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## THE NUFFIELD EARLY LANGUAGE INTERVENTION SCALE-UP

Evaluation Report – Year 2

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## Executive summary

### The project

The Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI) programme is designed to improve the language skills of reception pupils (aged four to five) and involves scripted individual and small-group language teaching sessions delivered by school staff, usually teaching assistants (TAs) or reception teachers. The 20-week intervention consists of two 15-minute individual sessions and three 30-minute small group sessions each week delivered to the three to six children with the lowest language skills in each classroom. Schools with a high proportion of disadvantaged pupils were prioritised in recruitment efforts. The sessions focus on improving children's vocabulary, listening, and narrative skills while phonological awareness and letter sound knowledge are also developed during the second half of the programme.

The second independent impact evaluation of NELI (Dimova et al, 2020) found that participating Reception pupils made on average +3 months progress in oral language skills compared with a business-as-usual control group. Based on this evidence from 200 schools, and the need to support with education recovery in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Department for Education provided £9 million to scale the delivery of NELI to over 6,500 schools across England in the 2020/21 academic year and 4,297 schools in the 2021/22 academic year.

This study, conducted by RAND Europe, was a mixed methods process evaluation of the implementation of NELI at scale across schools in England using surveys, interviews, and case studies. An estimated 94,000 pupils participated in the intervention over the first year (2020/2021) and second year (2021/2022) of the scale-up, averaging six pupils per class. There are two reports: this is the second and summarises findings from the cohort of schools (4,297) that started receiving NELI in the 2021/2022 academic year. Data collection for the evaluation of the second year of the NELI scale-up began in December 2021 and finished in August 2022.

Table 1: Summary of key findings

Research theme	Findings
<b>School recruitment and engagement</b>	<p>There continued to be a high level of interest from schools in NELI as an evidence-based programme to address poor language skills in the second year of the scale-up. The number of schools that signed up to deliver NELI in 2021/2022 (4,297) exceeded delivery partners' expectations and the majority of new schools were those identified by the Department for Education (DfE) as meeting priority criteria (high FSM, Opportunity Areas, LAs with lower Ofsted ratings), as intended.</p> <p>The self-registration process for schools that signed up to deliver NELI in 2021/2022 was perceived by delivery partners and school staff to work well. Self-registration was introduced to improve the efficiency of registration and the accuracy of data collection. Most school staff surveyed found this process easy to navigate, indicating that this adaptation drove efficiencies and improvements without leaving schools feeling confused or unsupported.</p>
<b>Fidelity within recruited schools</b>	<p>Although schools did not face school closures in the 2021/2022 academic year (as they had in 2020/2021), the impact of COVID-19 was arguably no less severe. Limited staff time and capacity, often linked to absences caused by COVID-19, presented major barriers to NELI delivery. Some school staff surveyed also felt the NELI programme sessions took longer to deliver than they had expected.</p> <p>Around half of Cohort 2 schools surveyed (204 of 415) as part of the evaluation completed the full 20 weeks of NELI delivery during the 2021/2022 academic year. Many Cohort 2 schools that took part in the research did not deliver the programme according to the intended delivery model. Schools more commonly deviated from the intended delivery model in terms of individual NELI sessions compared to group NELI sessions; only around a third of staff surveyed from Cohort 2 schools (127 of 427) reported that their school always delivered the two 15-minute individual sessions per pupil per week. Some staff from Cohort 2 schools reported that their school skipped elements of the NELI programme, such as the content relating to phonics (which was perceived as less useful by some school staff, possibly reflecting a lack of understanding about the importance of the opportunity to consolidate learning related to phonics as NELI pupils' language skills improve). A key challenge for delivery partners noted in the first year of the scale-up was limited insight into how NELI was being delivered in schools, particularly with regard to individual and group NELI sessions. To address this issue, delivery partners introduced a regular survey of Cohort 2 schools to understand progress with delivery and challenges experienced. This survey highlighted that schools had not made as much progress with delivery as hoped and drew attention to some issues with fidelity. These difficulties were hard to address</p>

	during the academic year and delivery partners understood the challenges faced by schools in an environment where COVID-19 was still causing great disruption.
<b>Perceived programme impacts</b>	Despite issues with fidelity of delivery in schools, NELI was widely perceived by school staff as beneficial for pupils' language abilities and confidence using language, particularly for schools that had completed the full NELI programme or were delivering individual/group sessions with fidelity.  Differences across Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools surveyed in the perceived impact of NELI on pupils' abilities and teachers' knowledge and skills were small. Schools from both cohorts widely perceived the programme to be beneficial for pupils' development and staff members' professional development.
<b>Scale-up approach</b>	Continuity in the personnel and organisations involved in delivering NELI made the collaboration in year two streamlined and efficient. Some delivery organisations took on new or different roles in 2021/2022 compared to 2020/2021 but were able to benefit from the knowledge and experience of the organisation(s) that had taken on that role in the previous year.  Building on learnings from the first year of the scale-up, the delivery team introduced changes and adaptations, including changes to the recruitment strategy (shifting the recruitment window earlier, introducing webinars, and engaging those who support improvement across schools) and improvements to data management systems (including a new customer relationship management (CRM) database for information management, schools self-registering on the <a href="http://www.teachneli.org">www.teachneli.org</a> portal (henceforth 'TeachNELI'), and auto-populating school information during the registration process). These changes were widely regarded as positive, creating efficiencies, reducing error, and streamlining the process.
<b>Sustainability of NELI</b>	Most Cohort 1 schools continued to deliver NELI to the new cohort of reception pupils in 2021/2022 showing that there is appetite from schools to continue with NELI delivery over the longer term.  Most schools were open to continuing with NELI delivery in 2022/23 and beyond but some were undecided at the time of the survey. Many school staff who took part in the research felt their school would need continued support to continue delivering NELI. The most important forms of ongoing support mentioned were continued (free) access to FutureLearn and LanguageScreen.  An agreement reached in summer 2022 between the DfE and delivery partners meant that schools from both Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 will continue to receive free access to training for new staff in 2022/2023, as well as ongoing online support with delivery. In addition, a small number of new schools were able to sign up to deliver NELI for the first time in 2022/2023 if they met the priority criteria.

## Limitations

The findings of this study should be interpreted with some limitations in mind. Although efforts were made to make the survey instruments as comprehensive as possible, they may not have covered all aspects of schools' experiences due to the need to keep surveys short to support completion rates. Moreover, no pupil-level data was collected from which to assess programme delivery and fidelity.

Furthermore, not all schools that signed up to deliver NELI in the 2021/2022 academic year (Cohort 2 schools) agreed to be contacted about research or participated in data collection activities. Of those delivering NELI (10,797), 72% of Cohort 1 schools and 75% of Cohort 2 schools agreed to be contacted by the evaluation team about research opportunities, of which fewer than a quarter of Cohort 2 schools (21% in both surveys) and less than one in ten Cohort 1 schools (8%) participated in surveys. The qualitative data gathered in this study is also based on a relatively small number of interviews which, despite representing a range of schools, should not be considered wholly representative. In addition, it was difficult to recruit multiple staff members (for example, TAs, teachers, NELI leads, SLT) from schools to participate in interviews and represent a range of perspectives on NELI delivery, as originally intended. The low response rate in both surveys and interviews could indicate a potential bias wherein schools more invested in NELI or those that had made more progress with delivery were more likely to take part.

## Implications for future scale-ups of educational interventions

Large-scale educational programmes could learn from the lessons of NELI's recruitment experience in the 2021/2022 academic year. For example, the introduction of online information sharing (such as webinars) and increased

engagement with local networks such as MATs and LAs were largely successful. Moving the recruitment window earlier to start in the previous year also worked well as it gave schools time and flexibility.

The study also recommends that delivery organisations should set up mechanisms to understand how programmes are being implemented in schools and that regular monitoring should ideally start early in the delivery period and on a continuous basis. As many Cohort 2 schools did not complete the full 20 weeks of NELI delivery and not according to the intended model often due to a lack of staff time and capacity, schools should be fully informed up-front about the time commitment needed when delivering educational programmes. Delivery teams should also consider how to minimise time required to prepare materials and resources. However, educational programmes may be delivered without perfect delivery and still be perceived by school staff to have a beneficial impact for pupils or staff.

The TeachNELI website worked well but some school staff wanted fewer separate platforms and logins relating to NELI (for example, LanguageScreen, FutureLearn). This study therefore recommends that support for educational programmes should be streamlined as much as possible before scaling, ideally creating a single point of contact for all information and communication. The self-registration system for schools can also work well if a suitable platform or portal is developed and there is sufficient support for schools that encounter difficulties.

Although some level of ongoing support is likely required to enable long-term NELI delivery (considering issues such as staff turnover and resource restraints), the high level of buy-in for NELI from schools and its widely perceived positive impact indicate that schools might be willing to invest their own financial resources into the programme. However, withdrawing funded resources may result in fewer schools participating in the programme or lower fidelity of delivery.

## Glossary

<b>Cohort 1 pupils</b>	Pupils in their reception year in the academic year 2020/2021.
<b>Cohort 2 pupils</b>	Pupils in their reception year in the academic year 2021/2022.
<b>Cohort 1 schools</b>	Schools that signed up to deliver NELI in the academic year 2020/2021.
<b>Cohort 2 schools</b>	Schools that signed up to deliver NELI in the academic year 2021/2022.
<b>FutureLearn</b>	Platform used by OxEd to host the online NELI training and support ( <b>NELI Delivery Support Hub</b> ).
<b>LanguageScreen</b>	A school-administered app-based assessment of oral language skills.
<b>NELI Delivery Support Hub</b>	Support for schools delivering NELI administered by OxEd and Assessment Ltd. (OxEd) using the platform <b>FutureLearn</b> . The support on the Hub takes the form of discussion, query forums, and videos. It includes 'See NELI in action' videos that show real life sessions delivered by an experienced NELI practitioner, paired with commentary and examples of reporting and target-setting for the children involved. The Hub is divided into different sections that provide extensive information about various aspect of delivery including the individual and group sessions, practical information on how to time the NELI sessions, on how to track progress, teaching techniques and good practices, and practical matters.
<b>NELI leads</b>	All schools nominate a NELI project lead as the key point of contact between the NELI delivery team and the staff delivering NELI to children in the school. The NELI lead is responsible for ensuring that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- staff in their school complete the NELI training as intended;</li><li>- the language abilities of children in reception are assessed using LanguageScreen before NELI is delivered to select the children who will participate;</li><li>- children are assessed using LanguageScreen after NELI is completed to assess the progress the children have made; and</li><li>- support is provided for NELI practitioners who are delivering NELI in the school.</li></ul>
<b>NELI mentors</b>	Specialist speech and language professionals, managed by OxEd, who offer guidance and support to schools as they train and deliver the NELI programme. Schools can communicate with mentors via the NELI training courses and the Delivery Support Hub.
<b>OxEd and Assessment Ltd (OxEd)</b>	A University of Oxford spin out company launched to take the research of Professor Charles Hulme and his team through to practical application in schools. OxEd maintains an ongoing relationship with participating schools by providing online support in the form of emails, live chat, and an online forum.
<b>TeachNELI portal</b>	Schools that signed up to deliver NELI in the 2021/2022 academic year ( <b>Cohort 2 schools</b> ) registered on the <a href="http://www.teachneli.org">www.teachneli.org</a> platform, which also functioned as a source of information and a means of signposting to, or requesting, support during registration and ongoing delivery. There is a LiveChat function and web enquiry forms; email support requests generated by this website were managed by Nuffield and OUP during recruitment and then OxEd.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background

Early oral language skills are important and a key element for predicting educational success (Snowling et al., 2016). Evidence shows that some children start school with poorly developed language skills (7% to 14%, depending on the thresholds and measures applied), particularly in areas of deprivation (Law et al., 2017). The added health and financial concerns that many families have experienced and continue to experience as a result of COVID-19 may further exacerbate this disadvantage gap (DfE, 2020).

The existing evidence suggests that acquisition of the core language skills occurs in the early years when children are between one and four years old. Studies have shown that around 30% of children with low language abilities in pre-school continue to experience difficulties into their school years (Snowling et al., 2016; Law et al., 2017). Children from more disadvantaged backgrounds are disproportionately more likely to be affected by language difficulties when they enter school (Fernald et al., 2013; Law et al., 2017; Hutchinson et al., 2020). Providing the right support in the early years for children who have lower language abilities can be essential for reducing this 'language gap'.

The Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI) has demonstrated its potential to benefit young pupils in need of support with spoken language in pilot studies (Fricke et al., 2013), efficacy trials (Sibleta et al., 2016; Fricke et al., 2017), and effectiveness trials (Dimova et al., 2020; West et al., 2021). The most recent independent evaluation, undertaken by a team from RAND Europe, found that reception pupils who took part in NELI made, on average, three months more progress in language skills than a group of similar children who did not receive the intervention (Dimova et al., 2020). Given that the attainment gap at the end of reception year between disadvantaged pupils and their more affluent peers is around 4.6 months (Hutchinson et al., 2020), the impact of NELI is significant. It offers real promise and, if targeted and scaled effectively, could make an important contribution to closing the disadvantage gap nationally.

This strong evidence base for the potential impact of NELI prompted the Department for Education (DfE) in England to commit £9 million to make NELI available to state-funded schools with reception pupils for the 2020/2021 academic year (the first year of the NELI scale-up). This was announced as part of the government's £1bn COVID-19 'catch-up' package announced in June 2020, although even without the special challenges posed by COVID-19, the strong evidence for the effectiveness of NELI makes it a strong candidate for scaling up. During the 2020/2021 academic year, 6,667 schools across England signed up to deliver NELI (Disley et al., 2023). In February 2021, the DfE announced that it would invest an additional £8 million in the second year of the NELI scale-up with the aim of delivering NELI in more schools in the 2021/2022 school year. Funding was made available to schools that did not receive DfE-funded NELI resources in the first year of the scale-up in 2020/2021.

Parallel to overseeing the delivery of NELI, the EEF funded RAND Europe as an independent evaluator to provide useful information to delivery partners in the 2020/2021 academic year. The objective of the first year of the evaluation was to assess and understand the scaling process in a COVID-19 affected environment and to provide recommendations for supporting future scale-up of educational interventions (see Disley et al., 2023). In light of the new funding from the DfE for schools delivering NELI in the 2021/2022 academic year, the EEF commissioned an extension of the evaluation conducted by RAND Europe. This report summarises findings from the second year of the evaluation, which covers **delivery of NELI in the 2021/2022 academic year, prospects and challenges for sustainability of NELI in the future (that is, beyond this academic year), and wider lessons for implementing education interventions at scale**. As well as summarising findings at the end of the year in a report, in April 2022 RAND Europe shared interim findings with delivery partners to inform ongoing delivery.

### 1.2. Intervention

This section briefly describes the NELI intervention as delivered at scale. More detailed information about NELI can be found in the evaluation report for the first year of the scale-up (Disley et al., 2023).

The implementation of NELI across schools in England was an act of scaling-up a proven intervention previously delivered in a small number of schools. While the intervention provided by school staff to pupils was intended to be delivered in the same way as during effectiveness trials (Dimova et al., 2020), accommodations and adjustments were made to NELI delivery in the context of the scale-up, described in Box 1 and discussed in more detail in the previous

report (Disley et al., 2023). DfE funding meant that NELI training and resources (LanguageScreen assessment app, NELI resource packs, and ongoing support with delivery) were made available to participating schools free of charge, as they had been in the first year of the scale-up.

Box 1: Summary of changes to NELI delivery at scale compared to previous trials

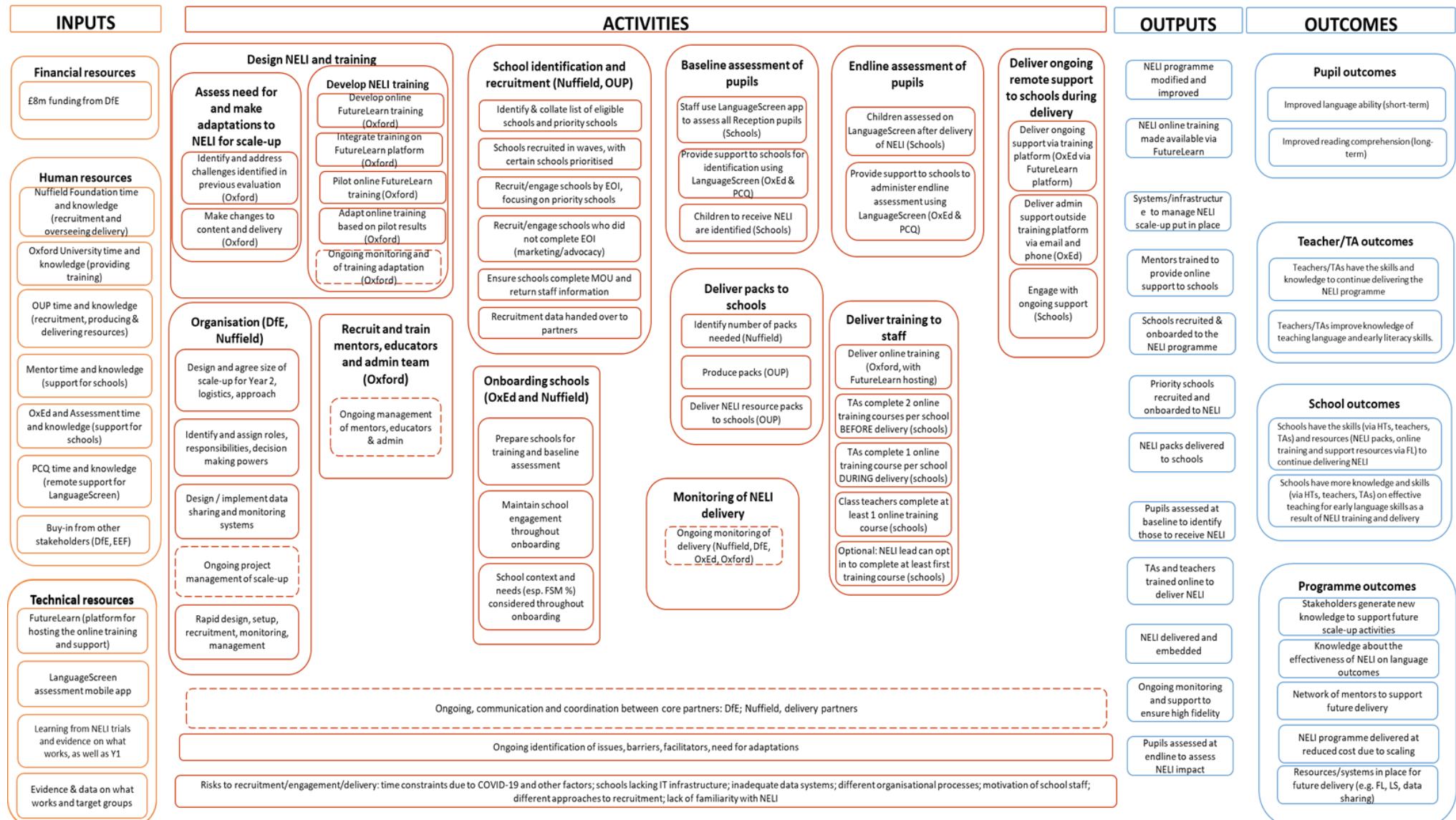
The intervention provided by school staff to pupils during the scale-up was intended to be delivered in the same way as during effectiveness trials. However, several changes to delivery were introduced in the context of the scale-up:

- online training, rather than face to face training—the University of Oxford was in the process of developing online asynchronous NELI training before the scale-up but the online training model was implemented for the first time in the context of the scale-up in 2020/2021 and 2021/2022; while the university directly managed the training and support for schools in the first year of the rollout, management was undertaken by OxEd in the second year;
- remote support provided by OxEd in the form of LiveChat function (on websites), web enquiry forms, and email support as well as the NELI Delivery Support Hub and NELI mentors;
- forming a consortium to rapidly facilitate the delivery of NELI at scale and to determine the scaling approach;
- investing resources in recruiting a large number of schools with a higher percentage of FSM pupils—including making schools aware of the possibility of delivering NELI and the process of supporting schools in the recruitment process;
- the logistics of producing and distributing the NELI packs to schools;
- recruiting mentors;
- managing the scaling programme and coordinating between the delivery partners (DfE, the Nuffield Foundation, Oxford University Press (OUP), University of Oxford, and OxEd and Assessment Ltd.); and
- managing information about participating schools—for example, their progress through the stages of recruitment, whether packs had been received, whether the training had been accessed. and so forth.

In addition to these factors, DfE funding in the 2020/2021 and 2021/2022 academic years meant that the NELI training, resources, and support were made available to schools free of charge.

Figure 1 sets out the logic model for the NELI intervention in the context of the scale-up. The logic model was developed in the first year of the scale-up (2020/2021) during the delivery period (Disley et al., 2023) and was updated to reflect changes for the second year of the scale-up. While the evaluation does not 'test' the logic model, any deviations from planned or expected delivery are noted in the report.

Figure 1: NELI scale-up logic model for the second year of the scale-up (2021/2022)



Source: RAND Europe, 2022, based on conversations with delivery partners

NELI is an intensive targeted support programme delivered by school staff (usually teaching assistants, 'TAs') and designed to improve the spoken language ability of young children with relatively poor spoken language skills. NELI is designed to be delivered to the three to six children with the weakest language skills in each classroom. A total of 6,667 schools accepted the offer to deliver NELI to pupils to their reception cohort pupils in the academic year 2020/2021 and 4,297 did so in 2021/2022. Schools with a high proportion of disadvantaged pupils were prioritised for recruitment and accounted for over half of all schools that signed up to deliver NELI in 2021/2022.

The intervention is delivered using resources available from OUP.<sup>1</sup> These include handbooks with detailed lesson plans, picture cards, resources that can be photocopied to use in sessions, and a puppet to support session delivery. Prior to NELI implementation, TAs, teachers, and other school staff involved in the delivery take part in online training developed by the University of Oxford and administered in the second year of the scale-up by OxEd on the platform FutureLearn. The online training involves a series of three linked courses (Box 2), two which are completed before delivery and a final short course undertaken at the midpoint of programme delivery to pupils

Box 2: Overview of NELI training courses

#### **Course one: language fundamentals**

The first course is designed to enhance teachers' and TAs' understanding of what oral language is, why it is so important for children to have good language skills, and how to select children in reception classes for the programme. Staff find out about the programme itself, the critical role that teaching assistants play in delivering NELI, and familiarise themselves with some of the key teaching strategies used in the programme to support the development of good oral language skills. By the end of the training, staff will be in a good position to begin the NELI programme and to support reception children—particularly those with weak oral language skills—in developing the language skills that will be critical to their success in school and beyond.

#### **Course two: delivering the intervention**

This second course is aimed at only the staff who will deliver the NELI programme to children, usually a teaching assistant. But this course is also open to reception class teachers and NELI project leads. The course focuses on how to deliver the NELI programme effectively. In the course, learners are taken through the structure of the NELI programme followed by a deep dive into each of the two different types of session in NELI—the small group sessions and the individual sessions. Teachers and TAs undertaking the training also examine the different elements that make up each type of session, which run consistently through the programme, and are familiarised with all the course materials and how to use them. By the end of this course, school staff should be confident in their ability to deliver NELI to the children.

#### **Course three: teaching letter sound and phonics**

This is the last training course for NELI, which should be completed by TAs before beginning to deliver Part 2 of the NELI programme. The short course introduces TAs to a new element of NELI which will be incorporated into group and individual sessions in Part 2 of the programme, providing the tools needed to support NELI children in developing their letter-sound knowledge and phonological awareness. Topics covered include: difference in programme structure between Part 1 and Part 2, terminology in letter-sound knowledge and phonological awareness, and key teaching strategies for letter-sound knowledge, blending, and segmenting activities.

Schools delivering NELI can access support via email, telephone, and live chat through the TeachNELI portal. Additional remote support is made available through the **Delivery Support Hub**, which is hosted on FutureLearn. The support on the Hub takes the form of discussion, query forums, and videos. It includes 'see NELI in action' videos that show real life sessions delivered by an experienced NELI practitioner. During implementation, if information is not available in the training or on the Hub, schools can contact and receive answers from NELI mentors via the interactive course or Hub discussion functionality. NELI mentors are specialist speech and language professionals who offer guidance and support to schools as they train and deliver the programme. In addition to the reactive support provided in the online training and Hub for schools as needed, proactive support is provided to all schools by OxEd through regular email communications containing information and guidance.

NELI comprises group and individual sessions. The sessions encourage active participation between children and the TA. Lessons are designed around activities that support and reinforce narrative, vocabulary, active listening, letter-

<sup>1</sup> Oxford University Press, NELI webpage: <https://global.oup.com/education/content/primary/series/nuffield-intervention/?region=international>

sound knowledge, and phonological awareness skills. The programme is delivered over 20 weeks. TAs normally deliver three group sessions in a week lasting 30 minutes each. Children selected to participate in NELI also attend two 15-minute individual sessions each week provided by the TAs.

The delivery of NELI at scale in 2021/2022 relied on number of delivery partners and funders:

- **The NELI programme** was developed by a team of researchers led by Professors Charles Hulme and Maggie Snowling while at the University of York, including Claudine Bowyer-Crane and Silke Fricke. Team members now span the universities of Oxford, York, and Sheffield. The intervention development was funded by the Nuffield Foundation.
- The scale-up of NELI to the second reception cohort (2021/2022) was **funded** by a DfE grant to the Nuffield Foundation. The Nuffield Foundation has created a spin-off organisation, Nuffield Foundation Education Ltd, for the purpose of delivering NELI.
- The **online NELI training** was developed by Oxford University and administered by OxEd in 2021/2022 on the platform FutureLearn.
- **Recruitment** to the scale-up in 2021/2022 was delivered by Nuffield Foundation Education Limited and the OUP.
- The **programme resources** were printed and distributed to participating schools by the OUP.
- **Support for schools** was provided by OxEd for training access, programme delivery, and LanguageScreen support, and by NELI mentors on the online training and Delivery Support Hub provided by OxEd on the FutureLearn platform.
- The **screening** of children's language with the aim to identify pupils who would receive NELI was provided via the LanguageScreen app managed by OxEd.
- The **evaluation** of the NELI scale-up for the 2020/2021 and 2021/2022 academic years is funded by the EEF.

### 1.3. Evaluation scope

The first year of the NELI scale-up evaluation focused on delivery of NELI in schools that signed up to deliver the programme in 2020/2021. Findings are published in an evaluation report (Disley et al., 2023) referred to where relevant throughout this report. The second year of the NELI scale-up evaluation aims to capture and understand (evaluate) the process of implementing and delivering NELI **in two different groups of schools**:

- **Cohort 2 schools**— who were recruited to deliver NELI for the first time in the 2021/2022 academic year (hereafter referred to as Cohort 2 schools, delivering only to Cohort 2 pupils); and
- **Cohort 1 schools** who were recruited to deliver NELI for the first time in the 2020/2021 academic year and are choosing to deliver NELI to a new cohort of reception pupils who started school in the 2021/2022 academic year (hereafter referred to as Cohort 1 schools, delivering to Cohort 2 pupils and possibly Cohort 1 pupils, see below).

Some Cohort 1 schools may have been delivering NELI to Year 1 pupils as well as reception pupils in the 2021/2022 academic year (the 'extended delivery plan' introduced in response to delays linked to COVID-19 restrictions). Delivery of NELI to Cohort 1/Year 1 pupils in the 2021/2022 academic year as part of the extended delivery plan is covered in the report for the first year of the evaluation (Disley et al., 2023).

**This report focuses on NELI delivery to Cohort 2 pupils—pupils who were in their reception year in 2021/2022—in Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools.** For Cohort 2 schools, it was intended that NELI delivery should be completed during the reception year in line with the evidence-based model of delivery. No changes were made to the NELI intervention for delivery in 2021/2022 and the support offered to schools was broadly similar to the previous academic year (2020/2021), with some changes and adaptations made (as outlined in Section 3 of this report). The report covers all aspects of NELI delivery in Cohort 2 schools, whereas Cohort 1 schools—whose first year of delivering NELI is addressed in the previous report (see Disley et al., 2023)—are included from the perspective of sustainability and perceived programme impact.

Table 1: Overview of evaluation scope for year 1 and year 2

	Cohort 1 schools	Cohort 2 schools
Academic year 2020/2021	<p><b>Schools that signed up to deliver NELI in 2020/2021</b></p> <p><b>Delivery to Cohort 1 pupils</b></p> <p>Pupils in their reception year in 2020/2021</p>	
Academic year 2021/2022	<p><b>Delivery to Cohort 1 pupils</b></p> <p>Pupils in their reception year in 2020/2021</p> <p><b>Delivery to Cohort 2 pupils</b></p> <p>Pupils in their reception year in 2021/2022</p>	<p><b>Delivery to Cohort 2 pupils</b></p> <p>Pupils in their reception year in 2021/2022</p>

Note: cells coloured in green are covered in the report for the first year of the evaluation (Disley et al., 2023); cells coloured in blue are covered in the report for the second year of the evaluation (this report); cells covered grey are not applicable.

## 1.4. Evaluation objectives

The second year of the NELI scale-up evaluation aims to:

1. assess and understand the processes and effectiveness of recruiting Cohort 2 target schools;
2. assess and understand the delivery of NELI at scale in schools recruited in 2021/2022;
3. assess the perceived impact of NELI on pupils' language skills and on TA/teacher skills and knowledge for teaching language and early literacy skills in Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools;
4. capture lessons (for NELI delivery partners and others responsible for similar scaling-up activities) to support scaling of education interventions in the future; and
5. assess and understand prospects and challenges for the sustained delivery of NELI in Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools.

Box 3 sets out the research questions for the second year of the scale-up evaluation. These fall into the following five overarching topic areas (which are themselves aligned to the five research objectives as listed above):

Topic area 1: **school recruitment and reach in 2021/2022** focuses on the strategies used to ensure that adequate numbers of Cohort 2 schools were recruited and supported to deliver NELI in 2021/2022. Recruitment for year two of the scale-up is covered in Sections 3 and 4 of this report.

Topic area 2: **fidelity of delivery of NELI** relates to how NELI was implemented in Cohort 2 schools and the barriers and enablers of effective adoption of the intervention. In contrast to the first NELI scale-up evaluation in 2020/2021, the current evaluation will assess fidelity in the context of delivery unaffected by the movement to remote learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, although the pandemic continued to cause a great deal of disruption to schools in 2021/2022. This topic area, covered in Section 5 of this report, is concerned with adherence to the key elements of NELI in the school, the scope and rate of participation, and the degree to which staff engage with the NELI approach.

Topic area 3: **perceived impact** in (i) Cohort 2 schools and (ii) Cohort 1 schools that continued delivering NELI to the next cohort of reception pupils. This topic area, covered in Section 6 of this report, covers the perceived impact of NELI on pupils, teachers, and TAs involved in delivering the programme and the impact on schools.

Topic area 4: **transition of scale-up approach from NELI in 2020/2021 to NELI in 2021/2022** focuses on the strategy used to scale up NELI in 2021/2022 and the adaptations made based on the learnings gained from the scale-up in 2020/2021. This topic area is covered in Section 3 and Section 8 of the report.

Topic area 5: **the sustainability of NELI** after the current funding provided to Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools ends. This topic area is about understanding the prospects and challenges for sustainment of the intervention in schools for delivery to future cohorts of reception pupils. Section 7 of this report examines whether Cohort 1 schools that were delivering NELI in 2020/2021 continued to deliver it to the new cohort of reception pupils and whether both cohorts of schools intend to deliver NELI in the future (and why). This section also covers stakeholder perceptions of barriers and enablers to sustained NELI delivery.

Box 3: Topic areas for the Year 2 scale-up evaluation with specific research questions

#### 1. School recruitment and reach in 2021/2022

- 1.1. Why were recruited Cohort 2 schools attracted to NELI and what was the reason they signed up?
- 1.2. To what extent were the intended number of Cohort 2 Schools recruited?
- 1.3. To what extent do the recruited Cohort 2 schools reflect the intended characteristics (in terms of FSM, Ofsted rating etc.)? If not, why?
- 1.4. What were the main barriers to recruitment of Cohort 2 schools?
- 1.5. What was the experience of Cohort 2 schools from sign-up to delivery?
- 1.6. What changes were made to recruitment processes in 2021/2022 compared to 2020/2021? Why were they made? To what extent did changes make the recruitment process more effective?

#### 2. Fidelity of delivery of NELI within Cohort 2 schools

- 2.1. Were all the aspects of the intervention delivered as intended in Cohort 2 schools? If not, why and what remedial action can or could be taken?
- 2.2. Were the delivery partners able to successfully monitor and address any delivery issues in Cohort 2 schools?
- 2.3. Did staff in Cohort 2 schools feel confident and well supported to deliver the intervention?
- 2.4. Did the intervention reach the intended pupils in Cohort 2 schools? If no, why not?

#### 3. Perceived impacts of NELI in Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools

- 3.1. What is the perceived impact of NELI on reception pupils' language skills in Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools, based on teachers' and TAs' perceptions?
- 3.2. What is the perceived impact of NELI on reception pupils' confidence in their use of language in Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools, based on teachers' and TAs' perceptions?
- 3.3. What is the perceived impact of NELI on TA/teacher knowledge of teaching language and early literacy skills to reception pupils in Cohort 1 and 2 schools, based on teachers' and TAs' views?
- 3.4. What differences (if any) in the perceived impact of NELI on reception pupils' language skills and confidence, as well as TAs/teacher knowledge of teaching language and early literacy skills to reception pupils, can be observed between Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools?
- 3.5. What are the perceived impacts on the school of delivering NELI in terms of:
  - 3.5.1. approaches to teaching language and literacy;
  - 3.5.2. approaches to teaching other subjects;
  - 3.5.3. use of TAs;
  - 3.5.4. approach to using evidence/research for decision-making; and
  - 3.5.5. other impacts identified by schools.

#### 4. Transition of scale-up approach from NELI in 2020/2021 to NELI in 2021/2022 including adaptations

- 4.1. What changes or adaptations (if any) to the scale-up approach used in 2020/2021 were made for scaling up NELI in 2021/2022? For example, in relation to communications with schools, systems for monitoring and record-keeping, the format, content, and delivery mode of training, the distribution of materials, the format, content, and delivery mode of support for schools via online platforms and mentors, and the roles played by the delivery partners.
  - 4.1.1. Why were these changes made?
  - 4.1.2. What were the processes for identifying and implementing changes to the scale-up approach?

4.2. What were the roles and responsibilities of the delivery partners involved in the second year of the scale-up in 2021/2022, and to what extent did the delivery partners work together effectively?

4.3. What were the barriers and facilitators to achieving the intended scale of implementation of NELI in 2021/2022, including any impacts from COVID-19?

4.4. To what extent was the approach and process of scale-up in 2021/2022 effective according to the perception of schools and delivery partners?

4.5. What lessons can be drawn for others intending to implement similar programmes in a similar number of schools within similar timeframes?

**5. The sustainability of NELI after the current funding provided to Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools ends**

5.1. Have Cohort 1 schools recruited in 2020/2021 continued to deliver NELI in 2021/2022? If so:

- 5.1.1. Why did schools decide to continue delivery (or not to continue delivery)?
- 5.1.2. What were the barriers and enablers of continued delivery to reception pupils in Cohort 1 schools if staff delivering were new to the NELI?
- 5.1.3. What were the barriers and enablers of continued delivery to reception pupils in Cohort 1 schools if staff delivered NELI in the 2020/2021 academic year? What resources and support were needed to continue delivery?
- 5.1.4. What changes or adaptations did Cohort 1 schools make when delivering NELI to reception pupils in the 2021/2022 academic year and why?

5.2. To what extent do Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools intend to continue to deliver NELI in the next 2022/23 academic year?

- 5.2.1. Why/ why not?
- 5.2.2. What were the expected barriers and enablers?
- 5.2.3. What resources and support do Cohort 2 schools think they will need to continue delivery?

Research ethics processes for this evaluation were conducted in accordance with the ethics policies adopted by RAND Europe. The evaluation design was approved by RAND U.S. Human Subjects Protection Committee (HSPC). Key documents relating to research ethics and data protection can be found in the appendices to this report: see Appendix A for the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and Appendix B for the privacy notices. Research ethics and data protection for the NELI scale-up evaluation are discussed in more detail in the report for the first year of the scale-up (Disley et al., 2023).

## 1.5. Project team

The NELI intervention was developed by a team of researchers led by Professors Charles Hulme and Maggie Snowling while at the University of York, including Claudine Bowyer-Crane and Silke Fricke. Team members now span the universities of Oxford, York, and Sheffield. The intervention development was funded by the Nuffield Foundation. The scale-up of NELI in 2021/2022 was funded by a DfE grant to the Nuffield Foundation. Recruitment in 2021/2022 was led by the Nuffield Foundation, with support from the OUP. The NELI programme resources were produced and distributed to participating schools by the OUP. The online staff training and support was developed by the University of Oxford and for 2021/2022 was administered by OxEd on the platform FutureLearn. The LanguageScreen app was provided by OxEd. Ongoing support for schools via the NELI Delivery Support Hub (NELI mentors) and phone, email, LiveChat, and webform support through the TeachNELI portal was delivered by OxEd.

The evaluation was conducted independently by RAND Europe. The evaluator was responsible for the study design, analysis, reporting, and quality assurance of the evaluation. The evaluation team in RAND Europe comprised Dr Emma Disley (project leader), Dr Madeline Nightingale (project management, fieldwork, and analysis), Giovanni Amodeo (fieldwork and analysis), Asha Haider (fieldwork and analysis), and Katrin Feyerabend (fieldwork). The evaluation team benefitted from advice and quality assurance from Elena Rosa Brown (RAND Europe) and Lucy Strang (RAND Europe).

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Research methods

This report relates to the second year of a two-year process evaluation that seeks to assess and understand the process of delivering NELI at scale in schools across England to inform delivery of NELI and other educational interventions in the future. The research methods and data collection activities were selected in order to:

- ensure data was collected from a range of stakeholders (schools, delivery partners)—ensuring the evaluation captured multiple perspectives; the evaluation did not gather data from pupils due to ethical considerations and the fact that these were young children for whom it might be difficult to comment on their experiences of participating in NELI;
- balance breadth and depth—collecting information from all schools delivering NELI (via online surveys), complemented with in-depth data collection from a smaller number of case study schools; and
- collect data at several timepoints—the aim was to capture the scaling journey throughout the evaluation period to allow exploration of issues arising.

Regarding the latter, to answer the research questions, the evaluation triangulates data across the different sources outlined in Table 2. Breadth of insight from the surveys (all schools that signed up to deliver NELI were invited to take part) was complemented by in-depth interviews with specific case study schools (interviews were tailored to respond to survey responses). Interviews with delivery partners gave context to data collected from schools, as well as generating additional insights on the scale-up process.

The methodology for the first and second years of the evaluation was broadly similar, drawing on quantitative data (surveys) and qualitative data (interviews with case study schools and delivery partners). However, certain elements of the evaluation methodology were specific to Year 1 or Year 2:

- Year 1: interviews with NELI mentors (Disley et al., 2023);
- Year 1: interviews with schools that declined the offer to take part in NELI (Disley et al., 2023);
- Year 2: analysis of delivery partner surveys, which were introduced for the first time in 2021/2022 (summarised in this report);
- Year 2: analysis of FutureLearn data for 2021/2022 (summarised in this report); and
- Year 2: analysis of recruitment data for 2021/2022 (summarised in this report).

Table 2: Methods overview

Research methods	Timing	Data collection methods	Participants/data sources	Data analysis methods	Thematic topic area
Interviews with organisations involved in Year 2	Two rounds: Jan 2022 Jul/Aug 2022	Semi-structured interviews	OxEd team, Nuffield Foundation, DfE, OUP, University of Oxford, the EEF	Thematic analysis, deductive coding	1, 2, 4, 5
School staff survey for Cohort 2 schools	Dec 2021	Online questionnaires	School staff (TAs/teachers, headteachers, NELI leads), all Cohort 2 schools	Descriptive statistics, frequency counts	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
School staff survey for Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools	July 2022	Online questionnaires	School staff (TAs/teachers, headteachers, NELI leads), all Cohort 1 schools	Descriptive statistics, frequency counts	1, 2, 3, 4, 5

Interviews in case study schools	Two rounds: Feb/March 2022 June/July 2022	Semi structured telephone interviews	School staff, 20 schools	Thematic analysis, deductive coding	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Secondary data analysis: Recruitment and training data	July/August 2022	Data collected by Nuffield Foundation (recruitment) / through the FutureLearn platform (training)	All schools	Descriptive statistics	1, 4
Secondary data analysis: delivery partner survey	July/August 2022	Data collected by Nuffield Foundation	NELI leads all schools	Descriptive analysis	2

### **Interviews with delivery partners**

The study team conducted **semi-structured interviews with organisations involved in delivering NELI**:

- the EEF;
- Nuffield Education Organisation Ltd;
- Oxford University Press (OUP);
- OxEd;
- the DfE; and
- the University of Oxford.

The interviews explored the different and aligning views and definitions of success among delivery partners with regard to the NELI scale-up as well as any compromises made during the scale-up process. These interviews for Year 2 explored changes and adaptations introduced to the scale-up approach in 2021/2022 in response to lessons learned in 2020/2021 and the rationale and processes for implemented these. The first round of interviews with delivery partners was conducted in January and February 2022 followed up with a second round of interviews at the end of the academic year (July/August 2022).

Table 3: Interviews with delivery partners

Delivery organisation	Number of interviews	Number of interviewees	When interviews took place
The EEF	1	1	January 2022
<b>The Nuffield Foundation</b>	2	2	January 2022, July 2022
The University of Oxford	2	1	January 2022, July 2022
DfE	3	1	January 2022, July 2022, August 2022
OxEd	2	2	February 2022, August 2022
OUP	2	3	January 2022, July 2022
<i>Total</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>8</i>	

### **Surveys of school staff**

School surveys were selected to reach the largest population possible and to give all schools that agreed to be contacted about the evaluation the opportunity to contribute. Survey data allows for a comparison across different groups (teachers, TAs, headteachers) and conducting multiple survey waves enables insight into how NELI implementation and fidelity varied across the period of interest. Two survey waves were conducted with school staff at different stages during NELI delivery. Invitations to participate in each survey wave were sent by email to the NELI lead in each school who was asked to forward the link to other relevant staff members. It was possible for more than one staff member per school to participate in the surveys. Contact information about NELI leads was collected when schools signed up to deliver NELI and, in some cases, there may have been a change in personnel, meaning that the invitation did not reach the right member of staff. The **first survey wave** (conducted December 2021) was conducted with **Cohort 2 schools only**. The aim of this survey was to examine schools' motivations for joining the programme and their understanding of NELI so that potential barriers to recruitment can be better understood. The survey gained insights on the school staff

experiences of undertaking the online training. Finally, the survey was used to assess whether schools had undertaken any delivery activities (that is, whether schools had administered the LanguageScreen assessment, selected children to take part in NELI, and had begun delivering NELI sessions) prior to the commencement of the main roll-out window.

**The second survey wave** (conducted June 2022) was administered at the end of 2021/2022 and included **Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools**. The survey included questions about programme delivery, perceptions of NELI resource packs, ongoing support, and the perceived effect of the programme on children's language skills. The survey also captured data on whether schools intended to continue with NELI delivery in the 2022/2023 academic year.

Survey questionnaires were developed by the project team at RAND Europe in consultation with the delivery partners and the EEF. Survey questions were tailored to each type of respondent—TAs/teachers, headteachers, and NELI leads. Surveys were kept relatively short at 15 to 20 minutes to maximise engagement and participation. Two reminder emails were sent to schools for each survey wave to encourage participation.

Table 4: Overview of survey participants

	December 2021		June 2022	
	Staff from Cohort 1 schools	Staff from Cohort 2 schools	Staff from Cohort 1 schools	Staff from Cohort 2 schools
<b>Teachers</b>	N/A	340	147	309
<b>TAs</b>	N/A	184	150	296
<b>Headteachers /other SLT</b>	N/A	344	119	243
<b>Total number of survey participants</b>	N/A	868	416	848
<b>Total number of schools</b>	N/A	660	360	683
<b>Number of schools that agreed to be contacted about research</b>	N/A	3,209	4,798	3,209
<b>Response rate per survey wave</b>	N/A	21%	8%	21%

### Interviews with case study schools

Case study interviews were designed to complement and build on the surveys, developing a more detailed, nuanced picture of NELI delivery in schools, including information that may be difficult to capture through a survey. Case study interviews were conducted at two points: in February/March 2022 (Round 1) and at the end of the academic year in June/July 2022 (Round 2). Case study interviews covered the following topics: school engagement with NELI including training, support, and delivery, perceived impact of NELI on children's language skills, the impact of COVID-19 on delivery, and other aspects of the practicalities of delivery including how fidelity to the programme was facilitated or hindered by various factors. To ensure that the case studies complemented and added value to data collected via the surveys, the evaluation team developed a tailored topic guide for each respondent, drawing directly on their responses to the survey. Cohort 2 schools were interviewed at both points in time to explore their experiences of delivery across the year. Cohort 1 schools were interviewed at the end of the academic year to explore sustainability questions and the perceived impact of NELI.

A purposive stratified sampling was used to select case study schools. Schools were stratified by the following characteristics (see Appendix E for more information on the case study sampling framework):

- engagement with NELI delivery (use of LanguageScreen, participation in training);
- geographical region;
- target schools, that is:
  - o schools in local authorities (LAs) that are in the bottom third based on LA Ofsted ratings;

- schools with higher than average share of FSM pupils; and
- schools in Opportunity Areas (OAs).

The aim was to include a range of schools as case studies in terms of these characteristics, including those further behind with delivering NELI. As shown in Table 5, case study schools were drawn from across England (although no case study schools were located in Yorkshire and the Humber); they included several priority schools—schools with a high proportion of FSM pupils—and, for Cohort 2 schools, a number were included in the sample that had not progressed far with NELI at the time of the December 2021 survey.

NELI leads, headteachers, teachers, and TAs within each case study school were invited to take part in semi-structured interviews. These lasted around 30 minutes and were conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams. As shown in Table 5, most case study interviews involved one member of staff but some interviews involved multiple members of staff.

A total of 36 interviews were conducted (15 in Round 1, 21 in Round 2) with staff from 24 case study schools that signed up to deliver NELI in 2021/2022 (**Cohort 2 schools**) and six case study schools that signed up to deliver NELI in 2020/2021 (**Cohort 1 schools**). The original aim was to recruit 15 Cohort 2 schools and ten Cohort 1 schools, so recruitment was in line with expectations for Cohort 2 schools but slightly below for Cohort 1 schools. It proved more challenging than anticipated to recruit Cohort 1 schools to participate in interviews at the end of the academic year, which may be because these schools have received a large number of invitations to participate in data collection activities related to the evaluation over the last two years, combined with ongoing pressure on schools linked to COVID-19.

The original intention for the NELI scale-up evaluation was to interview the same case study schools at multiple points in time to follow them on their journey over the year. However, as discussed in the evaluation report for the first year of the scale-up (Disley et al., 2023), it proved more challenging than anticipated to recruit schools and to arrange a second follow-up interview with schools that were interviewed. In response to these challenges, the evaluation team invited a new set of Cohort 2 schools to participate in the second round of interviews in addition to recontacting the schools that took part in the previous round of interviews. This approach ensured that a sufficient number of schools were interviewed to gather a range of perspectives on NELI and meant that interviews were not heavily skewed towards the first round of interviews. However, there were an insufficient number of Cohort 2 schools interviewed at both timepoints ( $n = 6$ ) to conduct within-case analysis and track schools' progress over the year.

Table 5: Profile of case study schools and interviewees

		Round 1 (Feb/Mar 2022)		Round 2 (Jun/Jul 2022)	
		Cohort 1 schools	Cohort 2 schools	Cohort 1 schools	Cohort 2 schools
School staff interviewed	Teacher	N/A	7	2	6
	TA	N/A	1	2	6
	Headteacher	N/A	9	2	7
Number of interviewees	One	N/A	13	6	13
	Two	N/A	1	0	1
	Three	N/A	1	0	0
	Four	N/A	0	0	1
Interviewed at Round 1	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A	6
	No	N/A	N/A	N/A	9
Priority school (high FSM)	Yes	N/A	9	4	10
	No	N/A	6	2	5
Region	East Midlands	N/A	1	0	1
	East of England	N/A	2	3	2
	London	N/A	1	2	2
	North East	N/A	2	0	0
	North West	N/A	2	0	3
	South East	N/A	5	0	4
	South West	N/A	1	0	1
	West Midlands	N/A	1	0	2
	Yorkshire and The Humber	N/A	0	0	0

<b>NELI delivery (December 2021)</b>	Started NELI delivery	N/A	14	N/A	6
	Not started NELI delivery	N/A	1	N/A	9
<b>LanguageScreen (December 2021)</b>	Used LanguageScreen	N/A	6	N/A	5
	Has not used LanguageScreen	N/A	9	N/A	10
<b>Total number of interviewees</b>	0	18	6	19	
<b>Total number of interviews</b>	0	15	6	15	
<b>Total number of schools</b>	0	15	6	15	

Note: the first two rows (staff role and number of interviewees) relate to interviewees whereas the remaining rows relate to schools. The totals for the first two rows may therefore exceed the total number of schools.

### Secondary data analysis

To supplement primary data collection, the evaluation team analysed three sources of secondary data:

- **recruitment data** shared by the Nuffield Foundation, which contained information on date and month of sign-up for each school;
- **training (FutureLearn) data** shared by the University of Oxford and OxEd, which contained information on the number of staff who registered for and completed the training, the number of comments made in relation to each course, number of views for each instructional video, and the proportion of correct and incorrect responses on tests and quizzes; and
- **data from delivery partner surveys of Cohort 2 schools** conducted at three timepoints in 2021/2022 (data collection for the three survey waves started in February 2022, March 2022, and June 2022 respectively) by emailing NELI leads and requesting they complete a short form linked in their account area on TeachNELI; delivery partner surveys contained multiple choice questions to gather information on use of Language Screen, the number of pupils receiving NELI in each school, the number of NELI groups, the number of staff involved in delivering NELI, number of group and individual sessions delivered, and the approximate duration of sessions; the same questions were asked at each timepoint.

### Analysis

Descriptive statistics from **surveys of staff from schools delivering NELI** were aggregated and summarised, focusing on emerging patterns and themes. Where possible (that is, where the same question was asked in multiple survey waves), key findings are compared across the delivery period. The survey analysis did not allow for responses from individual schools or staff members to be tracked over time. Open-text responses were coded and analysed based on themes identified from the data. This data is treated qualitatively, presented in terms of recurring themes and overarching findings rather than frequencies or percentages.

Information gathered from **interviews with case study schools and delivery partners** was analysed using a general inductive approach, that is, deriving concepts and themes from the raw data (Thomas, 2006). Detailed notes were written up for each interview and notes were analysed thematically. This report does not indicate how many interviewees made each point (either numerically or with descriptors such as 'many', 'some', 'a small number' etc.), reflecting the fact that inferences about how widespread views and experiences are cannot be made from a small, non-representative sample.

For the case study interviews, the original intention was to include within-case as well as between-case analysis (that is, conducting over-time analysis following the specific journey of each case study school). However, there was felt to be an insufficient number of schools interviewed at both timepoints to enable within-case analysis.

Each data source (surveys, interviews with case study schools, and interviews with delivery partners) was initially analysed separately before triangulating data sources to draw out overarching themes and findings. By triangulating different data sources, the evaluation team were able to build a richer, more-detailed picture of the implementation of NELI at scale. Survey findings provided insight into the prevalence of attitudes, perceptions, and activities in schools participating in NELI. Qualitative data complemented the survey data by providing contextual insights on *how* and *why*

schools took decisions with regard to NELI, as well as providing richer insights into how different aspects of delivery were interconnected. By conducting interviews with a range of stakeholders (participating schools, non-participating schools, delivery partners, and NELI mentors), we were able to understand different levels of delivery and how these interconnected.

## 2.2. Strengths and limitations of this evaluation

This evaluation draws on multiple data sources (surveys and interviews with schools and delivery partners) to build a rounded picture of NELI delivery at scale. Complementary methods were used to combine breadth (inviting all schools delivering NELI to take part in surveys) and depth of insight (in-depth discussions with a smaller number of case study schools). Multiple survey waves provided insight into schools' experiences from first signing up to NELI to completing delivery.

A number of limitations to the research methodology should be noted. Efforts were made to make the survey instruments as comprehensive as possible, including incorporating open text questions to allow flexibility in responses and enable unanticipated findings to emerge. However, comprehensiveness had to be balanced against the need to keep the survey short to maximise engagement. The surveys may not have covered all aspects of schools' experiences that were pertinent to the research questions. Moreover, no pupil-level data was collected from which to assess programme delivery and fidelity.

One important limitation of the evaluation to note is that not all schools that signed up to deliver NELI in 2021/2022 (Cohort 2 schools) participated in the research. Not all schools delivering NELI agreed to be contacted about research—only 72% of Cohort 1 schools and 75% of Cohort 2 schools agreed to be contacted by the evaluation team). Of these, only a minority that were invited to take part in the surveys did so. As shown in Table 4, staff from approximately a fifth of Cohort 2 schools (21% in both waves) and less than one in ten Cohort 1 schools (8%) participated in the survey. These response rates are comparable to the first year of the evaluation (see Disley et al., 2023) and consistent with the wider literature highlighting low response rates for surveys of school staff (Lavidas et al., 2022). The lower response rate for Cohort 1 schools compared to Cohort 2 may be attributable to survey fatigue (Porter et al., 2014)—the survey conducted in June/July 2022 was the fourth that staff from Cohort 1 schools had been invited to participate in. Low response rate matters because it increases the risk of bias. Schools that participated in the research may not have been wholly representative of schools that signed up to deliver NELI. For instance, schools that participated in the research may have been, on average, more engaged and motivated than non-participating schools. Survey results should be interpreted with this caveat in mind and not assumed to be representative of all schools delivering NELI.

Qualitative data to inform this evaluation is based on a relatively small number of interviews which, while they represent a range of schools, should not be considered representative. Although efforts were made to include a broad range of schools in the case study interviews, the response rate—in terms of the number of schools contacted that agreed to take part in an interview—was relatively low. In addition, it was difficult to recruit multiple staff members from schools to take part in interviews to gather a range of perspectives on NELI delivery as intended (for example, from TAs, teachers, NELI leads, and the SLT). For both surveys and interviews, lack of participation from some schools has the potential to introduce bias if, for instance, schools that were more invested in NELI or had made more progress with delivery were more likely to take part.

## 2.3. Timeline

Table 6 presents a timeline of the main activities related to the evaluation.

Table 6: Evaluation timeline

Dates	Activity
May 21–Oct 22	Schools recruited to deliver NELI
Dec 21	Post-training survey (Cohort 2 schools)
Jan–Feb 22	Interviews with delivery partners (Round 1)

Dates	Activity
Feb–Mar 22	Interviews with case study schools (Round 1, Cohort 2 schools)
Feb–Mar 22	Delivery partner survey (Round 1)
Apr 22	Presentation of interim evaluation findings to delivery partners
May–Jun 22	Delivery partner survey (Round 2)
Jul 22	End-delivery survey (Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools)
Jun–Jul 22	Interviews with case study schools (Round 2, Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools)
Jul–Aug 22	Interviews with delivery partners (Round 2)
Jul–Aug 22	Analysis of secondary data (recruitment, training, delivery partner surveys)

### 3. Transition of scale-up approach from NELI in 2020/2021 to NELI in 2021/2022 including adaptations

This section addresses research questions 1.6, 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3. It provides an overview of the approach to scaling up NELI in 2021/2022 including changes and adaptations introduced in response to learnings from the first year of the scale-up. This section is based primarily on interviews with delivery partners, with some supplementary data from school surveys. The source of data (interviews, surveys, and so forth) is indicated in the report text in this section (as well as in other empirical sections in the report).

Box 4: Scale-up approach—key lessons

- **Continuity in the organisations and personnel involved in delivering NELI made the collaboration in year two streamlined and efficient.** Some organisations took on new or different roles in 2021/2022 compared to 2020/2021 but were able to benefit from the knowledge and experience of the organisation(s) that had taken in that role in the previous year.
- **A number of changes and adaptions were made to improve data management processes in the second year of the scale-up** including a new CRM database for information management, schools self-registering on the TeachNELI portal, and auto-populating school information during the registration process. These changes were widely regarded as positive, creating efficiencies, reducing error, and streamlining the process.
- **Building on lessons from the first year of the scale-up, the recruitment approach involved more information-sharing activities (webinars) and engagement with networks, including LAs.** This approach appears to have been effective, with some Cohort 2 schools first hearing about NELI from webinars or LA contacts. The recruitment period was moved earlier, starting in June of the previous academic year.

#### 3.1. What were the roles and responsibilities of the delivery partners involved in the second year of the scale-up in 2021/2022, and to what extent did the delivery partners work together effectively (RQ 4.2)?

*Roles and responsibilities changed for the second year of the scale-up, but there was continuity in the organisations involved*

The second year of the NELI scale-up was funded by an £8m grant provided by the **DfE** to the **Nuffield Foundation**. The **EEF**—grant recipient for the first year of the scale-up (2020/2021)—was less closely involved in overseeing delivery for 2021/2022. It was always the intention that the EEF would be temporary custodian for the first year of the scale-up (Disley et al., 2023). In the second year of the scale-up, the Nuffield Foundation had overall responsibility for overseeing delivery. The Nuffield Foundation was responsible for coordinating delivery and communication between partners, reporting back to the DfE.

The DfE was not directly involved in recruiting schools to deliver NELI in 2021/2022 (as it had been in the first year of the scale-up). School recruitment and engagement in 2021/2022 was managed by the **Nuffield Foundation** working with the **OUP**. In addition to its role in recruitment, the OUP was responsible for producing and distributing NELI resource packs.

The EEF continued to play a role in the second year of the scale-up in facilitating support for Cohort 1 schools—those that first signed up to deliver NELI in 2020/2021. Initially, this was supposed to be short-term support—as specified in the extended delivery plan—but it soon became clear that Cohort 1 schools also needed support with delivering NELI to the new cohort of reception pupils. DfE funding was extended to allow the EEF to fund OxEd to take on this role so there could be continued support for Cohort 1 schools until July 2022.

The **University of Oxford** and **OxEd** continued to be responsible for delivering the NELI online training (via the FutureLearn platform) and LanguageScreen app (used to screen pupils) as they had been in the first year of the scale-up. One difference from the first year was that there was a contract between the Nuffield Foundation and OxEd. In the first year, OxEd had been contracted via the University of Oxford. It had not been possible for the EEF to contract OxEd in the first year of the scale-up because OxEd was a new organisation. In the second year of the scale-up, the Nuffield

Foundation felt comfortable contracting OxEd directly because of its experience of working as a delivery partner in the first year. In the second year of the scale-up, OxEd had primary responsibility for handling support queries relating to training, LanguageScreen, and delivery to pupils: queries about NELI resource kits were dealt with by the OUP.

***Delivery partners described effective partnerships based on long term relationships. However, contractual delays made it more difficult to work effectively at the beginning of the year***

Delivery partners generally felt the collaboration between organisations in the second year of the scale-up had worked very well, with smoother communication than in the first year. Continuity in the organisations involved (albeit with some organisations taking on a different role) meant that the second year benefitted from well-established relationships and tried and tested ways of working.

‘I would say overall Year 1 worked well and Year 2 built on the foundation of the fact that we were a core team and built from it. We had new elements but there was trust and we could see the value of collaboration’ (Delivery partner, interviewed July/August 2022).

For delivery partners taking on a new role in 2021/2022, efforts were made to transfer knowledge and create a smooth transition. The DfE passed on a lot of information about recruitment to the Nuffield Foundation (for instance, effective communication strategies and the optimum time to approach schools) and staff members involved in recruitment in the previous academic year were drafted into the recruitment team. A member of staff was seconded from the EEF to the Nuffield Foundation for the beginning of 2021/2022 and this was described as ‘extremely beneficial’.

Delivery partners described the second year of the NELI scale-up as being more organised and structured than the first. The funder, the DfE, was more removed from day-to-day delivery than in the first year of the scale-up, with the Nuffield Foundation acting as a conduit for communication between the DfE and delivery partners subcontracted by the former. This was felt to be a more appropriate role for the DfE, but there was a suggestion from one delivery partner that there was less of a collegiate feel compared to the first year of the scale-up, where all organisations were part of the day-to-day discussions.

There was regular communication between organisations, and delivery partners felt they could be open and transparent with one another. As in the first year, delivery organisations (the Nuffield Foundation; OxEd for 2021/2022) had weekly progress calls, which were described as ‘very useful’. As the organisation with overall responsibility for delivery, the Nuffield Foundation acted as channel of communication between different delivery partners, but this sometimes meant that different organisations were not in regular contact with one another.

Delivery partners described challenges getting contracts signed in time to prepare for delivery in 2021/2022. Some partners chose to start work at their own risk during the period before contracts were signed. For instance, the Nuffield Foundation developed the [www.teachneli.org](http://www.teachneli.org) ('TeachNELI') website during this period. However, other organisations were unable to start work without a contract in place and were, therefore, not involved in such developments. This meant that it was not possible to integrate platforms such as FutureLearn and LanguageScreen with TeachNELI to the extent that had been hoped, potentially providing a less straightforward experience for schools and making it more difficult to integrate support for Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools.

### **3.2. What changes or adaptations (if any) to the scale-up approach used in 2020/2021 were made for scaling up NELI in 2021/2022 (RQ 4.1)?**

The first year of the NELI scale-up was implemented at speed, with a compressed timeline due to the urgency of rolling out the intervention to provide support for children whose development was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Lessons were learnt in the process about scaling up NELI specifically and education interventions more broadly, as summarised in the evaluation report for the first year of the scale-up—see Disley et al., 2023. These lessons fed into decisions about how to deliver NELI in 2021/2022. Delivery organisations also had more time to prepare for delivery in 2021/2022 whereas in the previous year time constraints had limited their ability to make some changes (Disley et al., 2023).

***Data management processes were improved and streamlined for the second year of the scale-up***

One of the findings from the evaluation of the first year of the NELI scale-up was that delivery partners experienced **challenges with data management** linked to using spreadsheets where data had to be inputted manually (Disley et al., 2023). Data errors, in particular incorrect school email addresses, caused issues and delays. A new CRM (Customer Relationship Management) database, Salesforce, was introduced for the second year of the NELI scale-up. However, the CRM system was not integrated with FutureLearn and LanguageScreen and so was unable to provide automated information from across the different platforms. OxEd undertook this provision manually on a weekly basis.

Delivery partners described this system as aiding communication and improving efficiency. The Nuffield Foundation, OxEd, and OUP (for the purposes of recruitment) had access to the CRM database. The database provided live updates on recruitment and contained more detailed information about recruitment than had been available in the first year of the scale-up. For instance, the CRM database contained information about schools that had started the sign-up process but had not yet completed all steps. This information could be used to prioritise schools and target communications. The CRM database gave the school recruitment team detailed information about schools as context to support queries raised, for instance, previous communication and who this was with. This made communication with schools about signing up for NELI more effective, as illustrated by the quotation below from a delivery partner:

‘When a school query comes in, you can see them . . . Anyone who is supporting with queries can see the school, the school details and see what previous interactions have been with them. So, you can see where they’re at in terms of their journey through recruitment, any other queries they’ve asked, and the detail really. More detailed information about the school themselves: their size and things. So, individual communications with schools are more effective because you have got good information’ (Delivery partner, interviewed Jan/Feb 2022).

### ***TeachNELI was created to provide a single point of contact for Cohort 2 schools***

One of the learnings from the first year of the NELI scale-up was **the importance of having a single point of contact for registration and support throughout the programme**. The Nuffield Foundation created the TeachNELI website and portal to be a ‘one stop shop’, providing the means of registering and a source of detailed information about the programme for Cohort 2 schools. (Different support systems were in place for Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools—this issue is discussed under section 7.2.) One delivery partner, OxEd, dealt with almost all school queries. As outlined elsewhere in this report, schools found the self-registration process straightforward (see Section 4.4) and were generally satisfied with the support provided (see Section 5.3).

The design and functionality of TeachNELI was created to respond to data management issues and limitations identified in the first year of the scale-up. In the first year, schools had to contact the delivery team and request any changes to staff members registered for training at their school. However, delivery partners highlighted that TeachNELI enabled schools to add learners, making the process more streamlined and efficient. TeachNELI included a live chat function where schools could ask OxEd questions. In the previous academic year (2020/2021), live chat had only been available in the LanguageScreen app (which continued to be available in 2021/2022).

### ***The registration process was automated to create efficiencies and reduce the risk of data errors***

For the second year of the NELI scale-up, **schools registered themselves** via the TeachNELI portal with certain fields auto-populated based on the school’s unique reference number. This made the registration process simpler and quicker. Given problems caused by incorrect email addresses in the first year (Disley et al., 2023), a check was introduced where email addresses were validated via receipt of an activation email. Delivery partners felt the self-registration process had worked well, as illustrated by the quotation below. This sentiment was shared by school staff, most of whom saw the self-registration process as straightforward and easy to complete (see Section 4.4).

‘The portal built for Year 2 [Cohort 2] schools required a URN [Unique Reference Number] and would prepopulate their information and have the schools confirm. This made it a lot smoother and quicker. And there was an auto checker for their email addresses to make sure it was accurate; I think that made the situation smoother for everyone’ (delivery partner, interviewed Jan/Feb 2022).

### ***Changes were introduced to LanguageScreen access to encourage schools to make full use of the app***

In the first year of the NELI scale-up, schools were given 200 free tokens for LanguageScreen, with each token translating into one pupil assessment to be used over a period of two years. This was felt by some delivery partners to result in schools using the tokens sparingly, which was not the intention. In 2021/2022, Cohort 2 schools were given

**unlimited access to LanguageScreen** for a period of two years while Cohort 1 schools were given unlimited access for the remaining year of their two-year period. The hope was that this would encourage schools to screen the whole reception cohort and to use LanguageScreen to reassess reception pupils as per the intended delivery model for NELI so they could more accurately consider the progress made by children in NELI, as well as their peers. School staff who participated in surveys and interviews for this evaluation did not comment on arrangements for, or restrictions on, accessing LanguageScreen.

Another change was that **two-factor authentication** was introduced to LanguageScreen to increase security. One delivery partner noted that the team had received a lot of support queries concerning the app update implemented to provide two-factor authentication, suggesting that some schools may have found this update challenging.

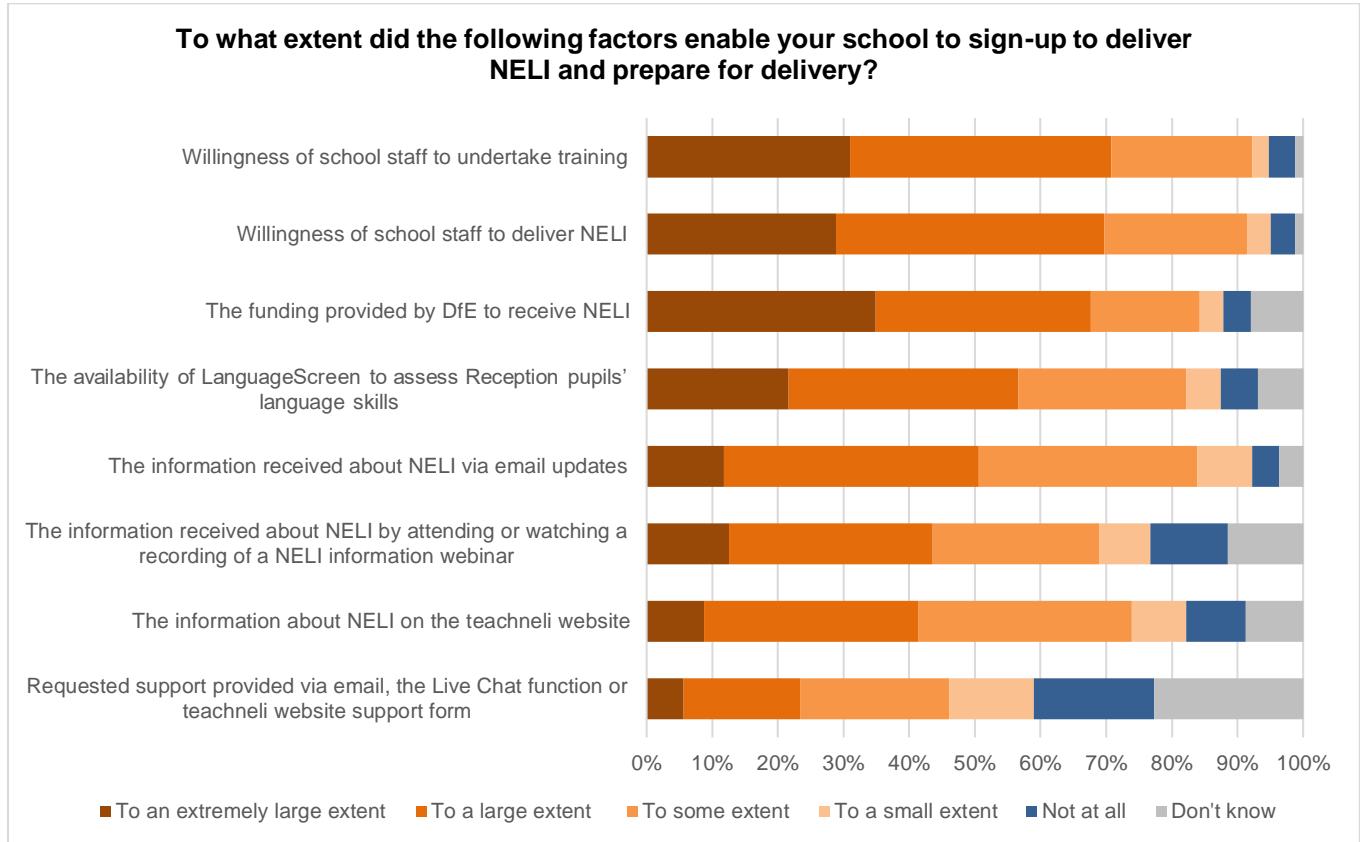
### 3.3. What changes were made to recruitment processes in 2021/2022 compared to 2020/2021? Why were they made? To what extent did changes make the recruitment process more effective (RQ1.6)?

#### *Building on learnings from Year 1 of the scale-up, the delivery team utilised webinars and existing school networks to recruit schools to deliver NELI*

Delivery partners described how the recruitment approach for the second year of the NELI scale-up (led by the Nuffield Foundation) built on experiences and lessons learnt in the first year (where recruitment was led by the DfE).

One learning from the first year of the NELI scale-up was **the need to provide more information for schools** that were considering signing up to deliver NELI about the programme and the requirements for delivering it. To this end, the delivery team provided a more detailed website ([www.teachneli.org](http://www.teachneli.org)) and hosted webinars for schools. Webinars were well attended and perceived to be effective by delivery partners. School staff surveyed in December 2021 were asked to comment on how far different factors had enabled their school's participation in NELI (Figure 2). Close to half of school staff surveyed indicated that the information about NELI on the TeachNELI website (228 of 551; 41%), in the webinars (240 of 551; 44%), and shared via email updates (279 of 551; 51%) were factors that enabled their school to sign up to deliver NELI. Around a quarter (129 of 551; 23%) indicated that the support they had accessed during the registration process had enabled their school to sign up.

Figure 2. Factors enabling schools to sign up to deliver NELI and prepare for delivery (Cohort 2 schools)



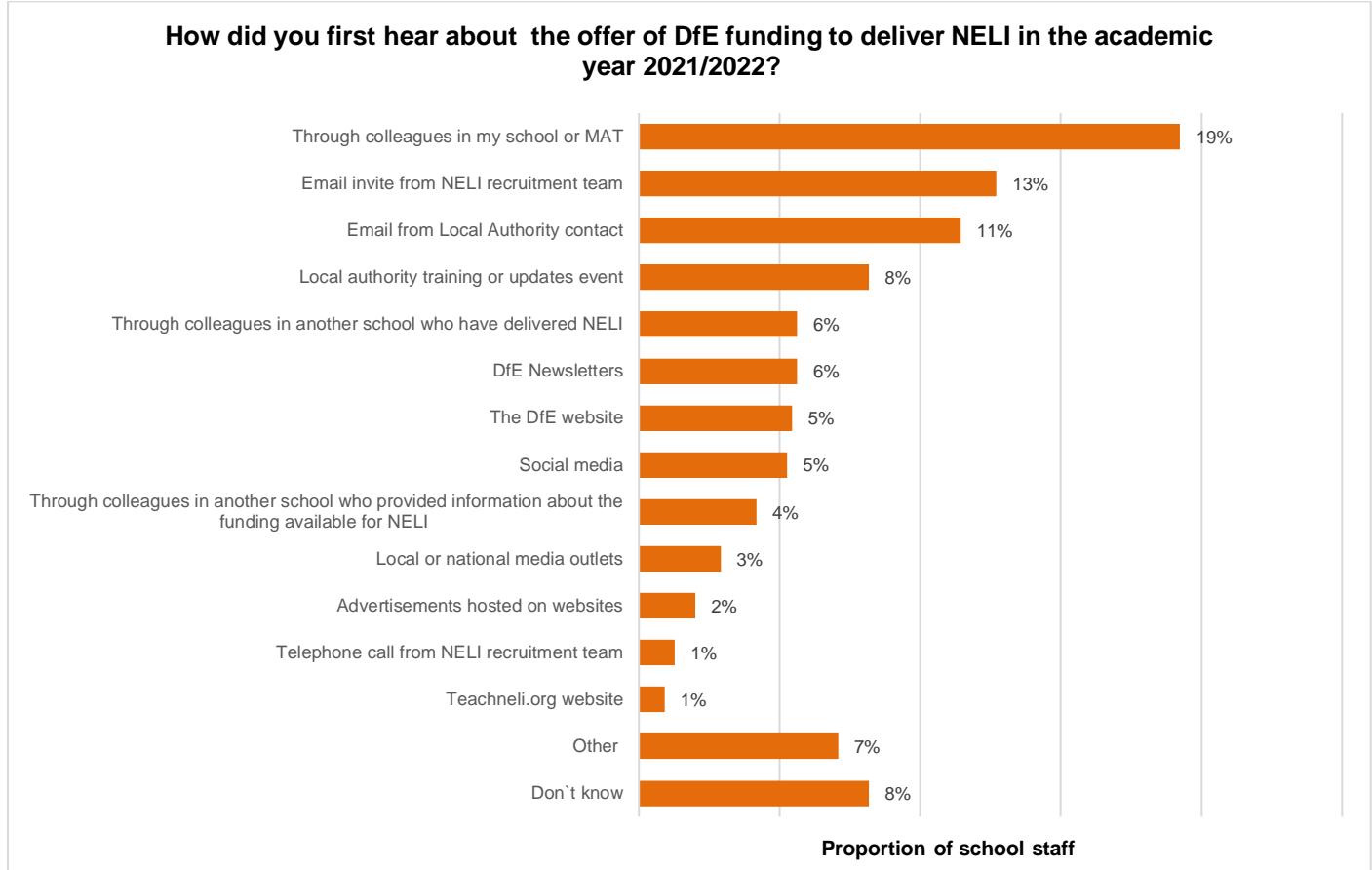
Responses from n = 551 school staff surveyed in December 2021.

***The recruitment approach for the second year of the scale-up relied on engaging networks such as local authorities and MATs***

A finding from the first year of the evaluation (Disley et al., 2023) was that there might be **scope to engage more effectively with existing networks** as part of the NELI recruitment strategy. A key change for Year 2 was involving those working to support improvement across schools in NELI recruitment, such as LAs, MATs, and speech and language therapy teams, as a means of engaging them with the programme and supporting with communicating with schools. The recruitment team ran a webinar specifically for this group. While delivery partners did not know what, if anything, these networks did to raise awareness of the programme with schools, survey results indicate that, in some instances, school staff first heard about the NELI offer from emails from their LA (63 of 551; 11%) or at LA events (45 of 551; 8%; see Figure 3). One interviewee from a case study school indicated that LAs were effective at raising awareness of NELI (even if this evaluation has not been able to describe how they did this). Specific organisations or networks were also listed under 'other' (where survey participants could write in a response) included Early Years Networks, Early Years Hubs, multi-academy trusts (MATs), local speech therapy services, and the National Literacy Trust. The recruitment team also raised awareness of NELI via DfE networks, which was perceived to work well. As shown in Figure 3, 31 of 551 (6%) school staff surveyed first heard about NELI from a DfE newsletter and 30 of 551 (5%) from the DfE website. Commenting on factors that had enabled their school to sign up, some school staff surveyed in December 2021 mentioned support from their LA or other networks, such as an early language network.

Only a very small minority of those surveyed—7 of 551 (1%)—first heard about the NELI offer for 2021/2022 via a telephone call from the recruitment team, which was the primary means of communication with schools in Year 1 of the scale-up (Disley et al., 2023). This indicates that making use of existing networks reduced the need to proactively reach out to schools via cold calling, which was time and resource intensive (Disley et al., 2023). There was also greater knowledge and awareness of NELI in the second year of the scale-up compared to the first, which may have reduced the need for cold calling.

Figure 3: How school staff first heard about the NELI offer for 2021/2022 (Cohort 2 schools)



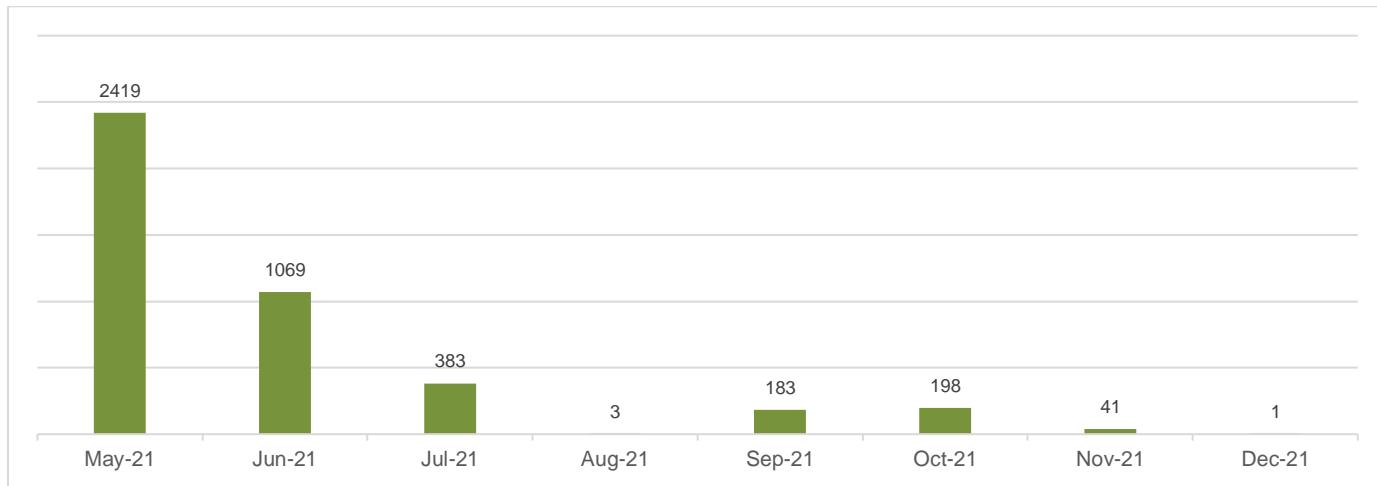
Responses from n = 551 school staff surveyed in December 2021. Respondents could select multiple options.

***Based on learnings from the first year of the scale-up, the recruitment window was shifted earlier in the year***

Compared to the first year of the scale-up (where recruitment took place at the beginning of the academic year), **the recruitment window was shifted earlier**, with the primary recruitment period occurring between May and July 2021 (see Figure 4). The evaluation of the first year of the scale-up found that starting recruitment earlier might increase engagement and take-up since schools may have already committed funding and resources by the beginning of the academic year (Disley et al., 2023). This was not possible to implement in the first year of the scale-up because of the timeframe for delivery (Disley et al., 2023). Enabling schools to sign up earlier in the year was suggested by delivery partners as a reason for the success of recruitment for year two.

Aware of the pressure that COVID-19 was placing on schools, the delivery team allowed a long recruitment window. The main recruitment period was May to July 2021 but a period of 'light touch' recruitment followed this and although active recruitment of new schools had ceased, schools that had started the recruitment process in the summer were able to complete their registration in September and October 2021 (see Figure 4). Although starting recruitment earlier in the year worked well, extending recruitment into the autumn term created some challenges. The decision to extend the recruitment window was driven by the desire to enable as many schools as possible to participate in the programme. As shown in Figure 4, some schools surveyed did take up this offer and sign up relatively late in the autumn. However, allowing sign-ups this late was not always the intention and re-opening recruitment after the start of 2021/2022 caused some challenges because some of the recruitment team had moved on to new jobs or other commitments. Late sign-ups also made it more challenging for schools to complete the full programme during the academic year and complicated the process of communicating with schools since they were on different schedules. These challenges had to be balanced against the importance of allowing as many pupils as possible to benefit from the funding to make NELI available to them.

Figure 4: Number of schools that signed up to deliver NELI in 2021/2022 by month (Cohort 2 schools)



Source: recruitment data provided by the Nuffield Foundation.

### 3.4. What were the barriers and facilitators to achieving the intended scale of implementation of NELI in 2021/2022, including any impacts from COVID-19 (RQ 4.3)?

***As in the previous year, the scale of implementation exceeded expectations, but this did not appear to translate into any issues with delivery***

Overall, delivery partners felt that the second year of the scale-up was successful in terms of the scale of implementation. The aim was to ensure that all schools were aware of the NELI offer and for all schools to participate that wanted to. As mentioned in Section 4.2, there was no specific recruitment target. In the first year of the NELI scale-up, the large number of schools that signed up (and the fact that demand was unknown at the beginning of the year) created challenges for the delivery team, for instance difficulty estimating how many NELI resource pack(s) would be needed and dealing with a large number of support queries from schools (Disley et al., 2023). No specific concerns were reported in the second year other than a very busy period for the support team in autumn 2021. This may be due to the smaller number of schools that signed up to deliver NELI in 2021/2022 compared to 2020/2021 (4,297 compared to 6,667). It may also be due to the improvements and efficiencies described above, and the fact that the delivery team were more experienced and, based on their experiences in the first year of the scale-up, worked on the assumption that close to the maximum number of places would be taken up.

When asked about the impact of COVID-19 on the scale of NELI delivery in 2021/2022, delivery partners emphasised that the detrimental impact of the pandemic on children's learning was a huge motivating factor for schools. At the same time, however, delivery partners were aware that pressures associated with COVID-19 (for instance, increased staff and pupil absences) made it more difficult for schools to commit to delivering programmes such as NELI. It was therefore difficult for delivery partners to comment on the net impact of COVID-19 on the scale of NELI delivery in 2021/2022. Delivery partners did feel that COVID-19 had a large impact on schools' progress with delivering NELI and fidelity of delivery, covered in Section 5 and Section 8.

## 4. School recruitment and reach in 2021/2022

This section addresses research questions 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, and 1.5.<sup>2</sup> It summarises findings from data collection activities (surveys and interviews) relating to the process of recruiting and signing up schools to deliver NELI in 2021/2022 (Cohort 2 schools; recruitment of Cohort 1 schools is covered in the previous report for the first year of the scale-up, see Disley et al., 2023).

Box 5. School recruitment and reach—key lessons

- **Recruitment in 2021/2022 was felt to be very successful with over 4,000 schools signing up to deliver the programme, over half of which were priority schools.**
- Schools' motivations for signing up were similar to those reported in the first year of the evaluation. Addressing **the impact of COVID-19 on children's language development** was key, as well as **NELI's reputation as an evidence-based programme**. As highlighted in the first evaluation report, it is unclear if or how schools' engagement with NELI would have differed had COVID-related factors been absent or less pronounced, with implications for NELI delivery over the longer term.
- **The time commitment involved in delivering NELI was a barrier to schools signing up**, as in the first year of the scale-up. Some school staff surveyed felt the time commitment involved, particularly that relating to the training, could have been communicated more clearly at the beginning of the process.
- **The self-registration process for schools that signed up to deliver NELI in 2021/2022 worked well**. As described in the previous section, self-registration was introduced to improve the efficiency and accuracy of collecting data as part of the registration process. The vast majority of school staff surveyed found this process easy to navigate, indicating that this adaptation drove efficiencies and improvements without leaving schools feeling confused or unsupported

### 4.1. Why were recruited Cohort 2 schools attracted to NELI—what was the reason they signed up (RQ 1.1)?

***Addressing setbacks in children's learning associated with the COVID-19 pandemic was a key factor motivating schools to sign up in 2021/2022***

Staff from Cohort 2 schools surveyed in December 2021 were asked about their school's motivations for signing up to deliver NELI in 2021/2022 (Figure 5). The majority of staff surveyed (477 of 551; 87%) indicated that a key motivation for their school was **improving pupils' language skills** and this aligned with feedback from case study schools. Some interviewees commented that their school had a high proportion of pupils who would benefit from NELI (poor language skills, EAL, SEN etc.), which was a reason for signing up. One interviewee reflected on how speech and language skills are fundamental to academic progress; without these skills, pupils cannot engage fully with the curriculum.

Delivery partners expected that **the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on pupils' speech and language skills** (Tracey et al., 2022) would be a key factor motivating schools to sign up, and this was borne out by the evaluation data. Over two-thirds (373 of 551; 68%) of school staff surveyed indicated that their school signed up to deliver NELI in 2021/2022 to address setbacks in children's learning associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Responding to the impact of COVID-19 on children's language skills was also highlighted by interviewees from case study schools, some of whom stressed that they were seeing the impact of the pandemic first-hand in their classroom. In the words of one school staff member:

‘With COVID, I think noticing the barriers to learning, especially in vocabulary and communication skills. We were looking for different ways to support them [pupils]. That is possibly why NELI was quite popular, because schools were looking for ways to try and close those gaps’ (teacher from a Cohort 2 case study school, interviewed Feb/March 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Partially, the rest is covered in Section 5.

Delivery partners expected that schools would be motivated to sign up to NELI because of the **strength of the evidence base behind the programme**. Just over half of school staff surveyed (302 of 551; 55%) indicated that implementing an evidence-based approach to teaching early years language skills was a motivating factor for their school. **DfE funding available for NELI** was selected by four in ten school staff surveyed (222 out of 551; 40%). One interviewee from a case study school highlighted the importance of the DfE funding offer, commenting that their school had looked at other programmes but could not afford to deliver them. Funding from the DfE was identified by survey participants as a factor that had enabled their school to sign up to deliver NELI, as illustrated by the quotation below:

‘The funding was a major draw as a small rural school we could not have funded this ourselves’ (headteacher/other SLT member from Cohort 2 school, surveyed December 2021).

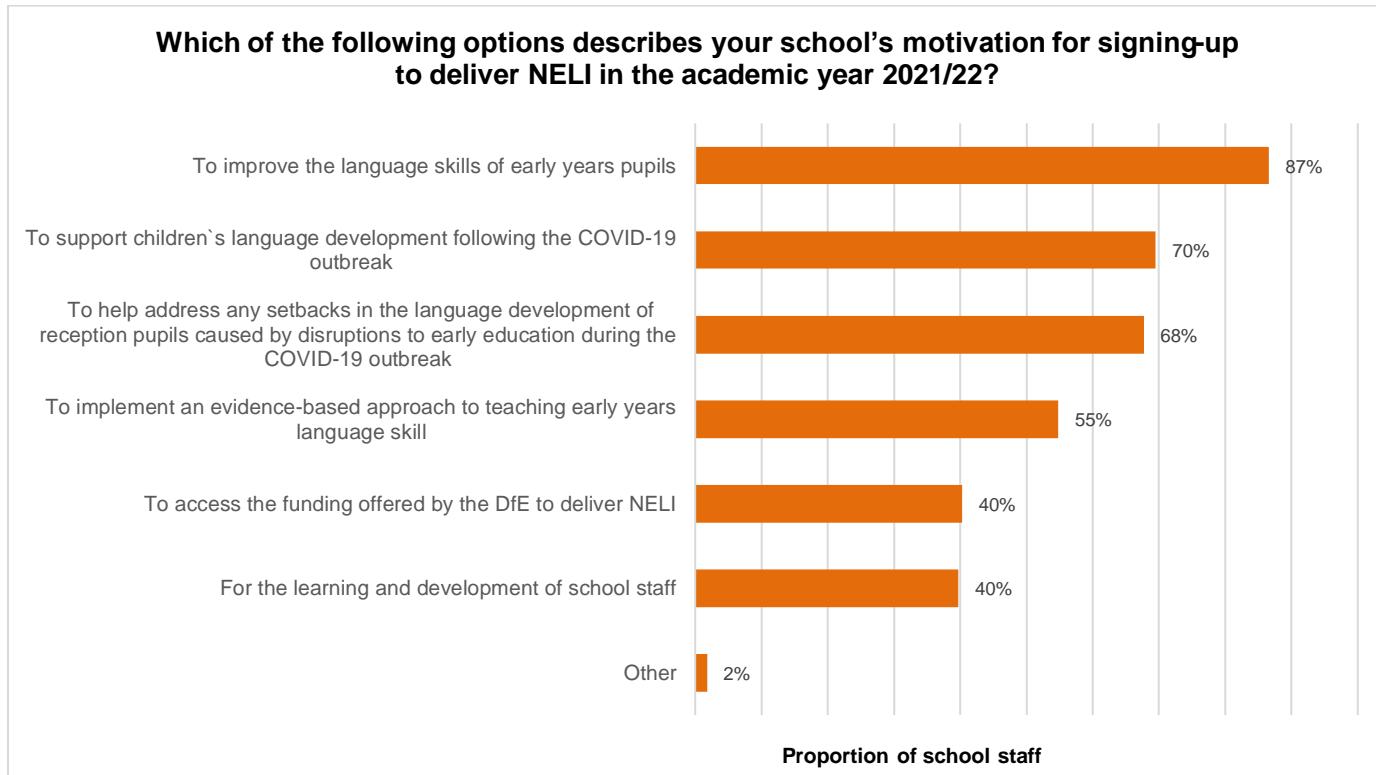
One delivery partner interviewed stressed that funding was only part of the picture because schools recognised the value of the NELI programme:

‘Even if we took away the funding, I think there still would be buy-in because schools see the need for the programme’ (delivery partner, interviewed Jan/Feb 2022).

Some staff surveyed (219 of 551; 40%) indicated that their school signed up to deliver NELI as **an opportunity for the learning and development of staff**, and this factor was also mentioned by one interviewee from a case study school:

‘We knew that the children were going to come in with poor language skills because of remote learning and I also felt that our staff in reception hadn’t had training for a little while and it would be a good opportunity for CPD’ (assistant headteacher from a Cohort 2 case study school, interviewed Feb/March 2022).

Figure 5: Motivations for signing up to deliver NELI (Cohort 2 schools)



Responses from n = 551 school staff surveyed in December 2021. Respondents could select multiple options.

**4.2. To what extent were the intended number of Cohort 2 schools recruited (RQ 1.2)? To what extent do the recruited Cohort 2 schools reflect the intended characteristics (in terms of FSM/Ofsted rating etc.)? If not, why (RQ 1.3)?**

***Close to the maximum number of schools possible were recruited to deliver NELI in 2021/2022 and over half were priority schools as intended***

No specific recruitment target was set for the number of schools recruited to deliver NELI in the 2021/2022 academic year. The aim was **to ensure that all schools were aware of the NELI offer and to enable as many schools as possible to benefit from the programme**. There was effectively a cap on how many schools could be included based on the funding available from DfE for the 2021/2022 academic year (£8 million). One delivery partner described how the team did not expect to receive as much interest from schools that year as ended up being the case:

‘We felt we had had such a phenomenal success with recruitment [in the 2020/2021 academic year] that we had quite limited expectations, I think, in terms of sign-up for the second year, and that certainly exceeded expectations’ (delivery partner, interviewed July/August 2022).

In total, 4,297 schools<sup>3</sup> were recruited to deliver NELI in 2021/2022, meaning that 10,964 schools were recruited across the 2021/2022 and 2020/2021 academic years. This corresponds to around two-thirds of primary schools in England.<sup>4</sup>

Although no formal target was set, the aim of the delivery partners was **for the majority of schools that signed up in 2021/2022 to be priority schools**. ‘Priority schools’ were identified by the DfE using a slightly different approach to Year 1 of the scale-up (2020/2021). In Year 1, priority schools were those with a higher-than-average proportion of pupils eligible for FSM. In Year 2, in addition to this metric, recruitment activities focused on schools in local authorities (LAs) where the LA was in the lowest third in terms of Ofsted ratings and schools in Opportunity Areas (OAs). Over half of schools recruited to deliver NELI in 2021/2022 were priority schools, so this objective for the scale-up was met.

Delivery partners considered recruitment for Year 2 of the scale-up to be a success, as illustrated by the quotation below:

‘Overall, we recruited nearly the number of schools that we had budget for, so as successful as it could be, and the majority of the schools were our priority schools’ (delivery partner, interviewed Jan/Feb 2022).

#### 4.3. What were the main barriers to recruitment of Cohort 2 schools (RQ 1.4)?

This section discusses barriers to recruitment in 2021/2022 based on survey and interview responses. Data was collected from staff whose school had signed up to deliver NELI (Cohort 2 schools). Concerns and reservations reported by this group give an indication of why schools might have decided not to sign up to deliver the programme. However, it is important to note that data was not collected from non-participating schools. It is possible that concerns and barriers differ between participating and non-participating schools. Qualitative data was collected from non-participating schools in the first year of the NELI scale-up evaluation (Disley et al., 2023).

***Schools were concerned about the amount of time involved in preparing for and delivering the NELI programme, particularly in the context of COVID-related staff absences***

Around a third of school staff surveyed in December 2021 (177 of 551; 32%) reported that their school had concerns about signing up to deliver NELI, a similar proportion to the previous academic year (Disley et al., 2023). As shown in Figure 6, these concerns centred on **the time commitment involved for the school** in preparing to deliver NELI (136 of 177 or 77% of those with concerns selected this option) and delivering NELI sessions (160 of 177; 90%), as well as **the capacity of the staff to undertake the online training** (87 of 177; 49%).

Almost half of school staff surveyed indicated that **the commitment required** for training and preparing to deliver NELI (261 of 551; 48%) and **lack of staff cover and capacity** (250 of 551; 46%) presented a barrier to their school to a large or extremely large extent (Figure 7). Under ‘other’ (where survey participants could write in a response), participants described difficulties making the time to complete the training, conduct LanguageScreen assessments, and prepare NELI resources, as illustrated by the quotations below:

<sup>3</sup> Figure based on data shared with RAND Europe by the Nuffield Foundation.

<sup>4</sup> In 2021/2022 there were 16,786 state-funded primary schools in England (DfE, 2022).

‘Covering all members of staff to complete training in the allotted time is very difficult, especially due to COVID absences, I think it is an unrealistic ask of school’ (teacher from a Cohort 2 school, surveyed December 2021).

‘The amount of resource preparation has been a huge barrier. The time taken to laminate and cut all the resources is extremely onerous!’ (teacher from a Cohort 2 school, surveyed December 2021).

Some school staff surveyed felt that they did not have a good understanding of the time commitment required when they signed up to deliver NELI:

‘The large time requirements are a huge barrier, and not totally clear when signing up that this was going to be the case!’ (teacher from a Cohort 2 school, surveyed December 2021).

Interviewees also talked about how the training took more time than expected and how NELI resources had provided confusing or inconsistent estimates of how long it would take.

‘When we signed up for the project, we weren’t fully aware of the time constraints or how much time it will take. Only working through the training programme did we find out how much time needed to be invested. I don’t think that was highlighted enough on face value’ (teacher from a Cohort 2 case study school, interviewed Feb/March 2022).

One interviewee commented that they had seen negative comments about NELI on social media focusing on the duration of the training and how this had been communicated.

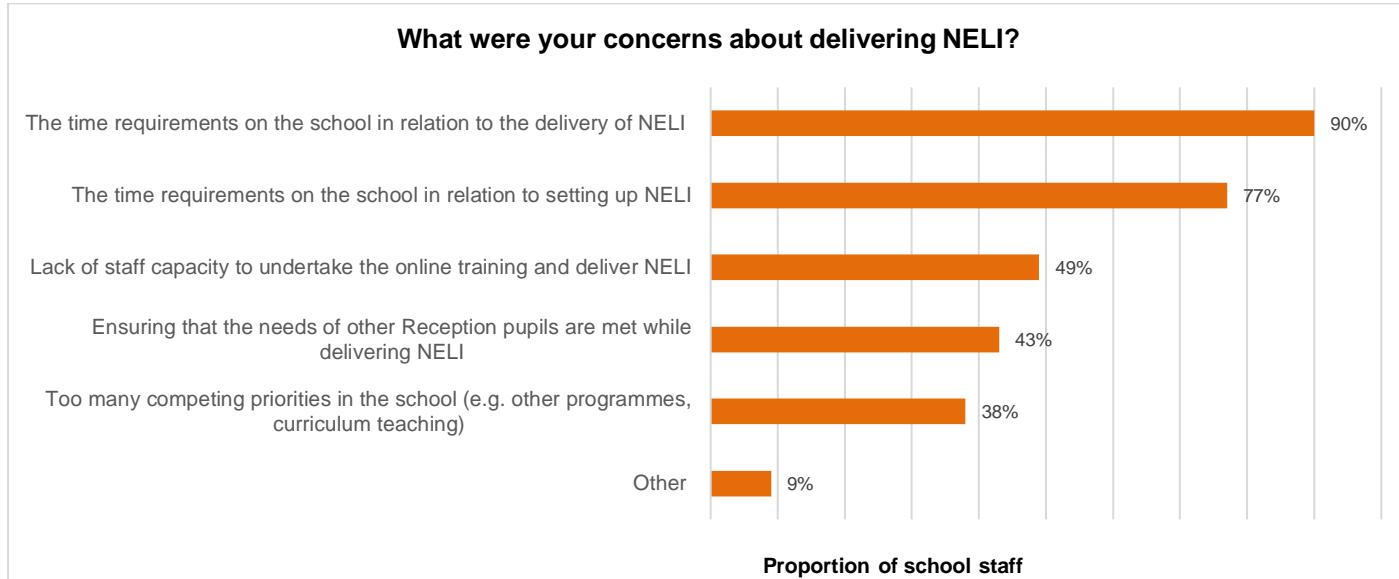
Under ‘other’ (a write-in option), some schools surveyed mentioned concerns about **the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on staff capacity**, a factor also mentioned by delivery partners. Survey participants expressed mixed views on whether **issues relating to COVID-19** had made it more difficult for their school to sign up to NELI and prepare to deliver the programme in the 2021/2022 academic year (Figure 7). Some felt this had been a barrier for their school to a small extent (112 of 551; 20%), some extent (110 of 551; 20%), a large extent (61 of 551; 11%) or an extremely large extent (48 of 551; 9%). However, four in ten school staff (218 of 551; 40%) reported that issues relating to COVID-19 did not present a barrier to their school in the 2021/2022 academic year. Under ‘other’, some school staff surveyed talked about how staff absences associated with COVID-19 had made it more difficult for their school to prepare to deliver NELI.

In addition to a lack of staff capacity to deliver NELI (or provide classroom cover), survey participants also described how **staff turnover** created challenges in preparing to deliver NELI:

‘Due to high levels of staff absence and the main member of staff that was due to deliver the program leaving it has been impossible to start the training’ (headteacher/other SLT member from a Cohort 2 school, surveyed December 2021).

Staffing shortages associated with COVID-19 and staff turnover are barriers to delivering educational interventions in general and are not specific to NELI. However, as described, there were some concerns expressed about the time required to deliver the NELI programme, and these concerns will interact with broader issues relating to staffing and resources.

Figure 6: Concerns about signing up to deliver NELI (Cohort 2 schools)



Responses from n = 177 school staff surveyed in December 2021 who reported that their school had concerns. Respondents could select multiple options.

**Staff from Cohort 2 schools were concerned about balancing NELI with other school commitments, including the needs of the wider reception cohort**

For some Cohort 2 schools, concerns related to **competing pressures such as curriculum teaching and delivering other interventions**. This was selected by 68 of 177 (38%) of staff surveyed in December 2021 whose school had concerns about signing up to deliver NELI (Figure 6). This was also identified as a barrier to signing up by around a third of school staff surveyed in December 2021 (34%; 188 of 551, see Figure 7).

Staff from some Cohort 2 schools highlighted a **lack of understanding and support from the SLT** as a barrier to signing up. Conversely, support and understanding from the SLT was identified as a factor that enabled some schools surveyed to sign up to deliver NELI.

‘School SLT do not understand the time commitment in setting up the programme and running it with no extra members of staff’ (teacher from a Cohort 2 school, surveyed December 2021).

In terms of competing pressures in schools, staff from Cohort 2 schools that took part in the survey also expressed concerns about **balancing the needs of pupils participating in NELI with the needs of the wider reception cohort** (76 of 177; 43%):

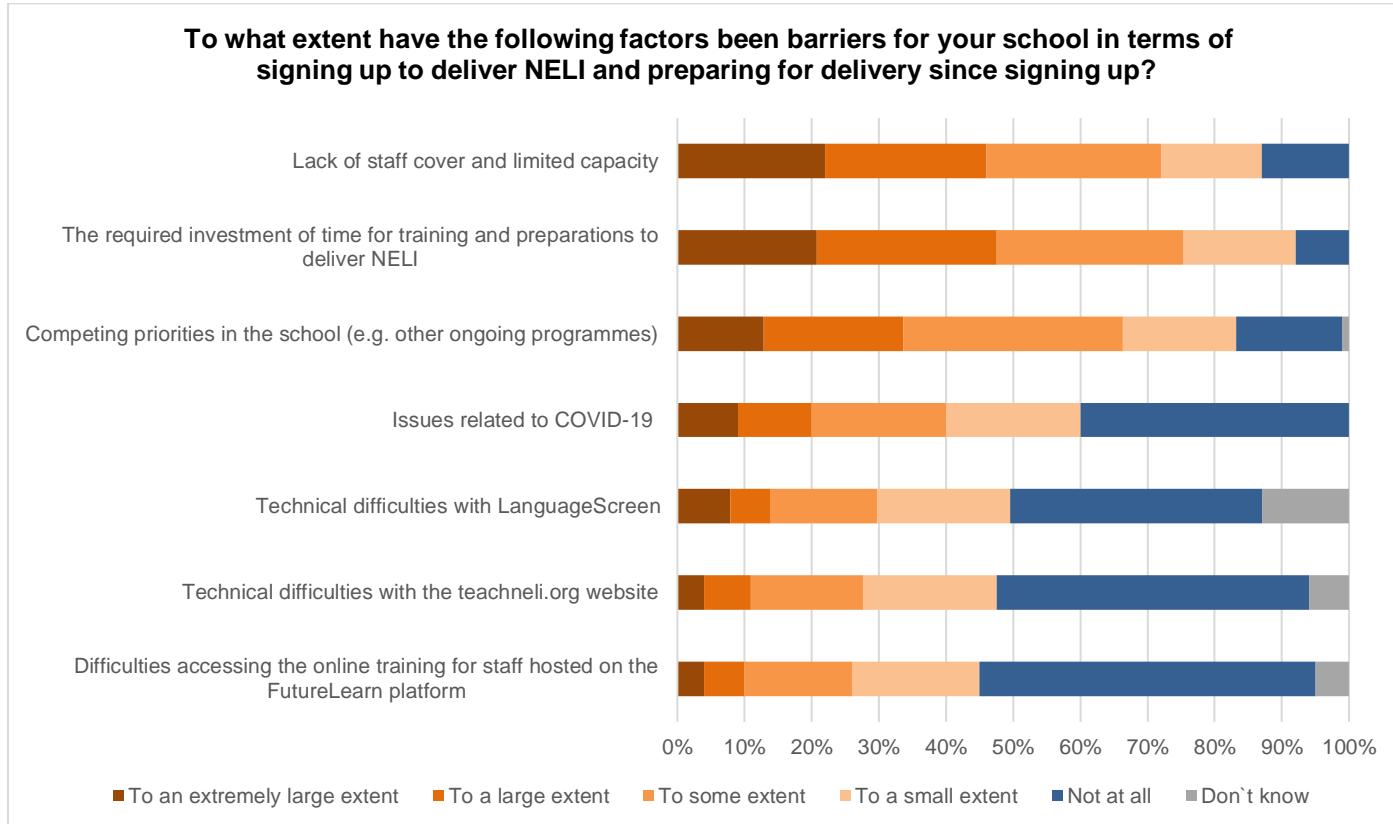
‘I worry that whilst, yes, the children selected for the program are likely to make great progress that the others will suffer as they have fewer adults to interact with’ (teacher from a Cohort 2 school, surveyed December 2021).

Some of these aspects are concerns that relate to delivering education interventions in general, however, the latter point is specific to targeted, small-group programmes such as NELI that are not delivered to the entire cohort.

A small number of survey participants expressed concerns about the effectiveness of the NELI programme, as illustrated by the quotation below. It is unclear whether these survey participants were familiar with the evidence on the effectiveness of NELI.

‘There is also a concern that this intervention may not be as good as it is being advertised and may not deliver the outcomes required’ (headteacher/other SLT member from a Cohort 2 school, surveyed December 2021).

Figure 7: Factors making it more difficult for schools to sign up to deliver NELI and prepare for delivery (Cohort 2 schools)



Responses from n=551 school staff surveyed in December 2021.

***The financial cost of delivering the programme (primarily in terms of staff time) was highlighted as an issue by some school staff surveyed***

A concern raised under 'other' and highlighted by delivery partners involved in recruitment was **the financial implications of signing up to deliver NELI**. As illustrated by the quotation below, while DfE funding allowed the NELI training and resources to be made available to schools free of charge, there could be a financial cost for schools associated with providing cover for staff members delivering NELI:

'Cost . . . the programme and resources are free, but not the salaries of staff needed to deliver this or paying for their time to complete training or paying for cover for their usual duties whilst delivering NELI. This has reduced our school's capacity in terms of staffing as stated above, but also financially' (headteacher/other SLT member from a Cohort 2 school, surveyed December 2021).

***Some schools surveyed experienced technical difficulties that had made it more difficult for their school to sign up or prepare to deliver NELI***

A minority of school staff indicated that **technical difficulties** with LanguageScreen (74 of 551; 13%), the TeachNELI website (62 of 551; 6%), or accessing the online NELI training (55 of 551; 5%) had presented a barrier to their school either signing up or preparing to deliver NELI to a large extent or an extremely large extent. Under 'other', some survey participants mentioned not having enough iPads to conduct LanguageScreen assessments or having older versions that were not compatible with the LanguageScreen app:

'Lack of appropriate technology in school. After wasting so much time trying circular routes, eventually ended up having to use personal mobiles and personal iPads' (TA from a Cohort 2 school, surveyed December 2021).

This issue was also mentioned by interviewees from case study schools and by delivery partners. In one case study school, iPads were too old to install LanguageScreen and they had to use a personal device to install the app. Other schools had to buy new devices in order to use the LanguageScreen app:

'We had a lot of difficulty of getting the app on a working device. That was more of an internal problem in terms of the IT department didn't want to buy new iPads and there was a whole thing, and they ended up having to buy new tablets because our ones were too old to download the programme so that really delayed our starting process' (Early Years Lead from a Cohort 2 case study school, interviewed June/July 2022).

One delivery partner explained that no personal data is stored on devices where the LanguageScreen app is used. However, some schools have a policy against using personal devices. Two-step authentication (introduced for the first time in 2021/2022) caused difficulties for some schools, for instance needing to use one person's phone to log-in.

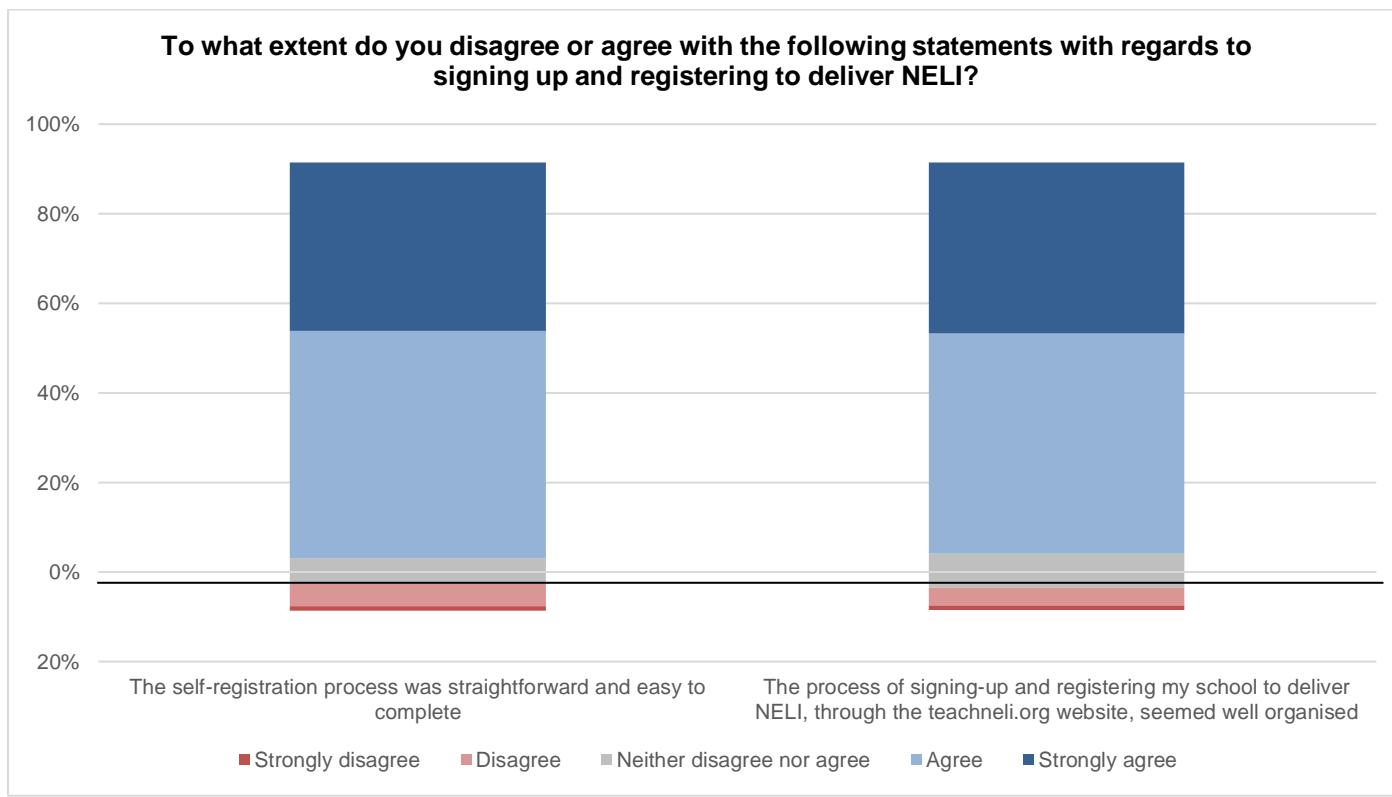
#### 4.4. What was the experience of Cohort 2 schools from sign-up to delivery (RQ 1.5)?

##### ***Most school staff found the self-registration process straightforward to navigate***

The majority of school staff surveyed in December 2021 agreed or strongly agreed that the self-registration process was straightforward and easy to complete (476 of 551; 87%) and that the process seemed well organised (475 of 551; 87%), as shown in Figure 8. Survey participants and interviewees from case study schools described the registration process as straightforward and well organised, commenting on receiving a clear timetable for delivery, sufficient information and support, and the user-friendliness of TeachNELI:

'Over my 5 years teaching, this has by far been the easiest website/sign up that I have some across. Everything was clear and straight forward right from the first moment' (teacher from a Cohort 2 school, surveyed December 2021).

Figure 8: Perceptions of the registration process (Cohort 2 schools)



Responses from n = 551 school staff surveyed in December 2021.

##### ***Some school staff surveyed felt the registration process and communication could have been streamlined***

Although most found the registration process straightforward, school staff had some suggestions for improvement. When asked how the registration process could be improved (open survey question December 2021), some school staff expressed a preference for a **single website or platform for all NELI information and resources**, requiring one log-in:

‘Have everything in one place. There are too many different websites. NELI’s website, the language screen website, oxford owl and future learn, logging in can be difficult with different passwords’ (TA from a Cohort 2 school, surveyed December 2021).

‘One hub for all the elements would be useful. Having a separate platform for NELI, the Language Screen Assessment and then the training can be quite confusing’ (headteacher/other SLT member from a Cohort 2 school, surveyed December 2021).

Some school staff surveyed and interviewees from case study schools felt the information shared with schools could be **condensed and consolidated into fewer emails**. Other suggestions including copying in all staff members, or the staff member who originally signed up to NELI, into all correspondence with schools, including those directed to the headteacher or SLT:

‘It would be helpful if the email confirmation came through to the person who applied for NELI as otherwise you are relying on your headteacher seeing and understanding the importance of the NELI email’ (headteacher/other SLT member from a Cohort 2 school, surveyed December 2021).

Some school staff surveyed expressed a desire to communicate with the NELI recruitment team (Nuffield and OUP) in a different way during the registration process, making it easier to speak to someone on the phone or giving a named contact in email correspondence:

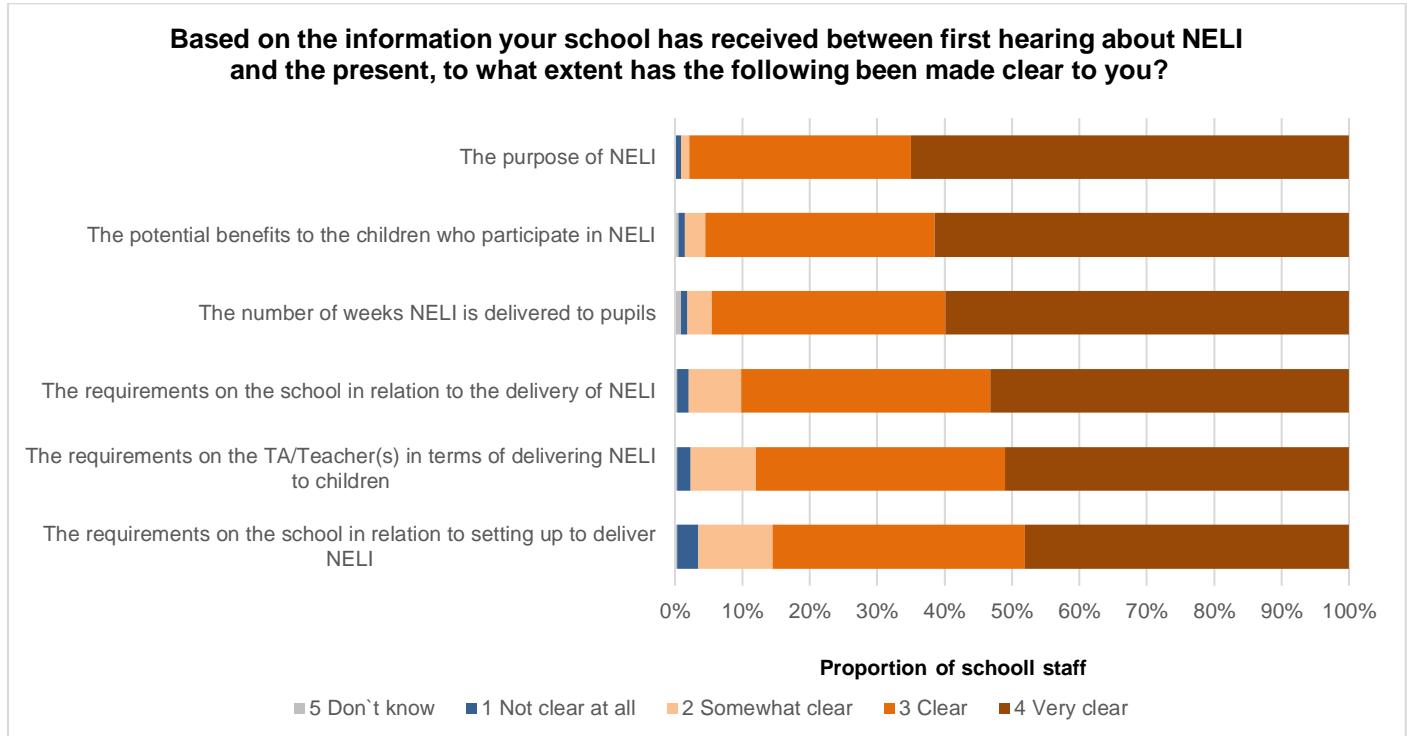
‘It was very hard to actually speak to someone. I wasted a lot of time on the phone and emailing trying to sort it out and in the end gave up!’ (headteacher/other SLT member from a Cohort 2 school, surveyed December 2021).

### ***Most school staff from Cohort 2 schools felt well prepared to deliver NELI***

School staff surveyed in December 2021 were asked how prepared their school was to deliver NELI. The average (mean) response was seven out of ten, indicating a high level of preparedness.

A clear majority of school staff surveyed in December 2021 felt the purpose of NELI (539 of 551; 98%) and the potential benefits to pupils (526 of 551; 95%) was clear or very clear to them (Figure 9). In terms of NELI delivery, most school staff felt the number of weeks to deliver the NELI programme (521 of 551; 95%), the requirements on the school (497 of 551; 90%), and on teachers and TAs (485 of 551; 88%) to deliver NELI were clear or very clear. Over three quarters of those surveyed (471 of 551; 85%) said the requirements on the school in terms of preparing to deliver NELI were clear or very clear. However, 3% (17 of 551) said this was not clear at all and 11% (61 of 551) said it was somewhat clear. This may relate to the perception among school staff, described earlier in this report, that the time commitment required to complete the online training was not sufficiently clear.

Figure 9: Understanding of the NELI programme (Cohort 2 schools)



Responses from n = 551 school staff surveyed in December 2021.

## 5. Fidelity of delivering NELI in Cohort 2 schools

This section summarises evidence on delivery of NELI in Cohort 2 schools—those that signed up to deliver NELI in 2021/2022—addressing research questions 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, and 2.4. ‘Delivery’ is taken to include preparatory activities such as training staff and selecting pupils to participate in the programme as well as delivering individual and group NELI sessions. This section reflects on delivery partners’ ability to monitor and address any issues with delivery in Cohort 2 schools. NELI delivery in Cohort 1 schools—those that signed up in 2020/2021—is covered in a previous publication (Disley et al., 2023) but commonalities and differences between the two cohorts of schools are referred to in this report where relevant.

Box 6: Fidelity of delivery—key lessons

- **Some staff involved in delivering NELI sessions did not complete all three training courses.** As in the first year of the scale-up, reception teachers were more likely than TAs not to complete all of the training, as they were only required to complete the first of the three training courses if they were not involved in delivering NELI sessions.
- **Most Cohort 2 schools used the LanguageScreen app to screen all reception pupils to participate in NELI as intended.** However, some schools surveyed did not screen all reception pupils, largely due to a lack of time. This means that some pupils suitable to participate may have been missed, particularly since some school staff surveyed reported LanguageScreen results that highlighted children that they would not have thought of for the intervention. Most Cohort 2 schools had reassessed, or intended to reassess, pupils using LanguageScreen to assess their progress.
- **Only around half of Cohort 2 schools completed the full 20 weeks of NELI delivery during 2021/2022.** The impact of COVID-19 on schools that year was less uniform than in 2020/2021 (with no school closures) but arguably no less severe. Staff from Cohort 2 schools where the programme had not been delivered in full explained that staff time and capacity, often linked to absences caused by COVID, presented major barriers to delivery. Staff turnover could also be an issue. Most schools had a relatively small number of staff involved in NELI delivery—one or two individuals—and if these staff members were off due to illness, this could cause major delays.
- **Many Cohort 2 schools that took part in the research did not deliver NELI sessions according to the intended delivery model.** Deviations were mostly in relation to the number and length of NELI sessions. Schools tended to prioritise group sessions over individual sessions, which were perceived as more resource-intensive to deliver. Some staff from Cohort 2 schools reported that their school skipped elements of the programme, such as the content relating to phonics (which was perceived as less useful).
- **In 2021/2022, delivery partners introduced regular surveys of schools to understand better how NELI was being implemented.** Over the course of the academic year, delivery partners became increasingly concerned about schools’ progress with delivering NELI and fidelity of delivery. It was difficult to take effective action to address the issue during the academic year, and delivery partners understood the challenges faced by schools in an environment in which COVID-19 was still causing great disruption.

### 5.1. Were all the aspects of the intervention delivered as intended in Cohort 2 schools? If not, why and what remedial action can or could be taken (RQ 2.1)?

#### Training

Box 7: NELI online training—intended delivery

The online training is intended for staff involved in delivering NELI. The first training course is intended for all school staff involved in all aspects of NELI delivery whereas the second and third courses are directed at TAs or teachers involved in delivering NELI sessions. Class teachers not involved in delivering sessions are asked to participate in the first course so that they can understand the importance of the intervention and support the TAs when required (for example, by letting the TAs work with the selected children during class time). The second and third courses should be completed prior to delivery of NELI Part 1 (first ten weeks); training course three should be completed prior to delivery of NELI Part 2 (second ten weeks).

**Most TAs completed the online NELI training but only around half of the teachers involved in delivering NELI sessions did so**

The online NELI training for Cohort 2 schools was launched in October 2021. The majority of TAs (170 of 184; 92%) and teachers (288 of 340; 85%) from Cohort 2 schools surveyed in December 2021 had completed NELI Training Course 1 (Table 7); only a small minority had not started the course. By the end of the academic year (June 2022), 84% of TAs surveyed (234 of 277) had completed Training Course 3. Around half (70 of 138; 51%) of reception teachers surveyed completed the training. This finding is similar to staff in Cohort 1 schools that undertook the training in 2020/2021 for whom participation was higher for TAs than for teachers (Disley et al., 2023). Training Courses 2 and 3 are optional for class teachers who are not involved in delivering NELI sessions. Survey questions relating to these training courses were only asked of class teachers who were involved in the day-to-day delivery of NELI. However, teachers may have been involved in other aspects of delivery (for example, screening pupils) rather than delivering NELI sessions, and therefore some may not have been required to complete all three courses. Data provided by OxEd from the FutureLearn platform shows that as of August 2022, 7,249 school staff had completed all three training courses in 2021/2022 (Table 8).

Table 7: Participation in NELI training for staff (Cohort 2 schools)

	December 2021		June 2022	
	TAs	Teachers	TAs	Teachers
<b>NELI training course 1</b>				
<b>Completed</b>	92%	85%	N/A	N/A
<b>Started but not completed</b>	3%	10%	N/A	N/A
<b>Not started</b>	4%	6%	N/A	N/A
<b>NELI training course 3</b>				
<b>Completed</b>	N/A	N/A	84%	51%
<b>Started but not completed</b>	N/A	N/A	5%	9%
<b>Not started</b>	N/A	N/A	10%	41%
<b>Total</b>	184	340	277	138

Note: no data was collected on NELI training course 2.

Table 8: FutureLearn data for 2021/2022

	NELI Training Course 1	NELI Training Course 2	NELI Training Course 3
Number of school staff registered	43,429	28,823	16,653
Number of school staff completed the course	18,506	13,310	7,249
<b>Proportion of staff who registered who completed the course</b>	43%	46%	44%
Number of comments posted	45,302	14,663	3,986

Source: training (FutureLearn) data provided by the University of Oxford. Figures correct as of 1 August 2022.

**Key barriers to completing the online training were lack of staff time, competing priorities in school, and ongoing disruption associated with COVID-19**

Teachers and TAs surveyed who had not started or not completed the courses were asked why this was the case (Table 9). **Limited staff time and capacity** emerged as a key barrier, particularly for completing the course(s) once started. The same issue was also highlighted as a barrier in case study interviews. Not all school staff involved in delivering NELI were given (sufficient) working time in which to complete the training, and this made it more difficult to staff to complete the training:

‘There was no [working] time offered for me to complete this [the training] so has had to be done around my other work’ (teacher from Cohort 2 school, surveyed December 2021 ).

In one case study school where staff did complete the training in school hours, the interviewee highlighted the financial implications of this for the school.

School staff surveyed in December 2021 were asked how the online NELI training could be improved and some responded that the training might be condensed or shortened, potentially making it less repetitive:

‘It was very time consuming for my small school during this time. More concise information and training would be appreciated’ (teacher from Cohort 2 school, surveyed December 2021).

‘The sections in the training could be simplified and superfluous information could be relegated to the extra information sections’ (teacher from Cohort 2 school, surveyed December 2021).

**Disruption associated with COVID-19** continued to make it more difficult for staff to complete the training. Around one in ten school staff identified factors relating to COVID-19 as a reason for not starting training courses one and three. In the previous academic year (2020/2021), COVID-19 was both a barrier and an enabler of completing the training since school closures and self-isolation periods made it easier for some school staff to undertake the training (Disley et al., 2023). There was little indication of this ‘positive’ effect on training in Year 2 (2021/2022). In 2021/2022, although COVID-19 continued to cause disruption to schools in terms of staff and pupil absence, this was linked to illness rather than school closures or self-isolation periods linked to possible exposure (during which time a teacher or TA might be working from home).

Table 9: Reasons for not starting/completing the online training (Cohort 2 schools)

Reason for:	NELI Training Course 1		NELI Training Course 3	
	Not starting	Not completing	Not starting	Not completing
Limited capacity due to professional and personal commitments	30%	53%	13%	31%
The course was difficult to follow	N/A	1%	N/A	0%
The course is taking longer than anticipated	N/A	N/A	N/A	8%
I did not find the course to be useful	N/A	0%	N/A	N/A
Technical difficulties	3%	7%	1%	4%
Competing priorities in the school (for example, other ongoing programmes)	21%	60%	16%	31%
Challenges related to COVID-19	11%	20%	11%	8%
I was not invited to participate in the course	21%	N/A	4%	N/A
I was invited to participate in the course too late	N/A	N/A	N/A	8%
I was not required to participate in the course	42%	N/A	41%	N/A
I was not aware of the course	5%	N/A	N/A	N/A
I was on leave at the time (for example, annual leave, parental leave, sick leave, etc.)	4%	3%	0%	0%
My school did not progress far enough with NELI delivery	N/A	N/A	24%	N/A
I did not find NELI training courses 1 or 2 useful	N/A	N/A	0%	N/A
Topics covered by training course 3 were already familiar to pupils participating in NELI	N/A	N/A	4%	8%
Topics covered by training course 3 were already familiar to staff participating in NELI	N/A	N/A	5%	8%
<i>Total</i>	76	69	85	26

Note: no data was collected on NELI training course 2.

Some school staff surveyed reported that they did not start or complete the third NELI training course because **the content was already familiar to staff or pupils**. One headteacher from a case study school commented that they found the phonics component of this course less interesting than the rest of the training because the content was familiar. However, they felt this content would be useful for TAs, who would likely have less prior knowledge about phonics.

Some school staff surveyed reported that they had not started or completed the NELI training because they were **not invited to or required to**. Almost half (48 of 114; 42%) of teachers and TAs surveyed who had not started training

course three said this was because they were not required to participate in the course. This survey question was only asked of teachers and TAs who were personally responsible for delivering NELI sessions (an earlier survey question) who should have completed all three courses (see Box 5). This may be because survey participants had misunderstood the earlier survey question, but it may also reflect some degree of confusion about who is required to participate in the different NELI training courses. Around a quarter (20 of 84; 24%) of school staff surveyed in June 2022 who had not yet started the third course said this was because their school had **not progressed far enough with NELI delivery**.

A small number of school staff surveyed reported that **technical difficulties** made it more difficult for them to start or complete the NELI training. Under 'other' (open-ended survey question), some school staff reported not receiving a link to the training despite having requested one.

## Selecting pupils

### Box 8: Selecting pupils to take part in NELI—intended delivery

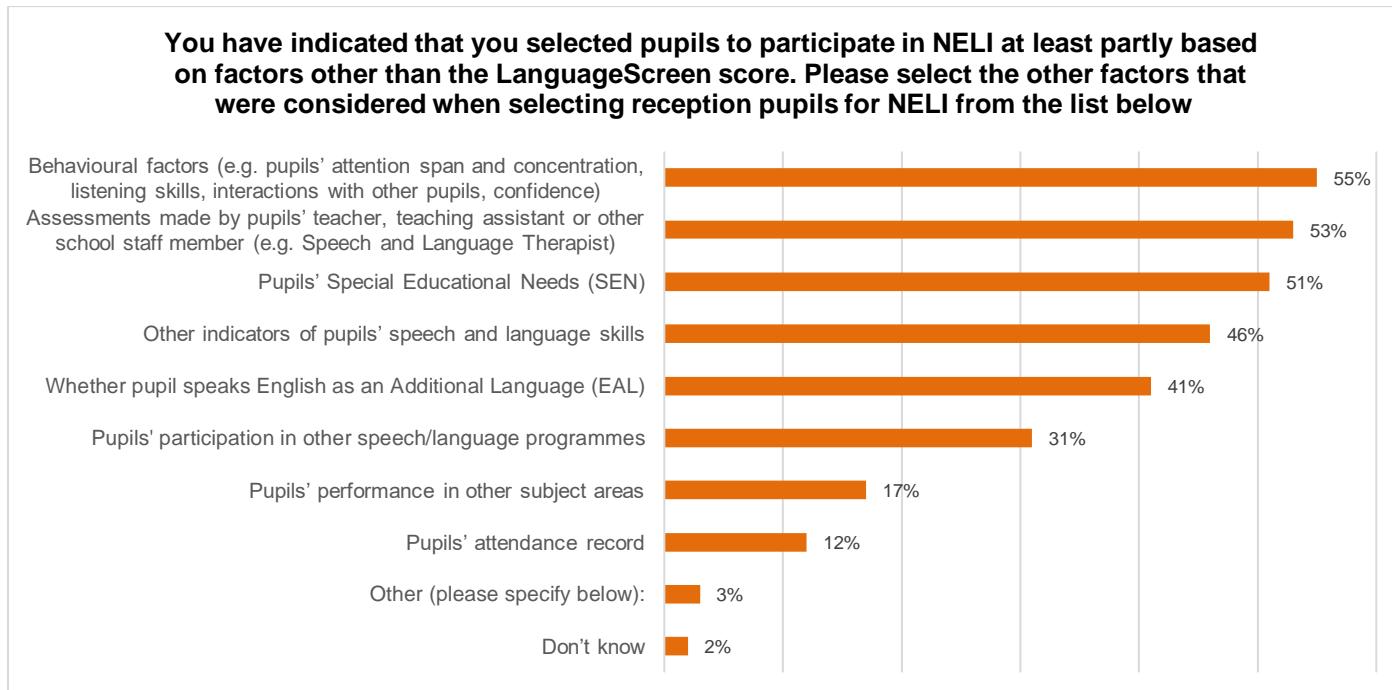
The LanguageScreen app was developed to help schools select pupils to take part in NELI. Schools were advised to conduct baseline assessments of all reception pupils using the app to select pupils to take part in the programme. Use of the app was not mandatory and schools were free to consider other factors alongside or instead of LanguageScreen data. In addition to using LanguageScreen to screen pupils to take part in NELI, schools should conduct endline assessments after delivery is complete to monitor their progress.

### ***Most schools screened all reception pupils using LanguageScreen although around two thirds also took other factors into consideration***

In a survey conducted in December 2021, 20% (62 of 308) of staff from Cohort 2 schools reported that their school had completed the process of selecting pupils to participate in NELI. A further 39% (119 of 308) had started the process of selecting pupils and 41% (127 of 308) had not yet started.

Only one member of staff—of 181 surveyed—reported that their school did not use LanguageScreen assessments in selecting pupils to participate in NELI. A third of those surveyed (60 of 181; 33%) reported that their school selected pupils based exclusively based on LanguageScreen scores, whereas two thirds (120 of 181; 66%) took other factors into consideration, most commonly behavioural factors, teacher assessments, and pupils' special educational needs (SEN) (see Figure 10). Some staff interviewed from case study schools that had used LanguageScreen reported taking other factors into consideration when selecting pupils to participate in NELI, including perceptions of staff and speech and language specialists and internal assessments.

Figure 10: Factors other than LanguageScreen used to select pupils to participate in NELI (Cohort 2 schools)



Responses from n = 121 staff from Cohort 2 schools surveyed in December 2021. Respondents could select multiple options.

School staff surveyed in June 2022 whose school had used the LanguageScreen app were asked whether they had screened all reception pupils or just some pupils. Nine out of ten staff from Cohort 2 schools (376 of 417; 90%) reported that their school had assessed all pupils using LanguageScreen in line with the intended delivery model (see Box 5). Most staff from case study schools reported screening all reception pupils with LanguageScreen, although some did not. One interviewee from a case study school commented that screening all pupils using LanguageScreen was time consuming and had delayed the start of NELI delivery:

‘It’s the fact that you have to screen all the children. I can understand completely why because it evaluates the effectiveness, and you can see the difference those children have made in their progress, but we’ve got 120 reception children. I can see if you had a class, one class, you could just speed through them all but 120 children takes a lot of time’ (Early Years Lead from a Cohort 2 case study school, interviewed June/July 2022).

In some case study schools, the decision not to screen all reception pupils was driven by time constraints:

‘Staff were not able to do the Language Screen assessment with all the cohort prior to starting the intervention, this would have been too time consuming’ (headteacher/other SLT member from Cohort 2 school, surveyed June 2022).

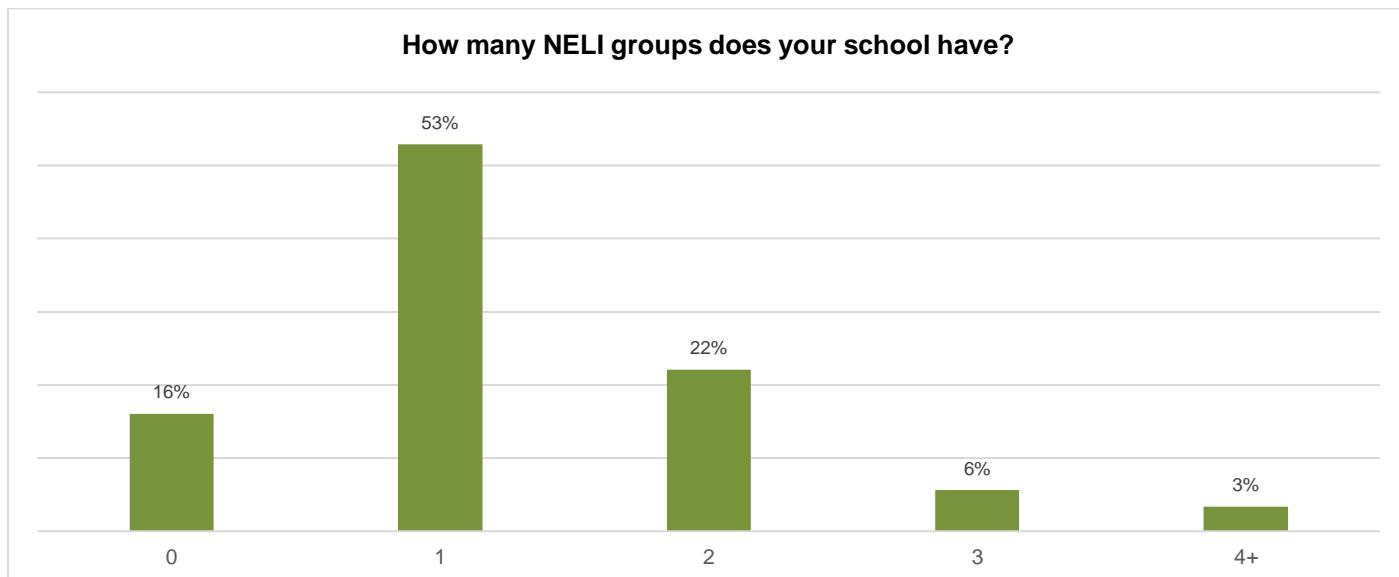
One teacher whose school had screened all reception pupils using LanguageScreen observed that they learnt a lot from the results about the strengths and weaknesses of different pupils.

#### Group size

***The size of NELI groups was generally in line with the intended delivery model—three to six pupils in each group***

A survey conducted by delivery partners from February 2022 highlighted a large range in the number of pupils receiving NELI in Cohort 2 schools, ranging from zero (indicating that the school had signed up to deliver NELI but had not delivered any sessions due to LanguageScreen results or other factors) to 44, with an average of six. Most schools had one or two NELI groups, with a range of zero to ten (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Number of NELI groups per school (Cohort 2 schools)



Responses from n = 1,835 Cohort 2 schools surveyed by delivery partners between 3 February and 3 March 2022.

## Box 9: Delivering NELI sessions—intended delivery

NELI is designed to be delivered to pupils over a period of 20 weeks in their reception year. The programme is intended to be delivered in three group sessions a week, each lasting 30 minutes. The intended group size is between three and six pupils. Children selected to participate in NELI also attend two 15-minute individual sessions each week. Evidence on the effectiveness of NELI is based on this model of delivery.

The majority of staff surveyed as part of this evaluation reported that their school completely complied with the requirement to have between three and six pupils in each NELI group (Figure 16, see Box 9 for an overview of the intended delivery model) indicating a high level of fidelity in this regard.

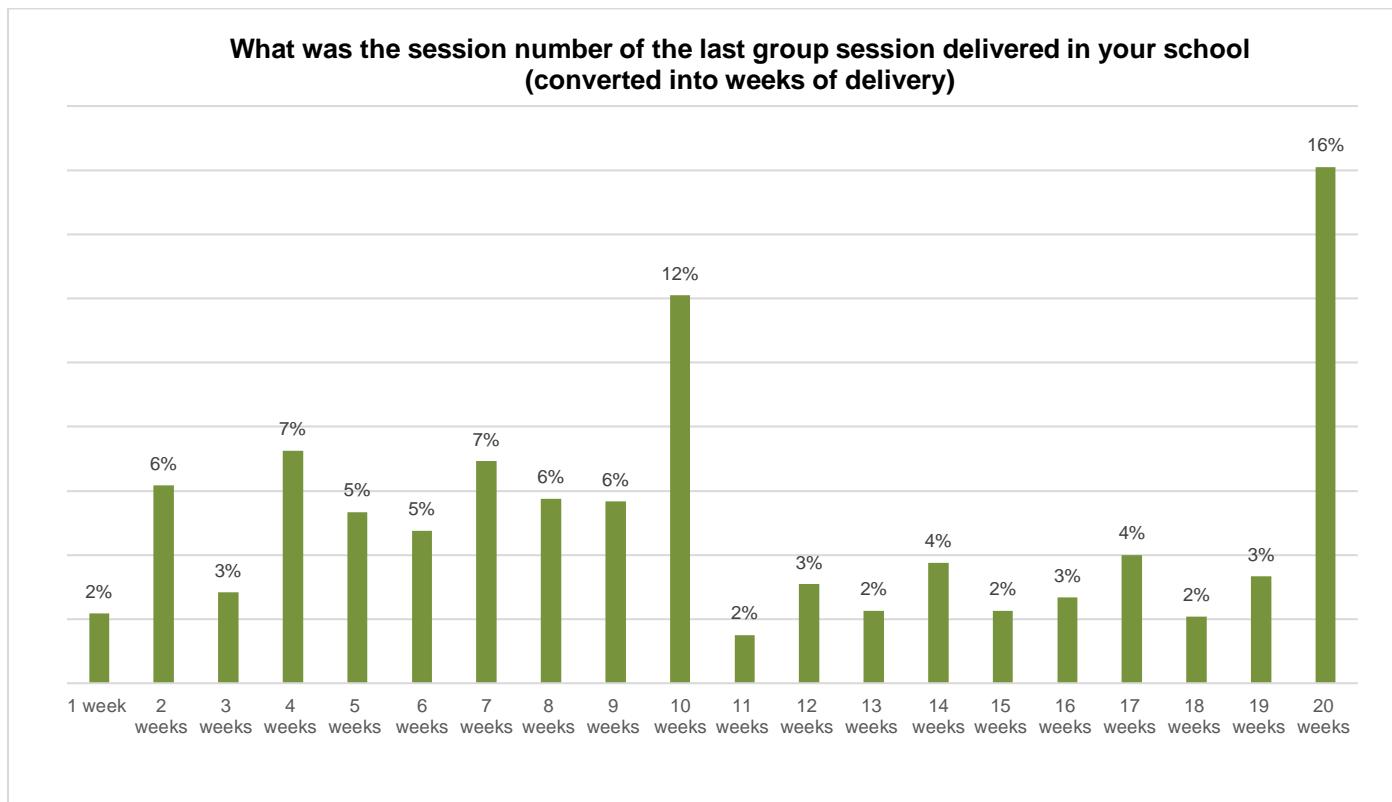
### Number of group sessions delivered

#### ***A large proportion of Cohort 2 schools did not complete NELI delivery during 2021/2022***

Data from delivery partner surveys (Figure 12) shows that by the end of delivery for 2021/2022, the average school had delivered 31 group sessions (corresponding to approximately ten out of 20 weeks of NELI delivery). The proportion of participating schools that had completed all 60 group sessions (20 weeks) was 16% (193 of 1,199). Wide variation in compliance with delivery of NELI group sessions, as shown in Figure 12, is consistent with findings from effectiveness trials (Dimova et al., 2020).

In February and March 2022, most interviewees from case study schools expected to complete the programme during 2021/2022, although some commented that their school might need to complete delivery in the following academic year. However, by the end of the academic year (June/July 2022), many schools were mid-way through delivery and not close to completing the programme. A minority of interviewees reported that their school had completed NELI delivery or were close to completing it at the time they were interviewed. Of those schools surveyed by delivery partners at the end of the delivery period that had not completed the full 60 sessions in 20 weeks, around half (51%; 525 of 1,033) indicated that they would not deliver any further NELI sessions to the 2021/2022 reception cohort.

Figure 12: Progress with delivering NELI as measured by delivery partner surveys (Cohort 2 schools)

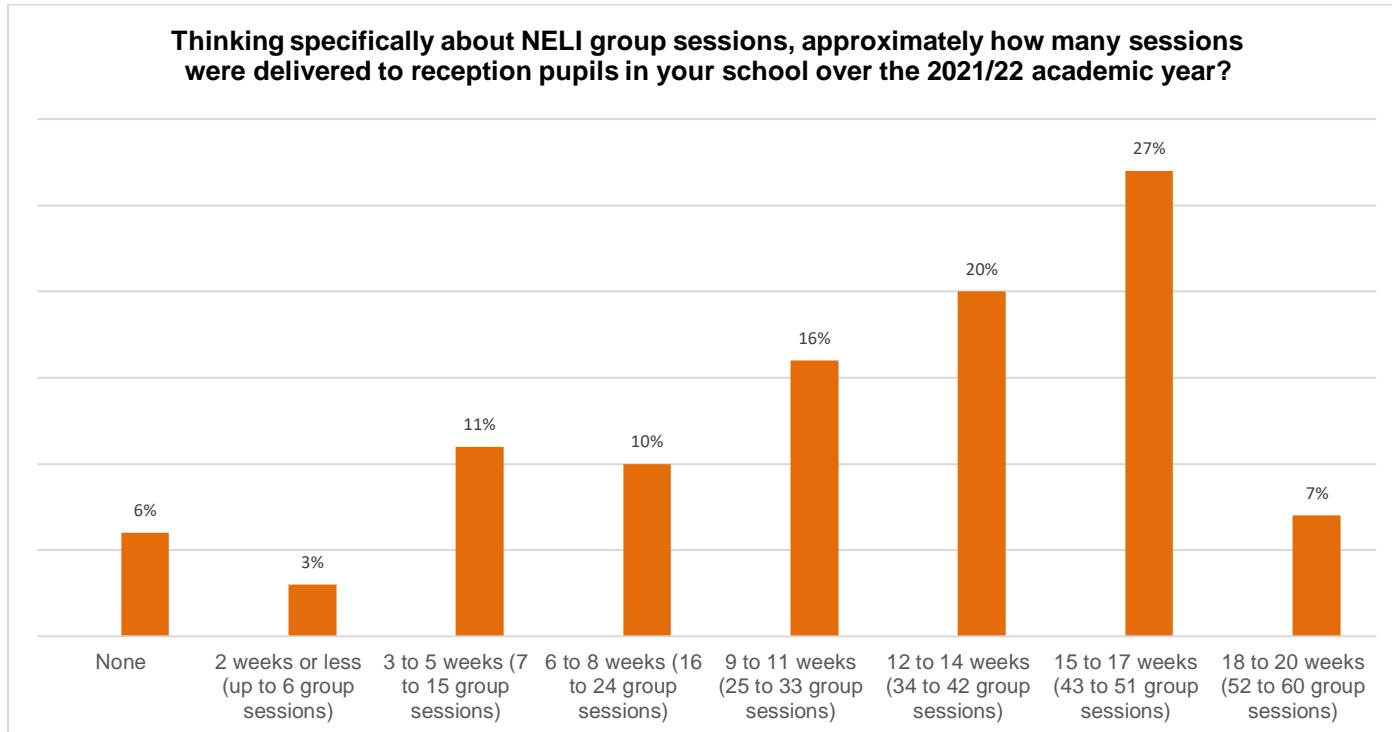


Responses from n = 1,199 staff from Cohort 2 schools delivering group NELI sessions surveyed by delivery partners between 7 June and 7 December 2022.

Around the end of the academic year (June 2022), around half (204 of 415; 49%) of staff surveyed from Cohort 2 schools reported that their school had completed the full 20 weeks of NELI delivery. This is higher than the proportion of schools that completed NELI in the previous academic year—6% (72 of 1,235). Although it represents an improvement on the previous year, a large proportion of pupils receiving NELI in 2021/2022 did not receive the full programme in their reception year as intended (see Box 6). The proportion of staff from Cohort 2 schools that reported delivering the full NELI programme was higher in the survey conducted by RAND Europe in June 2022 (Figure 13: 49% or 204 of 415) compared to the delivery partner survey conducted in May and June 2022 (Figure 12: 16%). This discrepancy may be due to differences in how the survey questions were framed (for example, weeks vs. sessions), the survey response rate, and who participated in the surveys. The survey conducted by RAND Europe in June 2022 had a lower response rate than the delivery partner surveys and it may be that this sample is weighted towards schools with a higher level of engagement.

Schools that had not completed NELI delivery in 2021/2022 differed in the number of weeks of the programme completed in terms of group sessions, as shown in Figure 13. A total of 6% (12 of 209) of staff surveyed reported that their school had signed up to deliver NELI in 2021/2022 but had not delivered any NELI group sessions. This may have been partly due to the suitability of the reception cohort in that school: several survey participants explained that LanguageScreen did not identify any pupils as suitable for NELI in their school.

Figure 13: Progress with delivering NELI group sessions for schools that did not complete delivery (Cohort 2 schools)



Responses from n = 209 staff from Cohort 2 schools that did not complete NELI delivery surveyed in June 2022.

### **COVID-19 continued to present a major barrier to NELI delivery in Cohort 2 schools in 2021/2022**

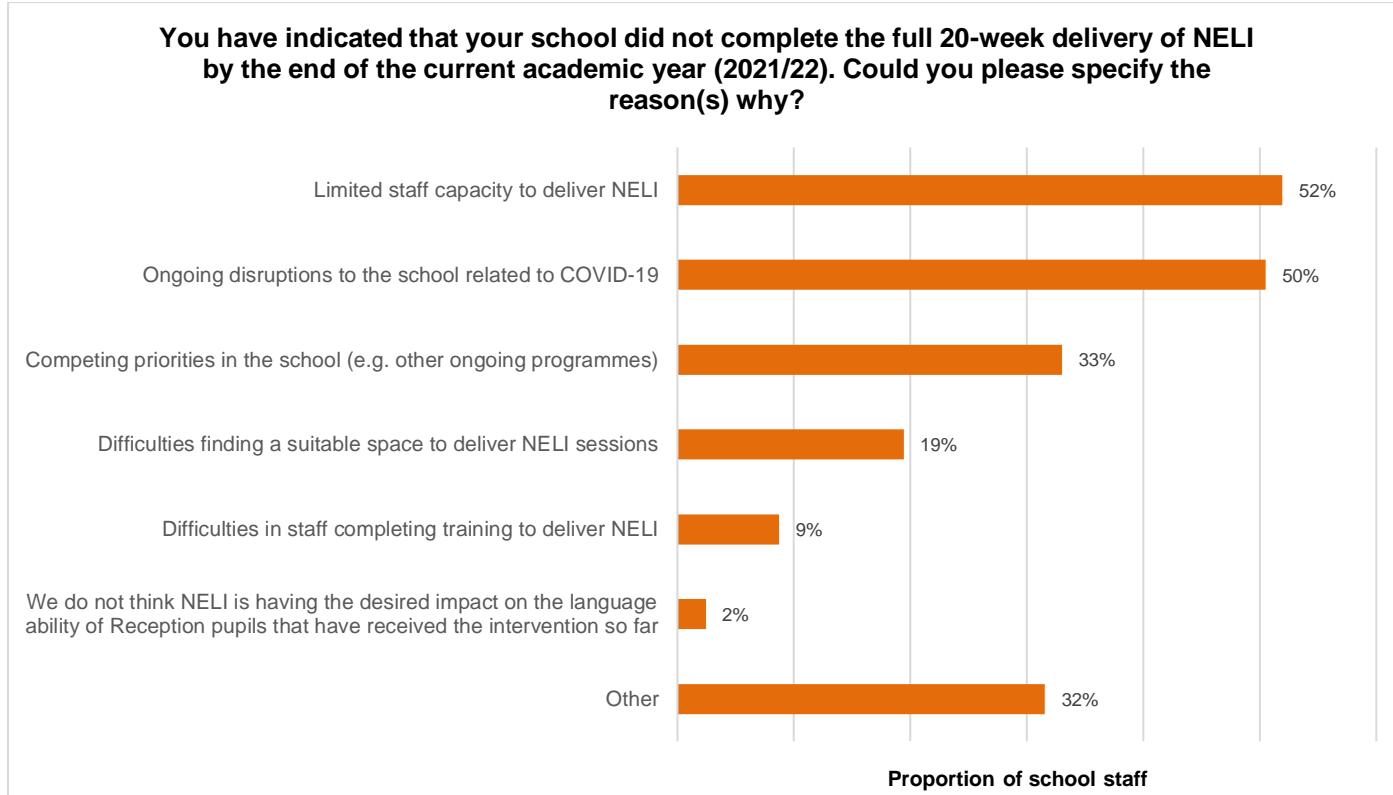
Staff whose school had not completed NELI delivery by the end of 2021/2022 were asked why this was (**Error! Reference source not found.**). Schools experienced similar barriers to those identified in the previous academic year (Disley et al., 2023). While the impact of COVID-19 on schools was less uniform or predictable than in the previous year when schools were closed for in-person teaching for most pupils at certain points during the year (schools remained open for vulnerable children and those whose parents were key workers), COVID-19 continued to have a large impact on schools in 2021/2022, with staff and pupil absences making it more difficult to progress with the programme. Half of

staff surveyed from Cohort 2 schools where the programme had not been delivered in full (105 of 206; 50%) indicated that disruption related to COVID-19 was a reason for their school not completing NELI delivery.

'We have only managed to deliver a quarter of the programme so far. This is mainly because of the high staff absences this year due to covid and stomach bugs outbreaks in school' (teacher from Cohort 2 school, surveyed June 2022).

All school staff who participated in the survey in June 2022 were asked about barriers and enablers of effective NELI delivery (Figure 15). Around half of schools surveyed from Cohort 2 (445 of 815; 55%) agreed or strongly agreed that **specific challenges stemming from COVID-19** created barriers to effective delivery.

Figure 14: Reasons for not completing NELI delivery during 2021/2022 (Cohort 2 schools)



Responses from n = 206 staff from Cohort 2 schools surveyed in June 2022.

### **Many Cohort 2 schools found it difficult to fit NELI into the timetable or to identify a suitable space to deliver the sessions**

Almost three quarters of school staff surveyed from Cohort 2 schools (607 of 815; 74%) agreed or strongly agreed that it was **difficult fitting NELI sessions into the timetable** (Figure 15). One interviewee from a case study school described delivering NELI sessions during lunchtime because of lack of time during the school day (this school shortened the sessions to enable the children to have some playtime during lunch).

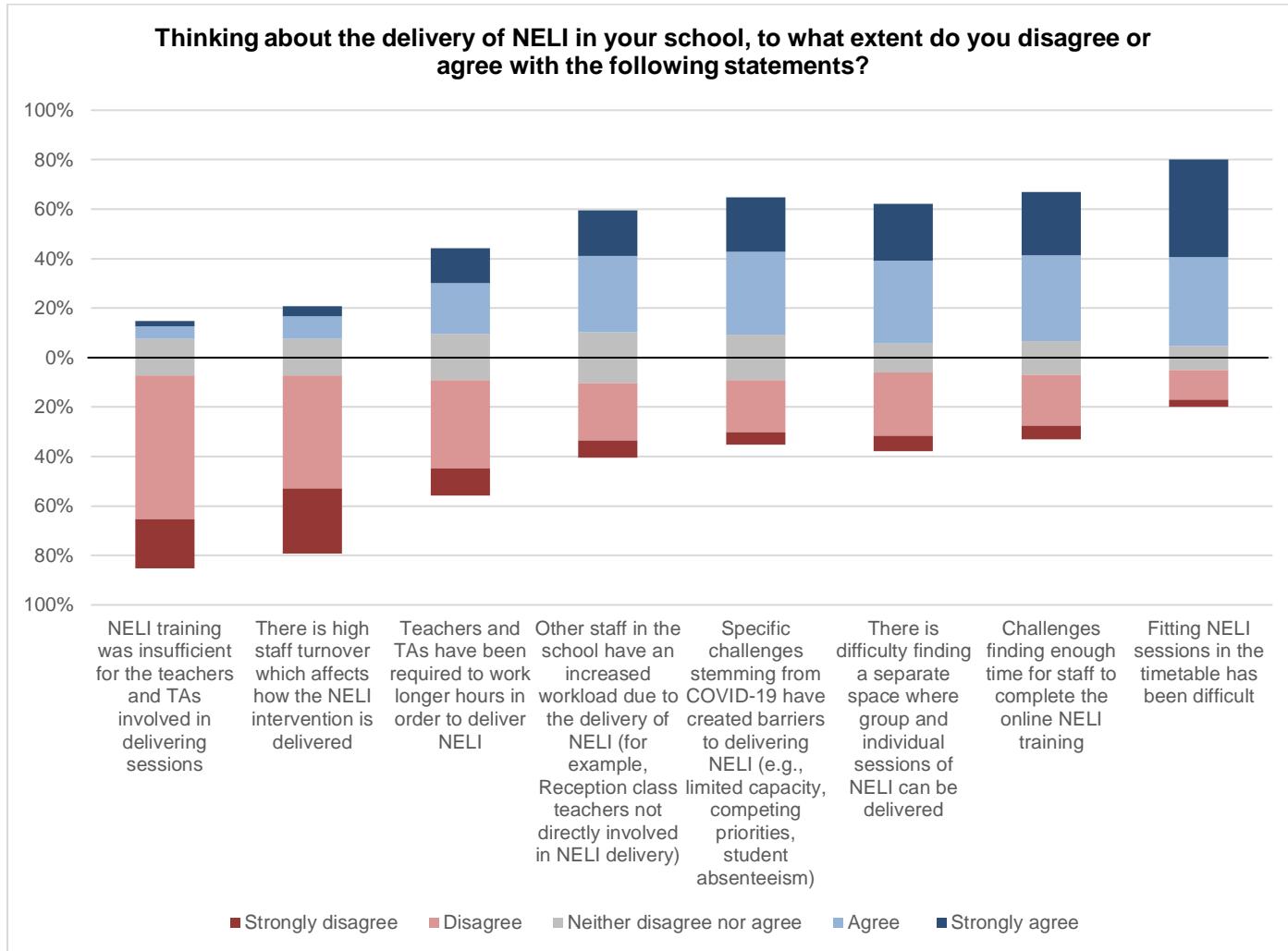
For schools that were able to fit NELI sessions into the timetable in a structured way, this enabled effective delivery of the programme. This was highlighted by some survey participants as a factor enabling effective implementation of the programme:

'The staff have been really good at making it a priority, so they've been putting time aside for it so it's delivered in line with the programme, and I think that's key' (teacher from a Cohort 2 case study school, interviewed Feb/March 2022).

Over half of staff surveyed from Cohort 2 schools (458 of 815; 56%) agreed or strongly agreed that there was **difficulty finding a separate space where individual and group NELI sessions could be delivered** in their school (Figure 15),

and this was also mentioned by some interviewees. For some schools surveyed that did not complete delivery during 2021/2022 (40 of 206; 19%), difficulty finding suitable space was a contributing factor (Figure 14).

Figure 15: Barriers and facilitators of effective NELI delivery (Cohort 2 schools)



Responses from n = 815 staff from Cohort 2 schools surveyed in June 2022.

### **Lack of staff capacity was a key barrier to effective delivery, exacerbated by staff absences and staff turnover**

Staff from Cohort 2 schools also highlighted a **lack of staff capacity** as a reason for not completing NELI delivery (107 of 206; 52%) (Figure 14). In terms of barriers to effective NELI delivery (Figure 15), some staff surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that **teachers and TAs had been required to work longer hours in order to deliver NELI** (278 of 815; 34%). Almost half of staff surveyed from Cohort 2 schools (387 of 815; 47%) agreed or strongly agreed that **other members of staff—those not directly involved in NELI delivery—had an increased workload as a result of the school implementing the programme**.

A minority of school staff surveyed (106 of 815; 13%) agreed or strongly agreed that high **staff turnover** affected how NELI was delivered in their school:

'[The] TA who was trained to deliver NELI secured a new job and left. There was not enough time to train an additional TA to then complete the NELI programme this year' (headteacher/other SLT member from Cohort 2 school, surveyed June 2022).

The impact of staff turnover and staff absence (often linked to COVID-19) on NELI delivery may have been compounded by the relatively small number of staff involved in delivering NELI in most Cohort 2 schools. Delivery partner surveys showed that over half of Cohort 2 schools (1,035 of 1,835; 56%) only had one member of staff involved in delivering

NELI. Staff absence or a lack of staff retention will naturally have a greater impact the fewer staff members are involved, as illustrated by the quotation below:

‘Some sessions have been missed due to other things going on in school. We only have one member of staff trained to deliver it so if this person is away it cannot be delivered’ (TA from Cohort 2 school, surveyed June 2022).

When asked what had facilitated effective NELI delivery in their school (open survey question), one survey participant highlighted the importance of having more than one staff member trained to deliver NELI:

‘Having more than one staff member trained so the programme doesn’t have to stop if any staff members are absent’ [facilitated effective NELI delivery in our school]’ (teacher from a Cohort 2 school, surveyed June 2022).

At the same time, one staff member from a case study school observed that what worked well about delivery in their school was having a single member of staff delivering NELI who was fully trained and very knowledgeable about the programme.

### ***Some Cohort 2 schools did not complete NELI delivery because LanguageScreen results did not identify any pupils as in need of the programme***

A small minority of staff from Cohort 2 schools—2% (5 of 206)—reported that their school did not complete the NELI programme because **they did not think it was having the desired impact on pupils** (Figure 14).

Under ‘other’, some staff from Cohort 2 schools explained that they did not complete NELI delivery because **no pupils were identified as in need of the intervention** by LanguageScreen:

‘Language Screen showed us that NELI is not appropriate for our current cohort, otherwise we would have done the programme’ (teacher from Cohort 2 school, surveyed June 2022).

### **Frequency and length of group sessions**

#### ***Some schools did not comply with the intended delivery model for group NELI sessions***

Around half of staff surveyed (216 of 467; 51%) reported that their school always followed the model of delivering three 30-minute group sessions per week (Figure 16). Some case study schools were delivering fewer than three group sessions per week. One school delivered three group sessions for the first eight to ten weeks of NELI, but this later dropped to one a week.

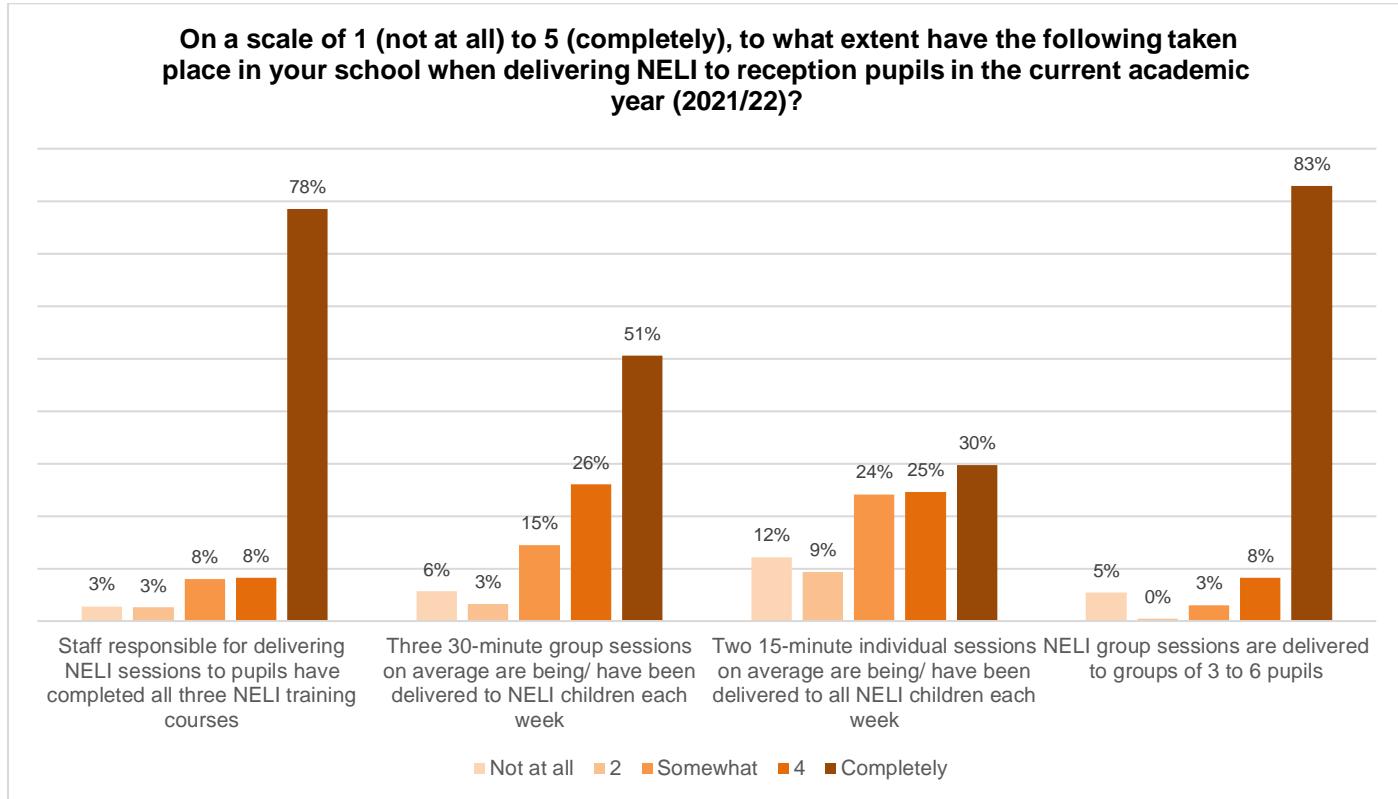
Data from the first wave of the delivery partner surveys found that half (728 of 1,448; 50%) of Cohort 2 schools were delivering group sessions of approximately 30 minutes (25 to 35 minutes) as intended. Over a quarter (375 of 1,448; 26%) of Cohort 2 schools that participated in this survey said the average length of a group session in their school was 20 minutes or less. Shorter than intended group sessions is likely to mean that some of the content was being missed or covered in insufficient detail, meaning that the pupils did not benefit from the full NELI programme.

Some interviewees expressed the view that group NELI sessions were a bit long for children in reception who struggled to maintain concentration for the duration of the session. Concerns about the duration of NELI sessions were also expressed in the context of delivery in the effectiveness trial (Dimova et al., 2020). One interviewee noted that the children were better able to sustain attention as the programme progressed. When asked what had facilitated effective NELI delivery in their school (open survey question), some staff from Cohort 2 schools mentioned running individual or group sessions in the morning because pupils were more engaged at that time of day.

One interviewee commented that NELI group sessions tended to take longer than the 30 minutes allocated:

‘I think it’s difficult to get everything in in the time that’s allocated. The sessions tend to run over. Both myself and the TA who delivers them find that quite difficult’ (Assistant Headteacher from a Cohort 2 case study school, interviewed Feb/March 2022).

Figure 16: Fidelity of delivery (Cohort 2 schools)



Responses from n = 427 staff from Cohort 2 schools surveyed in June 2022.

### Number of individual sessions delivered

**Group NELI sessions were generally prioritised over individual sessions if schools were unable to deliver the programme in full**

The first wave of the delivery partner surveys found that around half (890 of 1,835; 49%) of Cohort 2 schools were delivering individual NELI sessions to all pupils participating in NELI. Around a third (583 of 1,835; 32%) were not delivering individual NELI sessions to any pupils. Staff from Cohort 2 schools surveyed in June 2022 were asked if they did not deliver any elements of the NELI programme and, if so, why. The most common response was that schools had not delivered some or all individual NELI sessions, and this was also mentioned by some interviewees from case study schools. One interviewee described how their school followed up on group sessions with individual sessions only when there was a perceived need:

'Sometimes it's been harder to fit in the individual sessions, so what we've done is not necessarily done it every week for every child but just for the ones that have struggled in the group sessions, we've actually focused on those one or two children and we've found that that's worked for us rather than sticking rigidly to having to do an individual session for every child' (teacher from a Cohort 2 case study school, interviewed June/July 2022).

Another interviewee explained that their school was only delivering individual sessions for three out of the five pupils participating in the programme because of a perception that the other two did not benefit from these sessions.

Not delivering some or all individual NELI sessions was generally due to a lack of staff time and capacity:

'We have had to cut some 1:1 sessions to fit all the group ones due to staff absences. Otherwise we won't get it all finished' (Headteacher/other SLT member from Cohort 2 school, surveyed June 2022).

'I'm getting the three sessions done a week, but it's those extra one-to-ones that are difficult to fit in' (Assistant Headteacher/other SLT member from a Cohort 2 case study school, interviewed Feb/March 2022).

Some interviewees felt that pupils benefitted more from group sessions compared to individual sessions. Individual sessions were described as more resource intensive and more difficult to fit into the school timetable.

One survey participant explained that their school had delivered paired rather than individual NELI sessions due to staffing issues:

‘We do paired sessions rather than individual sessions due to staffing. Due to staff absence we are behind in the sessions’ (TA from Cohort 2 school, surveyed June 2022).

Lower fidelity in relation to individual NELI sessions compared to group sessions is consistent with findings from the effectiveness trial for NELI, which found that some schools prioritised the group sessions (Dimova et al., 2020).

### **Frequency and length of individual sessions**

#### ***Many Cohort 2 schools did not deliver two individual NELI sessions per pupil per week***

Around a third (127 of 427; 30%) of staff from Cohort 2 schools reported that their school always delivered two 15-minute individual sessions per pupil per week (Figure 16). Data from the delivery partner surveys showed that in most Cohort 2 schools—75% (935 of 1,245)—individual NELI sessions were around 15 minutes in length (10 to 20 minutes) in line with the intended delivery model. The discrepancy between the two surveys may indicate higher compliance with the length of individual sessions rather than the number—since the delivery partner survey, where compliance was higher, only asked about the length, whereas the evaluation survey where compliance was lower asked about the number as well as length of individual sessions—but caution is required because there are also other differences between the two surveys (question wording, sampling, and so forth). One survey participant mentioned that their school was delivering individual NELI sessions of shorter than 15 minutes because their pupils have complex needs and struggle to concentrate.

### **Content of individual and group NELI sessions**

#### ***Some Cohort 2 schools adapted the NELI programme rather than delivering it exactly as intended***

One teacher from a case study school described delivering ‘NELI-style’ sessions rather than delivering the programme to the letter, following up on group sessions with participating pupils on an ad hoc basis. This interviewee described how staff involved in delivering NELI were very experienced; they trusted them to select elements of the NELI programme that would benefit pupils the most.

A staff member from another case study school described how their school had ‘dipped in and out’ of NELI, running some group and individual sessions and incorporating elements of the programme into general classroom practice. This interviewee expected that a modified version of NELI would still be beneficial for pupils:

‘I was aware when I signed us up that we might not be able to deliver it in its entirety in the model way that it’s meant to be, but I think that having it as a baseline and then using some good practice from it and having your staff have that up to date research and evidence . . . is better than not signing up because you can’t commit to exactly the time stipulations . . . I definitely think it’s still beneficial’ (assistant headteacher from a Cohort 2 case study school, interviewed June/July 2022).

This interviewee went on to say that they would have preferred NELI information and guidance to be less focused on the ideal delivery model. They felt there was a danger of putting schools off if the ideal delivery model was not achievable, even though delivering a modified version of NELI may still be beneficial for pupils:

‘I think the only thing would be more flexibility. I understand that maintaining the fidelity of the scheme is to deliver it in its entirety, but I think for many schools it’s just not achievable . . . there was a really strong emphasis in the language on it “must” be delivered this way, it’s all important. If you miss these sessions the children won’t make as much progress. I’m sure that’s true but I think also acknowledging there is still some benefit even if you just deliver aspects of the programme and we understand you have a heavy workload and no budget, would have gone a long way’ (assistant headteacher from a Cohort 2 case study school, interviewed June/July 2022).

***Some Cohort 2 schools chose to skip certain aspects of the NELI programme, most commonly the content related to phonics***

The first year of the NELI scale-up evaluation found that aspects of NELI relating to phonics were perceived by some school staff to be less relevant and helpful because this content is also covered elsewhere, whether through the curriculum or other early years language interventions (Disley et al., 2023). This suggests that some school staff may not have understood the role of NELI in consolidating classroom learning for lower-ability pupils.

Some staff from Cohort 2 schools commented that their school did not deliver NELI sessions (in full) that related to phonics:

‘The phonics section has not been delivered because of the programme we already follow that covers this’ (TA from Cohort 2 school, surveyed June 2022).

Aspects of NELI related to phonics were perceived to be less useful later on in the reception year when most pupils already have a good grasp of these concepts:

‘Phonics part 2 was behind where the children were in their phonics so not implemented’ (teacher from Cohort 2 school, surveyed June 2022).

‘It took a long time to scan all the children to see who was eligible for the programme. If we had started earlier then the phonics teaching would have been more relevant’ (TA from Cohort 2 school, surveyed June 2022).

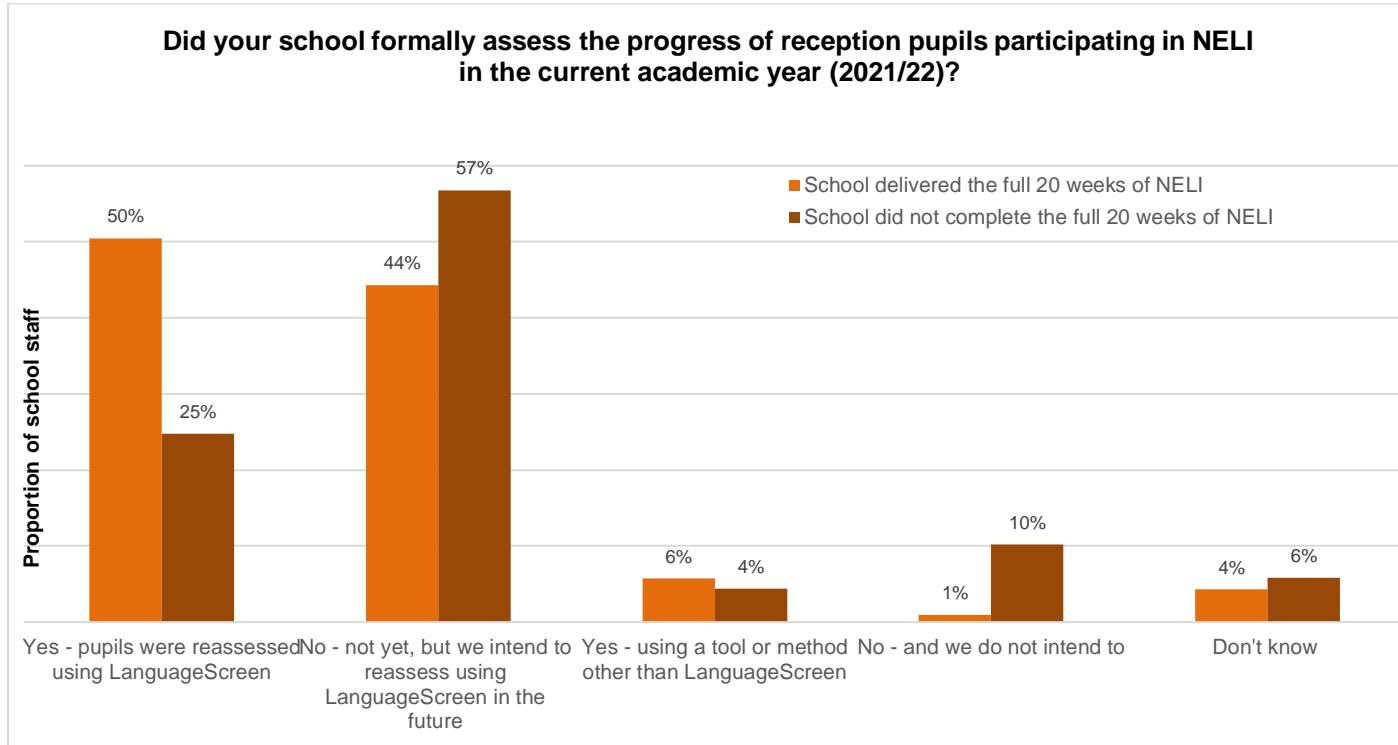
**Monitoring pupils’ progress**

***Most Cohort 2 schools had reassessed, or intended to reassess, pupils using LanguageScreen to assess their progress***

Staff from Cohort 2 schools were asked in June 2022 whether their school had (or intended to) formally assess the progress of pupils participating in NELI and, if so, how. The majority of school staff reported that their school had used LanguageScreen to formally assess pupils’ progress (190 of 492; 39%) or planned to do so in the future (245 of 492; 50%). One delivery partner mentioned that LanguageScreen data showed that some schools had used LanguageScreen to assess pupils more than twice, which was not as intended.

The fact that many schools had not yet conducted LanguageScreen assessments partly reflects the fact that some schools had not completed delivery by June 2022. Half (106 of 210; 50%) of schools that had completed the full 20 weeks of NELI delivery by June 2022 had used LanguageScreen to assess pupils’ progress, but many (93 of 210; 44%) were still to do so, as shown in Figure 17. A minority of schools (12 of 210; 6%) had formally assessed pupils’ progress using tools or methods other than LanguageScreen. Schools that did not intend to formally assess pupils’ progress were predominantly those that did not complete NELI delivery (Figure 17). Some of these schools may not have delivered any NELI sessions, for instance, because initial LanguageScreen assessments suggested that there were no pupils in the school who were suitable for NELI or because they did not think they had progressed far enough with the programme to see measurable effects.

Figure 17: Formally assessing pupils' progress using LanguageScreen (Cohort 2 schools)



Responses from n = 210 staff whose school had completed the full 20 weeks of NELI delivery and n = 206 whose school had not completed delivery surveyed in June 2022.

Staff whose school had formally assessed pupils' progress using the LanguageScreen app were asked a follow-up question about whether they assessed all reception pupils or just those participating in NELI. The most common approach (114 of 190; 60%) was to use LanguageScreen to assess the progress of all reception pupils, but four in ten (76 of 190; 40%) just assessed the NELI cohort.

## 5.2. What was experience of Cohort 2 schools from sign-up to delivery (RQ 1.5)?

### Training

***The online NELI training was widely regarded as useful, although the third training course was perceived as less useful than the first***

The majority of school staff surveyed who had undertaken the training found training courses one (667 of 688; 97%) and three (280 of 330; 85%) moderately or extremely useful (Figure 18). Staff from case study schools also commented positively on the training, saying they found it useful. One interviewee commented that the first course clearly communicated the purpose and potential impact of NELI. Another interviewee felt that it would be beneficial for all reception teachers and TAs to undertake that course to inform their understanding of early years language. Some interviewees felt the content of the training was more useful for TAs than for reception teachers or NELI leads, for whom the content—particularly phonics—would be more familiar. One reception teacher who had completed the first two courses commented that the content was already familiar, and they felt they didn't gain much from it. When asked how the online NELI training might be improved, one interviewee suggested tailoring the content:

'Perhaps there could be some tailoring on the amount of background information given to extremely experienced early years practitioners' (teacher from a Cohort 2 school, surveyed December 2021).

Although most participants found the third training course useful, this course was perceived as less useful than the first (Figure 18). This may reflect the fact that some schools had not progressed far enough with delivering NELI to make Training Course 3 relevant. However, qualitative survey data suggested that in some cases, this was linked to a perception that some school staff were already highly knowledgeable about teaching phonics, as illustrated by the quotations below:

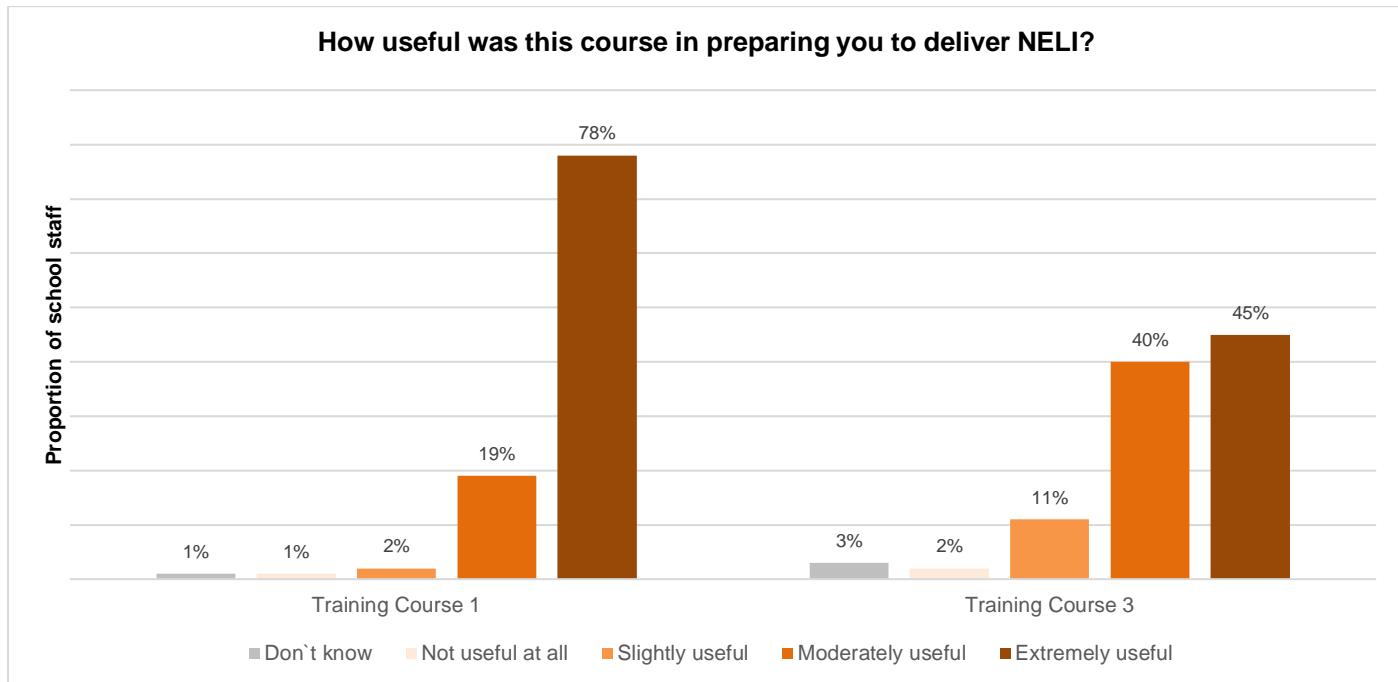
‘It [online NELI training] would have been better without the letter sounds element as this is covered by other interventions etc. and class phonics’ (TA from a Cohort 2 school, surveyed June 2022).

‘The training course 3 didn't tell me anything I didn't already know’ (TA from a Cohort 2 school, surveyed June 2022).

‘As an infant school, that's pretty much what we do. We do phonics. We're teaching everyone to read whereas I think if you were doing it with slightly older children or even preschool, that [aspects of the NELI training relating to phonics] would be really useful because you wouldn't necessarily have those skills’ (deputy headteacher from a Cohort 2 case study school, interviewed June/July 2022).

The finding aligns with data collected from Cohort 1 schools that undertook the training in the previous academic year (2020/2021) (Disley et al., 2023).

Figure 18: Perceived usefulness of NELI training (Cohort 2 schools)



Responses from n = 688 staff from Cohort 2 schools surveyed in December 2021 (training course one) and n = 330 staff from Cohort 2 schools surveyed in June 2022 (training course three).

### **Staff from Cohort 2 schools that completed the online NELI training generally felt very well prepared**

School staff who had completed all three training courses by the time of the survey in June 2022 were asked how prepared they felt to deliver NELI on a scale of one to ten, where one was ‘not at all prepared’ and ten was ‘completely prepared’. Over half (175 of 330; 53%) of staff from Cohort 2 schools said they felt completely prepared to deliver NELI (ten out of ten). The average response was 8.7 indicating a high level of preparedness. When asked what would have helped them to feel more prepared, the most common response was more time to engage with the NELI training and resources.

### **The majority of school staff who undertook the training thought it was clear, useful, and appropriate in terms of the volume of information and level of detail**

Echoing findings from the evaluation of the first year of the scale-up (Disley et al., 2023), survey participants generally found the information in the training clear and appropriate, with a suitable level of detail (see Figure A1 in Appendix F). Similar themes emerged to the previous year in that staff valued the ability to stop and start the training and identified the videos and the handbook as particularly useful (see Figure A2 in Appendix F).

Some interviewees from case study schools commented that they would have liked more information in the training on running individual NELI sessions, particularly how to tailor these for pupils with complex needs.

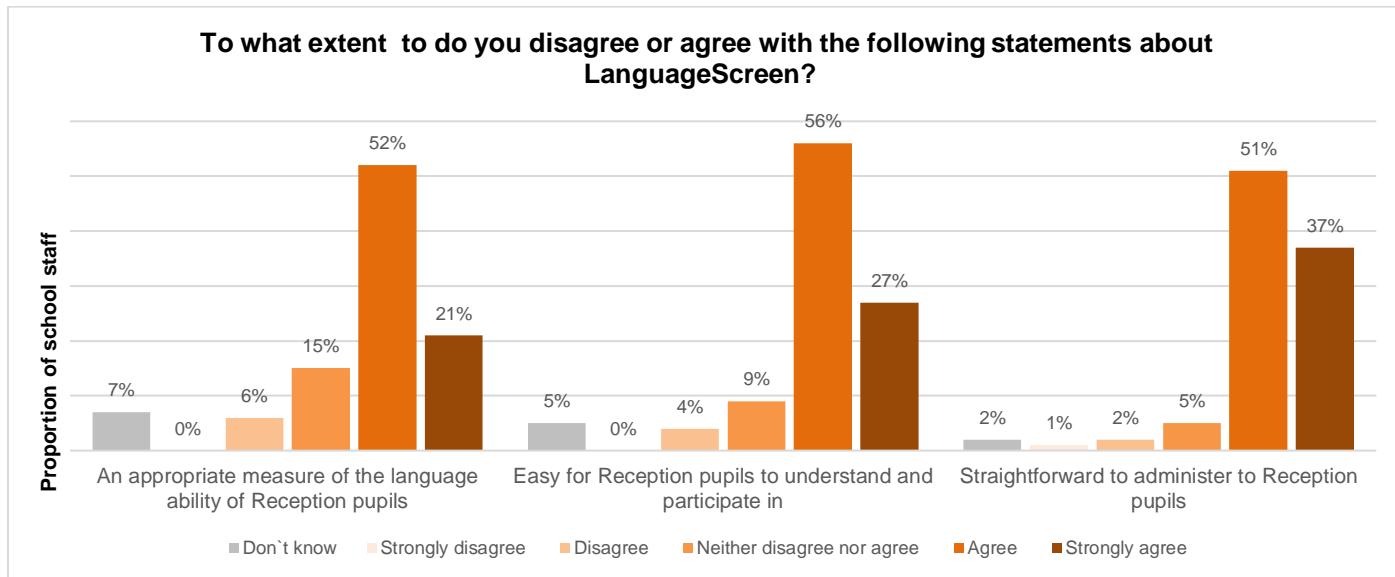
### Using the LanguageScreen app

#### ***Most school staff found the LanguageScreen app straightforward to use***

Staff from Cohort 2 schools surveyed in December 2011 generally felt that the LanguageScreen app was straightforward to administer (270 of 308; 88%) and easy for reception pupils to understand and participate in (253 of 308; 83%). Staff from case study schools similarly found the LanguageScreen app easy and straightforward to use. One interviewee reported that they found the LanguageScreen results confusing in the sense that it was difficult to see which assessments had been completed.

Some interviewees commented that pupils enjoyed the process of using LanguageScreen. One interviewee commented that some of the pictures in the LanguageScreen app were a bit obscure for young children, for instance, a dial-up telephone. Staff from one case study school described how LanguageScreen results were helpful because they showed not just which pupils were in need of additional support but which areas in particular they were struggling with. As discussed earlier, some school staff reported experiencing technical issues accessing the LanguageScreen app.

Figure 19: Perceptions of the LanguageScreen app (Cohort 2 schools)



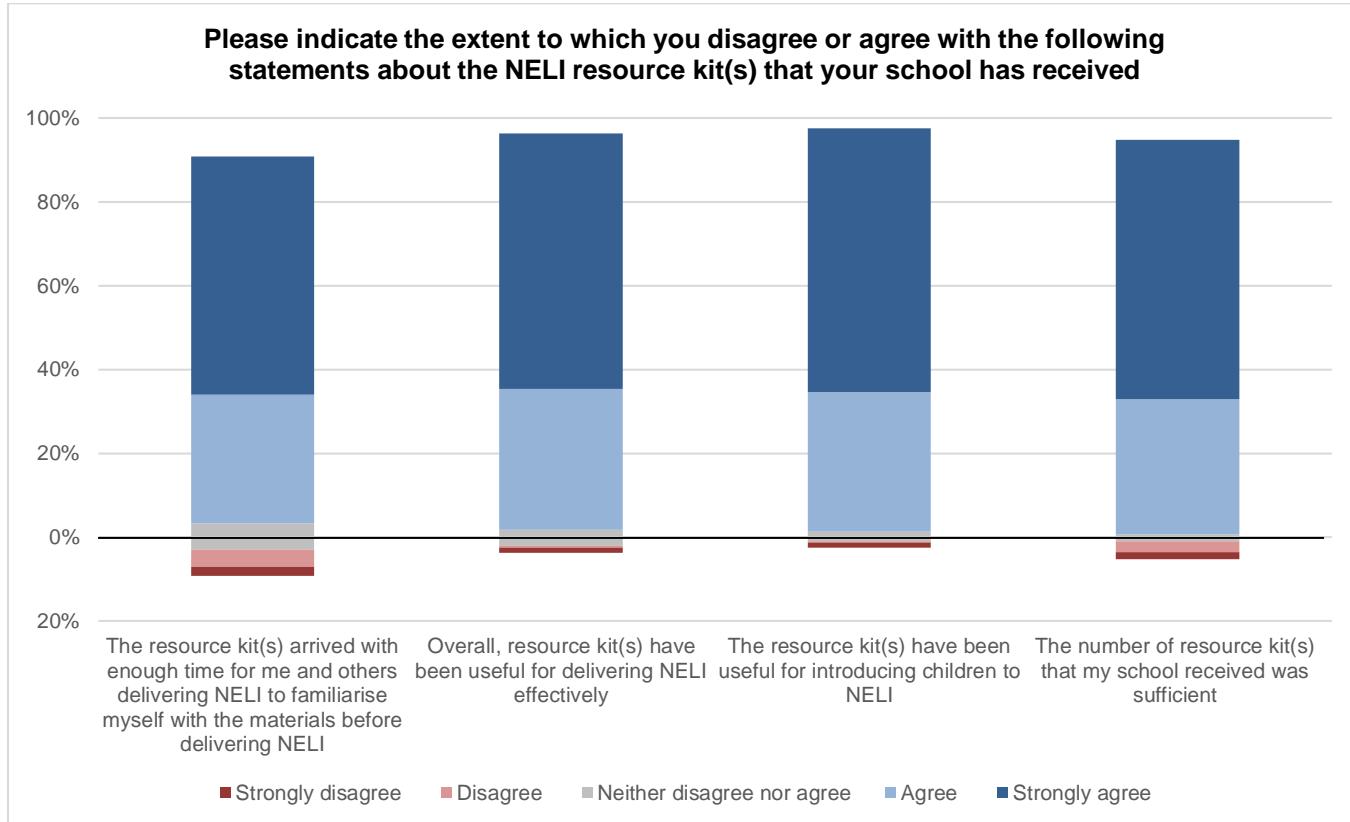
Responses from n = 308 staff from Cohort 2 schools surveyed in December 2021.

### 5.3. Did staff in Cohort 2 schools feel confident and well supported to deliver the intervention (RQ 2.3)?

#### ***Most Cohort 2 schools received a sufficient number of NELI resource packs***

Schools participating in NELI should receive at least one NELI pack per reception class. The majority of staff from Cohort 2 schools reported that their school received one NELI pack (342 of 438; 78%) or more than one (60 of 438; 14%) per class. A total of 94% (397 of 44) of staff surveyed from Cohort 2 schools agreed or strongly agreed the number of NELI packs received by their school was sufficient (Figure 20). Most staff surveyed from Cohort 2 schools (368 of 424; 87%) agreed or strongly agreed that the resource kit(s) arrived with sufficient time for school staff to prepare to deliver NELI.

Figure 20: Perception of NELI resource kits (Cohort 2 schools)



Responses from n = 424 staff from Cohort 2 schools surveyed in June 2022.

### ***Schools valued the resources in the NELI kits and generally found these very helpful***

School staff generally regarded the NELI materials and resources very highly:

‘I think the resources are just really engaging. I think all the picture cards and everything, the children absolutely love them. It’s really high quality, engaging stuff, so they really enjoy doing it. They’ll come out of their session and come and chat to me about what they’ve been learning and they’re really enthusiastic about it’ (teacher from a Cohort 2 case study school, interviewed June/July 2022).

Some school staff identified NELI resources as a factor that had enabled effective delivery in their school:

‘The fantastic training courses, ongoing access to the delivery videos on the support hub, and the excellent resources supplied [facilitated effective NELI delivery in our school]’ (TA from a Cohort 2 school, surveyed June 2022).

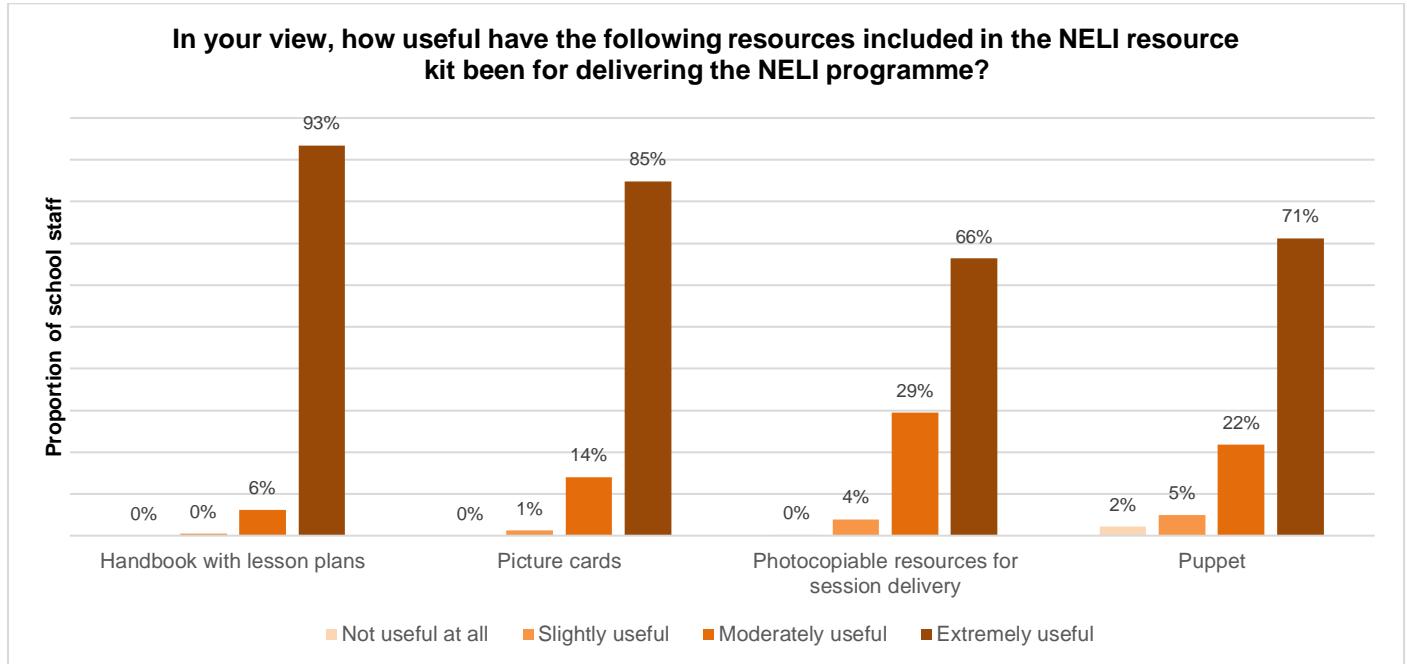
‘I think the NELI resource kits have been brilliant. The pictures are bright and wording is clear and big. The children love the puppet Ted’ (TA from a Cohort 2 school, surveyed June 2022).

Nine out of ten of staff surveyed from Cohort 2 schools in June 2022 (382 of 424; 90%) agreed or strongly agreed that they had all the information and resources needed to deliver NELI to pupils.

### ***The NELI handbook was perceived as particularly useful***

Cohort 2 school staff surveyed in June 2022 who had used resources in the NELI kits were asked how useful they had found these. The majority found the handbook, picture cards, puppet (Ted), and photocopiable resources useful, as shown in Figure 21. In particular, over nine in ten (382 of 409; 93%) of those surveyed described the handbook with lesson plans as extremely useful.

Figure 21: Perceived usefulness of resources included in the NELI kits (Cohort 2 schools)



Responses from n = 409 staff from Cohort 2 schools surveyed in June 2022 who had used the handbook, picture cards and puppet; n = 407 staff who had used the photocopiable resources.

### **Some school staff would like to see NELI resources that take less time to prepare**

Staff from Cohort 2 schools surveyed in June 2022 were asked an open survey question about how the resources in NELI kits could be improved. Some expressed a desire for NELI resources that took less time to prepare in the survey and interviews. This aligns with findings from the first year of the evaluation (Disley et al., 2023) and effectiveness trials (Dimova et al., 2020).

‘A lot of time was spent cutting up and sorting resources, could future packs be already prepared?’ (TA from a Cohort 2 school, surveyed June 2022).

‘If the resource cards were laminated. It would mean they would last longer and not be damaged with all the groups holding them and bending them with continued use’ (TA from a Cohort 2 school, surveyed June 2022 ).

Another suggestion was to have digital/electronic copies of the resources:

‘A digital copy of the handbook and a personal physical copy to add notes and highlights’ (TA from a Cohort 2 school, surveyed June 2022).

Some school staff felt the images used on the picture cards could be improved because they were ambiguous or old fashioned:

‘Pictures could be less ambiguous. Uniform picture was overseas students wearing and not easily recognised uniform to UK four-year-olds. The word “jacket” was represented by what many children call a coat’ (TA from a Cohort 2 school, surveyed June 2022).

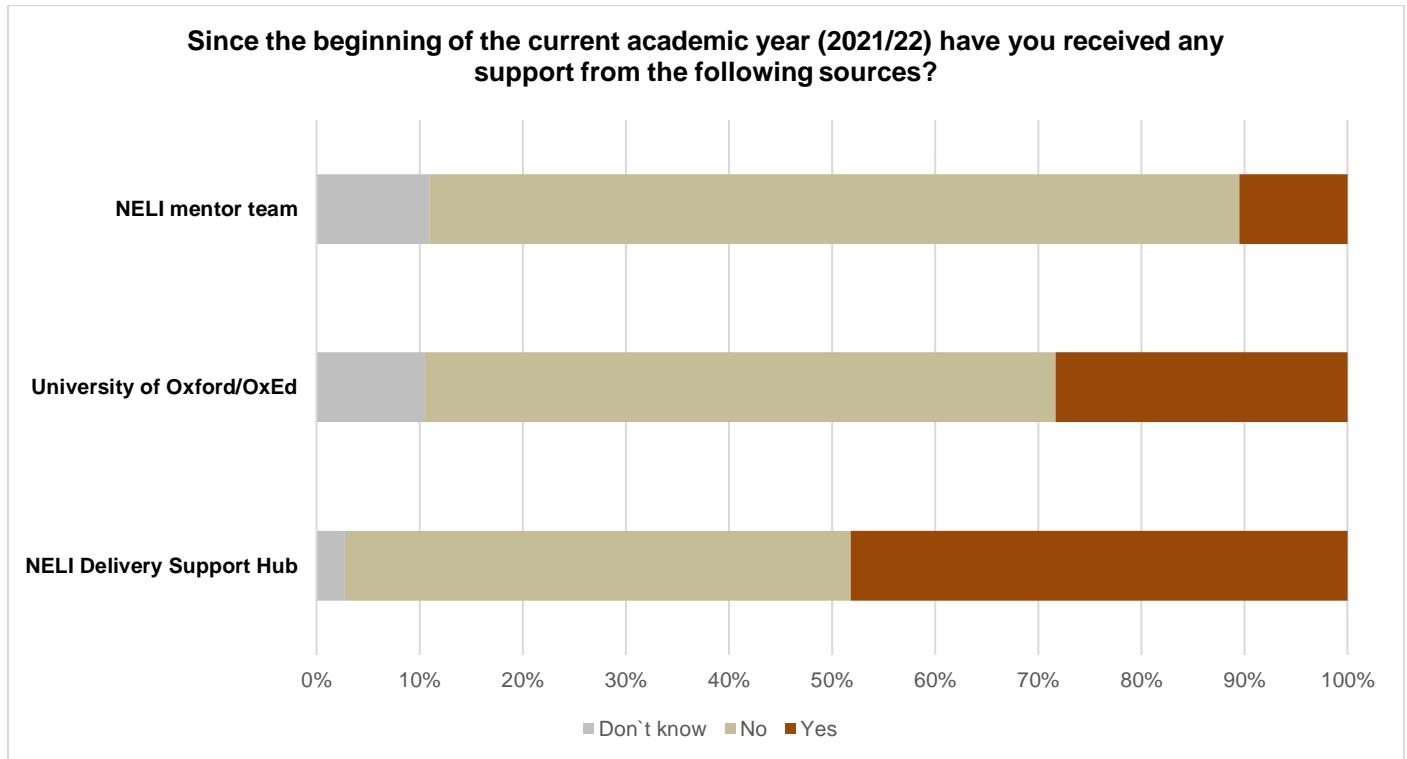
‘Some of the images used, both photos and animations, were a little old fashioned for today's children’ (TA from a Cohort 2 school, surveyed June 2022).

Another suggestion was to have photocopiable resources in colour (rather than black and white) to help children engage with the materials.

### **The most commonly used form of official support for Cohort 2 schools was the NELI Delivery Support Hub**

Staff from Cohort 2 schools surveyed in June 2022 were asked whether they had used various forms of support for NELI delivery (Figure 22). The most commonly used form of support was the **NELI Delivery Support Hub**, which was used by 48% (211 of 438) of those surveyed over the course of the academic year, followed by support from **OxEd** (124 of 438; 28%) and lastly, the **NELI mentor team** (46 of 438; 11%).

Figure 22: Use of official NELI support (Cohort 2 schools)

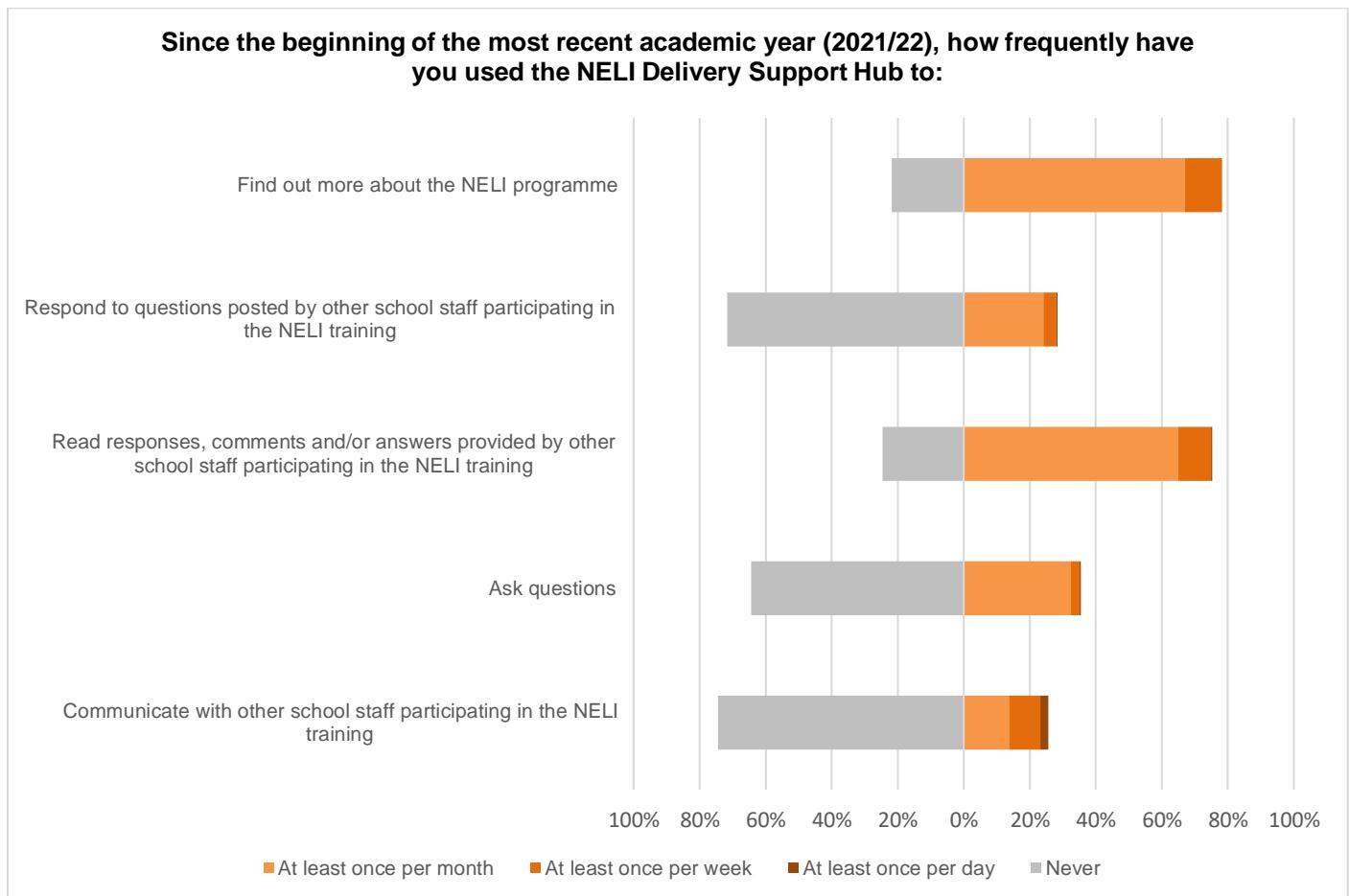


Responses from n = 438 staff from Cohort 2 schools surveyed in June 2022.

**Cohort 2 schools' engagement with the NELI Delivery Support Hub was largely 'passive' rather than 'active', reflecting the fact that a large amount of information was already available**

School staff who had used the NELI Delivery Support Hub were asked how frequently they used it for different purposes (Figure 23). Staff from Cohort 2 schools mostly used the Delivery Hub to find out more about the programme (165 of 211, 78%, had used it once a month or more frequently for this purpose) and to read responses, comments, or answers provided by other school staff (158 of 211; 75%). It was less common for staff from Cohort 2 schools to use the Delivery Hub to ask questions (74 of 211; 36%), respond to questions posed by other school staff (59 of 211; 28%), or to communicate with other school staff (59 of 211; 26%), although some did. Engagement with the Delivery Support Hub was therefore more 'passive' than 'active'.

Figure 23: Frequency of using the NELI Delivery Support Hub for different purposes (Cohort 2 schools)

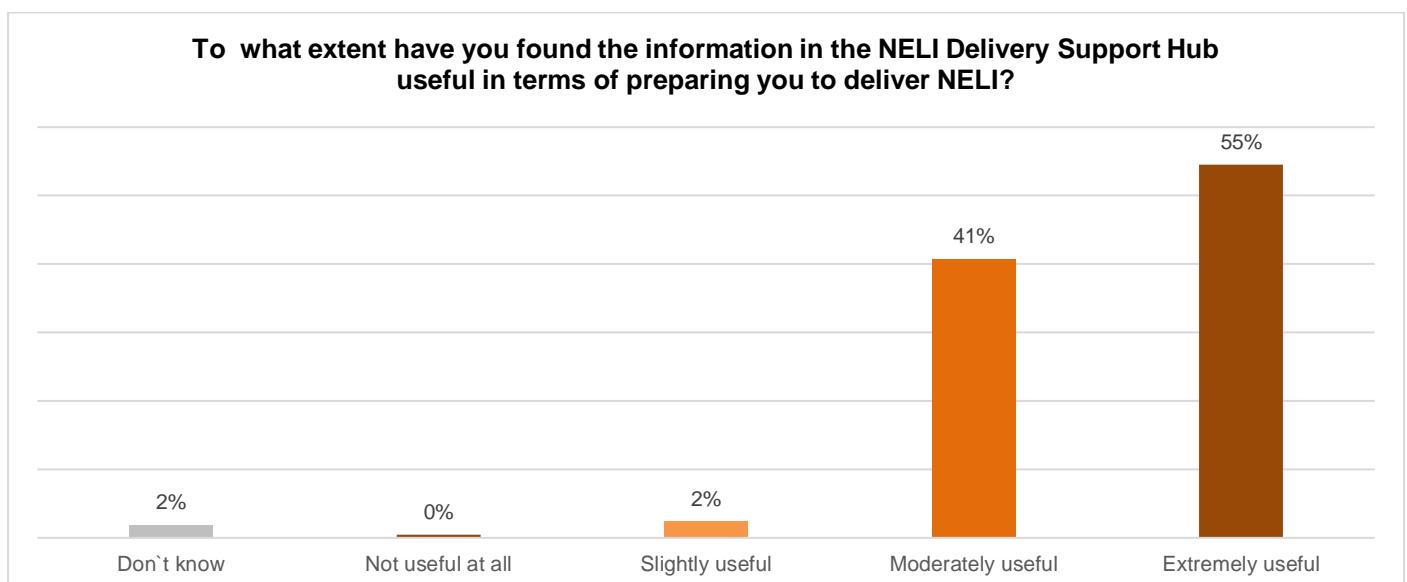


Responses from n = 211 staff from Cohort 2 schools that had used the Delivery Support Hub.

**Staff from Cohort 2 schools that engaged with official NELI support generally found this useful**

Staff from Cohort 2 schools that had used the NELI Delivery Support Hub overwhelmingly found this resource helpful, as illustrated by Figure 24. Interviewees from case study schools also found the NELI Delivery Support Hub helpful.

Figure 24: Perceived usefulness of the NELI Delivery Support Hub (Cohort 2 schools)



Responses from n = 211 staff from Cohort 2 schools that had used the Delivery Support Hub.

Staff from Cohort 2 schools that had accessed support from the University of Oxford, OxEd, and/or the NELI mentor team were generally satisfied with this support, as illustrated by Figure 25. One interviewee from a case study school described how a member of staff from their school had been pleased to receive a quick response via the live chat function on TeachNELI:

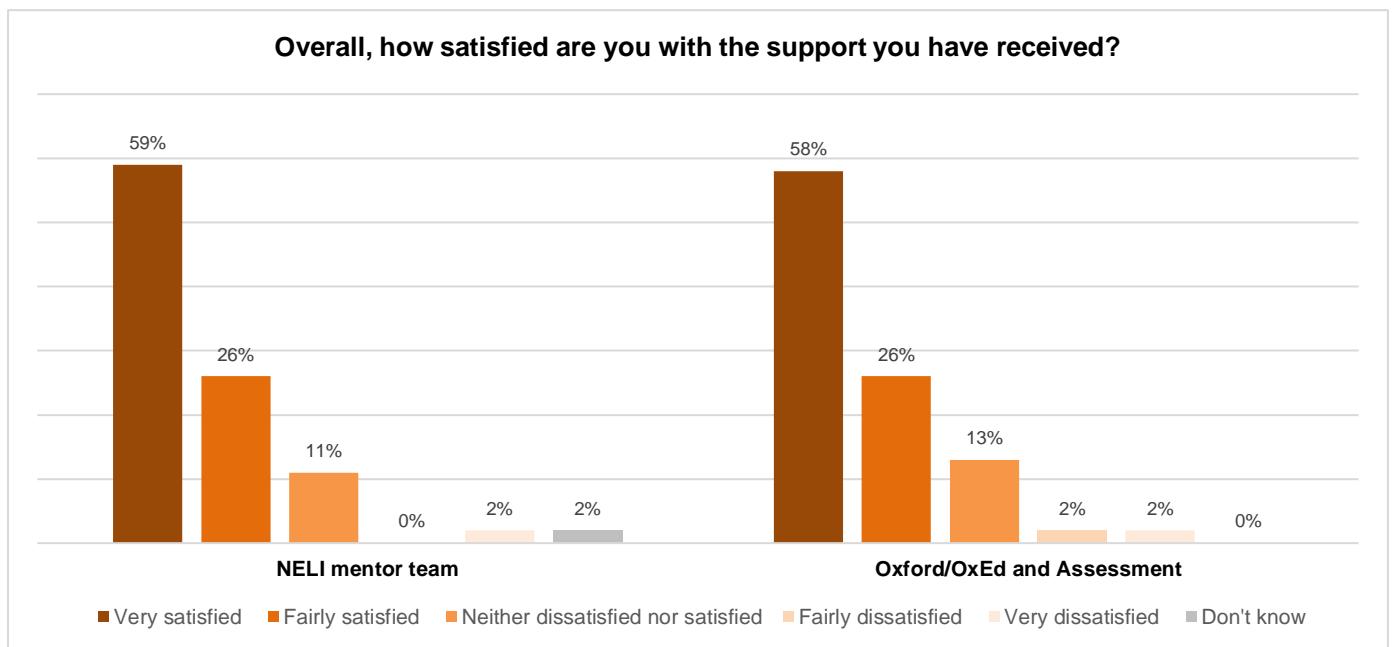
‘When one of our staff had a bit of a wobble about the testing aspect the chat function on the website was very useful. I was just able to email an advisor and confirm in writing that there was no requirement to pass a test and anything like that, which I then was able to show to the member of staff. That put her mind at rest. Being able to get quick feedback like that was really useful’ (Early Years Lead from a Cohort 2 case study school, interviewed Feb/March 2022).

Some other interviewees also reported a positive experience of using the live chat. One had emailed with a query and had received timely and useful response. One case study school that had experienced major technical issues that had prevented it from conducting LanguageScreen assessments (and therefore progressing with the programme) commented that the support was excellent, with quick responses to questions.

Delivery partners explained that feedback from the NELI mentors was that questions asked by staff from Cohort 2 schools had been different to those received in the previous academic year from Cohort 1 schools. The mentors had been surprised by some of the questions asked, feeling these to be basic and reflective of schools not having engaged as thoroughly with the materials. It was suggested that this might have been linked to the ongoing pressure of COVID-19 on schools in 2021/2022 without school closures, which, the previous year, had enabled some school staff to complete the NELI training (Disley et al., 2023):

‘The kinds of questions that they [NELI mentors] were getting from the Cohort 2 [schools] were indicating that they hadn’t really fully read or understood the material as well as they had the year before. And we’ve talked a little bit about it, and we wonder whether it’s to do with, because last year the training was up when the schools were closed and so teachers and TAs were at home, obviously still teaching online but had a little bit more time and headspace to be doing the training at their own pace’ (Delivery partner, interviewed July/August 2022).

Figure 25: Satisfaction with support (Cohort 2 schools)



Responses from n = 46 staff from Cohort 2 schools surveyed in June 2022 who had accessed support from the NELI mentors and n = 124 who had accessed support from the University of Oxford/OxEd.

One interviewee from a case study school reflected that they would have liked there to be an online community of NELI practitioners (an official community—unofficial groups on social media are discussed below). This interviewee did not want engagement with the community to be mandatory:

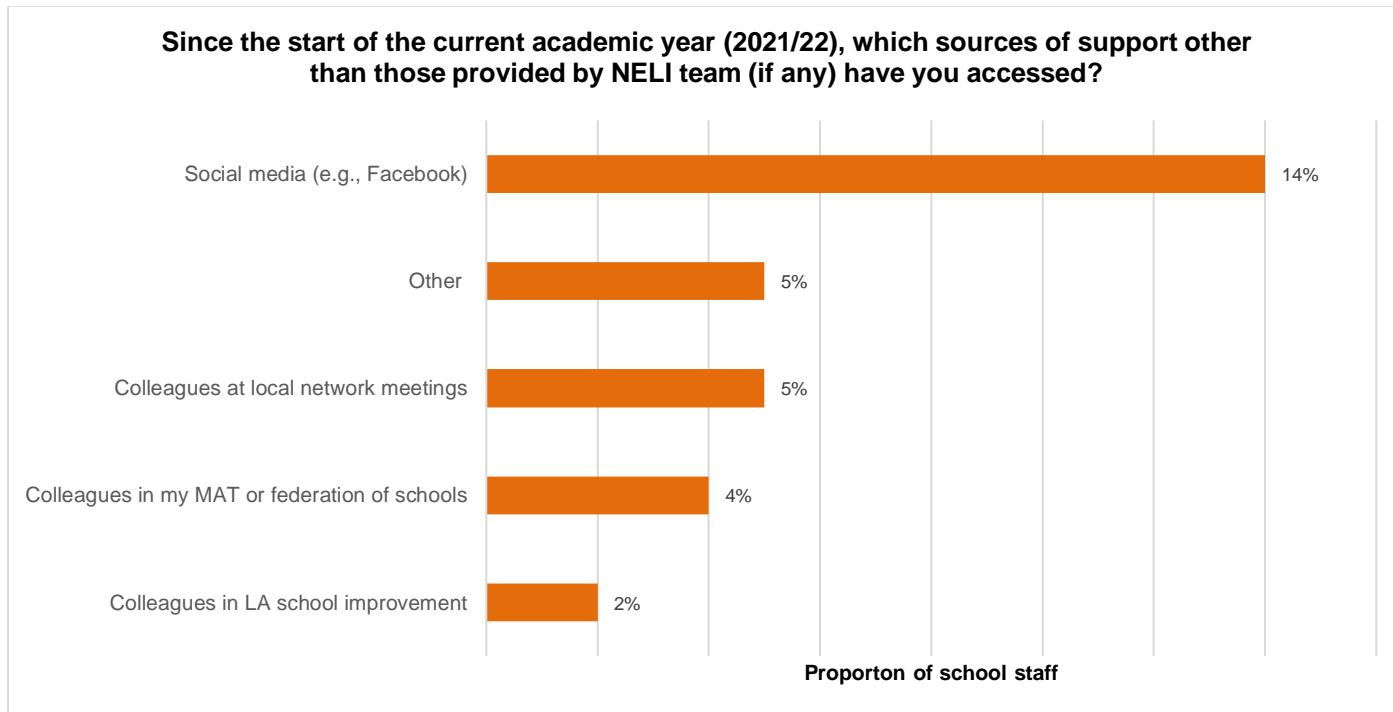
‘I know a lot of these schemes now have, like, you can log into an app and there’s an online community to chat with . . . it can be useful but again, it also feels like another layer of accountability that I have to now remember to log in there once a month and write a comment otherwise I don’t look like I’m engaging with the programme and that’s just frustrating’ (assistant headteacher from a Cohort 2 case study school, interviewed June/July 2022).

They also noted that content would need to be moderated to ensure that it was not inaccurate or misleading.

***Around one in ten staff from Cohort 2 schools had accessed informal NELI support on social media platforms such as Facebook***

Staff from Cohort 2 schools were asked whether they had accessed support for NELI delivery outside official channels. As shown in Figure 26, some schools surveyed had accessed support from their MAT, LA, or local networks. Over one in ten staff surveyed from Cohort 2 schools (43 of 314; 14%) had accessed informal support for delivery on social media platforms such as NELI Facebook groups.

Figure 26: Use of informal NELI information and support networks (Cohort 2 schools)



Responses from n = 314 staff from Cohort 2 schools surveyed in June 2022. Respondents could select multiple options.

***School staff use NELI Facebook groups as a means of sharing experiences as well as finding out practical hints and tips***

School staff who participated in the survey and had accessed informal support on Facebook were asked a follow-up (open) survey question about how this has been useful. Interviewees from case study schools were also asked if, how, and why they had engaged with NELI on social media such as Facebook.

Some school staff delivering NELI looked to social media for **practical information, hints, and tips** and **to ask questions**:

‘It is great to learn practical advice from people who are actually delivering NELI and to share pitfalls and good practise. Invaluable’ (TA from a Cohort 2 school, surveyed June 2022).

It is difficult to say why school staff used social media for these purposes rather than official NELI support. Some school staff emphasised the speed of response on social media, as illustrated by the quotation below. As described earlier in this report, the delivery team did provide support via a live chat function on TeachNELI and LanguageScreen. It may be that some staff delivering NELI were not aware of this support or had other reasons for preferring social media. One headteacher interviewed from a Cohort 1 school observed that it was easier and quicker for school staff to log into Facebook compared to the NELI Delivery Support Hub, particularly since they may have already been accessing Facebook for other purposes.

'Useful to get a quick response [on Facebook] from people actually delivering it [NELI] in real time' (TA from a Cohort 2 school, surveyed June 2022).

'With this generation, everything's online and easy to get to forums, and I think people just reply a lot quicker, and hearing other people's experience as well is quite nice' (TA from a Cohort 2 case study school, interviewed June-July 2022).

'You just go on Facebook, you know, it's easier [than official NELI support] . . . because you've got the support from that [Facebook] I didn't feel like I needed anything else' (teacher from a Cohort 2 case study school, interviewed June-July 2022).

Some interviewees from case study schools that had not accessed NELI support on social media expressed concerns about the accuracy of information being shared via these channels, which are not moderated by the delivery team.

A common theme that emerged was use of social media to **share experiences** and **build a community** of practitioners delivering NELI. Interviewees described hearing about other schools' experiences on social media as reassuring, showing them that they were not alone in challenges experienced.

One teacher interviewed from a case study school commented that they preferred to access support from people directly involved in delivering NELI in schools. There were hints that some school staff may have felt freer to be **honest about the challenges of delivering NELI and deviations from the intended delivery model** on social media compared to official NELI support, as indicated by the quotations below. One teacher from a case study school commented that school staff felt less bad about not delivering NELI as intended when discussing with peers compared to the delivery team.

'[Facebook is useful for] having honest and open conversations about the delivery of NELI' (teacher from a Cohort 2 school, surveyed June 2022).

'I think it makes a difference that it [the support] is from people who are doing it [delivering NELI in schools] . . . on the Facebook page . . . it's real life . . . you don't feel as bad for not doing it, or you don't feel as bad for if your kids aren't getting it. If we'd have come to the [NELI] Support Hub it would probably be [viewed in a] negative [light]. On the Facebook group it is not sugar coated . . . [it's like] when you go to a forum and it is run by a company and they tell you everything you want to hear . . . [in contrast] the Facebook group is people who are experiencing it' (teacher from a Cohort 2 case study school, interviewed June/July 2022).

One delivery partner commented that it was clear from observing discussions on unofficial NELI Facebook groups that some schools were tailoring the NELI programme, for instance by dropping individual sessions and just having group sessions. However, because this was not an official NELI resource, the delivery team could not harness this conversation or respond to it in a meaningful way.

### ***Most staff from Cohort 2 schools felt that they had support from colleagues within school***

Support from colleagues in school, particularly from the SLT, was identified as a factor facilitating effective NELI delivery by staff in Cohort 2 schools:

'[What has facilitated effective delivery of NELI in your school?] School leaders very committed to NELI and have ensured time/space to deliver sessions' (TA from a Cohort 2 school, surveyed June 2022).

'[What has facilitated effective delivery of NELI in your school?] All staff in reception understanding and valuing the importance of NELI' (Headteacher/other SLT member from a Cohort 2 school, surveyed June 2022).

Most staff from Cohort 2 schools surveyed in June 2022 (341 of 438; 78%) agreed or strongly agreed that they got support from colleagues within their school regarding NELI delivery; only 3% (16 of 438) disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

#### 5.4. Did the intervention reach the intended pupils in Cohort 2 schools? If no, why not (RQ 2.4)?

##### ***LanguageScreen was generally felt to be a good measure of children's abilities***

Around three quarters (224 of 308; 73%) of staff from Cohort 2 schools surveyed in December 2022 agreed or strongly agreed that LanguageScreen is an appropriate measure of the language ability of reception pupils (Figure 19). Only 6% of those surveyed (17 of 308) disagreed with this statement. Most staff interviewed from case study schools also felt that LanguageScreen was a good measure of children's abilities.

Echoing findings from the evaluation of the first year of the NELI scale-up (Disley et al., 2023), some school staff reported in interviews that they had been surprised by some of the LanguageScreen results, expecting some pupils to score higher or lower. One interviewee reflected that this was more common in cases where children had low skills in specific areas, for instance listening, whereas in other respects they were working at the expected level.

'It [LanguageScreen] was really helpful because it wasn't always the children we thought would need the intervention that came out as scoring low. There were a few surprises on there. Some children we referred externally for speech and learning scored quite highly on that programme' (Early Years Lead from a Cohort 2 case study school, interviewed June/July 2022).

A teacher from one school described a pupil whose language needs would have been missed if it had not been for the LanguageScreen assessment. This pupil was quiet and adept at following or mimicking other pupils, making it more difficult for teachers and TAs to spot language issues. One reception teacher from another case study school commented that their school also completed similar assessments for a different intervention, which did not always identify the same children as in need of support. This school included one pupil in the NELI group who was not identified by LanguageScreen as in need of the intervention but was highlighted by the other assessment process. Another interviewee had a similar experience where LanguageScreen results were not aligned with a different screening tool and this made them question the accuracy and reliability of LanguageScreen:

'I couldn't fully trust the [LanguageScreen] assessment based on my knowledge of the children and obviously they passed the assessment and that's great, but when we did the other . . . [assessment/screening], they came out as quite different levels, some of them—I found it a really useful tool, but I didn't quite feel I could trust it as a whole thing' (Early Years Lead from a Cohort 2 case study school, interviewed June/July 2022).

Staff from one case study school commented on how they were surprised at how many reception pupils were identified by LanguageScreen assessments as suitable for NELI.

NELI is designed to be delivered to pupils in their reception year and evidence on the effectiveness of the intervention is based on delivery to this group. One assistant headteacher interviewed described how their school had also included Year 1 pupils in NELI groups. Another reception teacher commented that Year 1 and Year 2 teachers in their school were asked to screen pupils in their class who did not reach their Early Learning goals in reception.

#### 5.5. Were the delivery partners able to successfully monitor and address any delivery issues in Cohort 2 schools (RQ 2.2)?

##### ***Delivery partners flagged concerns about lack of insight into how NELI was being implemented in schools***

Delivery partners observed that relatively little was known about how the NELI programme was implemented in schools:

'We have always been a bit behind in knowing what is actually happening on the ground in schools in terms of [NELI] implementation because obviously if you are delivering a programme of this scale . . . you are not tracking in real-time where they [schools] are up to' (Delivery partner, interviewed July/August 2022).

The delivery team had insight into certain aspects of delivery, for instance, they could see how many LanguageScreen assessments had been carried out and how many school staff had completed the online training. As in the first year of the NELI scale-up, this kind of information was circulated as part of a weekly dashboard shared with the delivery team. However, less was known about the delivery of individual and group NELI sessions.

*'I don't think the delivery team knew well enough at all [what was going on in schools]. Once you have delivered the training, effectively it is entirely down to the school to kind of get on with it' (Delivery partner, interviewed July/August 2022).*

One delivery partner explained how collecting detailed monitoring information in schools is challenging because staff do not necessarily spend a lot of time at their computers, particularly TAs. Long-term, programmes such as NELI might be delivered digitally, which would facilitate the collection of monitoring data, but this is not the case for NELI at the current time.

***A delivery partner administered survey to NELI schools at three points in the 2021/2022 academic year filled some information gaps***

To rectify this information gap, in 2021/2022 delivery partners introduced a survey, which was distributed to NELI leads in Cohort 2 schools (findings from these surveys are included in Section 5). These surveys, distributed at three points over the academic year, collected data on the number of pupils and staff involved in NELI, the number of individual and group NELI sessions delivered and the length of sessions. These surveys gave delivery partners useful insights into implementation in schools, and highlighted concerns about schools' progress and fidelity of delivery. For instance, delivery partners were aware from these surveys that some schools were not doing individual NELI sessions.

*'Because we felt really blind to that in year one [i.e., how NELI was being delivered in schools], the delivery partners put in . . . a requirement for schools signing up to deliver NELI in Year 2 [2021/2022 academic year] to return . . . a questionnaire and that gives us a much closer and better insight into how in-school delivery is going . . . It has been really helpful in understanding challenges for schools, where they are at in their delivery and why' (Delivery partner, interviewed July/August 2022)*

*'As the months have gone on and we have got this feedback from schools, we have got more of a sense of that [delivery/fidelity issues]. We have realised that the actual implementation is really quite far from where we were in the EEF-funded trials that came before the pandemic where schools just weren't facing all those struggles of staff absences and pupil absences' (Delivery partner, interviewed July/August 2022)*

Although they provided useful insights, surveys conducted by delivery partners did not offer a comprehensive picture of NELI delivery in schools. Not all Cohort 2 schools participated in these surveys and those that did may not have been representative of all schools that signed up to deliver NELI in 2021/2022. These limitations also apply to the surveys conducted by RAND Europe to inform the evaluation. The limitations of surveys as a monitoring tool are demonstrated by discrepancies between surveys conducted by RAND Europe and delivery partners relating to the number of group NELI sessions delivered (described in section 5.1).

***Delivery partners were limited in their ability to act to address fidelity issues highlighted by monitoring surveys***

Delivery partners felt that had limited scope to address delivery issues in 2021/2022. Some actions were taken to try and promote fidelity of delivery, such as sending out additional communications to schools and emphasising the importance of programme fidelity. Delivery partners talked about how the messaging around fidelity was complicated. On the one hand, delivery organisations wanted to clearly communicate the intended NELI delivery model and the importance of fidelity. One interviewee from a delivery organisation talked about how it was important to respond to fidelity issues, otherwise schools might start to see it as unproblematic to deliver a truncated or adapted version of the programme. This is particularly concerning given that it is hoped that schools will continue to deliver NELI over the longer-term (see Section 7). At the same time, however, delivery partners were aware of the unprecedented challenges faced by schools in the context of the COVID-19 crisis and wanted to be sensitive to this.

*'Of course, we want the programme to be run as closely to fidelity as possible, but I'd rather that they were doing the best that they could rather than nothing. A bit of a pragmatic response, really' (Delivery partner, interviewed July/August 2022)*

One interviewee from a delivery organisation felt that more might have been done to communicate with schools on this issue and to help them find solutions. This interviewee felt that fidelity might have been improved if there was more of a community of NELI practitioners supporting one another through the challenges faced, or perhaps additional information provided, perhaps through webinars.

One interviewee commented that there had been a more coordinated approach amongst partners to fidelity issues in the first year of the scale-up, when challenges faced by schools were clearer and more uniform (notably, school closures in spring 2021).

***Schools were allowed to continue delivery in 2022/23 when pupils were in Year 1 but this was not actively encouraged the way it had been in the previous year***

There was a discussion amongst delivery partners about whether schools should be allowed or encouraged to continue delivery into the following academic year when pupils were in Year 1 (as there had been in the first year of the scale-up). The scale of delivery challenges and delays was unexpected in 2021/2022, but the delivery team were able to address the issue fairly easily by using the same approach as in the previous academic year. It was up to the school whether they left the programme unfinished or completed it in the following academic year.

‘We already had the Q&A for schools about what to do if they hadn’t finished delivery by the end of the year from NELI 1 so it was really quite easy to say, well we’ll use that again’ (*Delivery partner, interviewed July/August 2022*)

However, continued delivery in year 1 was not actively encouraged in the way that it had been in the previous academic year. For Cohort 1 schools, additional provisions were implemented to enable delivery in Year 1, namely additional NELI packs if needed and free training for Year 1 staff. No such provisions were made for Cohort 2 schools that did not complete delivery in the 2021/2022 academic year.

## 6. Perceived impacts of NELI in Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools

This section focuses on the perceived impact of the NELI programme on pupils, staff, and schools in 2021/2022, addressing research questions 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, and 3.5. Findings in this section relate to both cohorts of schools. In this section, we explore differences across the two cohorts of schools in the perceived impact of NELI.

Box 10: Perceived programme impacts—key lessons

- **NELI was perceived to have a positive impact on pupils' language ability, confidence, and enthusiasm in both Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools delivering the programme in 2021/2022.** Schools that had completed the full NELI programme or were delivering individual or group sessions with fidelity were more likely to observe a positive impact on pupils' language abilities.
- **The impact of delivering NELI on staff members' professional development is greater for TAs than for teachers.** In many schools, the role of TAs is perceived to have changed as a result of taking part in NELI.
- **Differences across Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools in the perceived impact of NELI on pupils' abilities and teachers' knowledge and skills were small or non-existent.**
- **In many schools, NELI is perceived to have resulted in a greater emphasis on evidence-based approaches.**

### 6.1. What is the perceived impact of NELI on reception pupils' language skills (RQ 3.1) and confidence (RQ 3.2) in Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools, based on teachers' and TAs' perceptions?

***Despite the issues with fidelity described earlier in this report, most school staff felt that NELI had a positive impact on pupils' confidence and language abilities***

At the end of the academic year (June/July 2022), school staff were asked how far they agreed with statements about the impact of NELI on participating pupils (Figure 27). The majority surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that they had observed an improvement in the **language ability** (787 of 1,099; 72%) and **confidence** (871 of 1,099; 79%) of pupils participating in the programme, above and beyond what they would normally expect over the course of the year. School staff were slightly more likely to agree that group sessions had a positive impact on pupils' language abilities than individual sessions (Figure 27). This may partially explain why many schools prioritised group sessions over individual sessions.

Staff from case study schools also highlighted the positive impact of NELI on pupils, commenting in particular on improvements in pupils' confidence, speaking and narrations skills, vocabulary, and their level of engagement and enthusiasm:

'They [the pupils participating in NELI] have all made progress . . . Their storytelling is so much better, their verbs and things are better and actually it's quite good language that you wouldn't expect a reception child to be using so you can see that it's had a real impact on them. We are pleased with the outcomes. The children are much more confident to speak' (teacher from a Cohort 2 case study school, interviewed June/July 2022).

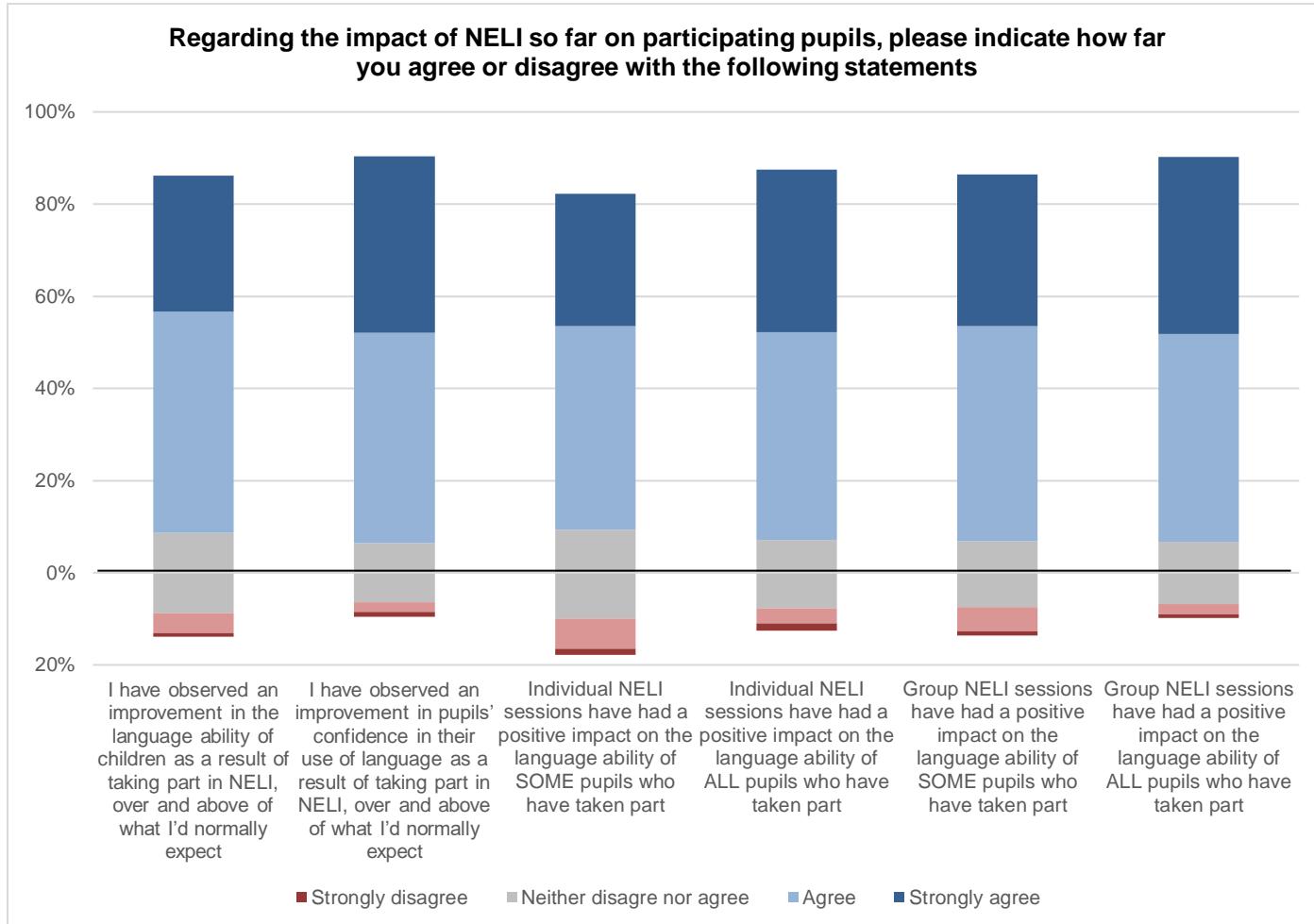
'I think they [the pupils participating in NELI] are all more confident to speak. Speech has improved. Vocabulary has improved. And I know the TA that works in that class commented on one little boy is really knowledgeable on naming objects; he knows what a lot of things are. He's got a broad range of vocabulary to describe—nouns, to describe objects that we wouldn't have expected him to have that when he started in September' (teacher from a Cohort 2 case study school, interviewed June/July 2022).

In an open survey question about the impact of delivering NELI on their school, some staff highlighted the positive impact of the programme on children's social skills:

'Children who may not be in the same friendships groups have been taking part in the group sessions together and it has been lovely to see new friendships blossom due to this' (teacher from a Cohort 1 school, June 2022 survey).

'Children who have taken part in NELI have really developed their social skills. They understand about turn-taking, not talking when others are talking, etc.' (teacher from a Cohort 2 school, June 2022 survey).

Figure 27: Perceived impact of NELI on pupils' language ability and confidence (Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools)



Responses from n = 1,099 school staff surveyed in June 2022

**Schools that had completed the full NELI programme with fidelity were more likely to believe that NELI had a positive impact on pupils' language abilities**

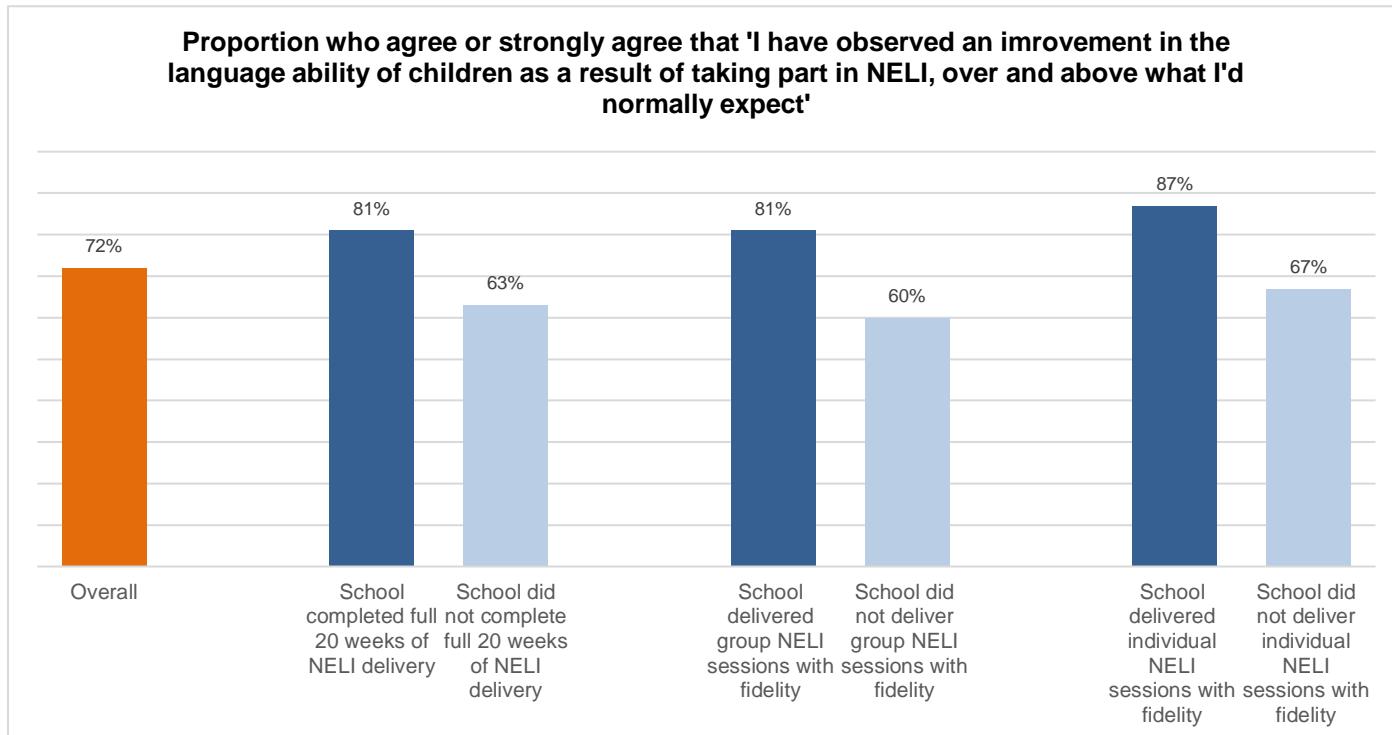
Despite the fact that NELI was not delivered in full or with fidelity in many schools in 2021/2022, the programme was widely perceived to have a positive impact on pupils. One TA interviewed from a Cohort 1 case study school explained that their school had not delivered any individual NELI sessions in 2021/2022 due to staffing issues. However, this interviewee commented that they had observed an improvement in the language abilities of pupils participating in the programme, as evidenced by improved scores on the LanguageScreen assessment. Similarly, a reception teacher in a Cohort 2 school highlighted the beneficial impact of the programme despite the fact that not all pupils had received individual NELI sessions:

'Three of five [pupils] did their individual sessions because two children I found didn't benefit from it, so they only came to the group sessions, where the other three, I could focus on them in their individual sessions. I just think altogether, they've all just massively improved I would say. I think they're all more confident to speak. Speech has improved. Vocabulary has improved' (teacher from a Cohort 2 case study school, interviewed June/July 2022).

One assistant headteacher interviewed from a Cohort 2 school commented that they would have liked more acknowledgement from the delivery team that NELI could still be beneficial for pupils even if not delivered in full or with perfect fidelity.

Survey data suggests that fidelity issues may have weakened the perceived impact of the programme. Staff from schools that had completed NELI delivery were more likely than those who had not completed the full 20 weeks of delivery to agree (or strongly agree) that they had observed a greater than expected improvement in pupils' language abilities (Figure 28). Similarly, staff from schools that had delivered individual and group NELI sessions with fidelity were more likely than others to agree (or strongly agree) on this point. This is consistent with evidence from the effectiveness trial for NELI (Dimova et al., 2020), which found that compliance (measured in terms of training attendance as well as the number of individual and group sessions delivered) increased the impact of the programme.

Figure 28: Perceived impact of NELI on pupils' language ability according to fidelity of delivery (Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools)



Note: delivering group or individual sessions 'with fidelity' is defined as giving the answer 'completely' when asked how often the desired delivery model for individual or group sessions had taken place in their school.

### ***Schools that had reassessed pupils using LanguageScreen found this a helpful exercise***

One teacher from a case study school described how the results from reassessing pupils using LanguageScreen demonstrated the positive impact of the programme:

'Their individual scores across the different areas, you can see that they've all gone up with every assessment point that we've got to, so I think the impact is really good and I think it's clearly measurable as well. I really like that you can see the actual points going up and you can see the impact it's having on them . . . I could see a steady build-up of progress over the intervention, which was really nice so obviously you know that it's having a positive impact halfway through and then you can see the final scores at the end' (teacher from a Cohort 1 case study school, interviewed June/July 2022).

Another teacher from a case study school observed that it was helpful to have the LanguageScreen assessment data at the end of delivery to inform decisions in their school about which intervention(s) to continue with:

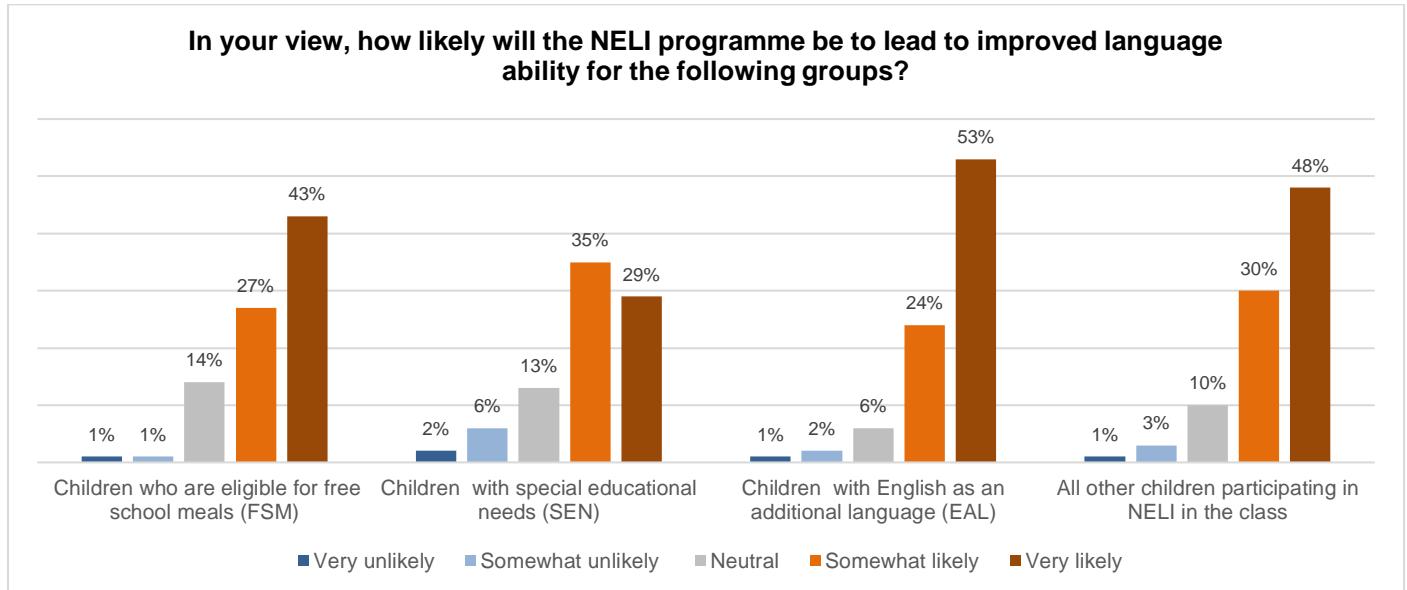
'We are really interested as a school to see that [LanguageScreen] data on performance about our own practice and which interventions are hanging around for too long' (teacher from a Cohort 2 case study school, interviewed June/July 2022).

### ***Although most school staff felt that SEN pupils would benefit from NELI, this group were perceived to benefit less from the programme than other pupils***

School staff surveyed in June 2022 were asked how far they expected different groups of pupils (for example, SEN, EAL, FSM) to benefit from the NELI programme in terms of their language ability (Figure 29). The proportion of school

staff who thought it was very likely that each group would see an improvement in terms of their language ability was higher for EAL (583 of 1,098; 53%) and FSM (469 of 1,098; 43%) pupils compared to SEN pupils (321 of 1,098; 29%), echoing findings from the evaluation of the first year of the NELI scale-up (Disley et al., 2023). However, most school staff surveyed (707 of 1,098; 65%) thought it was likely or very likely that participating in NELI would lead to improvements in the language abilities of SEN pupils.

Figure 29: Perceived impact of NELI on the language abilities of different groups of pupils (Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools)



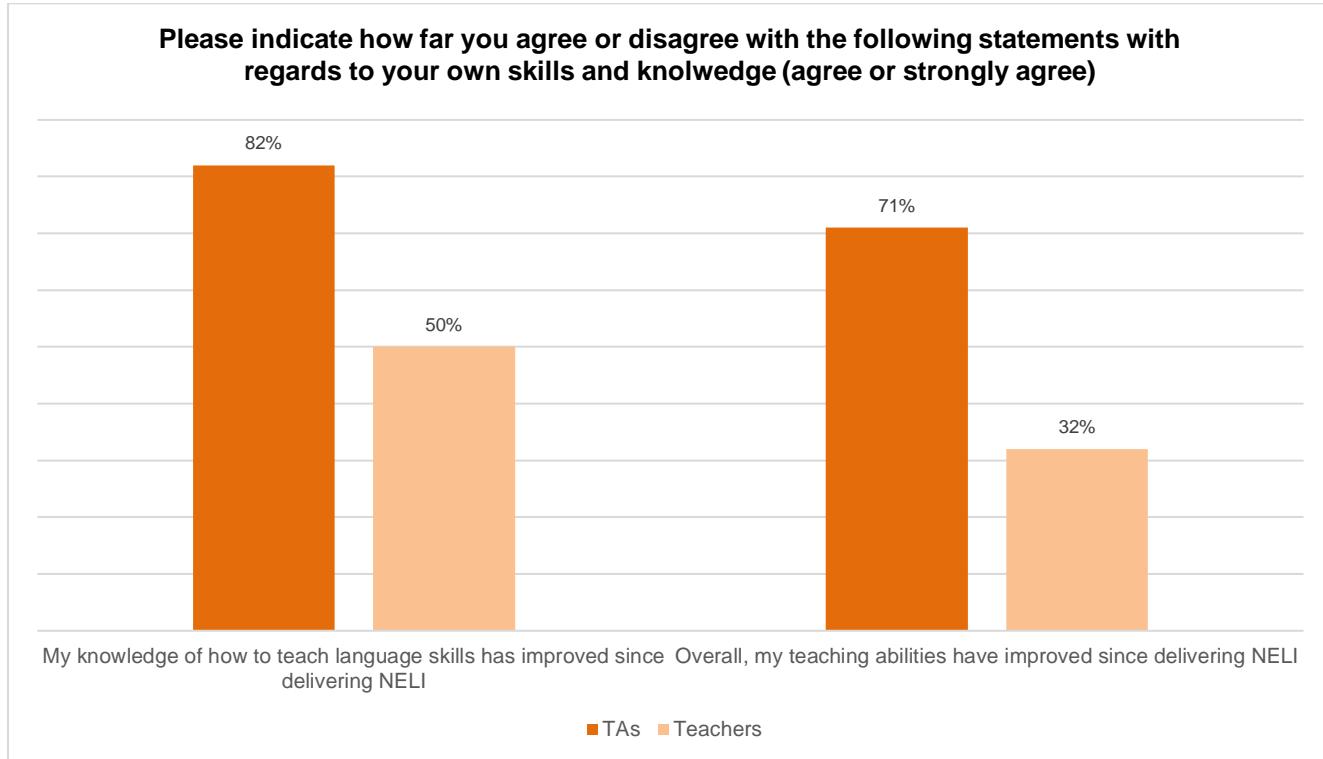
Responses from n = 1,098 school staff surveyed in June 2022

## 6.2. What is the perceived impact of NELI on TA/teacher knowledge of teaching language and early literacy skills to reception pupils in Cohort 1 and 2 schools, based on teachers' and TAs' views (RQ 3.3)?

### **TAs were more likely than teachers to believe that delivering NELI had improved their teaching skills**

School staff surveyed in June 2022 were asked how far they agreed that their 'teaching abilities and knowledge of teaching language skills had improved since delivering NELI'. As shown in Figure 30, the majority of TAs agreed (or strongly agreed) with this statement but fewer than half of teachers surveyed agreed (or strongly agreed) that their overall teaching abilities (131 of 415; 32%) and knowledge of how to teach language skills (206 of 415; 50%) had improved since delivering NELI. One interviewee from a case study school mentioned that for one of her colleagues who is just starting out as a TA, to have delivered NELI is a great asset and a boost for her professional development. Both teachers and TAs were more likely to agree that their knowledge of teaching language skills had improved than their general teaching skills.

Figure 30: Perceived impact of NELI on the skills and knowledge of TAs and teachers (Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools)



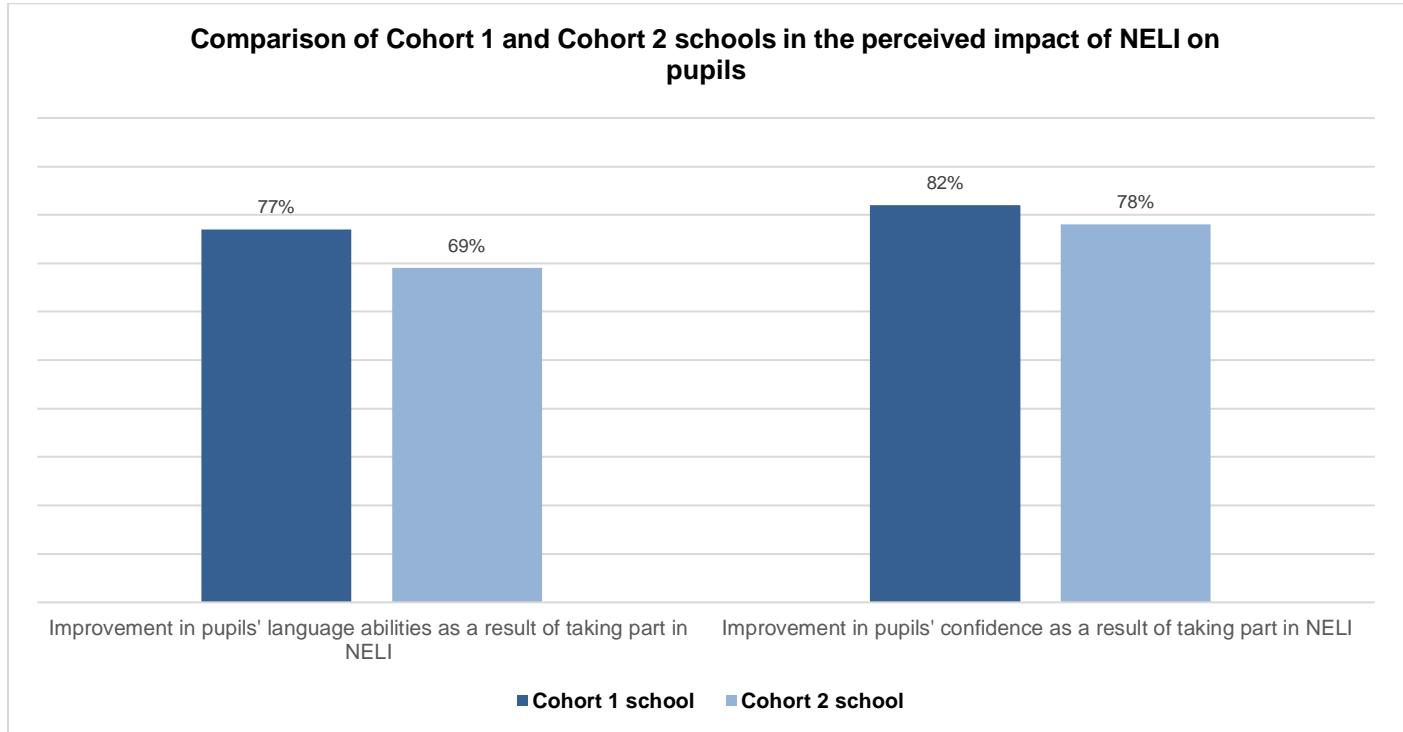
Responses from n = 427 TAs and n = 415 teachers surveyed in June 2022.

**6.3. What differences (if any) in the perceived impact of NELI on reception pupils' language skills and confidence, as well as TA/teacher knowledge of teaching language and early literacy skills to reception pupils, can be observed between Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools (RQ 3.4)?**

***There are few discernible differences between Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools in the perceived impact of NELI***

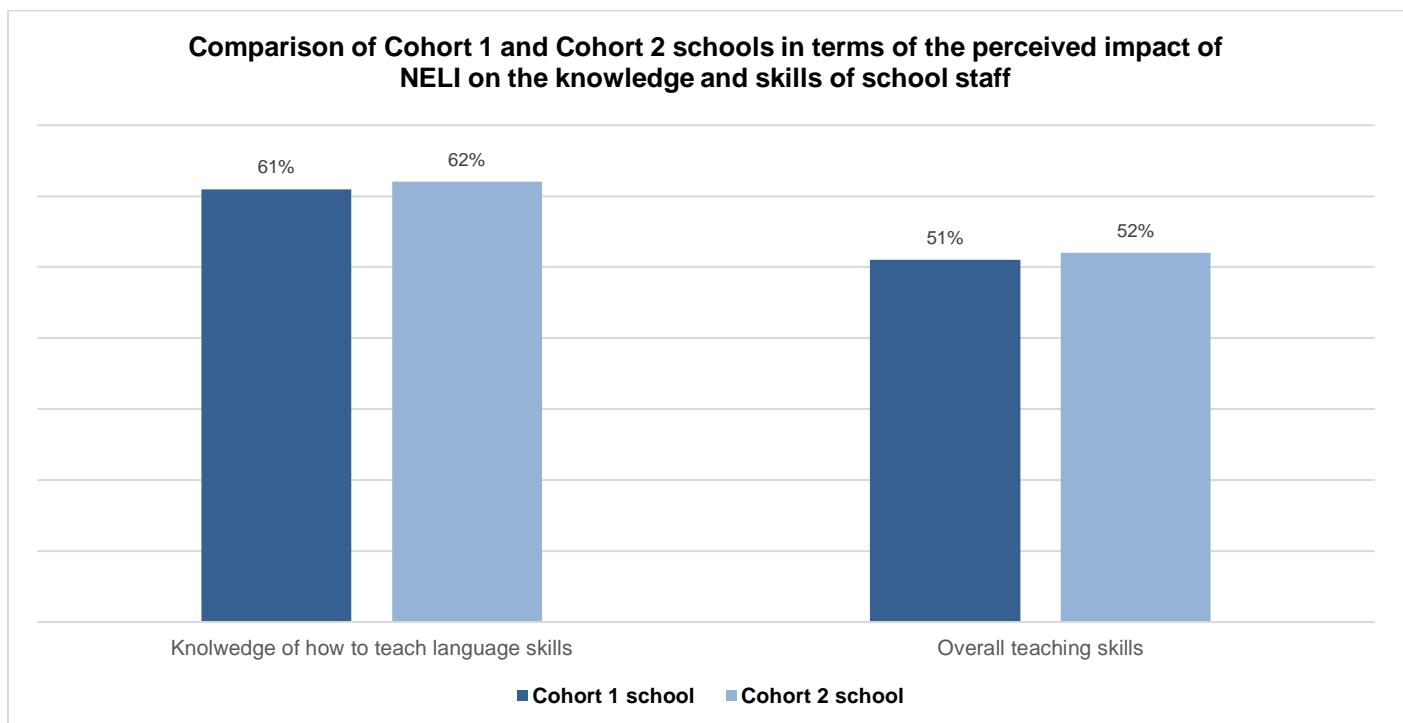
Differences between Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools (i.e., schools that signed up to deliver NELI for the first time in the 2021/2022 academic year and those that signed up in the previous academic year 2020/2021) in terms of the perceived impact of NELI on pupils' language abilities and confidence were modest. A slightly larger proportion of staff in Cohort 1 schools agreed (or strongly agreed) that NELI resulted in a greater than expected improvement in pupils' language abilities (Figure 31), but the difference was small. There were no discernible differences in the perceived impact of NELI on teacher knowledge and skills across Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools (Figure 32).

Figure 31: Perceived impact of NELI on pupils' language abilities and confidence (Cohort 1 vs. Cohort 2 schools)



Responses from n = 343 staff from Cohort 1 schools and n = 756 staff from Cohort 2 schools surveyed in June 2022.

Figure 32: Perceived impact of NELI on the knowledge and skills of school staff (Cohort 1 vs. Cohort 2 schools)



Responses from n = 297 teachers/TAs from Cohort 1 schools and n = 605 teachers/TAs from Cohort 2 schools surveyed in June 2022.

#### 6.4. What are the perceived impacts on the school of delivering NELI (RQ 3.5)?

***Many school staff agreed that delivering NELI had made their school more committed to evidence-based learning***

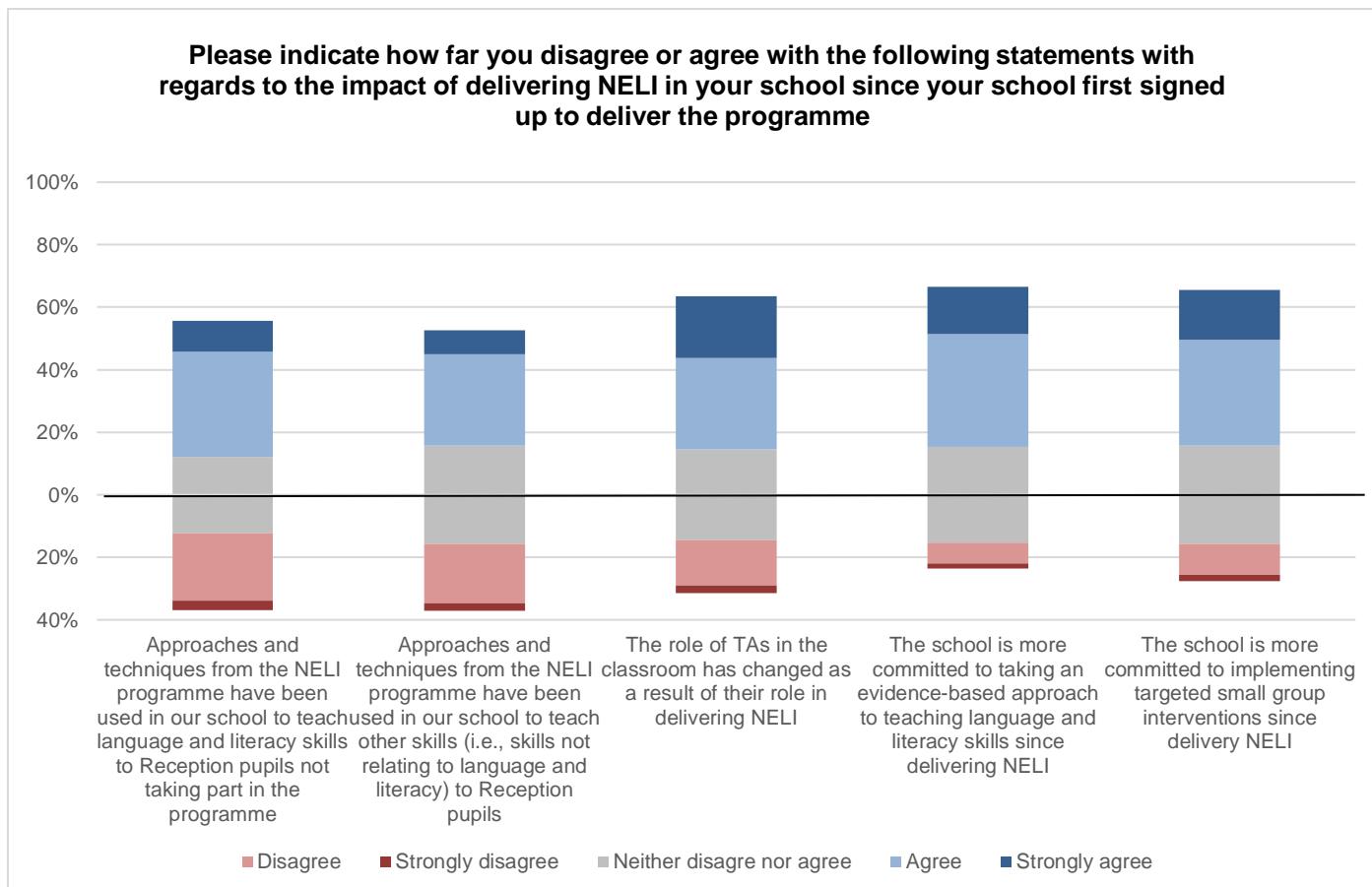
School staff surveyed at the end of the academic year in June 2022 were asked how far they agreed with statements about the impact of delivering NELI on their school (Figure 33). Around half of those surveyed agreed (or strongly agreed) that their school was **more committed to taking an evidence-based approach** to teaching language and literacy skills (591 of 1,155; 51%) and to implementing targeted small group interventions (575 of 1,155; 50%) since delivering NELI. Interviewees from case study schools observed that delivering NELI had **raised awareness about the importance of early years language** in their school:

'I think it's just more awareness of how important language is and actually moving up through the school, it's just that awareness that it's not just about writing things on a bit of paper, it's about those spoken skills and that listening [is important] as well, so I think it is starting to filter through to the rest of the school' (teacher from a Cohort 2 case study school, interviewed June/July 2022).

Many school staff reported that **approaches and techniques from the NELI programme had been used to teach language and literacy skills** (490 of 1,155 or 43% agreed or strongly agreed) and **other skills** (427 of 1,155; 37%) to pupils not taking part in the programme. In an open-survey question about the impact of delivering NELI on their school, one survey participant whose school had screened all reception pupils using LanguageScreen commented that assessments highlighted areas for development across the entire cohort, informing the wider approach to teaching language for that year group.

In line with the perceived impact of NELI on TAs' knowledge and skills, around half of school staff surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that **the role of TAs had changed** as a result of their role in delivering NELI (567 of 1,155; 49%).

Figure 33: Perceived impact of NELI on schools (Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools)



Responses from n = 1,155 school staff surveyed in June 2022.

## 7. The sustainability of NELI after the current funding provided to Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools ends

This section focuses on the sustainability of NELI in terms of Cohort 1 schools' experiencing of continuing with NELI delivery into a second year (research question 5.1) and Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools' intentions to continue with NELI delivery into the 2022/23 academic year (research question 5.2). This section draws on survey data collected by the evaluation team as well as interviews with case study schools and delivery partners.

Box 11: Sustainability—key lessons

### Cohort 1 schools delivering NELI to reception pupils in 2021/2022

- **The majority of Cohort 1 schools continued to deliver NELI to the new cohort of reception pupils in 2021/2022**, despite the fact that many of them were also delivering NELI to Year 1 pupils as part of the extended delivery plan. This demonstrates that there is appetite from schools to continue with NELI delivery over the longer-term, even in a challenging context.
- Cohort 1 schools could nominate new members of staff to undertake the NELI training in 2021/2022. Despite this, some staff from Cohort 1 schools reported that **staff turnover and difficulties training new staff** prevented them from delivering the programme to reception pupils in 2021/2022.
- Having **different support systems** in place for Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools caused some confusion.

### Plans for future NELI delivery in both Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools

- Most schools are **open to continuing with NELI delivery in 2022/23 and beyond**, but many are still undecided. A number of factors contributed to this hesitancy, including concerns about the time commitment involved and not yet knowing the needs of the new cohort. A minority of schools were not sure whether they would continue to deliver NELI, at least in part because of **a perception that the programme was not having the desired impact on pupils' language abilities**. It is not possible to infer as part of this evaluation whether the issues with delivery and fidelity outlined in this report led to poorer outcomes, but it is possible that this may have been a factor.
- Many school staff said their school would need **continued support** to continue delivering NELI. The most important forms of ongoing support mentioned were continued (free) access to training courses and LanguageScreen. An agreement has been reached to enable schools to continue to benefit from free access to training and support in 2022/23. This applies to both Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools. Schools will be able to sign up to deliver NELI for the first time in 2022/23, with places reserved for priority schools

### 7.1. Have Cohort 1 schools recruited in 2020/2021 continued to deliver NELI in 2021/2022 and why (RQ 5.1)?

#### ***Most Cohort 1 schools that responded to surveys delivered NELI to reception pupils in 2021/2022***

Cohort 1 schools surveyed in June 2022—those who signed up to deliver NELI in the 2020/2021 academic year) were asked if they had delivered NELI to the new cohort of reception pupils in 2021/2022. A clear majority (394 of 503; 78%) had done this, despite the fact that during this school year many of these schools were also delivering NELI to Year 1 pupils who had not completed the programme during their reception year (as part of the 'extended delivery plan' for pupils receiving NELI in 2020/2021—see Disley et al., 2023). In fact, Cohort 1 schools that had delivered NELI to Year 1 pupils in 2021/2022 in line with the extended delivery plan were slightly more likely than others to be delivering NELI to the new cohort of reception pupils (175 of 192, 91% vs. 159 of 195, 82%).

#### ***The main barriers to Cohort 1 schools continuing to deliver NELI were lack of time and the impact of COVID-19***

Cohort 1 schools' reasons for not delivering NELI to the new reception cohort in 2021/2022 (Figure 34) were similar to those reported by Cohort 2 schools. Among those that did not continue with delivery (96 of 102; 94%), the main factors identified as important for Cohort 1 schools were **limited staff capacity** (48 of 96; 50%) and the **impact of COVID-19** (21 of 96; 22%). These factors were also highlighted as barriers to delivering NELI to the new cohort by interviewees from Cohort 1 case study schools:

‘Every time we started up with thinking “Yeah, this time we’ll do it” something came up, our plans had to change again, so we never really finished it’ (Early Years Lead from a Cohort 1 case study school, interviewed June/July 2022).

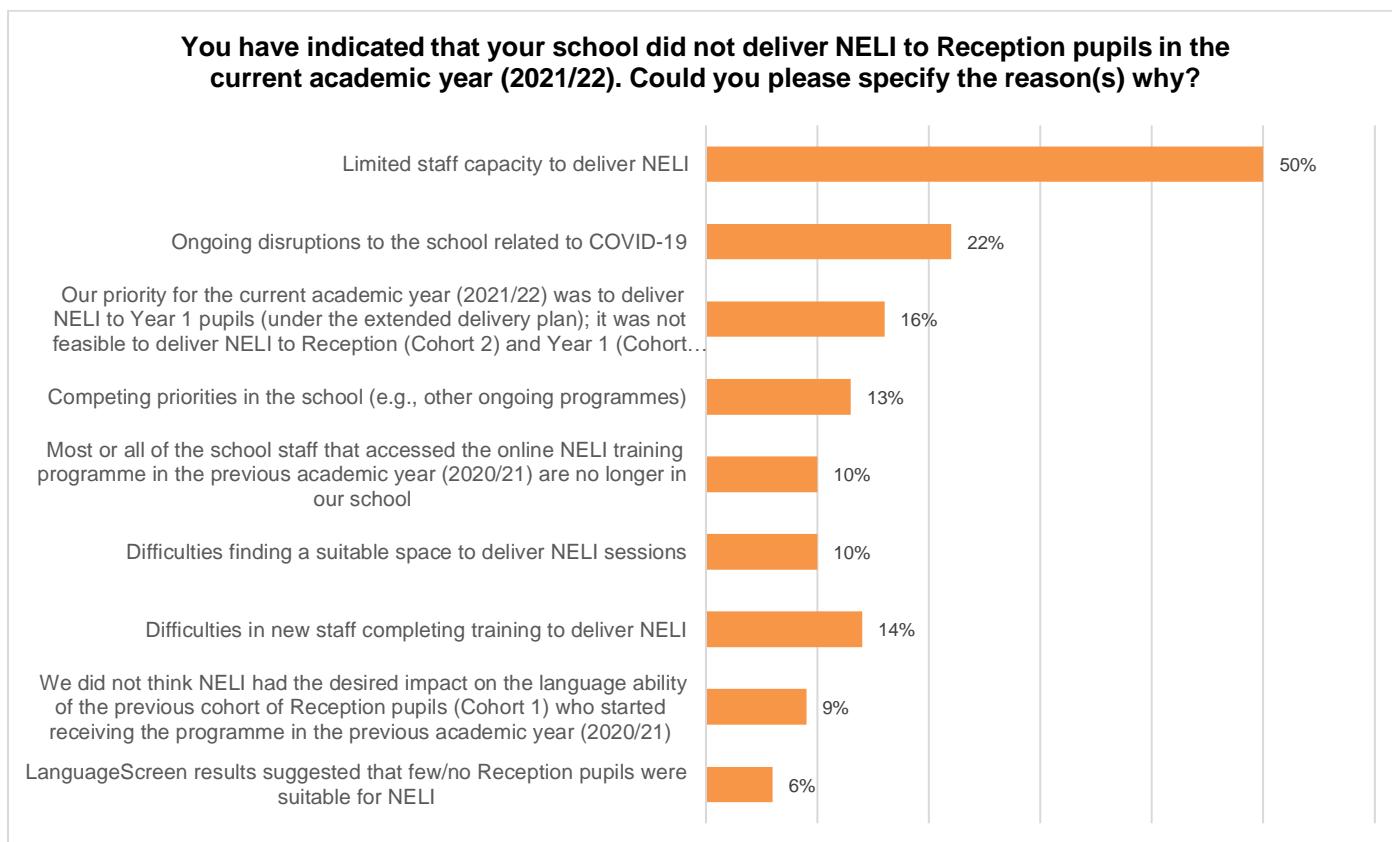
Some staff surveyed from Cohort 1 schools (15 of 96; 16%) reported that they did not deliver NELI to reception pupils in 2021/2022 because **it was not possible to do this while also delivering the programme to Year 1 pupils as part of the extended delivery plan**.

**Staff turnover** also proved to be an issue in some Cohort 1 schools: 10% (10 of 96) not delivering to reception pupils in 2021/2022 identified this as a barrier. Overall, 50% (209 of 415) of staff surveyed from Cohort 1 schools reported that there had been a change in the staff members involved in delivering NELI across the two academic years. Some indicated that their school had experienced **difficulties training up new staff to deliver NELI** (13 of 96; 14%) and identified this as a reason for not delivering the programme in 2021/2022. Delivery partners stressed that it was extremely important that schools already signed up to deliver NELI could nominate new members of staff to undertake the online training. Schools could nominate new members of staff to undertake the training, but one delivery partner observed that this was not communicated clearly enough to schools.

In some Cohort 1 schools there was perceived to be **no need to deliver NELI in 2021/2022** because LanguageScreen results did not identify any pupils suitable for the intervention (6 of 96; 6%). The official advice to schools is that NELI should be delivered to the five or six pupils in the class with the lowest LanguageScreen scores, regardless of the level of those scores. One delivery partner felt this had not been well communicated to schools, some of which thought they should not continue with the programme if no pupils were highlighted as ‘red’.

Finally, a small number of staff from Cohort 1 schools (9 of 96; 9%) reported that they were not delivering NELI to the new cohort of reception pupils in 2021/2022 because based on their experiences in the previous academic year **they did not think it had the desired impact on pupils’ language abilities**.

Figure 34: Reasons for not delivering NELI to reception pupils in 2021/2022 (Cohort 1 schools)

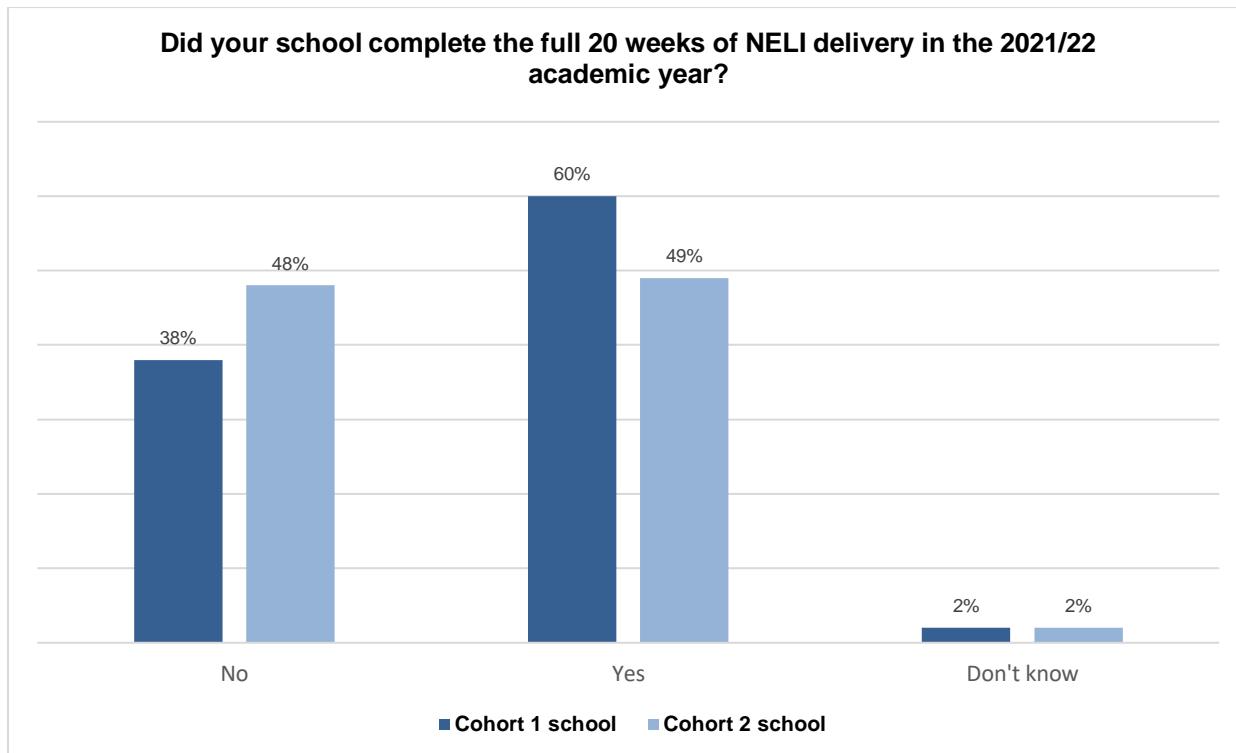


Responses from n = 96 staff from Cohort 1 schools surveyed in June 2022. Respondents could select multiple options.

**Cohort 1 schools were more likely than Cohort 2 schools to complete the full 20 weeks of NELI delivery in 2021/2022**

Cohort 1 schools that were delivering NELI to reception pupils in 2021/2022 were more likely than Cohort 2 schools to complete the full 20 weeks of delivery (121 of 203, 60% vs. 204 of 415, 49%—see Figure 35). This may be related to efficiencies associated with staff having already undertaken the online NELI training and prepared NELI resources.

Figure 35: Proportion of schools that completed NELI delivery (Cohort 1 vs. Cohort 2 schools)

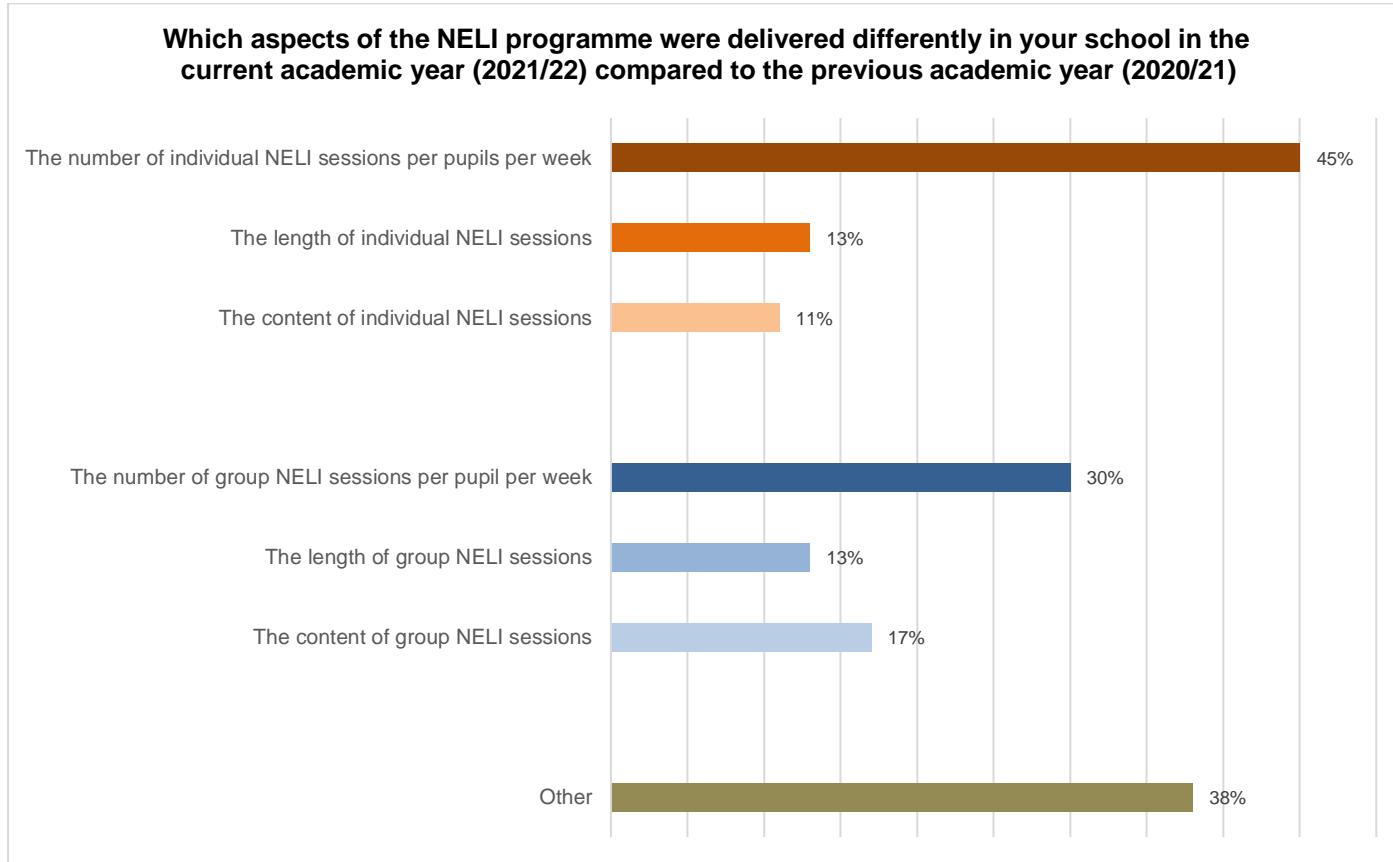


Responses from n = 203 school staff from Cohort 1 schools and n = 415 school staff from Cohort 2 schools surveyed in June 2022.

***It was not uncommon for Cohort 1 schools to make adjustments to NELI delivery in 2021/2022, most commonly in relation to the number of individual or group sessions delivered***

Around a quarter (10 of 47; 23%) of staff from Cohort 1 schools reported that elements of NELI were delivered differently in 2021/2022 compared to 2020/2021. When asked what they had done differently this year (Figure 36), survey participants most commonly mentioned changing the number of individual sessions (21 of 47, 45% of those who changed elements of NELI) and group sessions (14 of 47; 30%). It was less common for school staff to report altering the length of individual (6 of 47; 13%) or group sessions (6 of 47; 13%) or the content of the individual (5 of 47; 11%) and group (8 of 47; 17%) sessions.

Figure 36: Proportion of schools that made adaptations to NELI delivery in 2021/2022 (Cohort 1 schools)



Responses from n = 47 school staff from Cohort 1 schools surveyed in June 2022 who had made adaptations to NELI delivery. Respondents could select multiple options.

Responses under 'other' for this question suggested that for some schools surveyed, the change in the number of NELI sessions was a reflection of the fact that they were able to complete delivery, or at least progress further with delivery compared to the previous academic year. However, one survey participant from a Cohort 1 school mentioned that their school had not delivered individual NELI sessions in 2021/2022 (when they had in the previous academic year):

'We did not run individual sessions as these were too intense for the attention span of the individuals chosen to receive NELI this time' (TA from a Cohort 1 school, surveyed June 2022).

One interviewee from a Cohort 1 case study school also explained that their school had not delivered any NELI individual sessions in 2021/2022 due to time constraints.

In terms of changes to the content of NELI individual/group sessions, survey participants mentioned making adjustments for EAL students such as a stronger emphasis on vocabulary, as well as (unspecified) changes to make the sessions more interesting and engaging for the pupils. In relation to group sessions, one survey participant mentioned skipping the content on phonics since this was already familiar to most pupils.

One interviewee from a Cohort 1 case study school explained that their school had a smaller NELI cohort in 2021/2022 compared to 2020/2021. This was a deliberate choice rather than a result of fewer pupils being in need of the programme. This school felt that they could only afford to deliver NELI to a small number of pupils due to costs associated with staff time:

'It was a smaller cohort that received it [than the previous academic year], whereas before it wasn't that we had fewer children that needed it, it was that we could only afford to deliver it to fewer children, so that was different. Whereas before, we made it happen for all those that needed it. This time it was like "OK, who needs it the most" and they got picked. It wasn't who needed it, it's who needs it the most' (Early Years Lead from a Cohort 1 case study school, interviewed June/July 2022).

### ***Having different support systems in place for Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools caused some confusion***

Some Cohort 1 schools that were already registered to deliver the programme tried to register on TeachNELI (a resource designed for Cohort 2 schools). The delivery team had to use the DfE's list of Cohort 1 schools to block these schools. Delivery partners found that Cohort 1 schools still needed a lot of support in 2021/2022, more than was expected:

'Schools need a lot more hand-holding than we thought they did. You think once they've been given a programme they'd just be able to kind of continue delivering it but actually, they needed a facility to ensure that they were doing that, that they didn't need to re-register or needed to write it to make sure they got it or they need it to access more training for people and things like that' (delivery partner, interviewed Jan/Feb 2022).

Some Cohort 1 schools tried to access TeachNELI for information and advice, not realising that this was for Cohort 2 schools and that they were supposed to use the same support channels as in 2020/2021 (email and phone support, NELI Delivery Support Hub, and NELI mentors on FutureLearn):

'I think what made things really complicated is that we've got TeachNELI for year two [Cohort 2] schools and they knew about that or found it when they Google things and things like that, and so they didn't know where to go for support because the support functions for the first year were kind of hidden. That's quite confusing, but ultimately a lot of people are still getting support' (Delivery partner, interviewed Jan/Feb 2022).

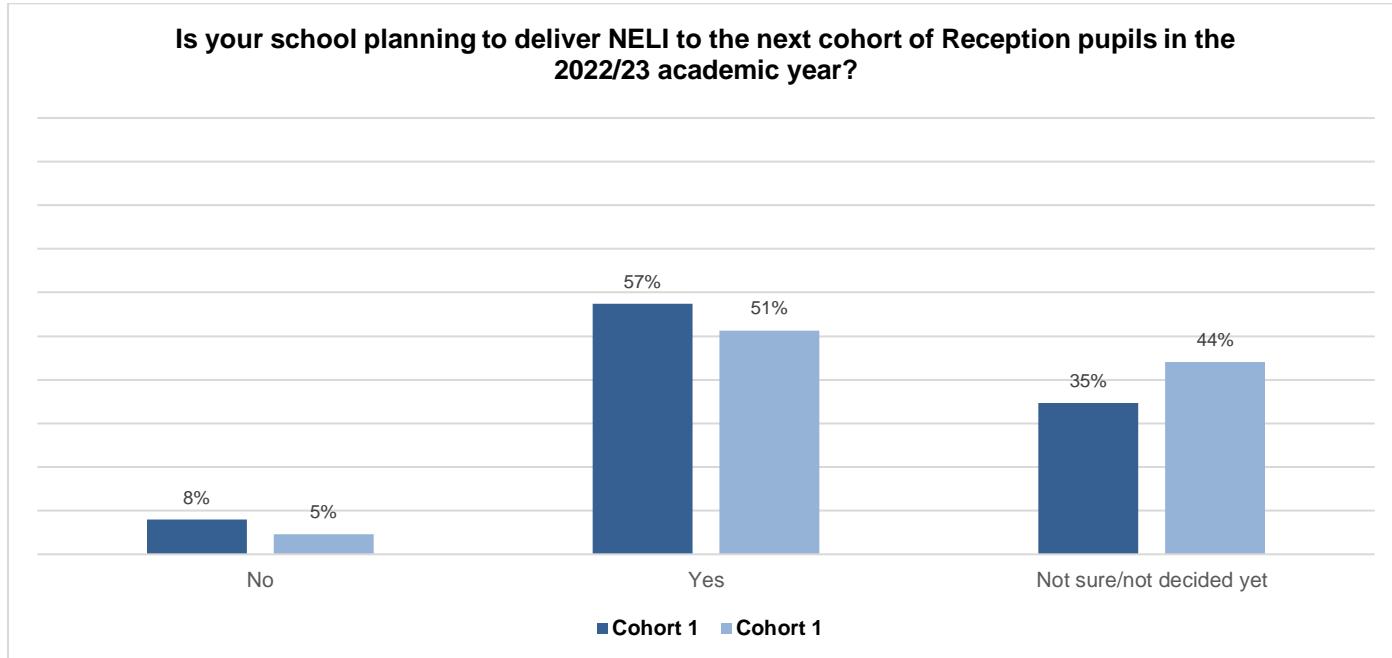
Delivery partners explained that they were able to direct such queries to the correct channel and respond to them. Cohort 1 schools could use the live chat on TeachNELI to reach the support team even though they could not log into their own account like Cohort 2 schools could. In the future, OxEd hope to redevelop TeachNELI as a 'one stop shop' for all cohorts of schools, including those that might sign up in the future.

## **7.2. To what extent do Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools intend to continue to deliver NELI in the next 2022/23 academic year and why (RQ 5.2)?**

### ***Many school staff were unsure whether their school would continue with NELI delivery in 2022/2023***

Schools surveyed at the end of 2021/2022 were asked if they intended to deliver NELI to the next cohort of reception pupils in the following year. A small proportion of staff surveyed (72 of 1,264; 6%) said their school was not planning to continue with NELI delivery and around half said they were (674 of 1264; 53%); the remainder were undecided (518 of 1264; 41%). The proportion of schools intending to continue was slightly higher in Cohort 1 compared to Cohort 2, as shown in Figure 37. Many case study schools interviewed at the end of 2021/2022 were planning to deliver NELI in the next academic year, although some were undecided. Interviewees from case study schools referred to the positive impact they had observed on reception pupils as a motivating factor in planning to deliver in the next academic year.

Figure 37: Intention to continue with NELI delivery in the 2022/2023 academic year (Cohort 1 vs. Cohort 2 schools)



Responses from n = 416 school staff from Cohort 1 schools and n = 848 school staff from Cohort 2 schools surveyed in June 2022.

***Many schools that were planning to continue with NELI were considering making changes or adaptations to how they delivered the programme***

Schools that were planning to continue with NELI delivery in 2022/23 were asked whether they planned to make any changes or adaptations to the programme for future cohorts of reception pupils. Just over a third of school staff (230 of 674; 34%) said no, 18% (124 of 674) said yes, and almost half (320 of 674; 48%) said they had not decided yet. This may indicate that some school staff see the NELI delivery model as flexible and adaptable rather than adhering strictly to the intended delivery model. Possible adaptations mentioned by school staff in the survey and interviews included not delivering individual NELI sessions, leaving out some of the content (for example, phonics), changing the order of the programme (for example, incorporating phonics into Part 1), and only delivering NELI Part 1:

‘On reflection, we have the biggest impact after Part 1 delivery so will just deliver that moving forward’ (TA from a Cohort 2 school, surveyed June 2022).

‘We will definitely continue with three group sessions a week; not sure with individual sessions as a lot of extra planning time was needed for the TAs’ (Early Years Lead from a Cohort 2 case study school, interviewed June/July 2022).

One interviewee from a case study school explained that their school was not planning to screen all reception pupils using LanguageScreen in the future because this was too time consuming. Not all planned changes and adaptations were associated with poor or lower fidelity, however. School staff mentioned starting the programme earlier (in the autumn), having smaller NELI groups, and having more individual NELI sessions. Some mentioned adapting specific sessions or content to make these better understood, particularly for SEN pupils, but did not go into detail about what this would entail. Some mentioned the possibility of allowing older or younger pupils to participate in NELI.

***A number of factors contributed to hesitancy about continuing with NELI delivery, including the time commitment involved***

Schools that were not planning to continue with NELI delivery in the 2022/2023 academic year and those who were undecided were asked why this was (Figure 37). Concerns about **staff capacity** and **whether NELI could be balanced with other school commitments** emerged as key reasons. Interviewees also expressed reservations about the amount of time involved in preparing for and delivering NELI. One interviewee from a case study school commented that it would depend on staffing that year.

Around a third of staff whose school had decided not to continue with NELI delivery said this was because **they felt the programme was not having the desired impact**. Caution is required since this is based on a small number of responses but it is possible that low fidelity may have led to poorer outcomes for some schools leading them to question the value of the programme. Concerns about the impact of the programme were not highlighted by any interviewees from case study schools, although one interviewee commented that the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of the programme would factor into their school's decision.

Just over a third of schools that were undecided said they were **waiting to see the results of the LanguageScreen assessment** in 2022/2023 before making a decision. Under 'other', some school staff said they were waiting to hear from the SLT in their school or their MAT before making a decision.

Although only mentioned by a small number of schools, **staff turnover** was identified as a barrier to continuing with NELI delivery. Some school staff who participated in the survey reported their school could not afford to train additional staff to deliver NELI.

Around a quarter of staff whose school was not planning to continue with delivery said that the **end of DfE funding** was a factor in this. Under 'other', some responses mentioned the (expected) cost of delivering the programme, and this was also highlighted by some interviewees.

Table 10: Reasons for not planning to continue with NELI in 2022/2023, or being undecided (Cohort 1 and Cohort 2)

	Reasons for not planning to deliver NELI in 2022/2023	Reasons for being undecided about delivering NELI in 2022/2023
Competing priorities in the school (e.g., other ongoing programmes)	36%	27%
Limited staff capacity to deliver NELI	67%	45%
We do not think NELI is having the desired impact on the language ability of reception pupils that have received the intervention so far	35%	7%
Most or all of the school staff that have accessed the online NELI training are no longer in our school	3%	7%
The school is not able to cover the costs of training additional school staff via the online NELI training programme	10%	5%
End of DfE funded support	25%	16%
Ongoing disruptions to the school related to COVID-19	1%	5%
Difficulties finding a suitable space to deliver NELI sessions	19%	16%
We expect that few/no pupils in the next cohort of reception pupils will be suitable to participate in NELI	17%	N/A
We are waiting for the results of the LanguageScreen assessment for this cohort	N/A	37%
Other	25%	30%
<i>Total</i>	72	518

***In order to continue with NELI delivery, some schools would need continued access to (funded) resources***

Schools that have already completed a year of delivery should be well placed to continue in future years:

'The whole thing about the programme is of course that once the school has got a trained person to deliver the programme and they have got the resources, they can deliver it year on year on year so multiple cohorts benefit' (delivery partner, interviewed July/August 2022).

Interviewees from case study schools commented that they had the resources they needed to deliver NELI.

School staff who took part in the survey and interviews at the end of the academic year were asked what resources and support they needed to continue with NELI delivery. Some school staff commented that they would need continued access to **NELI resources and support**:

‘Being able to continue to access the online support, training, and having the correct resources to ensure the programme is continued in the manner at which it should’ (headteacher/other SLT member from a Cohort 2 school, surveyed June 2022).

In terms of the training, school staff highlighted the need to be able to train new members of staff involved in delivering NELI (at no cost). There was also a suggestion that staff who were already trained to deliver the programme would benefit from continued access to FutureLearn as a refresher:

‘I guess it would be really useful to have an update on the training because although they’ve done it all it’s useful to kind of touch base so you haven’t fallen into habits of things that you shouldn’t do’ (Early Years Lead from a Cohort 2 case study school, interviewed June/July 2022).

Aware that NELI resources and support in 2021/2022 (and 2020/2021) were made available to schools by a DfE grant, some school staff commented that there would need to be continued funding for them to continue with delivery. Some school staff indicated that their school would need access to additional resources and support that had not been available in 2021/2022 and 2020/2021 to continue with NELI delivery. Some felt they would need additional staff and there was a suggestion that funding could cover (some) of the cost of delivering the programme in terms of staff time.

Some school staff who participated in the survey commented that their school would be more likely to continue with NELI delivery if the programme was shortened or resources were preprepared or took less time to prepare.

***An agreement has been reached to enable new schools to sign up to deliver NELI in 2022/2023 and to support Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools to continue with delivery***

Delivery partners were united in their desire to continue to enable schools to deliver NELI and were acutely aware that there was an ongoing need for the programme, particularly in light of the continued impact of COVID-19:

‘For the new kids who are coming in reception this September . . . these kids have actually had half their lives, you know, during pandemic conditions of some sort or another so they are absolutely ripe for this programme. So, I think it is absolutely the right thing to do to try and find a way of enabling those schools that took on the programme . . . to be able to pick things up and carry on. And in addition, there are some schools—and we think it is a relatively small number—that, for whatever reason, were unable or unwilling to take up the offer in the first two years of the programme’ (Delivery partner, interviewed July/August 2022).

However, reaching an agreement about what form this continued support would take was described by delivery partners as a complex and lengthy process. An agreement was reached in the summer of 2022 to support Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools with continued delivery and to enable a small number of new schools to sign up to deliver NELI in 2022/2023. No additional application for funding was made to the DfE or other potential funders to support NELI delivery in 2022/2023 and beyond. Ongoing support in the 2022/2023 academic year will be funded by repurposing grant money left over from 2022/2023.

It will be possible for new schools to sign up to deliver NELI in the 2022/2023 academic year but it is anticipated that these will be small in number given that non-participating schools have refused the NELI offer two times. Recruitment for 2022/2023 will be light touch with a hard deadline of 31 October 2022 for signing up to enable schools sufficient time to prepare for and deliver the programme. Funding is available to provide priority schools with the same support package—NELI resource backs, free access to LanguageScreen, and FutureLearn—that was available in the previous two years.

Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools that have already signed up to deliver NELI will continue to receive free access to NELI training and support on the platform FutureLearn and free unlimited access to the LanguageScreen app during the 2022/2023 academic year. (Continued access to LanguageScreen for Cohort 1 schools—for which the two-year LanguageScreen licence will be over—is being funded directly by OxEd, not the DfE.) Full support will be available for all schools in 2022/2023, including the Delivery Hub, the NELI mentors, the live chat, and email support.

Delays reaching an agreement about NELI delivery in 2022/2023 meant that the support on offer could not be communicated to schools in the previous academic year, giving them time to plan and prepare. Delivery partners described this as ‘frustrating’ and commented that many schools had been asking questions about this which they had been unable to answer. Support available during 2022/2023 was communicated to schools in mid-September 2022.

At the time of writing, no agreement had been reached about the funding and delivery of NELI after 2022/2023. In terms of NELI delivery in the longer term, the intention is for it to be made available to schools in the devolved nations and outside the U.K., although this is separate to the funding agreement reached between the delivery partners and the DfE.

## 8. Overall reflections on the scale-up in 2021/2022

This section is an overall reflection on the scale-up in 2021/2022, exploring its perceived effectiveness and lessons learnt for future delivery. This section addresses research questions 4.4 and 4.5.

### 8.1. To what extent was the approach and process of scale-up in 2021/2022 effective according to the perception of schools and delivery partners (RQ 4.4)?

Overall, delivery partners felt the second year of the NELI scale-up had gone very well. One commented that they were profoundly proud of the progress that had been made since the first year of the scale-up.

To summarise elements of the scale-up in 2021/2022 that were perceived to go well:

**All schools in England were given the opportunity to participate in NELI, enabling as many children as possible to benefit from the programme.** Across both academic years (2020/2021 and 2021/2022) almost 11,000 schools—around two thirds of state-funded primary schools in England—signed up to deliver NELI through the DfE-funded offer. In 2021/2022, close to the maximum number of schools (given the available budget) were recruited and the majority of those were priority schools. Recruitment efforts were extensive and wide-ranging, and new recruitment strategies used in 2021/2022 such as webinars and LA engagement appeared to be successful.

‘In terms of offering the programme to as many schools as possible it [the second year of the NELI scale-up] was highly successful. As far as I am aware, every school was offered the programme and all the schools that wanted the programme, got the programme’ (delivery partner, interviewed July/August 2022).

**The delivery team built on lessons learned in the first year of the scale-up to improve and streamline delivery in 2021/2022.** Based on learnings from 2020/2021, a number of changes and adaptations were introduced including improved data management processes, self-registration for schools, changing the recruitment approach (webinars, engaging local networks), and shifting the recruitment process earlier.

**The self-registration process for schools via TeachNELI was effective, efficient, and well received by schools.** Auto populating information based on schools’ URN improved accuracy and reduced the risk of error. This process was widely regarded as easy and straightforward by school staff, suggesting that these changes worked well for all parties.

**Delivery of the different elements of the programme—training, LanguageScreen, and NELI resource packs—all went to plan.** The training continued to be highly regarded by school staff and widely perceived to be useful. Most schools used LanguageScreen to assess all reception pupils (as intended) and found this a helpful exercise. School staff generally felt well supported and were impressed by the quality of the materials in the NELI resource packs.

#### Aspects of the NELI scale-up that were described as less successful in 2021/2022

**A large proportion of schools did not finish delivering the full 20 weeks of NELI during 2021/2022, meaning that pupils did not benefit from the full programme.** Delivery partners recognised the enormous pressure on schools due to COVID-19 in 2021/2022, the impact of which had been underestimated by them, having initially expected that the impact of the pandemic would be markedly less in 2021/2022 compared to 2020/2021. The impact of COVID-19 in the first year of the scale-up was easier for the delivery team to respond to in some ways because it was more uniform across schools (for example, school closures). One delivery partner described how the team had to continually adjust their expectations over the course of the year as it became clear that COVID-19 would continue to present major challenges to schools. In addition, **fidelity of delivery in terms of NELI group and individual sessions was low**, with many schools adapting the programme to fit what was feasible in their school. In particular, fidelity with individual sessions was low, with many schools dropping the individual sessions or reducing their number or length.

**Delivery partners had imperfect insight into these issues and there was limited scope to address concerns about schools’ progress with NELI and fidelity of delivery.** A survey was introduced to collect data on delivery in Cohort 2 schools in 2021/2022, which highlighted issues with delays and poor fidelity. Even being aware of these issues, however, there was little that the delivery team could do to encourage schools to complete delivery and to deliver the programme with fidelity.

**Delivery partners were not always in agreement in terms of how they perceived these deviations from the desired delivery model and how to address them.** Some delivery partners were very concerned about issues with fidelity since this draws the programme away from the evidence-based model. Evidence from trials shows that compliance increases the impact of NELI (Dimova et al., 2020), although it cannot be established from this evaluation how the fidelity issues described impacted pupil outcomes. What can be established from this evaluation is that despite issues with fidelity, the programme was still widely perceived by school staff to be beneficial. Some delivery partners felt that the programme would still be beneficial even if it was not delivered in full or with perfect fidelity. However, other partners challenged this perspective, suggesting that schools might lose interest in NELI if they have not seen the desired impact (because the programme had not been delivered with fidelity). Some partners were more concerned than others about the programme being delivered across two academic years and the idea that this might become the norm rather than an exception introduced in response to exceptional circumstances in 2020/2021 associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. These different viewpoints have not yet been fully resolved, leaving an open question about what NELI delivery can or should look like in the future.

## 8.2. What lessons can be drawn for others intending to implement similar programmes in a similar number of schools within similar timeframes (RQ 4.5)?

The table below outlines lessons identified by the research team based on the evaluation findings for future delivery of NELI and similar educational programmes delivered at scale. Key findings are structured according to the five topic areas for this evaluation.

Table 11: Key findings—implications and recommendations

Topic area	Evaluation finding	Lessons for NELI and similar programmes
School recruitment and reach	Building on learnings from the first year of the scale-up, the delivery team introduced webinars to share information about the programme and took steps to engage with local networks such as MATs and LAs. These strategies appeared to work well, with many school staff having heard about the programme via these channels.	Recruitment for large-scale educational programmes can benefit from online information sharing (for example, webinars) and by engaging with local networks such as MATs and LAs.
	Moving the recruitment window earlier to start in the previous academic year worked well, and a long recruitment window gave schools time and flexibility. However, longer recruitment windows complicate the process of communicating with schools since they are not delivering the programme on the same schedule.	The recruitment window for educational programmes should start in the previous academic year to allow sufficient time for planning, and be long enough to give schools flexibility and consider relevant funding and staffing issues (without making communication too complex for delivery organisations).
Fidelity of delivery of NELI	In 2021/2022, delivery partners introduced regular surveys of participating schools. This gave helpful insights into the challenges faced and flagged concerns about schools' progress and fidelity of delivery.	Where possible, delivery organisations should build in mechanisms to understand how programmes are being implemented in schools. Monitoring should start early in the delivery period and take place regularly, ideally on a continuous basis.
	Many Cohort 2 schools did not complete the full 20 weeks of NELI delivery and the programme was often not delivered according to the intended delivery model. It was not uncommon for schools to drop individual NELI sessions entirely. When asked to explain this, school staff generally pointed to a lack of staff time and capacity, particularly given ongoing disruption caused by COVID-19. Some school staff found that the NELI programme, particularly the online training, took longer to deliver than they had anticipated.	The time commitment involving in preparing and delivering educational programmes needs to be clearly communicated to schools, particularly in light of challenges faced (high staff workload, staff turnover, difficulty freeing up time in the school timetable), which were exacerbated by COVID-19. Delivery teams should consider how to minimise time required to prepare materials and resources, and as far as possible free up staff time for preparing for and delivering the programme. Schools should be encouraged and supported to build all staff time involved in delivering programmes into the school timetable. This may be facilitated by securing buy-in from SLT members during the recruitment and onboarding phase.
	It was difficult for delivery organisations to respond to fidelity issues because low fidelity was not generally caused by a lack of knowledge or understanding but rather practical constraints. Delivery organisations understood the challenges faced by schools and wanted to be sensitive to this. Delivery partners were	Delivery organisations should agree in advance how to respond to fidelity issues and the degree to which fidelity should be prioritised over other factors (such as the number of schools participating or the length or thoroughness of the programme).

	not always in aligned in the importance they assigned to delivery with fidelity as against delivering some of the programme, which may still have been beneficial to pupils.	As in the NELI scale-up, delivery partners should consider strategies for continued engagement and support over the delivery period such as building a community of practitioners for peer support or having a dedicated member of staff to liaise with schools.
<b>Perceived impact</b>	Despite delays and issues with fidelity, the programme was widely perceived as beneficial for pupils' language development and confidence using language. However, the perceived impact of the programme was greater for schools that had delivered the programme with fidelity.	Educational programmes may be delivered without perfect fidelity and still be perceived by school staff to have a beneficial impact for pupils and staff. However, fidelity issues likely undermine the effectiveness of programmes to some extent. There is a risk that schools attribute this to the programme itself rather than deviations from the intended delivery programme. This underscores the importance of communicating the implications of poor fidelity to schools and facilitating fidelity of delivery by clearly communicating the time and resources required to deliver interventions at the recruitment and onboarding phase.
<b>Transition of scale-up approach</b>	The TeachNELI website was created to be a 'one stop shop', providing the means of registering and a source of detailed information about the programme for schools in 2021/2022. This worked well, but the fact that Cohort 1 schools could not register and log in to TeachNELI created confusion. Some school staff expressed a desire for fewer separate platforms and log-ins relating to NELI (for example, LanguageScreen, FutureLearn, TeachNELI).	The process should be streamlined as far as possible for schools, ideally creating a single point of contact for all information and communication.
	For the second year of the NELI scale-up, schools registered themselves via the TeachNELI portal, with certain fields auto-populated based on the school's unique reference number. This made the registration process simpler and quicker, reducing the risk of manual error. Self-registration was perceived positively by both school staff and delivery partners, with most school staff describing the process as easy and straightforward.	Self-registration for schools can work well if a suitable platform/portal is developed and there is sufficient support for schools that encounter difficulties. If implemented well, self-registration can be 'win-win', creating efficiencies and cost savings for the delivery team while enabling a straightforward process for schools.
<b>Sustainability of NELI</b>	Most Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools are open to continuing with NELI delivery in 2022/2023 and beyond. However, many schools are unsure whether they will continue with the programme. Although schools have the resources they need to continue with delivery, they will need some continued support (training new staff, replacement NELI packs). Some school staff stressed that they would need training/LanguageScreen/resource packs to continue to be available for free to continue with delivery.	Some level of ongoing support is likely needed to enable long-term NELI delivery, responding to staff turnover and wear and tear of resources. Given the high level of buy-in to NELI from schools and the fact that the programme is widely perceived to have a beneficial impact, schools may be willing to invest their own financial resources in the programme. However, withdrawing funded resources may result in fewer schools participating in the programme or a lower fidelity of delivery.

### 8.3. Overall reflections on the scale-up across the 2020/2021 and 2021/2022 academic years

In 2020/2021 and 2021/2022, the NELI programme—previously delivered in a relatively small number of schools in a trial setting—was offered to all state-funded schools with reception pupils in England. The DfE funding for both years enabled key aspects of the intervention—training for staff, pupil screening, and materials and resources required to deliver NELI—to be made available to schools for free. Across both academic years, around two thirds of state-funded primary schools in England took up the offer and signed up to deliver the programme. In addition to the sheer scale of implementation, the NELI scale-up is noteworthy because of the speed at which the intervention was scaled up, responding to an emerging and evolving crisis (COVID-19) with profound implications for children's language development. This evaluation seeks to draw lessons from this experience for future implementation of NELI and other educational programmes.

This report focuses on the implementation of NELI in the second year of the scale-up (2021/2022) whereas the previous report (Disley et al., 2023) focused on the first year. This final section summarises key themes, commonalities, and differences across the two years and reflects on knowledge gaps and areas for future research.

A key theme across both years was the **high level of interest and buy-in from schools**. As evidenced by the fact that approximately two-thirds of schools with reception pupils in England took up the NELI offer, schools are committed to investing in early years language skills, particularly given the negative impact of the COVID-19 crisis on children's development. Overwhelmingly, schools talked about the programme in positive terms and perceived it to have a positive impact on pupils' language skills and confidence. What remains unknown is the extent to which this enthusiasm will translate into willingness to invest financial resources in the programme if/when DfE funding comes to an end (the DfE-funded offer will continue for the 2022/2023 academic year but no decisions have been made regarding funding from August 2023 onward).

Another key theme undercutting the evaluation findings from both years was the impact of practical constraints faced by schools, particularly **lack of staff time** and **difficulty finding time during the working day** for staff to prepare for and deliver NELI. These challenges were exacerbated by—but not solely attributable to—the COVID-19 pandemic, which increased pressure on schools and resulted in greater staff absence. Barriers relating to staffing and resourcing in schools are not specific to NELI and would likely also apply to other educational interventions. However, the amount of time required to prepare for and deliver NELI sessions was highlighted by school staff who took part in the research as 'challenging' in light of these wider issues.

Linked to these challenges, across both academic years **many schools that participated in the evaluation did not deliver the NELI programme in full or in accordance with the intended delivery model**. The evaluation report of the effectiveness trial for NELI (Dimova et al., 2020) found that increased compliance (measured in terms of training attendance and delivery of individual and group NELI sessions) resulted in better language outcomes for pupils. Further research is needed to understand how the fidelity of NELI delivered at scale affects pupil outcomes and this will be explored in the upcoming impact evaluation (Worth et al, 2023). What can be established from this evaluation is that **school staff still perceive NELI to have a beneficial effect on pupil and staff outcomes**, even if the programme is not always delivered with fidelity. However, this data is limited to the *perceived* impact of NELI.

Delivering NELI at speed at an enormous scale created challenges for delivery partners in terms of communication and logistics. As described in this report, several **changes and adaptations were introduced for the second year of the scale-up** (2021/2022) in terms of the structure of the delivery team, recruitment, school registration, and data management. New monitoring systems were put in place, which gave the team insight into challenges faced by schools, highlighting concerns about schools' progress and fidelity of delivery. However, delivery partners did not have perfect insight into these issues and were limited in their ability to address them. The NELI scale-up demonstrates both the difficulty and the importance of monitoring delivery of programmes in schools.

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