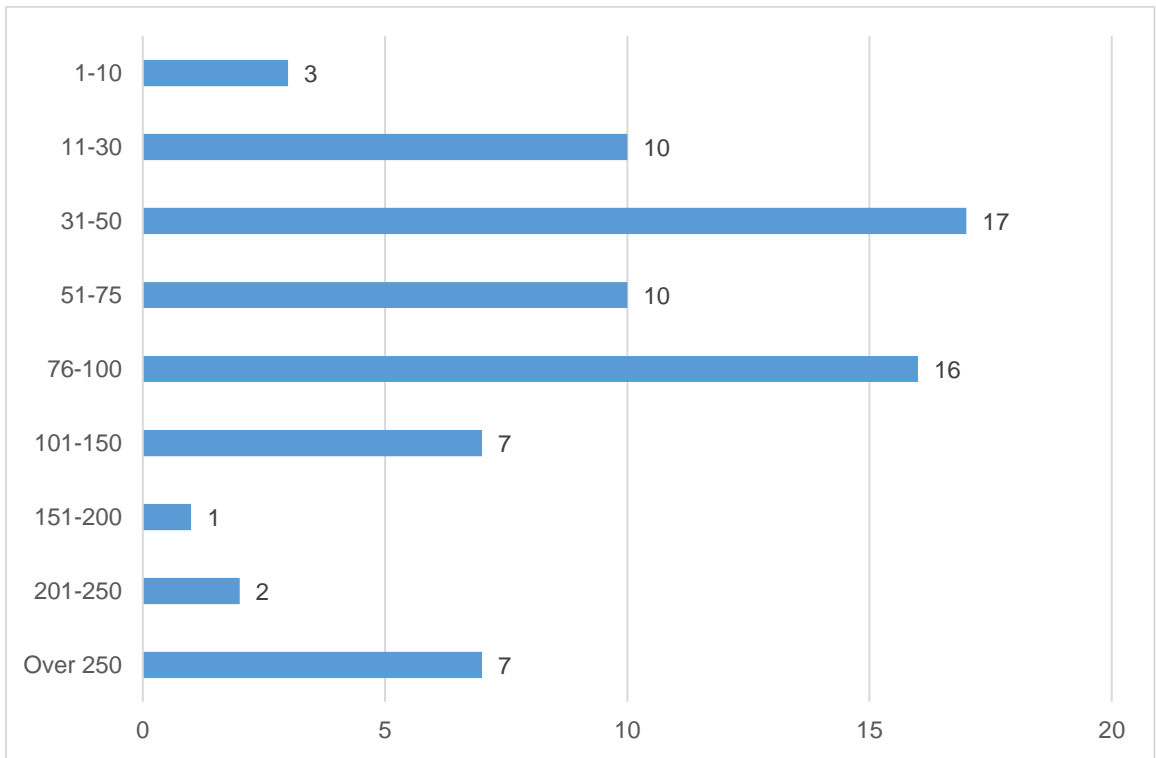
Which local authority area is your ELC service based in?



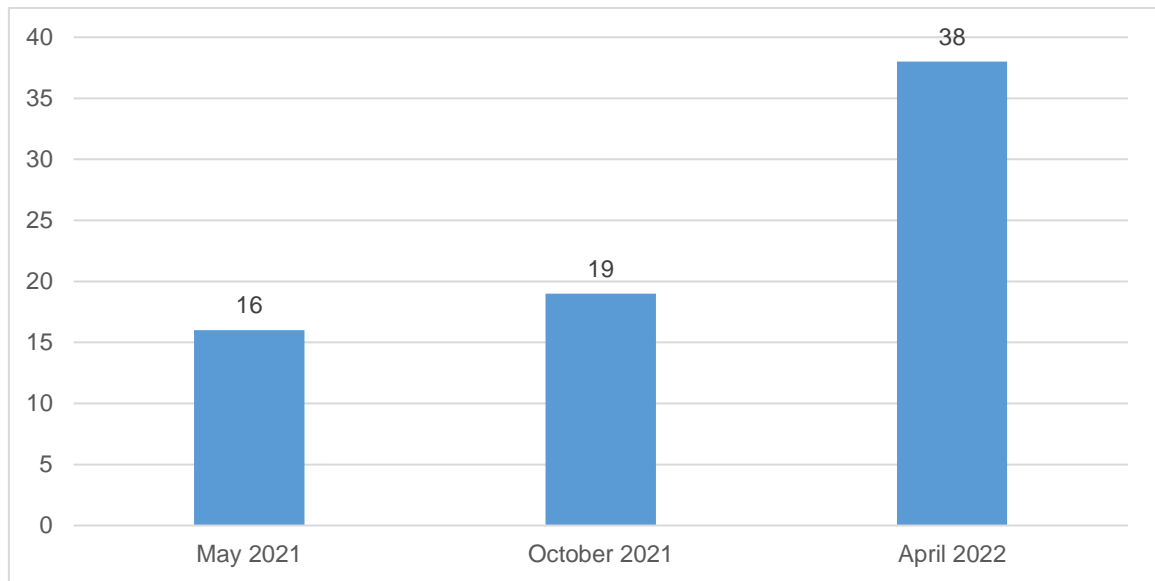
What type of organisation do you work in?



### How many children does your service support?

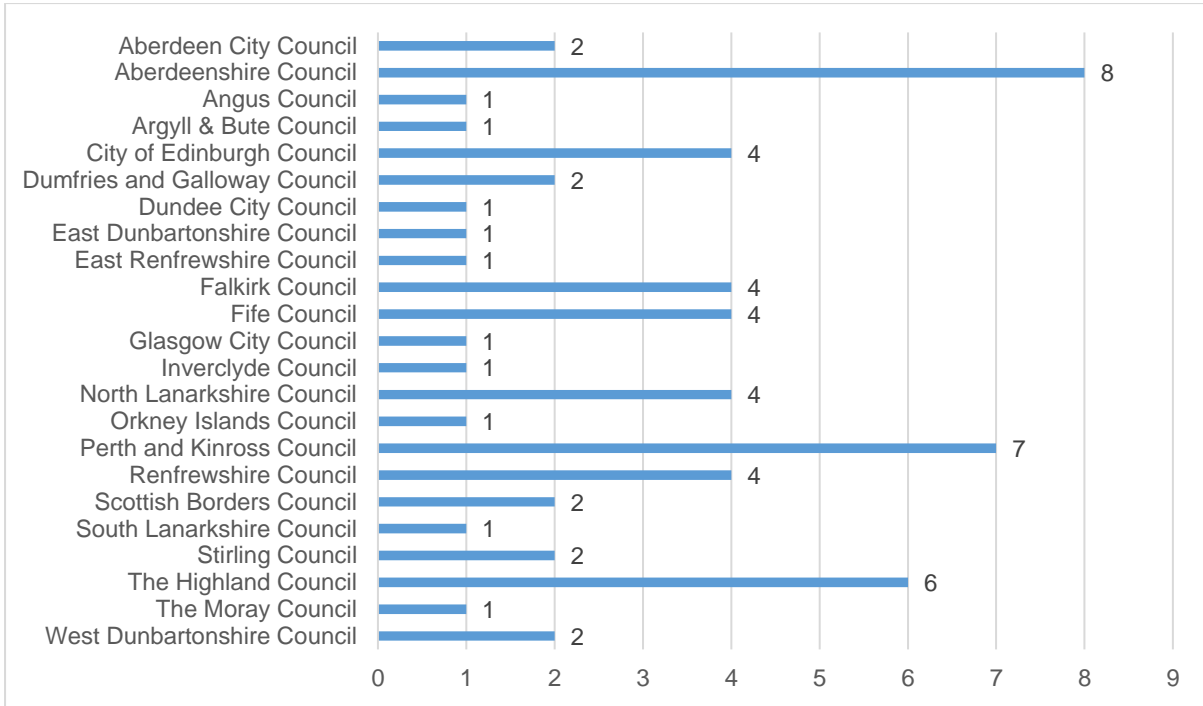


### When did you attend the ELC Improvement Programme?

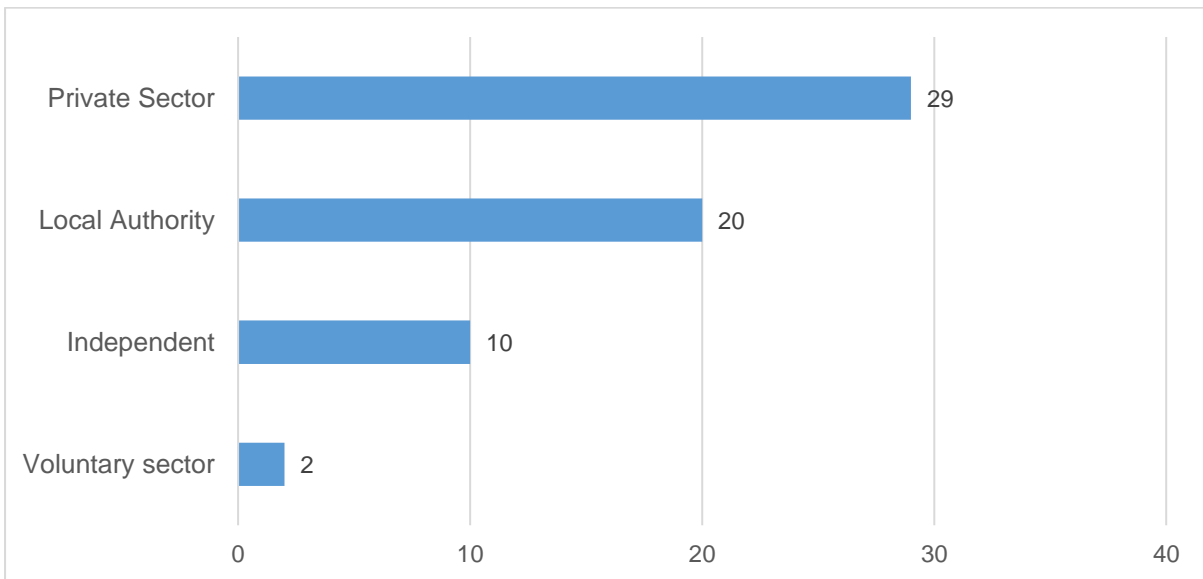


## APPENDIX 2 PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS TO THE SURVEY OF SETTINGS ACCESSING UNIVERSAL SUPPORT

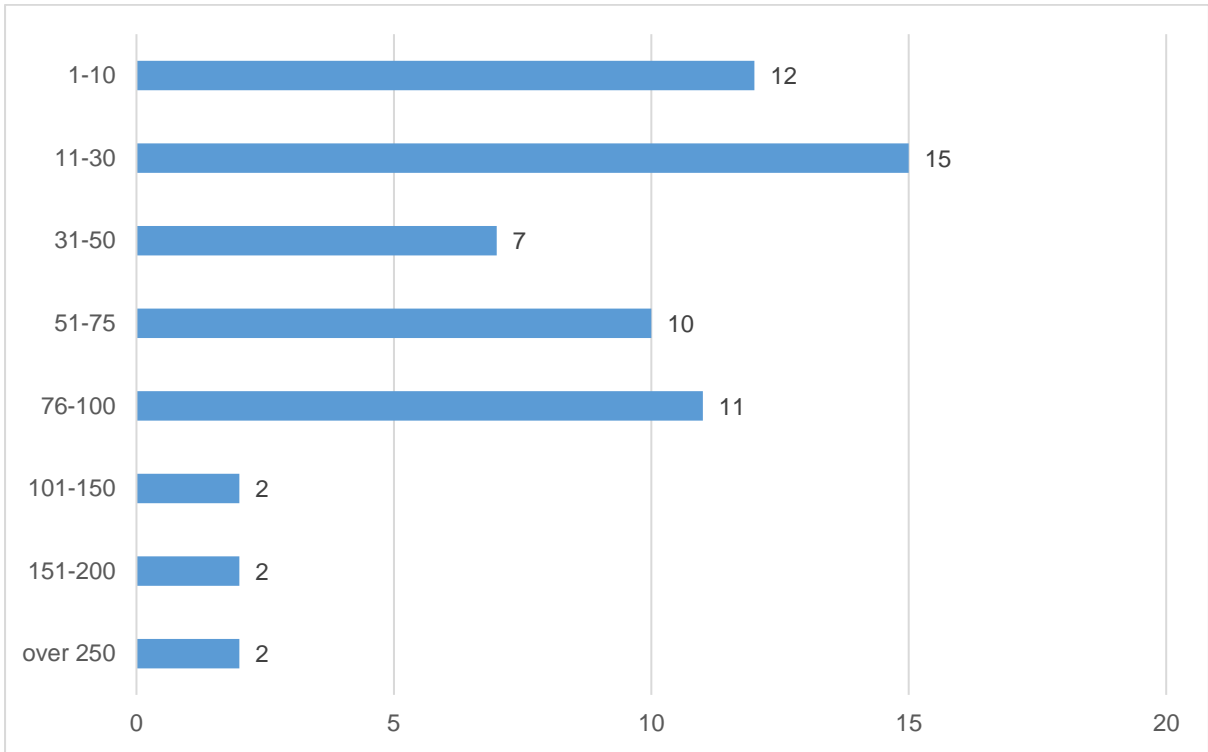
Which local authority area is your ELC service based in?



What type of organisation do you work in?

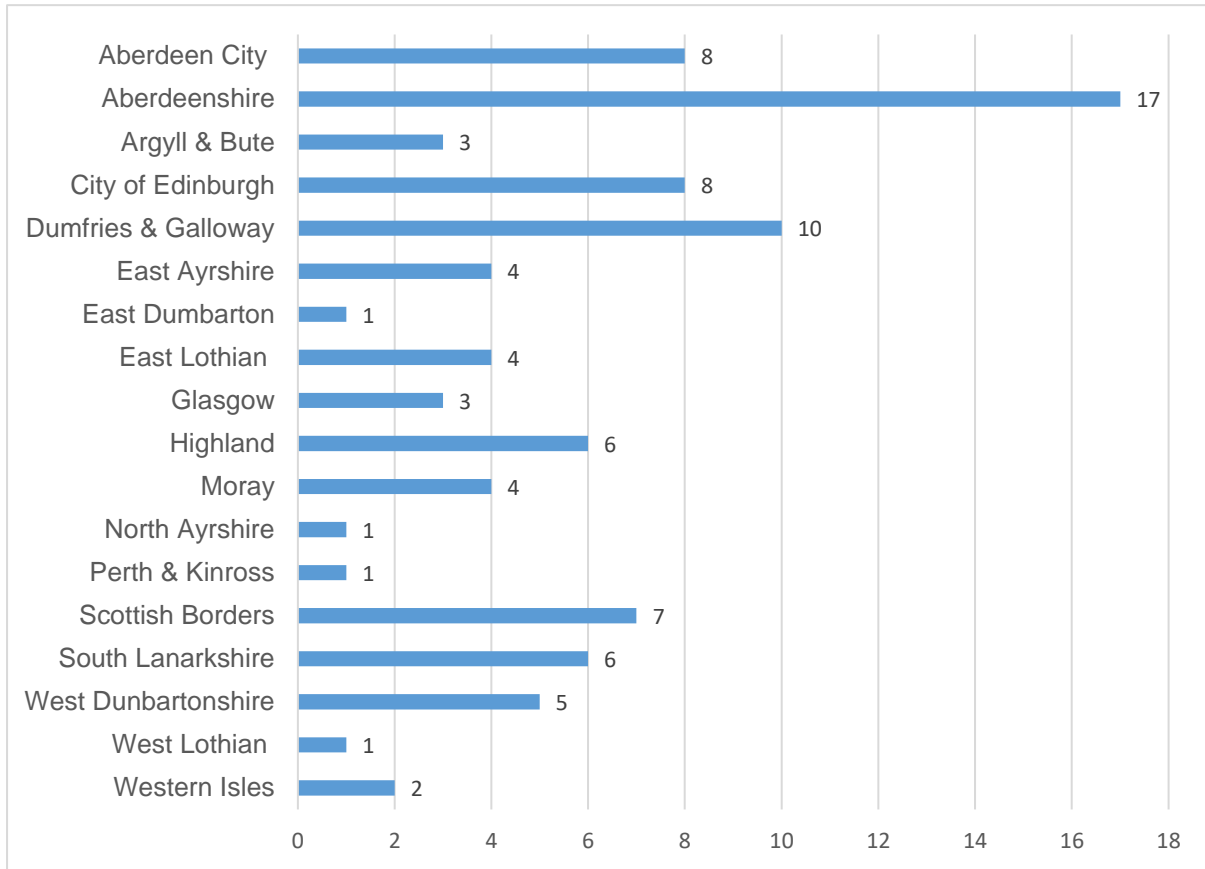


### How many children does your service support?

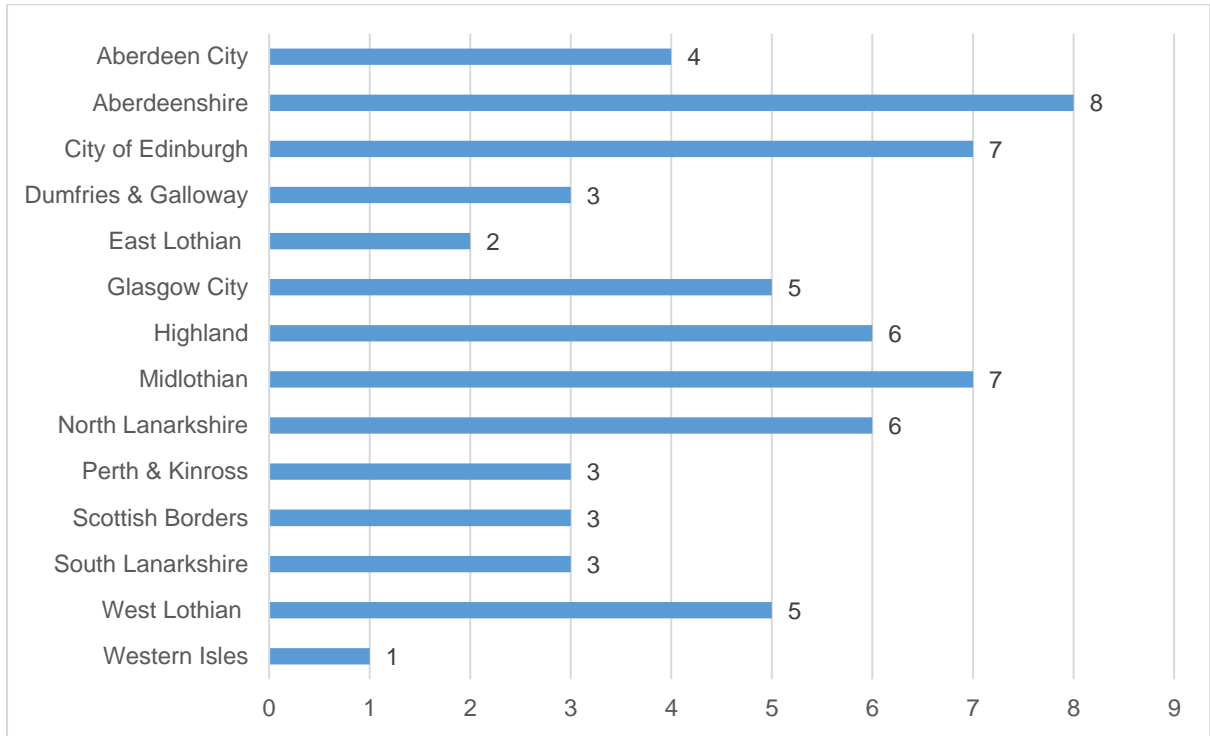


### APPENDIX 3 PARTICIPANTS IN COHORTS 1 AND 2 BY LOCAL AUTHORITY AREA

#### Cohort 1



## Cohort 2



## APPENDIX 4 CASE STUDIES

### Case Study

#### Pre-school Academy, North Lanarkshire

##### Overview

Pre-school Academy is based in North Lanarkshire and has up to 59 places available for children. It was referred to the ELC Improvement Programme due to inconsistent grading history and prior to the pandemic its grades had dropped to adequate across all quality themes. The service met the eligibility criteria for the programme and was keen to improve.

##### Experiences of taking part

The manager and deputy manager both attended the sessions and then disseminated their learning to other staff. They were active participants in the programme and attended all sessions. The focus of their support was “the improvement journey” – they learned about the importance of self-evaluation in determining what needed to change. There was a particular focus on improving mealtimes for children.

*“The Improvement Programme gave us the opportunity to ask questions, not just read guidance.”*

They emphasised the value in taking part, and were particularly positive about the Plan/Do/Study/Act process. They realised they had been applying it incorrectly and trying to use it in too broad a manner. Taking part in the programme helped them to focus on one thing at a time – *“the penny dropped for us”*.

They valued the peer support groups available through Yammer – they described how the forum brought everyone together to support each other:

*“It lifted everyone’s spirits and helped to lift people back out of the Covid way of doing things. We can’t praise it enough.”*

##### Impact

The programme had a major impact on Pre-school Academy. Their quality improvement approach is now much better, they feel like they are “firefighting” less and they take swifter action to address any changes required. Since participating in the programme, they have had a subsequent inspection and they were graded “good” across all quality areas. There is a significant difference in how improvements are identified and acted on.

##### Impacts on children have included:

- Children have relaxed and enjoyable mealtimes
- Children have access to better toys and materials

- Improved sensory tools
- Children are progressing learning through play
- Children are now involved in planning for mealtimes

**Impacts on Staff have included:**

- Managers are more confident
- Staff are more confident and better equipped
- Improved staff interaction with children during mealtimes

**Impact on parents have included:**

- Stronger links between the pre-school and parents
- Parents have more insight into planning

**Impact on the wider nursery have included:**

- Improvements are now identified and addressed more effectively
- Improved approaches to auditing and monitoring across the service
- They have improved grades across all quality themes at inspection
- They are meeting the National Standard

**Their advice to other settings**

*“The improvement Programme is delivered in a very supportive way. We couldn’t recommend it enough. It’s so beneficial to everyone.”*



## Case Study

### Little Scholars Nursery, South Lanarkshire

#### Overview

Little Scholars nursery was referred to the ELC Improvement Programme following a weak grading at inspection, in part due to the impact of COVID-19. Following this inspection, a new manager came into post and the programme was an opportunity for real changes to be made.

Little Scholars is based in South Lanarkshire and has 100 places, catering for babies from 6 weeks old, to children of five years of age.

#### Experiences of taking part

The nursery manager and staff all reported having had a very positive experience of taking part in the programme. They found the first meeting with the Improvement Team reassuring and realised after the first session that they were not alone in being at a point of transition.

*“Lots of managers will worry about taking part in this programme but the Improvement Team are really supportive. They kept reassuring us that it was about delivering the best outcomes for kids.”*

Their priority area for development was their outdoor garden. They are a large nursery with extensive outdoor space but recognised that this was not being used to its full potential. They also needed support with reporting and recording data.

They took part in targeted support from May 2021. All the support was online and included professional dialogue, training, and email and telephone support. They made extensive use of Bitesize sessions on quality improvement which were shared with all staff. They used mind maps to plan changes. They involved staff, parents and children in making decisions about what to change, using Forcefield Analysis and the Circle of Influence.

*“The targeted support was really useful – it helped us to prioritise actions.”*

*“The clinics were great experiences, which allowed us to share our experiences with other managers all over Scotland.”*

*“Bitesize sessions were great for sharing with the senior team so that they were also part of the journey.”*

*“We used the Ideas Light Bulb Moments and I now use this to inform all changes we make.”*

#### Impact

They now have a fully functioning wellbeing garden and nurture room that all rooms within the nursery can access directly. They use the wellbeing garden for a wide range of activities such as yoga, and for celebrations. There have been a wide range of impacts on the children in their care, their staff, and their relationship with the Care Inspectorate.

**Impacts on children have included:**

- More interaction between children of different ages
- Children having more exposure to sunlight and fresh air
- Increased opportunities for babies and children for outdoor play and learning
- Supporting closing of the attainment gap through supporting children's learning through outdoor play

**Impacts on Staff have included:**

- Improved staff morale
- Staff spending more time outdoors
- Higher quality learning experiences being delivered by staff
- Staff are tailoring experiences to what children need and want
- Staff now have a clear voice – their ideas and suggestions are taken on board
- Increased leadership across rooms in the nursery – the nursery now has a team leader in each room
- Staff confidence and ability to engage in professional dialogue has improved
- Staff engaging better in inspections

**Impact on parents**

- They now hold “blether conversations” over Zoom with parents.
- They create care plans for children that parents can contribute to every three months.
- Stronger partnership with parents who are more involved now, for example in developing the vision, values and aims of the nursery

**Impact on the wider nursery have included:**

- Literacy lead now in place
- Went from adequate to good across all Care Inspectorate gradings, and there are early signs that they are moving towards gradings of very good.
- They now meet the National Standard

**Aims for the future**

They continue to attend improvement sessions and they will continue to be in the changes that have been made. They are also continuing to use the resources on an ongoing basis, such as the Bitesize sessions which they use with any new staff.

In future, they are hoping to improve their tracking of children's progress so that they can better evidence the impact they are having.

**Their advice to other settings**

*“Think smaller and build on it”*

## Case Study

### Obsdale Primary Nursery, Highland

#### Overview

Obsdale Primary Nursery is based in Alness in the Highlands. At the point of referral, the nursery had just moved from the school to a new building which had only one room and a garden. There was nowhere separate for the children to have lunch and so there were challenges at mealtimes moving furniture around. At the same time, the Head of the nursery was on extended sick leave and there was no acting Head Teacher in place. This all took place not long after Covid-19 restrictions had been lifted, and the nursery had had a poor inspection visit which had identified a range of weaknesses in relation to the indoor environment. As a result, the local authority referred Obsdale Primary Nursery to the ELC Improvement Programme for support.

#### Experiences of taking part

The nursery manager took part in targeted support in April 2022. Together with the Improvement Team they decided to focus on improving the lunchtime experience for the children in their care. Both the nursery manager and the newly appointed acting Head of the nursery participated in the programme sessions. They welcomed the structured approach to Quality Improvement and the opportunities to engage with other nurseries facing similar challenges.

*“The stepped approach to Quality Improvement was so helpful. It made it more strategic and sustainable.”*

They noted that they will continue to use the Quality Improvement structure in future to inform other changes they wish to make. In particular, they noted the value of the “What, Who and By Whom” part of the process.

They also highlighted the value of having dedicated time to reflect on changes needed.

*“It was a real bonus that the programme gave us time together to reflect on improvements, without any interruptions. We will now make sure we carve out that time in future too.”*

#### Impact

The nursery now has an entirely new approach to serving and eating lunch which is working much more effectively. Staff were involved throughout the process which helped to build the team – it also enabled them to draw in staff who were more reluctant and give them a voice. They also involved children and kitchen staff in the process.

*“The whole staff group are on board with the changes – it is not just being done to them.”*  
(Inspector)

An inspection conducted in May 2022 showed significant improvements to the quality of care, and outcomes for children in the nursery.

*“It was like a different service. There are still things to embed, but learning is being rolled out across the nursery.” (Inspector)*

The team now leads changes and their attitude and mindset to improvements has changed completely. In addition, children are now being given more choice and are leading their play and learning.

**Impacts on children have included:**

- Children are more settled
- Children are eating more and are happier sitting at the lunch tables
- Conversation skills have improved
- More children are eating school lunches than previously (when most had packed lunches). This has impacted on the nutritional value of the lunch they are having.

**Impacts on Staff have included:**

- Improved staff morale
- Staff involved in effecting change in the nursery
- Staff modelling good behaviours to children, especially at the lunch table
- Higher quality learning experiences being delivered by staff

**Aims for the future**

Obsdale is intending to continue to apply their learning from the Improvement Programme to tackle other changes they would like to make in the nursery.