



## THE NUFFIELD EARLY LANGUAGE INTERVENTION SCALE-UP

Evaluation Report

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## About the evaluator

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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 4–5) and involves scripted individual and small group language teaching sessions delivered by school staff, usually teaching assistants (TAs). The 20-week intervention consists of two 15-minute individual sessions and three 30-minute small group sessions each week, delivered to the 3–6 children with the weakest language skills in each classroom. The sessions focus on improving children’s vocabulary, active listening and narrative skills, and in the second 10 weeks include a small additional session element (3 mins only) focusing on developing phonological awareness and letter–sound knowledge.

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 schools across England in the 2020/21 academic year.

This study, conducted by RAND, was a mixed methods process evaluation of the implementation of NELI at scale using surveys, interviews and case studies. There are two reports: this report summarises findings from the cohort of schools (6,667) and pupils (~50,000) who started receiving NELI in the 2020–21 academic year. The objective of the first year of the evaluation was to assess and understand the scaling process in a Covid-affected environment and to provide recommendations for supporting future scale-up of educational interventions. Due to the national lockdown in January–March 2021 and the subsequent delay to schools’ delivery of NELI to pupils, schools were encouraged to continue to deliver NELI in the 2021–22 academic year when pupils were in Year 1, to enable children to receive the full 20-week programme. The evaluation began in December 2020 and data collection finished in February 2022.

*Table 1: Summary of key findings*

| Research theme                    | Findings  |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| School recruitment and engagement | <p>There was a high level of interest in NELI as an evidenced intervention. The number of schools who signed up to deliver NELI in the 2020–21 academic year (6,667) was close to the maximum number that could be supported given the available funding (7,000). Schools with a higher proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) were prioritised for recruitment and accounted for most schools who signed up.</p> <p>The scale of schools’ interest in NELI was unknown at the beginning of the registration period, which made planning and scaling resources difficult. Delivery partners responded to demand by ordering more NELI kits within the sign-up period to increase the number of schools who could receive the programme. The large number of schools who signed up created challenges for delivery partners, including phased school start dates, which complicated communications and led to a high volume of support queries.</p>   |
| Fidelity within recruited schools | <p>The main adaptation for NELI implemented at scale was delivering NELI training online rather than face-to-face. Participation in the online training was very high for TAs, but lower for teachers even if they were involved in delivering NELI sessions. Teachers and TAs who participated in the online training overwhelmingly found this useful and felt well prepared. Being able to complete the training during the working day was a key facilitator for school staff.</p> <p>The rollout also used LanguageScreen, a highly reliable 10-minute language screening App, to identify the children who would most benefit from NELI. A clear majority of schools used the LanguageScreen app to select pupils to participate in NELI, as intended. Pupils selected to take part in NELI were generally regarded as suitable by school staff for the intervention. However, LanguageScreen results did not always align perfectly with staff perceptions of pupil abilities. NELI training also made clear that staff judgement should be used in the case of children with such severe visual, auditory or behavioural issues that they would not be able to access NELI sessions. Perhaps for this reason, around half of schools also took other considerations into account (e.g., SEN, EAL, behavioural factors) when making their selection.</p> |

|   |  |
|---|--|
|   | <p>Surveys completed by school staff suggested NELI individual and group sessions were delivered with a high degree of fidelity in terms of the number and length of individual and group sessions (60–65% as intended) and the number of participants in group sessions.</p> <p>School staff generally felt well supported in delivering NELI. Resources in the NELI pack were widely regarded as useful by school staff. Not all school staff had accessed NELI support (NELI Delivery Support Hub, NELI mentors), but those that had generally found this useful.</p> <p>Most schools did not complete the intended full 20 weeks of NELI delivery during the 2020–21 academic year. This was largely a result of Covid-related disruption, notably school closures in January–March 2021, but also ongoing disruption (e.g., staff and pupil absences) linked to the pandemic. The extended delivery plan (schools continuing to deliver the remainder of the NELI programme in the 2021–22 academic year when pupils were in Year 1) was introduced in response to the lockdown. Not all schools participated in the extended delivery plan, but those that did regarded this as beneficial for pupils' confidence (146 out of 154 school staff surveyed; 95%) and language abilities (142; 92%).</p> |
| Perceived programme impacts                                     | <p>Despite disruptions to delivery associated with Covid-19, most surveyed teachers and TAs involved in delivering NELI felt the programme had a positive impact on pupils' confidence (585 out of 706; 83%) and language abilities (480; 68%). This suggests that NELI may be effective even if it is delivered in a way that departs from the intended delivery model, although conclusions must remain tentative due to the small, non-representative sample of participants who opted to complete the survey.</p>  |
| Scale-up approach and processes in a Covid-affected environment | <p>Despite the speed and scale at which NELI was rolled out and the Covid-affected environment, delivery largely progressed as intended and as described in the logic model.</p> <p>The Covid-19 pandemic represented both a barrier and a facilitator to school engagement. There were many competing demands on schools due to partial school closures, remote teaching and high levels of staff and pupil absence due to illness/social distancing, and there were concerns about schools' ability to deliver NELI in these circumstances. At the same time, schools were motivated to provide NELI as a means of addressing setbacks in Early Years language skills caused by disruptions associated with the Covid-19 pandemic.</p> <p>Working from home due to partial school closures or self-isolation periods also enabled school staff to complete the online training during typical working hours. This has implications for the sustainability of NELI, since it is unlikely that similar conditions will be present in future years. It will be important in future years that school staff are given the time to complete training during working hours. To facilitate this, NELI training is now officially accredited by the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) service.</p>       |
| Sustainability of NELI  | <p>Most NELI leads who responded to the survey indicated that their school would deliver NELI to the new cohort of Reception pupils in 2021–22, which suggests most schools feel well equipped to continue use of the programme.</p> <p>Most barriers to sustained use relate to school capacity and resources, namely staff time and suitable spaces to deliver NELI sessions, rather than the NELI programme or support available. Some school staff also mentioned funding as a factor affecting their ability to continue delivering NELI; the fact that NELI is offered to schools for free (other than the staff time required) is a key motivating factor for schools.</p>  |

## Limitations

The findings of this study should be interpreted with some limitations in mind. Although the survey participants were broadly representative of participating NELI schools, the majority did not complete the surveys. Less than half of NELI schools contributed to the first wave of surveys ( $n = 2,472$ ) and this response rate declined in the second ( $n = 1,498$ ) and third ( $n = 724$ ) waves. Though these surveys were generally comprehensive, they may not have covered all aspects of schools' experiences due to effort made in keeping surveys short to support completion rates. There was also no data collection at the pupil level to explore their perceptions of participating in the programme.

The qualitative data gathered in this study is based on a relatively small number of interviews which, despite representing a range of schools, should not be considered wholly representative. Due to the overall lack of participation from schools in both surveys and interviews, this 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. The original intention for this study was to interview the same case study schools over time and thereby conduct a within-school analysis. However, this was not possible due to the low number of schools who agreed to participate in multiple interviews.

## Implications for future scale-ups of educational interventions

Based on the experience of recruiting schools to deliver NELI in the 2020–21 academic year, this study recommends the increased use of existing networks and information sharing between school staff as opposed to cold calling and accessing schools via receptionists. In cases where education interventions do use a cold-calling approach, endorsement from the relevant funder(s) and/or authorities is important to bypassing gatekeepers and reaching relevant staff members in schools. It was also suggested that the optimum sign-up window for education interventions is likely to be during the spring/summer of the previous academic year.

The online asynchronous NELI training provides a promising model for the provision of training for small group scripted education interventions delivered at scale. However, as this study did not make comparisons between online and face-to-face provision, it is not possible to draw conclusions around their relative effectiveness. To maximise engagement in online training, this study recommends: ensuring training is concise and able to be completed in multiple sittings; clearly communicating the duration of training; and (from the school's perspective) enabling training to be completed during the working day.

The effective delivery of education interventions at scale is largely facilitated by clarity and consistency in the number of schools the delivery team has provision for, and the use of efficient systems for communication to/from schools and processes for data management, which requires sufficient planning time and testing before the intervention is rolled out. Sources of ongoing support for those delivering NELI were rated highly by staff that used them, and this could be optimised with further opportunities for 'horizontal' communication where staff can share experiences with other staff in different schools, beyond the opportunities already provided in the online training and Delivery Support Hub.

General investment in education is also needed to support the take up and long-term delivery of education interventions, and requirements (particularly the time commitment) should be made clear by delivery organisations to participating schools from the outset in recognition of the capacity and staff time limitations that many schools have.

## Glossary

|                                       |  |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Cohort 1 pupils                       | Pupils in their Reception year in the academic year 2020–21  |
| Cohort 2 pupils                       | Pupils in their Reception year in the academic year 2021–22  |
| FutureLearn                           | Platform used by the University of Oxford to host their online NELI training and support ( <b>NELI Delivery Support Hub</b> )  |
| LanguageScreen                        | A school-administered app-based assessment of oral language skills developed by OxEd and Assessment Ltd. (OxEd).   |
| NELI Delivery Support Hub             | Support for schools delivering NELI hosted by the University of Oxford on the <b>FutureLearn platform</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 expert 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. |
| NELI leads                            | All schools nominate a NELI project lead, who is a key point of contact between the NELI delivery team at the University of Oxford 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 in NELI.</li><li>• Children are assessed using LanguageScreen after NELI is completed to assess the progress the children have made.</li><li>• Support is provided for NELI practitioners who are delivering NELI in the school.</li></ul>   |
| NELI mentors                          | Specialist speech and language professionals, managed by the University of Oxford, 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 NELI Delivery Support Hub. The University of Oxford maintains an ongoing relationship with participating schools by providing online support in the form of emails, and an online forum  |
| <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.  |

## 1 Introduction

### 1.2 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%–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 (GOV.UK, 2020).

The existing evidence suggests that acquisition of the core language skills occurs in the Early Years, when children are between 1 and 4 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 a pilot study (Fricke et al., 2013), an efficacy trial (Sibleta et al., 2016; Fricke et al., 2017) and an effectiveness trial (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, +3 months more progress in language skills than a group of similar children who did not receive the intervention (Dimova et al., 2020). Qualitative data from this evaluation found that school staff perceived the programme to increase children’s confidence as well as their language skills (Dimova et al., 2020). Given that the attainment gap at the end of the 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. 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.

There were several features of the intervention as trialled that required adjustment for operation at scale. For example, the intervention had relied on face-to-face training for teaching assistants (TAs) and teachers. To support the scale-up, online training and support was developed by the University of Oxford, funded by ICG and EEF.<sup>1</sup> Another feature that required adjustment for scale-up was the source of funding for participating in the programme. Previously, the programme cost of around £1,000 for each Reception class was covered by the schools. To reach more schools, the online training and resources were made available to schools at no cost.

In the 2020–21 academic year, the DfE, in partnership with the EEF and other delivery partners, rapidly recruited and offered NELI to 6,667 state-funded primary schools. DfE was responsible for the recruitment of schools, while EEF managed the grant from DfE which facilitated the delivery of NELI to the recruited schools. Programme resources were produced and distributed by Oxford University Press (OUP), while the University of Oxford managed schools’ access to the online training and support for NELI as well as LanguageScreen. The University of Oxford managed the training and support for schools and hosted the online training and the Delivery Support Hub on the FutureLearn platform. The

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<sup>1</sup> See more at <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/oxford-university-nuffield-early-language-intervention-development-of-an-online-training-model>

University of Oxford also convened and managed a team of NELI mentors, who are specialist speech and language professionals that offer guidance and support to schools as they deliver the programme. The University of Oxford also maintain an ongoing relationship with participating schools by providing online support in the form of emails.

Parallel to overseeing the delivery of NELI, the EEF funded RAND Europe as an independent evaluator to provide information to inform decisions about future delivery of NELI. This report summarises findings from the first year of the evaluation of the NELI scale-up. The objective of the first year of the evaluation was **to assess and understand the scaling process in a Covid-affected environment and to provide recommendations for supporting future scale-up of educational interventions**. This study is a mixed methods process evaluation of the implementation of NELI at scale across schools in England based on surveys, interviews and case studies.

## 1.2 Intervention

The delivery of NELI in schools who signed up to deliver the programme in the 2020–21 academic year was an act of scaling-up a proven intervention previously delivered in around 100 schools in a trial setting so that it could be delivered in thousands of schools across England. This section describes the NELI intervention and how it was delivered at scale.

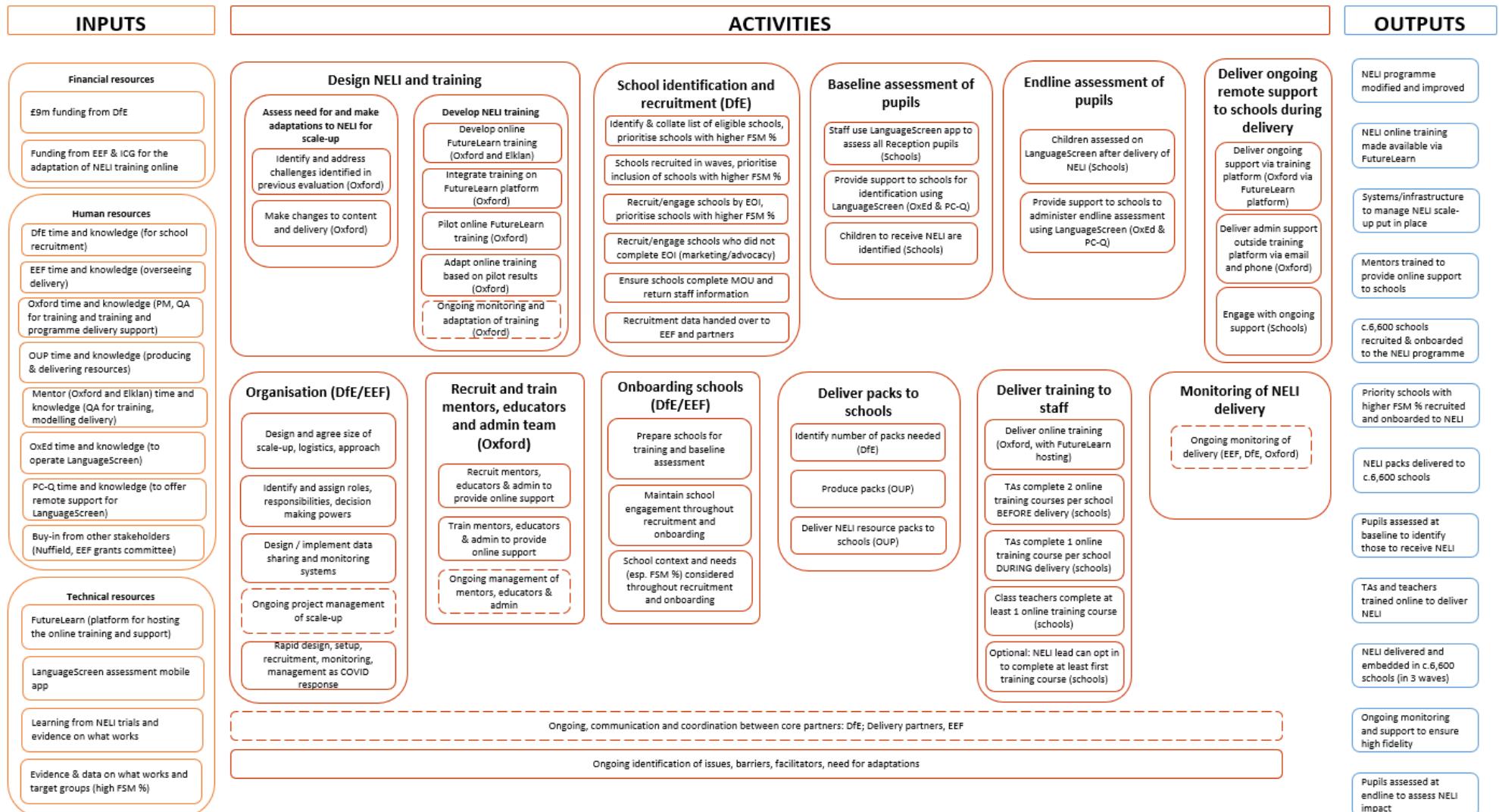
Figure 1 sets out the logic model for the NELI intervention in the context of the scale-up. The logic model sets out the inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes for NELI delivery at scale. Whilst the intervention provided by school staff to pupils was intended to be delivered in the same way as during effectiveness trials (Dimova et al., 2020) accommodations and adjustments were made to NELI delivery in the context of the scale-up (e.g., online rather than face-to-face training, free access to training and resources). Modifications to delivery are summarised in 2, with reflections on how these worked in practice in Section 3. DfE funding for the 2020–21 academic year meant that NELI training and resources (LanguageScreen assessment app, NELI resource packs, ongoing support with delivery) were made available to participating schools free of charge.

The logic model is a description of how NELI was implemented at scale rather than a theoretical model to be tested as part of the evaluation. The logic model was developed during the delivery period,<sup>2</sup> and reflects how NELI was being delivered at that point in time. Whilst the evaluation does not 'test' the logic model, any deviations from planned or expected delivery are noted in the report.

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<sup>2</sup> A Theory of Change workshop was held on 15 January 2021.

Figure 1: NELI scale-up logic model



Source: RAND Europe, 2020, based on conversations with delivery partners

## Why

NELI is an intensive targeted support programme delivered by school staff (usually TAs) and designed to improve the spoken language ability of young children with relatively poor spoken language skills. The sessions focus on improving children's vocabulary, listening, narrative skills, and phonological awareness. NELI aims to improve children's oral language skills and early word/emergent reading skills, with the ultimate goal of improving children's reading comprehension (as learning to read builds on oral language skills).

## Who (recipients)

**Pupils:** The programme is targeted at children with poor spoken language skills. Schools with a high proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) were prioritised for recruitment. A total of 6,667 schools accepted the offer to deliver NELI to pupils in their Reception cohort pupils in the academic year 2020–21. NELI is designed to be delivered to the 3–6 children with the weakest oral language skills in each classroom. Schools that accepted the offer to take part in NELI were advised to use LanguageScreen<sup>3</sup> to test their Reception cohort, to identify the children with the weakest language skills. LanguageScreen is an app for identifying language difficulties in nursery and primary school children that can be used to screen pupils for interventions such as NELI.<sup>4</sup> Research has highlighted challenges identifying children with poor language skills, particularly without access to a valid and reliable screening tool (Bishop et al., 2016). The use of LanguageScreen for screening pupils to participate in NELI was encouraged, but not mandatory. Children could be selected based on teacher/TA professional judgement.

**School staff:** TAs and teachers in Reception benefit by receiving online training that can enhance their oral language teaching practice and understanding of how to implement the NELI programme.

All schools nominate a **NELI project lead**, who is a 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:

- staff in their school complete the NELI training as intended.
- the language abilities of children in Reception are assessed, ideally using LanguageScreen, before NELI is delivered to select the children who will participate in NELI.
- children are assessed using LanguageScreen after NELI is completed to assess the progress the children have made. It is recommended to assess both the children who received NELI and the wider Reception cohort to understand if the NELI children have made accelerated progress in their oral language skills.
- support is provided for NELI practitioners who are delivering NELI in the school.

## What

**Physical or informational materials used in the intervention:** The intervention is delivered using resources available from OUP.<sup>5</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. Schools also benefitted from access to the LanguageScreen assessment, developed by OxEd and Assessment Ltd. (OxEd.) They received a subscription to LanguageScreen free of charge, with sufficient tokens to administer the screening tool to all Reception pupils both before and after NELI delivery. Schools that accepted the offer received the materials from OUP between December 2020 and the end of January 2021 and access to LanguageScreen from October 2020 or shortly after they agreed to receive the programme.

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<sup>3</sup> LanguageScreen is a school-administered app-based assessment of oral language skills. For more information, see <https://languagescreen.com/>.

<sup>4</sup> See: <https://oxedandassessment.com/languagescreen/>

<sup>5</sup> Oxford University Press, NELI webpage.

## Procedures and activities used

### ***Training and support to teachers, TAs and schools***

(1) **Online training:** Prior to NELI implementation, TAs, teachers and other school staff involved in the delivery take part in online training. School staff can access the NELI course after they receive an invitation by email. As mentioned, in previous trials, school staff were trained face-to-face. The online training was developed and piloted by the University of Oxford ahead of wider roll out and is hosted on the FutureLearn<sup>6</sup> platform. The development and pilot of the online model was funded by EEF and ICG, with the aim to support scale-up of promising projects. The course is designed to be accessed at any time and completed in a self-paced manner. Materials are provided online which the TA or teacher reads and engages with. Materials include video clips, items to read, quizzes and the opportunity to post questions and receive a response from NELI mentors, as well as other learners.

The online training involves a series of three linked courses, two of which are completed before delivery and a final short course undertaken at the midpoint of programme delivery to pupils. It takes around 10 hours to complete all modules of the training.

Reception teachers, TAs and any other school staff involved in the delivery of NELI complete Course 1 and then the TA (or other staff member who will deliver NELI sessions) completes the rest of the courses. Class teachers are asked to participate in Course 1 of the training 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 objectives of the three courses are described in Box 1 below.

#### *Box 1: Overview of NELI training courses*

##### **NELI Training Course 1: 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 TAs 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.

##### **NELI Training Course 2: Delivering the intervention**

This second course is aimed at only the staff who will deliver the NELI programme to children, usually a TA. However, 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. Learners 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.

##### **NELI Training Course 3: 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 2; terminology in letter–sound knowledge and phonological awareness; and key teaching strategies for letter–sound knowledge, blending and segmenting activities.

<sup>6</sup> FutureLearn is a digital education platform. For more information, see <https://www.futurelearn.com/>.

(2) **Remote support:** Additional remote support is made available through the **Delivery Support Hub** hosted on FutureLearn. The NELI Delivery Support Hub is available to school staff that have completed NELI Training Course 2.

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. The Hub is divided into different sections that provide extensive information about various aspects of delivery, including the individual and group sessions, practical information on how to time the NELI sessions, how to track progress, teaching techniques and good practices, and practical matters.

The University of Oxford provides additional remote support via email providing any additional online training access, solving programme delivery, and resource-related queries, etc, via a dedicated NELI support email inbox. Queries regarding access to and use of LanguageScreen are handled by OxEd and PC-Q via email, phone and LiveChat.

In addition to the reactive support provided in the Hub and by the University of Oxford, OxEd and PC-Q for schools as needed, proactive support is provided by the University of Oxford to all schools via regular email communications containing information and guidance.

(3) **Mentors:** During implementation, if information is not available on the online training or Hub, schools can interact with NELI mentors online, who will be able to provide answers. NELI mentors are specialist speech and language professionals, educators and experienced NELI practitioners who offer guidance and support to schools as they train and deliver the programme. NELI mentors, convened and managed by the University of Oxford, included staff from Elklan, who were involved in delivering the NELI training during the effectiveness trial (Dimova et al., 2020; West et al., 2021). Schools can communicate with mentors throughout both training and delivery via all three training courses and the NELI Delivery Support Hub. The team of NELI mentors maintain an ongoing relationship with participating schools and facilitate a community of practice among trainees by providing this online support.

#### *Delivery of NELI to children*

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, listening, letter–sound knowledge and phonological awareness skills.

(1) **Group sessions:** All NELI sessions follow a similar structure. The elements of the group sessions and the time allocated to each element is presented in Table 21. Part 1 (weeks 1–10) and Part 2 (weeks 11–20) sessions are similar, but Table 2 shows that letter–sound knowledge and phonological awareness activities are only included in Part 2. At the beginning of the NELI group sessions, TAs reinforce previously learned vocabulary and introduce new words in a context familiar to the children. Each session includes narrative tasks, which focus on skills such as storytelling by using the newly learned vocabulary.

*Table 21: Group session breakdown*

| Activity             | Purpose   | Part 1 (weeks 1–10)<br>Time (mins) | Part 2 (weeks 11–20)<br>Time (mins) |
|----------------------|---|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <b>Introduction</b>  | Give greetings, discuss day of the week, revise listening rules, settle children into session, play listening games | 3                                  | 2                                   |
| <b>Letter–sound</b>  | Introduce new letter  | N/A                                | 3                                   |
| <b>Reinforcement</b> | Reinforce vocabulary taught in the previous session, for example using flashcards                                   | 5                                  | 4                                   |

|                   |  |    |   |
|-------------------|--|----|---|
| <b>Vocabulary</b> | Introduce new vocabulary, use flashcards   | 5  | 5 |
| <b>Narrative</b>  | Work to improve narrative skills further, including sequencing and knowledge of story elements | 10 | 9 |
| <b>Plenary</b>    | Sequence and revise session, award Best Listener   | 2  | 2 |

**Source:** NELI Teaching Handbook Part 1 – detailed information and plans for implementing NELI, p.20 and NELI Teaching Handbook Part 2, p.27.

(3) **Individual sessions:** Individual sessions are tailored to the specific needs of each participating child, but the logic of NELI applies with no school or pupil variation. They offer an opportunity to focus on the child's language need. Planning for the individual sessions is informed by the progress on the group sessions. Similar to the group sessions, each individual session follows a similar structure. The breakdown by activity and time is presented in

(4) Table 32.

*Table 32: Individual session breakdown*

| Activity                   | Purpose  | Time (mins) |
|----------------------------|--|-------------|
| <b>Introduction</b>        | Get the child settled into the session   | 2           |
| <b>Vocabulary revision</b> | Revise vocabulary covered in previous sessions by focusing on words that the child found difficult | 5           |
| <b>Narrative</b>           | Monitor child's progress in storytelling   | 5           |
| <b>Plenary</b>             | Revise session and give the child a reward sticker   | 3           |

**Source:** NELI Teaching Handout book Part 1 – detailed information and plans for implementing NELI, p.25

**How:** NELI sessions should be delivered within the school in a quiet area (such as class, library, staff room, or dining room). TAs have the freedom to decide on a suitable place for session delivery.

**When and how much:** NELI is designed to complement the language and literacy lessons for Reception pupils rather than to replace them. It is recommended to deliver NELI during normal classroom hours but that requires children selected into the programme to be taken out of classes. The programme is delivered over 20 weeks. As a result of the national lockdown in January–March 2021, and subsequent closure of schools to all but vulnerable and key workers' children, the 20-week programme no longer fitted into the academic year. Planned delivery to pupils was postponed for most schools until schools fully re-opened to all pupils on 8 March 2021.

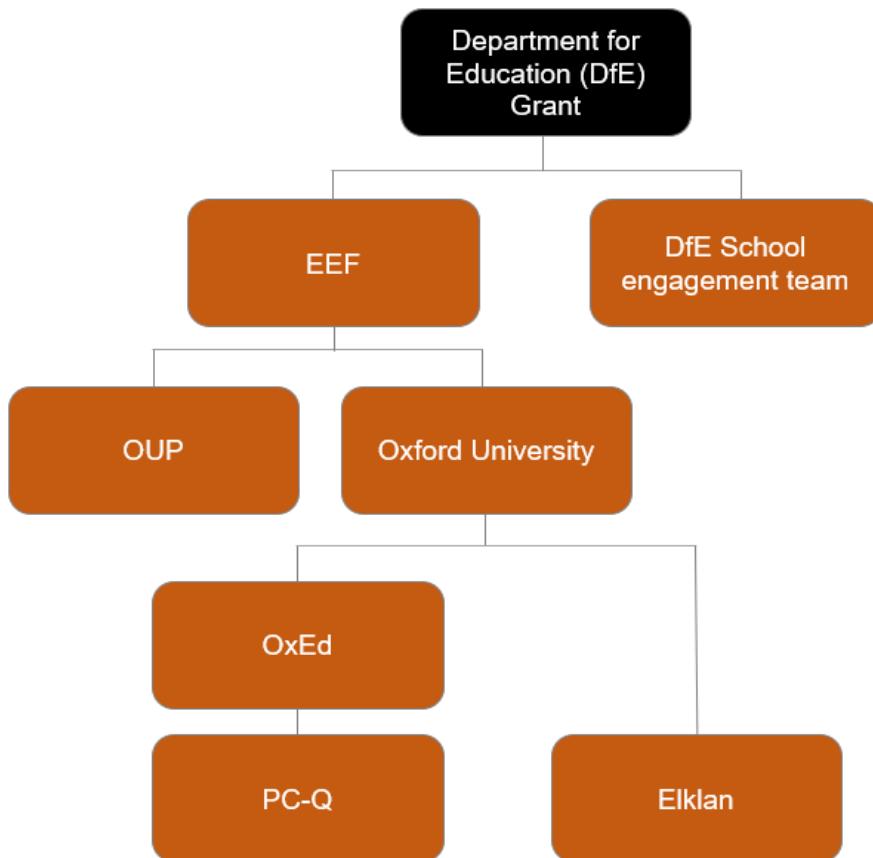
In February 2021, schools received an email recommending that, where possible, children should receive the full 20-week NELI programme. This meant that schools that agreed to deliver NELI according to this extended delivery plan continued to deliver NELI into the Autumn term of Year 1 in the 2021–22 academic year, with additional training places made available to schools to enable training of any new staff required to complete delivery.

Each week, TAs hold group and individual sessions with those children selected to take part in NELI. TAs normally deliver three group sessions, each lasting 30 minutes, each week. Children selected to participate in NELI also attend two 15-minute individual sessions each week. Group sessions and individual sessions generally do not take place on the same day.

**Who (delivery providers, implementers):** The delivery of NELI at scale in the 2020–21 academic year relied on number of delivery partners and funders as demonstrated in **Figure 2**.

- The **NELI programme** was developed by a team of researchers led by Professors Charles Hulme and Maggie Snowling at the University of York. Team members now span the universities of Oxford, York and Sheffield. The intervention development was funded by the Nuffield Foundation.

Figure 2: *NELI scale-up delivery partners*



- The scale-up of NELI to the first Reception cohort (2020–21 academic year) was **funded** by a DfE grant to the EEF. DfE wanted to invest in interventions to promote areas of Early Years learning affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, and NELI had been shown to be an effective intervention (Bowyer-Crane et al., 2008; Fricke, et al., 2013; 2017; Dimova et al., 2020; West et al., 2021).
- The EEF were responsible for managing the DfE grant for **the delivery of NELI** at scale in the 2020–21 academic year. This, along with the National Tutoring Programme, was the first time that the EEF had taken an active role in coordinating delivery for educational intervention. The EEF took on this role on a temporary basis (i.e., for the 2020–21 academic year) in the interests of Covid-19 education recovery support, because there was no other single organisation in a position to oversee delivery for the first year of the NELI scale-up.
- **Recruitment** to the scale-up in the academic year 2020/21 was funded and delivered by the DfE. The overall responsibility for recruiting schools rested with the DfE school engagement team. Other NELI delivery partners took a supporting role in the recruitment process; for example, by promoting the opportunity through their networks and communications.
- The programme resources were produced and distributed to participating schools by **OUP**.

- The **online NELI training** was developed and managed by the University of Oxford and hosted by them on the FutureLearn platform. The piloting of the online training was funded separately, financially supported by ICG and EEF.
- **Support for schools** was provided by the University of Oxford (via email), by OxEd and PC-Q for LanguageScreen support and by NELI mentors (from Elklan and the University of Oxford) via online training and Delivery Support Hub hosted on FutureLearn led by the University of Oxford.
- The **screening of children** with the aim to identify target pupils was provided via the LanguageScreen app by OxEd. Remote support for LanguageScreen was provided by PC-Q.

*Box 2: 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 were 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 the academic year 2020–21. Remote support in the form of the NELI Delivery Support Hub, NELI mentors, the University of Oxford and OxEd.
- 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 high 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 EEF, the Nuffield Foundation, OUP, University of Oxford, OxEd, PC-Q, Elklan).
- 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 etc.)
- In addition to these factors, DfE funding in the 2020–21 academic year meant that the NELI training and resources were made available to schools free of charge.

### 1.3 Evaluation objectives

The overarching objective of this evaluation is to assess and understand the process of scaling up NELI in a Covid-affected environment and to provide recommendations for supporting future scale-up of educational interventions. More specifically, the evaluation aims to:

- 1 provide information to NELI partners, DfE and EEF relevant for supporting scaling of education interventions in the future.
- 2 assess and understand the delivery of NELI at scale and across school years.
- 3 assess the perceived impact of expanding NELI on pupils' language skills.
- 4 assess and better understand the NELI scale-up process in a Covid-affected environment.
- 5 assess and understand prospects and challenges for sustainment of the NELI programme in schools over time.

The delayed delivery of NELI to pupils, due to the partial school closures January–March 2021 because of the Covid-19 lockdown, led to the addition of Objective 2 assessing and understanding the delivery of NELI across school years. It became clear to the delivery partners that, due to disruption associated with Covid-19, schools were struggling to complete the full 20-week delivery of NELI to the selected Reception school children during the academic year ending in July 2021. A decision was made to facilitate the opportunity for schools to complete NELI with these pupils when they returned as Year 1 pupils in the term starting in September 2021 (the extended delivery plan). This is a departure from the NELI model, which is designed for delivery to Reception children. The decision to complete delivery to these children, even though they would be in Year 1, was based on evidence that the effect of NELI on pupils' oral language skills is greater, the more weeks of the programme is delivered (Dimova et al., 2020), as well as recognition of the needs of pupils whose language development had been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.

For clarity, since the evaluation covers delivery across two academic years (2020–21 and 2021–22), we distinguish between two groups of pupils participating in NELI:

- **NELI Cohort 1 pupils:** Children who started receiving NELI in the 2020–21 academic year when they were in Reception. Cohort 1 pupils may have continued to receive NELI in the 2021–22 academic year when they were in Year 1 as part of the extended delivery plan.
- **NELI Cohort 2 pupils:** Children who started receiving NELI in the 2021–22 academic year when they were in Reception.

This report focuses on NELI delivery for Cohort 1 pupils across both academic years. However, it does cover schools' intentions to deliver NELI to Cohort 2 pupils. NELI delivery to Cohort 2 pupils will be covered in detail in the forthcoming report for the second year of the evaluation (see Disley and Nightingale, 2022).

Box 3 sets out the research questions (RQs) for this study. These questions fall into the following five overarching topic areas:

Topic area 1: **School recruitment and engagement** focuses on the strategies used to recruit and engage schools. This topic explores variations in take up depending on level of FSM and barriers to recruitment in a Covid-affected environment.

Topic area 2: **Fidelity within recruited schools** examines how schools are implementing NELI and identifies the barriers and enablers of effective adoption within schools. This topic 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 on pupils** aims to understand the impact of NELI on development outcomes of interest (i.e., on children's language skills and on school staff knowledge and confidence). Perceived impact is assessed from the perspective of teachers and TAs through data collected via surveys and interviews.

Topic area 4: **Scale-up approach and processes in a Covid-affected environment** focuses on the overall strategy used to scale-up NELI. The aim is to record and describe: the *ways in which the NELI programme had to be adapted* to make it suitable for at-scale delivery (either because the design of the intervention was not feasible at scale, because of local features, or because of features in the wider environment); the 'what, who, how and when' of the *practical activities and processes* undertaken so that NELI is delivered in thousands of schools; the *coordination and management activities* that were planned and actually implemented to scale-up NELI; the ways in which the *delivery partners worked together*; the *barriers and facilitators* to rolling out at such a large scale, in a relatively short period of time. The aim is to *identify lessons* that might be relevant to inform future scale-up programmes. Importantly, in exploring this topic the aim is to distinguish specific challenges and processes resulting from the Covid-19 context from those that may have occurred in non-Covid environments.

The approach taken by the evaluation to topic area 4 is to see the NELI scale-up as a case study. By treating NELI as partly an 'illustrative' case study of scaling-up (i.e., a case study that is descriptive and intended to capture the real

experiences of those involved) and partly as a ‘critical instance’ case study<sup>7</sup> (examining a single example of unique interest), the intention is to generate an account of the ‘story’ of the NELI scale-up – from the early decisions to roll-out the intervention throughout the process. This story should capture the decisions made, the actors involved, setbacks and successes. The case study approach is used to capture and communicate lessons from NELI to those looking to scale other interventions in the future.

Topic area 5: **The sustainability of NELI** focuses on understanding the prospects and challenges for sustainment of the programme in schools. The evaluation questions under this topic area aim to understand the factors that are critical for sustained delivery in schools, and how sustainable expansion of all aspects of the scale-up can be attained. The sustainability RQs are informed by data on whether schools are continuing to deliver NELI in the new academic year to the same pupils, and whether they intend to continue with delivery, as well as stakeholders’ perceptions of barriers and facilitators to continued delivery.

A full evaluation protocol for this study can be found on the **EEF website** (Disley et al., 2021).

*Box 3: Research questions (RQs) under each topic area*

**RQ1** School recruitment and engagement

- 1.1. Why are schools attracted to NELI?
- 1.2. Did NELI reach schools with a high proportion of FSM pupils? If not, why?
- 1.3. With the cost of training and programme resources removed, what barriers remain to school engagement?
- 1.4. What more could be done to improve the take-up of NELI?
- 1.5. How has the Covid-19 outbreak affected the recruitment of schools to the NELI scale-up?

**RQ2** Fidelity within recruited schools

- 2.1. Were appropriate adaptations to NELI introduced on an as-needed basis?
- 2.2. What was the school’s experience from sign-up to delivery?
- 2.3. Were the delivery partners able to successfully monitor and address any delivery issues?
- 2.4. Were all the aspects of the intervention delivered as intended as the scaling proceeded? If not, why not, and what remedial action can or could be taken?
- 2.5. Did staff and schools feel confident and well supported to deliver the intervention?
- 2.6. Did it reach the intended pupils? If not, why not?
- 2.7. What was the experience of schools who completed the delivery of NELI once pupils had begun Year 1? What approach was taken, and what issues arose from splitting delivery in this way?
- 2.8. How has the Covid-19 outbreak affected the implementation of NELI within schools?

**RQ3** Perceived programme impacts

- 3.1. What is the perceived impact of NELI on pupils’ language skills based on teachers’ and TAs’ perceptions?
- 3.2. What is the perceived impact of NELI on pupils’ confidence in their use of language based on teachers’ and TAs’ perceptions?
- 3.3. What is the perceived impact of NELI with regard to TA/teacher literacy skills and knowledge based on teachers’ and TAs’ views?

**RQ4** Scale-up approach and processes in a Covid-affected environment

- 4.1. What actions are/were taken to increase the scalability of NELI? Including
  - 4.1.1. Modifications to the intervention, training and support.
  - 4.1.2. Modifications intended to address concerns highlighted in previous evaluations.
- 4.2. What is the approach to scaling NELI? For example
  - 4.2.1. How is the scaling process organised?
  - 4.2.2. How is the organisational and strategic management of the NELI expansion set up?
  - 4.2.3. What strategies and/or methods are used to ensure that the scaling process is effective and coordinated?
- 4.3. Is the partnership between the different delivery organisations seamless?
- 4.4. Was the pace and coverage of expansion as intended? If not, what were the barriers to expansion and how can these be addressed? How was this affected by Covid-19?
- 4.5. Were existing monitoring systems adequate in supporting the NELI scale-up process?

<sup>7</sup> Better Evaluation Website: [https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/case\\_study](https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/case_study)

4.6. Were any changes needed to the scale-up approach due to changes in the environment and the local context to inform modifications to the scale-up approach?

4.7. How has the Covid-19 outbreak affected the NELI scale-up?

4.8. What are the delivery partners' conceptions of NELI scale-up success?

**RQ5** Sustainability of NELI

5.1. Did schools continue to deliver NELI in the academic year starting September 2021?

5.2. Did schools intend to deliver NELI to the new cohort of Reception pupils in the academic year starting September 2021 (and beyond)?

5.3. To what extent do schools feel equipped to continue delivering NELI to new Reception cohorts?

5.4. What are barriers and facilitators to the delivery of NELI to future cohorts of Reception children?

5.5. What resources and support are needed for schools to continue delivering NELI to future cohorts of Reception children?

## 1.4 Ethics

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).

Schools signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) (see Appendix A) with delivery partners confirming their participation in the NELI programme in the 2020–21 academic year. The MoU stated that delivery organisations would collect and share schools' data solely for the purposes of delivering the programme and contacting schools about the opportunity to take part in the evaluation. Schools agreed to be contacted about the evaluation by returning a form linked to the MoU. This was optional and not a condition of participation in the NELI programme. Delivery partners circulated a Privacy Notice letter to schools at the beginning of the project. Parents could opt out by returning the letter to the school or the delivery team.

Invitations to take part in the online surveys were distributed to all schools who signed up to deliver NELI in the 2020–21 academic year. A Privacy Notice (see Appendix B) was included on the first page of the survey, explaining the purpose of data collection and data protection processes. A question securing consent to contact school staff in relation to qualitative research (interviews) was included at the end of surveys conducted with teachers/TAs and Headteachers in March–April 2021. Only those school staff who opted in were contacted about the interviews.

RAND Europe collected consent forms for headteachers, teachers and TAs who volunteered to participate in an interview. A Privacy Notice (see Appendix C) was shared with respondents prior to the interview. If the participant consented, the interview was digitally audio-recorded for analysis purposes. All interview data will be deleted 12 months after the end of the project.

None of the members of the evaluation team had any conflicts of interest in undertaking this evaluation.

## 1.5 Data protection

RAND Europe obtained personal data from schools as data controller. The lawful basis for RAND Europe processing the data under the GDPR was 'legitimate interest'. That is, RAND had a legitimate interest in processing the data in order to work with schools that wished to participate in the evaluation of the NELI scale-up. Data was collected and processed solely to facilitate schools' voluntary contribution to the project. Data collected was not excessive and was only used for the purposes of contacting school staff to arrange participation in the surveys and interviews, as required to meet the project goals. In considering whether they could rely on legitimate interests as the lawful basis for processing the data, the data controllers balanced their interests with the interests of the data subjects. The data subjects' data was not used in any way that could be detrimental to their rights and/or freedoms.

Research participants were informed about their rights, legal basis, and the manner in which their data would be obtained and processed through Privacy Notices for the surveys and interviews (see Appendix B and Appendix C) and consent forms. Data that permits the identification of data subjects will be kept for no longer than necessary to process the information collected (and no longer than one year after the end of the contract).

Data sharing was governed by the grant agreement between RAND Europe and the EEF. This agreement (i) defined roles for controlling and processing data, (ii) explained data flows and limited sharing data to only essential data, (iii) outlined arrangements for the storage, retention, or destruction of data. Data required for the purposes of this evaluation was shared securely using specialised encrypted software (e.g., Syncplicity or Egress).

Data was saved on GDPR-compliant, secure servers inside the EEA or UK. RAND Europe is registered with the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO), registration number Z6947026 and is certified for adhering to ISO 9001:2015 quality management practices. All data shared with RAND Europe was held and processed in accordance with RAND Europe's data protection policy, data breach procedure and information security policies (all available on request) and using controls outlined in RAND Europe's ISO 27001 certification. Controls include data being stored in the EU in password-protected folders which are accessible only to the specific members of the research team. The folders are stored on RAND Europe's servers and special measures were put in place to ensure that the data was exempt from backups to the US servers, as is standard procedure for other information. RAND Europe implements a 'clean desk policy', in which all non-public documents are kept in locked drawers while the individual researcher is away from their desk, and all non-public printed material is securely shredded after use.

## 1.6 Project team

The 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. The intervention development was funded by the Nuffield Foundation. The scale-up of NELI in the academic year 2020–21 was funded by a DfE grant to the EEF, who were responsible for overseeing the first year of delivery. Recruitment in the academic year 2020–21 was funded and delivered by DfE. The NELI programme resources were produced and distributed to participating schools by OUP. The online staff training was developed by the team at the University of Oxford led by Professor Charles Hulme and Dr Gillian West and hosted on the FutureLearn platform. The LanguageScreen app was provided by OxEd, with remote support provided by PC-Q. Ongoing support for schools via the NELI training courses and Delivery Support Hub hosted on FutureLearn (NELI mentors) and phone/email, as well as weekly reporting to partners on scale-up implementation (assessment, training and programme delivery) was provided by the University of Oxford.

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), Dr Andreas Culora (formerly RAND Europe), Sashka Dimova (formerly RAND Europe), Lucy Gilder (formerly RAND Europe) and Dr Mann Virdee (fieldwork). The evaluation team benefitted from advice and quality assurance from Elena Rosa Brown (RAND Europe) and Lucy Strang (RAND Europe).

## 1.7 Structure of this report

This report is structured as follows. Section 2 gives an overview of the research methods used in this evaluation and the timeline for data collection. The following five sections present the empirical findings structured according to the topic areas for the evaluation: school recruitment and engagement (Section 3), fidelity of delivery (Section 4), perceived impact of NELI (Section 5), scale-up approach (Section 6) and sustainability (Section 7). Findings from the evaluation presented in Sections 3–7 are structured according to RQ (some RQs have been grouped together). Section 8 presents the main conclusions from the evaluation and recommendations for NELI and other interventions delivered at scale.

## 2 Methods

This section presents an overview of the research methodology and the timeline for data collection. Strengths and limitations of the methodology are discussed in the conclusion (Section 8).

### 2.1 Evaluation design

#### Research methods

This study is a 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 evaluation plan originally included an assessment of the impact on pupil outcomes of expanding NELI (see Disley et al., 2021). However, it was jointly agreed by the RAND evaluation team and the EEF that this aspect of the evaluation should not be pursued. This was for two reasons. Firstly, programme delivery was delayed. It was planned to begin in February 2021; however, this was suspended due to the movement of schools to remote learning as a result of a national lockdown which began in January 2021. Despite the reopening of settings in March 2021, the possibility of completing baseline LanguageScreen assessments, the full 20 weeks of the programme, and collecting outcome data at the end of the 2020–21 academic year was not considered feasible because the programme would not have been implemented under normal circumstances. Secondly, it became clear during the inception stages of the evaluation that sharing pupil-level data and collecting data on which pupils received NELI (essential to identify a suitable counterfactual) would be very difficult. Once a way forward for addressing these issues was resolved, the EEF commissioned an impact assessment of NELI delivered at scale across schools in England in the 2021–22 academic year.

This process evaluation draws on qualitative and quantitative data collected via surveys and interviews with school staff, as well as interviews with delivery partners and NELI mentors. The research methods and data collection activities were selected in order to:

- Ensure data were collected from a range of stakeholders (participating schools, non-participating schools, delivery partners), thus 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.
- Collect data at several timepoints with the aim of capturing the scaling journey throughout the evaluation period to allow exploration of issues arising. To answer the RQs, the evaluation triangulates data across the different sources outlined in Table . Breadth of insight from the surveys (all schools who 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.

Table 4: Methods overview

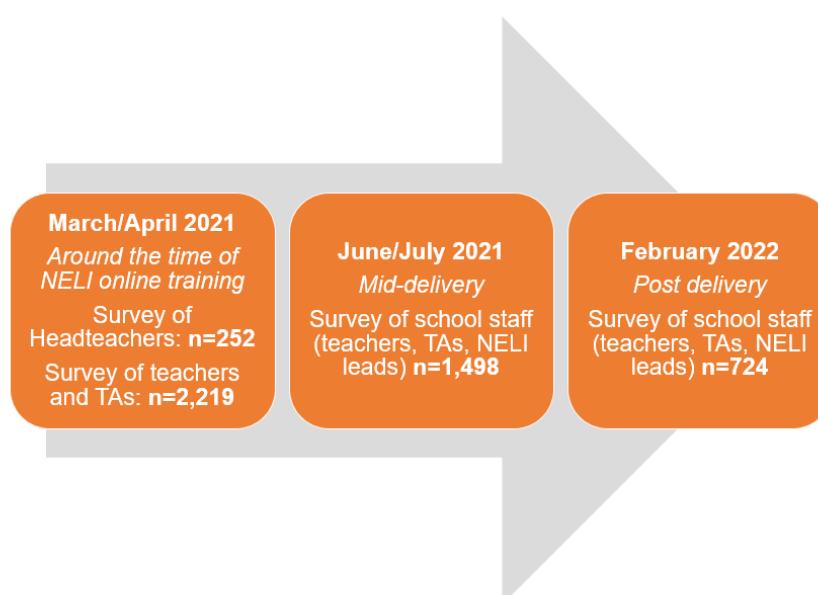
| Research method         | Data collection method     | Participants/ data sources | Data analysis methods               | Area of focus addressed     | Implementation/ logic model relevance  |
|-------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| Interviews with the DfE | Semi-structured interviews | DfE school engagement team | Thematic analysis, deductive coding | Evaluation objectives 1,2,3 | Exploring the process of recruiting schools and delivering NELI at scale in a Covid-affected environment |

| Interviews with delivery partners                     | Semi-structured interviews           | EEF, University of Oxford, Nuffield Foundation                     | Thematic analysis, deductive coding      | Evaluation objectives 1,2,3,4,5 | Exploring the process of delivering NELI at scale in a Covid-affected environment  |
|---|--------------------------------------|--|--|---------------------------------|--|
| School staff survey                                   | Online questionnaires                | School staff (TAs/teachers, Headteachers, NELI leads), all schools | Descriptive statistics, frequency counts | Evaluation objectives 2,3,4,5   | Exploring schools' motivations and concerns, experiences of delivering NELI, fidelity of delivery, perceived impact and sustainability of NELI |
| Interviews in case study schools                      | Semi-structured telephone interviews | School staff   | Thematic analysis, deductive coding      | Evaluation objectives 2,3,4,5   | Exploring schools' motivations and concerns, experiences of delivering NELI, fidelity of delivery, perceived impact and sustainability of NELI |
| Interviews with NELI mentors                          | Semi-structured telephone interviews | NELI mentors   | Thematic analysis, deductive             | Evaluation objectives 2,3,4,5   | Exploring the delivery of support for schools participating in NELI  |
| Interviews with schools who did not take part in NELI | Semi-structured interviews           | Headteachers or members of the SLT                                 | Thematic analysis, deductive coding      | Evaluation objective 1          | Exploring schools' concerns and barriers to participation  |

The study plan for this evaluation (Disley et al., 2021) stated an intention to undertake focus groups with delivery partners. Focus groups were intended to enable delivery organisations to reflect on and discuss the process of scaling up NELI, what went well, and what could be improved. However, it was agreed with the EEF that this data could be adequately captured via interviews with delivery partners. The study plan also stated an intention to conduct secondary data analysis of recruitment and reach data (provided by the DfE team) and data relating to engagement with the online training from the FutureLearn platform (provided by the University of Oxford). This data was not made available to RAND Europe during the 2020–21 academic year and will instead be used to inform the findings of the evaluation for the second year of the evaluation (Disley et al., 2023).

#### ***Surveys of schools who signed up to deliver NELI in the 2020–21 academic year***

Figure 3: Overview of survey waves



School surveys were selected to reach the largest population possible, and to give all schools participating in NELI the chance to contribute to the research. 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 (including delivery into the 2021–22 academic year as part of the extended delivery plan). As shown in Figure 3, three 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.

The main objective of **the first survey wave** (conducted March–April 2021; separate survey instruments for teachers/TAs and headteachers) was to examine the 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. It also probed school staff about their use of the resources and support, in order to gauge the level of take-up as well as how useful these resources and support have been. Finally, the survey was used to assess whether schools had undertaken any delivery activities (i.e., if schools administered the LanguageScreen assessment, selected children to take part in NELI, began delivering NELI sessions) prior to the commencement of the main roll-out window (i.e., between January and March 2021).

**The second survey wave** (June–July 2021) was administered at the end of the 2020–21 academic year and focused on the overall experience of delivering NELI in the 2020–21 academic year. The survey included questions about programme delivery, 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 2021–22 academic year, both for the existing cohort of Reception pupils (extended delivery plan) and the new cohort of Reception pupils.

**The third survey wave** (February 2022) was administered during the 2021–22 academic year, reflecting the fact that many schools completed delivery to Cohort 1 pupils in this academic year (the extended delivery plan). The survey included questions on training, delivery, and support in the 2021–22 academic year.

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

Table 5: Overview of survey participants

| Survey recipients   | March–April 2021 |              | June–July 2021                                    | February 2022                                     |
|---------------------|------------------|--------------|---|---|
|                     | Teachers/TAs     | Headteachers | School staff (teachers, TAs, Headteachers, other) | School staff (teachers, TAs, Headteachers, other) |
| <b>Teachers</b>     | 1,155            | N/A          | 610   | 284   |
| <b>TAs</b>          | 1,064            | N/A          | 625   | 292   |
| <b>Headteachers</b> | N/A              | 252          | 152   | 83  |
| <b>Other</b>        | N/A              | N/A          | 111   | 65  |
| <b>Total</b>        | 2,219            | 252          | 1,498   | 724   |

To investigate the representativeness of the surveys, we compared the characteristics of schools who participated in the surveys to the full sample (i.e., all schools that agreed to take part in the evaluation). The results presented in Table 6 show that schools who participated in the survey waves were broadly representative of the population of schools who agreed to take part in the evaluation.

Table 6: Schools who participated in the three survey waves compared to the full sample

|   | March–April 2021 survey | June–July 2021 survey | February 2022 survey | Schools delivering NELI who agreed to participate in the evaluation |
|---|-------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|---|
|   | Teachers/TAs            | Headteachers          | School staff         | School staff  |
| <b>Proportion of children in the school eligible for FSM (mean)</b> | 0.22                    | 0.21                  | 0.21                 | 0.21  |
| <b>Region</b>   |                         |                       |                      |   |
| <b>East Midlands</b>  | 8%                      | 8%                    | 10%                  | 9%  |
| <b>East of England</b>  | 11%                     | 12%                   | 11%                  | 11%   |
| <b>London</b>   | 12%                     | 16%                   | 14%                  | 15%   |
| <b>North East</b>   | 6%                      | 6%                    | 7%                   | 5%  |
| <b>North West</b>   | 15%                     | 11%                   | 15%                  | 13%   |
| <b>South East</b>   | 14%                     | 15%                   | 12%                  | 12%   |
| <b>South West</b>   | 11%                     | 13%                   | 11%                  | 13%   |
| <b>West Midlands</b>  | 10%                     | 7%                    | 9%                   | 10%   |
| <b>Yorkshire and The Humber</b>                                     | 13%                     | 12%                   | 11%                  | 13%   |
| <b>Total number of schools</b>                                      | 1,111                   | 196                   | 1,092                | 384   |
| <b>School response rate per survey wave</b>                         | 24%                     | 23%                   | 8%                   |   |

**Note:** figures are not consistent with Table 5 because this data relates to the total number of participating schools rather than individuals, and it was not possible to match data (FSM, region) to survey responses for all schools due to errors inputting school name and postcode. A single response rate is given for survey waves in March–April 2021. This is the proportion of eligible schools who had at least one staff member participate across the two surveys (teachers/TAs and Headteachers).

### **Interviews with case study schools who signed up to deliver NELI in the 2020–21 academic year**

Case study interviews were designed to complement and build on the surveys, developing a more detailed, nuanced picture of NELI delivery in schools that signed up to deliver the programme in the 2020–21 academic year, including information that may be difficult to capture through a survey. The aim was to follow up to 25 schools through the scale-up process via a series of interviews, exploring how schools proceeded along the NELI ‘journey’, from recruitment to delivery.

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):

- Proportion of FSM children in the school
- Geographical region
- Whether or not the school delivered any elements of NELI between January and April 2021 (March–April 2021 survey)

- Whether or not the school administered LanguageScreen between January and March 2021 (March–April 2021 survey).

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 7, case study schools were drawn from all regions, they included several priority schools (i.e., schools with a high proportion of FSM pupils) and schools who had not progressed far with NELI delivery by the time of the first survey (March–April 2021).

NELI leads, Headteachers, teachers and TAs within each case study school were invited to take part in semi-structured interviews. Interviews lasted around 30 minutes and were conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams. As shown in Table 7, most case study interviews involved one member of staff, but two interviews involved two members of staff.

Case study interviews were conducted at two points: at the end of the 2020–21 year in June–July (Round 1), and in the last weeks of NELI delivery in the 2021–22 academic year (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 and/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.

A total of 31 interviews were conducted (17 at Round 1, 14 at Round 2) with staff from 23 case study schools who signed up to deliver NELI in the 2020–21 academic year. The original aim was to recruit up to 25 case study schools and to interview each school at two time points across the year (see Disley et al., 2021). Due to the pressure on schools linked to Covid-19 and other factors, it proved more challenging than anticipated to recruit schools and to arrange a second follow-up interview with schools who were interviewed. In response to these challenges, the evaluation team invited a new set of schools to participate in Round 2 of interviews, in addition to recontacting the 17 schools who took part in Round 1 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 Round 1 interviews. However, there was an insufficient number of schools interviewed at both time points ( $n = 8$ ) to conduct within-case analysis and track schools’ progress over the year.

Table 7: Case study schools

|                            |                 | Round 1          | Round 2        |
|----------------------------|-----------------|------------------|----------------|
|                            |                 | (June–July 2021) | (Oct–Dec 2021) |
| School staff interviewed   | Teacher         | 10               | 6              |
|                            | TA              | 5                | 6              |
|                            | Headteacher     | 4                | 2              |
| Number of interviewees     | One             | 15               | 14             |
|                            | Two             | 2                | 0              |
| Interviewed at Round 1     | Yes             | N/A              | 8              |
|                            | No              | N/A              | 6              |
| Priority school (high FSM) | Yes             | 11               | 7              |
|                            | No              | 6                | 7              |
| Region                     | East Midlands   | 2                | 1              |
|                            | East of England | 6                | 4              |

|  |                           |    |    |
|--|---------------------------|----|----|
|  |                           |    |    |
| London                                   | 1                         | 1  |    |
| North East                               | 1                         | 0  |    |
| North West                               | 3                         | 3  |    |
| South East                               | 3                         | 0  |    |
| South West                               | 0                         | 1  |    |
| West Midlands                            | 0                         | 2  |    |
| Yorkshire and The Humber                 | 1                         | 2  |    |
| <b>NELI delivery (March–April 2021)</b>  | Started NELI delivery     | 10 | 10 |
|  | Not started NELI delivery | 7  | 4  |
| <b>LanguageScreen (March–April 2021)</b> | Used LanguageScreen       | 9  | 7  |
|  | Not used LanguageScreen   | 8  | 7  |
| <b>Total number of interviewees</b>      |                           | 19 | 14 |
| <b>Total number of interviews</b>        |                           | 17 | 14 |
| <b>Total number of schools</b>           |                           | 17 | 14 |

#### ***Interviews with staff from schools that were approached to take part but declined NELI***

Part of the purpose of the school surveys and case study interviews was to understand schools' motivations for signing up to NELI, their concerns about doing so and barriers and enablers of school engagement. Schools who did not take up the offer to deliver NELI in the 2020–21 academic year may have faced different challenges or differed in their experiences and priorities compared to schools who did take up the offer. To understand in more detail the reasons why some schools declined participation in NELI, we conducted short interviews (lasting 10 minutes) with three schools who were approached to take part in NELI but declined the offer. Stratified sampling was used to ensure that a mixture of schools in terms of region and the proportion of pupils eligible for FSM were invited to take part in an interview. However, it is important to bear in mind that these findings are based on a very small number of interviews with schools, and may not be representative of the wider population of non-participating schools. The original intention was to interview five non-participating schools but, as with schools delivering NELI, recruitment proved more challenging than anticipated. Interviewees were offered a £20 High Street voucher as an incentive to take part. Interviews focused on the factors influencing the school's choice not to participate, and whether anything could have been done to facilitate schools' participation.

#### ***Interviews with delivery partners***

To understand the recruitment strategies undertaken to reach, recruit and engage schools we conducted semi-structured interviews with the DfE recruitment team (see

Table 8). Included in the interview protocol were questions aimed at understanding the overall scaling approach and its management, barriers and enablers to recruitment and lessons learned for future scale-up activities in relation to recruitment. The DfE team were interviewed during the recruitment period (December 2020) and at the end of the recruitment period (February 2021).

Semi-structured interviews with delivery partners (EEF, University of Oxford,) were used to gather information about their experiences of implementing NELI at scale. These interviews were conducted at the end of the 2020–21 academic year. A range of topics were discussed to understand and assess the role and experiences of the different delivery partners: overall approach to the NELI scale-up; school recruitment; development and refinement of the online training and the impact of Covid-19 on the scale-up.

Table 8: Interviews with delivery partners

| Delivery organisation                  | Number of interviews | Number of interviewees | When interviews took place   |
|--|----------------------|------------------------|------------------------------|
| The EEF                                | 3                    | 3                      | June 2021                    |
| The University of Oxford               | 1                    | 2                      | June 2021                    |
| Department for Education               | 2                    | 2                      | December 2020, February 2021 |
| School recruitment and engagement team | 2                    | 2                      | February 2021                |
| <b>Total</b>                           | <b>8</b>             | <b>9</b>               |                              |

### Interviews with NELI mentors

NELI mentors were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews to obtain a more detailed understanding of their experiences in the scaling process. Five NELI mentors with a range of experience (i.e., mentors that were involved in the training in the previous NELI trial, and new NELI mentors) were each interviewed three times: during the online training period, mid-delivery and towards the end of the programme.

Interviews with NELI mentors were used to inform our understanding of what scaling looks like 'on the ground'. Questions focused on the overall experience of providing support to schools via the FutureLearn platform, as well as barriers or enablers to school staff engagement with NELI training or programme delivery.

### Analysis

Descriptive statistics from **surveys of staff from schools delivering NELI** were aggregated and summarised, focusing on emerging patterns and themes. Where possible (i.e., 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 emerging 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 non-participating schools, delivery partners and NELI mentors** was analysed using a general inductive approach (i.e., 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 (i.e., 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 time points to enable within-case analysis.

Each data source (surveys, interviews with case study schools, interviews with delivery partners and NELI mentors) 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 regards 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, NELI mentors), we were able to understand different levels of NELI delivery and how these interconnected.

## 2.2 Strengths and limitations of this evaluation

This evaluation draws on multiple data sources (surveys, 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 staggered across two academic years (2020–21 and 2021–22) provided insight into schools' experiences from first signing up to NELI to completing delivery, including the extended delivery plan. Survey participants were broadly representative of the population of schools participating in NELI, and case study interviews were conducted with a broad range of schools, including those who had made less progress with delivering NELI.

A number of limitations to the research methodology should be noted. Although the survey participants were broadly representative of the wider population of schools who agreed to be contacted about the research (see

Table 6: Schools who participated in the three survey waves compared to the full sample, it was not a census. Fewer than half of schools that signed up to deliver NELI in the 2020–21 academic year participated in the first survey wave (March–April 2021) and the response rate declined with each subsequent wave (meaning participating schools may have become a more selected group with each survey wave). Moreover, schools who agreed to be contacted about the research (4,798 out of 6,667 or 72%) may not have been wholly representative of the cohort of schools who signed up to deliver NELI in the 2020–21 academic year. 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 RQs. Moreover, no pupil-level data was collected from which to assess programme delivery and fidelity.

Qualitative data to inform this evaluation is based on a relatively small number of interviews which, whilst they include a range of schools, should not be considered representative. Only three interviews were conducted with schools who declined the offer to participate in NELI in the 2020–21 academic year, meaning that it is not possible to draw comparisons between the two groups of schools (i.e., those who did and did not take up the NELI offer). 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 who 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 (e.g., from TAs, teachers, NELI leads and SLT). For both surveys and interviews, lack of participation from some schools has the potential to introduce bias if, for instance, schools who were more invested in NELI or had made more progress with delivery were more likely to take part.

As described in the methodology (see section 2.1), the original intention was to interview the same case study schools over time, conducting a within-school analysis. However, this was not possible due to the small number of schools who agreed to take part in multiple interviews.

## 2.3 Timeline

Table 9 presents a timeline of the main activities related to the evaluation.

*Table 9: Evaluation timeline*

| Dates             | Activity   |
|-------------------|--|
| Aug–Dec 20        | Schools recruited to deliver NELI  |
| Oct 21 onward     | Schools had access to LanguageScreen   |
| Dec 20–Nov 21     | Regular communication with delivery organisations (EEF, University of Oxford, other delivery partners) |
| Dec 20–Feb 21     | NELI resource packs received by schools  |
| Dec 20 – March 21 | Regular communication with delivery organisations (DfE)  |
| Jan 21            | Online training via FutureLearn launched   |
| Jan– Feb 21       | Interviews with NELI mentors (Round 1)   |

| Dates           | Activity   |
|-----------------|--|
| Feb 2021        | Communication with schools about the extended delivery plan                |
| March– April 21 | Post-training survey (Round 1)   |
| April– May 21   | Interviews with schools that did not participate                           |
| May 21          | Presentation of interim evaluation findings to delivery partners           |
| May–July 21     | Post-training & mid-delivery case study interviews in 17 schools (Round 1) |
| June– July 21   | Mid-delivery survey at the end of the school year (Round 2)                |
| Aug 21          | Interviews with NELI mentors (Round 2)                                     |
| Sep 21          | Presentation of interim evaluation findings to delivery partners           |
| Oct–Dec 21      | End-delivery case study interviews in 14 schools (Round 2)                 |
| Dec 21–Jan 22   | Interviews with NELI mentors (Round 3)                                     |
| Feb 22          | End-delivery survey (Round 3)  |

### 3 Scale-up approach and processes in a Covid-affected environment

The number of schools in England who signed up to deliver NELI in the 2020–21 academic year (6,667) was considerably larger than the number of schools who participated in NELI as part of trials. For instance, 193 schools took part in the effectiveness trial (Dimova et al., 2020), 97 of whom received the intervention. The roll out of NELI across schools in England was implemented at speed and in the context of Covid-19. This section presents evidence on how delivery organisations managed the process of scaling up NELI in the context of Covid-19 and what modifications were made to facilitate this. It summarises challenges encountered by the delivery team in scaling up NELI at speed in the context of Covid-19, how these were managed, and what was learned from the process.

#### 3.1 Scale-up approach: key lessons

- The main modification for delivering NELI at scale was delivering the training for school staff online rather than face-to-face, and this appeared to work well. Data discussed elsewhere in this report shows the online training was perceived to be useful, and school staff were broadly satisfied with the FutureLearn platform. This suggests that online delivery of training for school staff is a viable model for NELI and other scripted small group interventions delivered at scale. Other modifications for delivering NELI at scale were remote support for schools provided by the University of Oxford and OxEd and the fact that DfE funding enabled the online training and NELI resources to be made available to schools free of charge.
- The large number of schools interested in signing up to deliver NELI in the 2020–21 academic year increased the workload and created challenges for delivery partners, including the need to place additional batch orders of NELI resource packs, which complicated the process of communicating with schools. The scale of NELI delivery for the 2020–21 academic year could only be estimated at the beginning of the recruitment period and the cap on the number of schools that could sign up increased over time based on demand from schools, which made planning more difficult.
- **Delays to NELI delivery to pupils took implementation away from the intended model.** The extended delivery plan (schools continuing to deliver NELI in the 2021–22 academic year when pupils were in Year 1) was introduced in response to delays with delivery to pupils due to Covid-19. Facilitating continued delivery was felt to be important by delivery partners because the evidence base suggested that the impact of NELI was greater, the more weeks of the programme were delivered. This decision was also informed by recognition of the ongoing needs of pupils whose language development had been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. At the same time, however, NELI is designed to be delivered to pupils during their Reception year, so this represented a departure from the intended model of delivery to pupils.
- The delivery team described **close working relationships and effective, agile delivery in complex and challenging circumstances.** The number of delivery organisations involved in the scale-up made decision-making complex, and there were some instances where delivery partners had different views and perspectives (the optimum number of schools to recruit, how to respond to challenges linked to Covid-19).
- The scale and pace of NELI delivery made it difficult to implement changes for year one of the scale-up, but changes are planned for future years. Planned changes include simplifying the registration process and improving data management systems.

#### 3.2 What actions are/were taken to increase the scalability of NELI? (RQ 4.1)

**The main modification to support the delivery of NELI at scale was delivering training for school staff online rather than face-to-face.**

No modifications were made to the content of the NELI programme resources or how it was intended to be provided by staff to pupils in schools for the scale-up. The main modification for delivering NELI at scale was that **the training for school staff was delivered online rather than face-to-face**, using the FutureLearn platform (which had not been used when NELI was implemented as part of trials). Previously, NELI training had been run in-person over two consecutive

days for TAs, with teachers joining for the first half-day (as reported in Dimova et al., 2020). There was also a half-day in-person workshop for TAs mid-way through NELI delivery (week nine or ten) (as reported in Dimova et al., 2020). Online asynchronous NELI training was already in development prior to the scale-up but had not previously been implemented. Online training was introduced to maximise reach and participation, since face-to-face training could be a barrier to schools from certain geographical areas signing up to deliver NELI. Moreover, offering face-to-face training was not felt to be feasible at the scale and speed necessary for rolling out NELI across schools in England in the 2020–21 academic year, given the social distancing requirements of Covid-19 pandemic.

As described by delivery partners, there were some concerns about delivering the NELI training online, specifically the degree to which schools would engage with and benefit from an online model of delivery (relative to face-to-face delivery) and the delivery team's ability to monitor and oversee the participation in training. These concerns had to be weighed against the need to roll out the programme at speed to help children whose language abilities had been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. A comprehensive programme of online training and delivery support was designed and built by the University of Oxford between June and October 2020. There was a piloting exercise conducted by the University of Oxford in November 2020 to identify whether any revisions or adaptations were needed to the online training. Piloting the training highlighted that relatively few adaptations were needed, mostly relating to the provision of a video library of NELI sessions, paired with expert commentary and written examples of reporting and target-setting for the children involved to explain and illustrate all aspects of NELI delivery. This was not finalised in time for the pilot, but was in place by January 2021 for the launch of the training.

**Other modifications included expanding the support offer and making the NELI training and resources free of charge for schools.**

The delivery team expanded **the remote support available to participating schools** as part of delivering NELI at scale. In trials, schools could ask questions of the team responsible for delivering NELI training during the delivery period (as reported in Dimova et al., 2020). In the scale-up, support (information, discussion forums, videos of NELI sessions) was made available through the Delivery Support Hub hosted by the University of Oxford on FutureLearn. Schools looking for additional information could contact the NELI mentors – specialist speech and language professionals trained to offer guidance and support to schools. Schools could also contact the University of Oxford delivery team via phone or email.

The DfE funding for NELI in the 2020–21 academic year meant that the **NELI training and resources were made available to schools free of charge**.

**3.3 What is the approach to scaling NELI? How is the scaling process organised? (RQ 4.2) Is the partnership between the different delivery organisations seamless? (RQ 4.3)**

**Funding for the first year of the NELI scale-up was provided by the DfE and delivery was overseen by the EEF.**

The scale-up of NELI across England in the 2020–21 academic year was funded by a grant from the DfE to the EEF. The DfE knew they wanted to invest in interventions to promote areas of Early Years learning affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, and research supported focusing on children's language abilities. A key factor informing the DfE's decision to invest in the NELI invention was the strength of the evidence from the NELI effectiveness trial (Dimova et al., 2020). The contract for delivering the NELI scale-up was not put out to tender in a competitive process due to the need to respond to Covid-19's impact on children's learning and development and the length of time a procurement process would take would prevent delivery of the programme to pupils in the 2020–21 academic year.

The EEF were responsible for managing DfE's grant for delivery of NELI at scale in the 2020–21 academic year. This, along with the National Tutoring Programme, was the first time that the EEF had taken an active role in coordinating delivery for educational intervention. The EEF took on this role on a temporary basis because there was no other single organisation in a position to oversee delivery for the first year of the NELI scale-up. The University of Oxford could only accept a grant to conduct research, not to oversee delivery, and given the speed with which NELI was rolled out there was insufficient time to set up a new delivery organisation with the processes and assurances in place to accept a large grant from the DfE. In addition, the EEF had a pre-existing contract with the DfE which could be amended to facilitate the new project. The EEF's role in overseeing NELI delivery was intended to be a temporary arrangement for the first

year of the scale-up. The EEF worked closely with the Nuffield Foundation (who own the intellectual property of the programme), including seconding staff from Nuffield to the EEF. The staff seconded from Nuffield Foundation worked as part of the EEF team to oversee delivery for the first year of the scale-up and to facilitate communication between delivery partners.

**The DfE were responsible for managing the recruitment of schools who signed up to deliver NELI in the 2020–21 academic year.**

The process of recruiting schools to deliver NELI in the 2020–21 academic year began in August 2020 and ended in December 2020. There was no specific recruitment target, but there was a limit on the number of schools that could be supported to deliver the NELI programme given the resources available. Within these limits, the aim was to enable as many schools as possible to participate in the programme, particularly those with a high proportion of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. The cap on the number of schools that could sign up to deliver NELI in the 2020–21 academic year was initially set at 4,000. However, this figure was subsequently amended twice by DfE to 5,000 and then 7,000, with the aim of enabling as many pupils as possible to benefit from NELI given the resources available. The total number of schools recruited to deliver NELI in the first year of the scale-up (2020–21 academic year) was 6,667.

The DfE led the recruitment drive and created a school engagement team to manage and execute the recruitment process. The engagement team was supported by two other teams in the DfE dedicated to the NELI programme: a policy team and a programme team. Other NELI delivery partners took a supporting role in the recruitment process by promoting the programme opportunity through their regular communication channels (e.g., websites, newsletters, social media and conversations with schools). The EEF organised training on NELI for the DfE engagement team.

The DfE NELI policy team created and published an Expression of Interest (EoI) form online. Members of the school engagement team saw the EoI as an effective tool because it disseminated information about NELI and provided an estimate of the number of schools that were interested in participating.

It was decided by DfE that the opportunity to receive NELI should be given to schools with high proportions of disadvantaged children first, reflecting the fact that their learning and development may have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. After modelling various parameters that could be used to identify the proportion of disadvantaged children in a school, DfE decided to use school-level percentages of pupils eligible for FSM. The DfE engagement team were aware that, although widely used, the percentage of pupils eligible for FSM as a school-level indicator is an imperfect proxy for the proportion of disadvantaged children in Reception who might be eligible to receive NELI. However, it was felt that this was the best measure available to identify which schools to prioritise in their engagement efforts:

*'FSM percentage looks at the whole school, we were just focused on Early Years. But very quickly we settled on FSM percentage as the best measure. But it has its flaws' (Delivery partner, interviewed February 2021).*

There was no specific target in terms of the number of priority schools (i.e., those with a higher-than-average proportion of pupils eligible for FSM) to be recruited, but the aim was for these schools to be prioritised in the recruitment drive.

The DfE team recruited schools using leads lists. Leads lists were generated by combining data from schools' EoIs with information held by DfE about the percentage of pupils in each school eligible for FSM. In order of priority, the DfE engagement team reached out to (a) schools who had submitted an EoI for NELI and  $FSM\% \geq 25\%$  (tranche 1); (b) schools without EoI and  $FSM\% \geq 25\%$  (tranche 2); (c) schools with EoI and  $25\% > FSM\% \geq 18\%$  (tranche 3); and (d) schools without EoI and  $FSM\% < 18\%$  (tranche 4):

*'In terms of tranches, it started with top quartile schools [in terms of FSM] with an EoI. And then we worked down the tranches. Then it was top quartile schools with no EoIs. This was more cold calling as they had not expressed interest. Then we moved down the list that way' (Delivery partner, interviewed February 2021).*

Multi-academy trusts (MATs)<sup>8</sup> were prioritised in terms of the number of their constituent schools with a high proportion of FSM pupils.

**Online NELI training and the LanguageScreen assessment app were provided by the University of Oxford and subcontractor (OxEd). OUP produced and distributed NELI resource packs.**

Training for school staff involved in delivering NELI as part of the scale-up was provided by the University of Oxford and delivered online via the FutureLearn platform. As part of their role in delivering the NELI training, the University of Oxford were responsible for managing a network of NELI mentors (from the University of Oxford and Elklan) who offered support and advice to school staff. Subcontracted by the University of Oxford, OxEd provided the LanguageScreen app used by schools for screening pupils to take part in NELI and PC-Q provided support for schools using LanguageScreen.

In terms of other resources, NELI programme resources were produced and distributed to participating schools by OUP.

**Close collaboration between organisations is critical for success, but needs to be managed very carefully, particularly when several partners are involved.**

Delivery partners emphasised the importance of close collaboration between organisations, including regular meetings and data sharing (regular updates were shared via a dashboard). Delivery partners interviewed for this evaluation described close collaboration and effective working relationships. However, partners also described challenges associated with multiple organisations collaborating to deliver a complex intervention at scale in challenging circumstances. Delivery partners described how it was challenging to agree the overall approach for implementing NELI at scale because of the number of parties involved, as well as the compressed timescale. There were challenges deciding how to address disruption and delivery delays linked to Covid-19, given that a number of delivery partners needed to agree on the approach. One delivery partner commented that the scale-up would have been more straightforward if fewer delivery organisations had been involved. Since they worked so closely together, a change in personnel in partner organisations could create challenges for other delivery organisations. Some delivery organisations took on a new or different role as part of the NELI scale-up, and there could be some challenges associated with this. For instance, DfE had not undertaken a recruitment exercise on this scale before and so recruited external staff from agencies to work in the school engagement team.

3.4 Was the pace and coverage of expansion as intended? If not, what were the barriers to expansion and how can these be addressed? (RQ 4.4) How has the Covid-19 outbreak affected the NELI scale-up? (RQ 4.7) Were any changes needed to the scale-up approach due to changes in the environment and the local context to inform modifications to the scale-up approach? (RQ 4.6)

**The delivery team experienced challenges associated with the compressed timeline for the first year of the NELI scale-up.**

Research on scaling up interventions has emphasised the importance of allowing adequate time and resources (World Health Organization, 2009; Berry et al., 2018). The first year of the NELI scale-up was implemented at speed, with little time for advanced planning. DfE funding was announced in June 2020 and the recruitment of schools started in August 2020, with a view to schools starting to deliver NELI sessions in early 2021. The compressed timeline for the first year of the NELI scale-up was a product of the magnitude and urgency of need for the intervention, with growing evidence of the detrimental impact of Covid-19 measures on children's early language development.

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<sup>8</sup> MATs are a group of academies, publicly funded schools independent from local authorities, that have come together to form a charitable company led by a single board of trustees

Delivery partners described the timeline for rolling out NELI at scale as challenging, observing that the process felt pressured to due to time constraints:

*'It was a very difficult process because so many people were involved trying to get to an end [point for] delivery. It was rushed' (Delivery partner, interviewed June 2021).*

There were some concerns that the speed at which NELI was scaled up might have implications for the quality and effectiveness of delivery. However, the findings presented in this report illustrate that, despite the time pressure on delivery partners, NELI was implemented with a high degree of fidelity. School staff were generally satisfied with the quality and availability of training, the materials and resources in the NELI pack(s) and the information and support available (NELI Delivery Support Hub, NELI mentors, NELI email contact). Moreover, with the exception of delays associated with the Covid-19 pandemic (exceptional circumstances out of the control of the delivery team), most schools implemented NELI sessions in accordance with the training and guidance they had received.

*'It's taken 20 years to get a programme of this quality to schools. I have concerns that by doing it [scaling up NELI across schools in England] at this speed ... I'm not sure it's being implemented properly' (Delivery partner, interviewed June 2021).*

Delivery partners talked about how recruitment started before all elements of delivery had been agreed on, meaning that they were not able to provide as much detailed information to schools as they would have liked:

*'Recruitment begins before everything is ironed out, so the information we provide to schools is vaguer than we'd like. This has a knock-on effect of schools not knowing enough about NELI. This should be improved for future roll out. Fundamentally, all of this has been done at breakneck speed so if you wanted to do this again you wouldn't do it this way' (Delivery partner, interviewed June 2021).*

### **The large number of schools who signed up to deliver NELI in the 2020–21 academic year created challenges for delivery organisations**

The large number of schools who signed up to deliver NELI in the 2020–21 academic year had implications for the ability of the delivery team to communicate with schools and provide them with resources in a timely manner.

The delivery team had to decide at the beginning of the year how many NELI resource packs to produce based on estimates of how many schools would sign up to deliver the programme. The level of demand from schools was unknown at the beginning of the year and as previously described, the cap on the number of schools who could sign up to deliver NELI in the 2020–21 was increased from 4,000 to 7,000. Demand from schools was higher than expected at the beginning of the year, which meant that two additional orders of NELI resource packs had to be placed. Consequently, there was some **variation in when schools received NELI packs**, ranging between December 2020 and February 2021. Shortages of cardboard associated with the Covid-19 pandemic caused some delays with producing NELI packs.

The fact that multiple orders had to be placed for NELI resource packs complicated the process of communicating with schools about training and delivery timelines. Invitations to participate in the online training were sent out to schools in multiple tranches. This staggered approach was necessary because of the timeline for schools receiving NELI packs, as illustrated by the quotation below. Moreover, it complicated communication to have schools following different timelines:

*'The biggest consideration was always getting the kits from OUP as they had such long lead times. [This] meant we had to stagger training times, sending complicated messages about who could access training and when' (Delivery partner, interviewed June 2021).*

The original intention was to provide schools with access to the training once they had received their NELI resource pack(s), since it was felt that the pack was important to contextualise the training. Since additional orders had to be placed for NELI resource packs (reflecting high demand from schools) and these would not arrive until after the online training was launched (January 2021), the University of Oxford enabled schools to complete the training **before** receiving NELI packs, if need be, with the elements of the programme required for training available as digital downloads from the courses themselves.

Another ramification of the size of the cohort of schools who signed up to deliver NELI in 2020–21 was a **larger than anticipated volume of information and support requests**. In January 2021, the University of Oxford reported having received around 2,000 queries from schools about LanguageScreen assessments and around 6,000 queries in total. The volume of emails and calls may have been greater than expected because a larger number of schools were recruited to take part in NELI than envisaged when the original targets were set. There was no single point of contact within the NELI delivery partner teams that was relevant for the entirety of the project, which made it harder to manage communications with schools. During the recruitment phase between September and December 2020, it often fell on the recruitment team as the first point of contact for schools to pass on queries and issues to the relevant delivery organisations. From the end of December 2020, the recruitment email was unmanned, leading to delays responding to some schools still using this contact method. Automatic re-routing to the support email set up by the University of Oxford would have averted this issue, but was not possible from a DfE domain.

**The extended delivery plan was introduced to enable schools to deliver the full 20 weeks of NELI.**

Scaling up interventions requires flexibility and agility to respond to changes in the wider context (World Health Organization, 2010; Gibbs et al., 2021). In this case, the Covid-19 pandemic continued to have a profound effect on schools across the 2020–21 academic year. In response to the challenges faced by schools delivering NELI in a Covid-affected environment, delivery partners extended the timeline to allow schools to continue delivery to Cohort 1 pupils (i.e., those who started the programme in the 2020–21 academic year) during the subsequent academic year (2021–22) when these pupils were in Year 1 (the extended delivery plan). Delivery partners described the extended delivery plan as a decision borne out of necessity. School closures meant the full 20 weeks of NELI delivery (see Box 7) for an overview of intended delivery for NELI sessions) would not be feasible for most schools during the 2020–21 academic year and enabling delivery to continue into the following academic year was a pragmatic solution. Delivery organisations knew that a small number of schools were delivering NELI remotely during the Covid-19 lockdown, but there was a lack of information on how common this was (as described earlier in this section, survey data indicates that this was uncommon) and the implications for programme participation and effectiveness. Facilitating continued delivery was felt to be important by delivery partners because the evidence base suggested that the impact of NELI was greater the number of weeks of the programme was delivered. This decision was also informed by recognition of the need for ongoing support for pupils whose language development had been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. However, delivery partners also noted that NELI is designed to be delivered to Reception children, whereas under the extended delivery plan it was (in some schools) being delivered to Year 1 pupils. The experiences of schools participating in the extended delivery plan is covered under Section 5.4.

**3.5 Were the delivery partners able to successfully monitor and address any delivery issues?**  
**(RQ 2.3) Were existing monitoring systems adequate in supporting the NELI scale-up process?**  
**(RQ 4.5)**

**Challenges linked to monitoring systems included errors associated with manual data entry.**

Previous research on scaling-up interventions has emphasised the importance of real-time data on implementation to highlight issues with fidelity and to facilitate continual learning and improvement (Barker et al., 2015). Organisations involved in delivering NELI highlighted **challenges relating to information management**, which were compounded by the high volume of queries received from schools. The DfE engagement team used Excel spreadsheets to monitor and track the recruitment process and it was broadly perceived as a complicated process, and as creating excessive work. Information relating to school registration and information and support queries had to be inputted manually rather than using automated processes. This was partly a product of the compressed timeline for rolling out NELI. For instance, DfE were unable to secure the necessary internal permissions in the time available to use online forms for school registration. The recruitment team described challenges associated with receiving incorrect email addresses from schools as part of the registration process.

*'Everything was done manually and the volume of communication on top of that made some instances totally unmanageable' (Delivery partner, interviewed June 2021).*

'We [the recruitment team] were working from spreadsheets, it was a nightmare. It was difficult. In an ideal world it would have been managed centrally from one department ... Having a central system to monitor and track the recruitment process would have been better. Data was always a problem, although the timescales did not facilitate a CRM [Customer Relationship Manager software]' (*Delivery partner, interviewed February 2021*).

'Schools often spell their emails wrong – thousands of them. For 30% we had to go back to schools to confirm email addresses. Which did elongate the process. It wasn't ideal' (*Delivery partner, interviewed February 2021*).

### **Delivery partners had limited data with which to monitor implementation and fidelity in schools.**

Through the provision of online platforms and resources (LanguageScreen, FutureLearn) delivery partners had access to some data on NELI delivery in schools, for instance the number of LanguageScreen assessments conducted (188,000 as of June 2021) and the number of school staff who completed the training. Training courses were made up of a number of self-contained 'Steps', that participants could mark as completed once they had worked through them. To be counted as having completed the course, a participant needed to have marked a minimum of 90% of course Steps as complete and passed the end of course test with a minimum score of 70%. This means that the number of completed Steps does not give complete information about how schools engaged with these resources. Although FutureLearn data provided information on how many participants completed the NELI training according to the criteria above, it was recognised by partners that this could be an underestimate, since marking Steps in this way was not mandatory. Participants choosing not to do so would result in their training being counted as incomplete. Delivery partners also commented that delivering the training online, the NELI team had less insight into how well participants were paying attention and their level of understanding compared to face-to-face training. For other aspects of NELI delivery in schools, in particular the delivery of NELI individual and group sessions, no data was available to monitor fidelity in the first year of the scale-up.

### **3.6 What are the delivery partners' conceptions of NELI scale-up success? (RQ 4.8)**

#### **Delivery partners were motivated by a shared purpose, but there was not always consistency over time and across different organisations on specific targets and priorities for the scale-up.**

Delivery partners were aligned in their understanding of the purpose of the NELI scale-up, which was to allow as many pupils as possible, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to benefit from the intervention in a Covid-affected context in which many pupils' learning and development had been impacted.

There was some uncertainty at the beginning of the academic year about the scale of interest in NELI delivery. Not only was the level of interest from schools unknown, but as described earlier in this section, the cap on the number of schools that could be supported to deliver NELI in the 2020–21 academic year was increased from 4,000 to 7,000 over the delivery period. The scale of delivery was larger than expected at the beginning of the year because the upper limit on the number of schools increased over time and because the level of demand from schools exceeded expectations. Whilst delivery partners shared a desire to enable as many pupils as possible to benefit from NELI, this objective had to be balanced against practical constraints:

'I think we never planned on it being as large as it was. We should have planned this in advance. We ended up with just one email inbox which was inundated with queries' (*Delivery partner, interviewed June 2021*).

Recruitment took place between August and December 2020 in three waves. DfE decided to keep recruitment open for as long as possible to enable the maximum number of interested schools to participate in the NELI programme in the academic year. Reflecting on the scale-up approach at the end of the academic year, one delivery partner questioned the approach to allow recruitment to continue until December 2021. It was more difficult for schools who signed up later in the process to deliver NELI according to the expected timeline (as the plan at the outset was for schools to complete LanguageScreen assessments in November/December 2021), as illustrated by the quotation below:

'[The] third wave [of recruitment] was mainly about shoehorning as many schools in the door [as possible], but this led us into chaos as schools didn't have enough time to deliver ... We had compromised everything to hit a number, but I don't know if this was the right decision in hindsight' (*Delivery partner, interviewed June 2021*).

Another point of discussion between partners related to how to respond to challenges with delivery linked to the Covid-19 pandemic. Ultimately, the delivery team decided to encourage schools to continue with NELI delivery in 2021–22 when pupils were in Year 1 (the extended delivery plan), as described above. There were trade-offs involved in this decision – between delivering NELI ‘by the book’ in terms of pupils receiving the full programme in their Reception year, and the need to be pragmatic given school closures and the pressure on school linked to Covid-19. Delivery partners ultimately agreed on an approach but may have had different opinions and priorities concerning the best way to proceed.

These different priorities across partner organisations should be seen against a backdrop of shared purpose in the context of what were otherwise close and effective working relationships. These issues may have been driven by the exceptional circumstances of the first year of the scale-up – firstly, the speed at which NELI was rolled out at scale, and secondly the fact that Covid-19 continued to have a profound impact on schools and their ability to deliver the intervention in the 2020–21 academic year.

**Delivery partners felt the first year of the scale-up had gone well in the circumstances, with a large number of schools recruited and delivery progressing despite challenges associated with Covid-19.**

There was a sense that the first year of the scale-up was experimental. NELI had never been delivered at scale before and doing so at speed in a Covid-affected environment involved some risk. Looking back on the year, delivery partners generally felt the process had gone well, but they were conscious of the need for improvements for future years of delivery:

‘I’m really happy with the overall outcome of the project, but we worked with extremely tight timescales. With more time, the school recruitment could be automated. You wouldn’t need a team ... With more time there would have been different ways of doing things’ (*Delivery partner, interviewed February 2021*).

Delivery partners mentioned **aspects of NELI delivery that might have been implemented differently had there been more time**, including putting the contract for NELI delivery out to tender as part of a competitive process, automating the recruitment process and having a single delivery timeline for all schools.

Delivery partners also mentioned **planned changes to NELI for future years of the scale-up**. Planned changes described by delivery partners were to have a single website ([www.teachneli.org](http://www.teachneli.org)) to simplify the registration process for schools, automated rather than manual data input for school registration to create efficiencies and reduce the risk of human error and a new CRM (Customer Relationship Management) database (Salesforce).

## 4 School recruitment and engagement

This section summarises findings from data collection activities, focusing on school recruitment and engagement. The section covers schools' motivations for signing up to NELI, whether the programme reached the intended schools with a high proportion of pupils eligible for FSM, barriers and enablers of participation (including the impact of Covid-19), and how the take-up of NELI might be improved.

### 4.1 School recruitment and engagement: key lessons

- **There is a high level of interest in NELI as an evidence-based intervention.** Demand outstripped the delivery team's expectations and recruitment targets shifted (increased) over time, meaning that the number of schools who signed up to deliver NELI in 2020–21 (6,667) was larger than originally anticipated. The number of schools recruited was close to the maximum possible given the available funding and resources (7,000). One of the key factors driving interest in NELI was the strength of the evidence base behind the intervention.
- Shifting the recruitment timeline earlier and engaging with existing school/LA networks might improve take-up of NELI. By the beginning of the academic year, some schools had already committed to delivering other programmes.
- **The Covid-19 pandemic represented both a barrier and a facilitator to school engagement.** Schools were under a lot of pressure due to school closures and high levels of staff and pupil absence, and there were concerns about schools' ability to deliver NELI in these circumstances. At the same time, schools were motivated to participate in NELI as a means of addressing setbacks in Early Years language skills caused by disruptions associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. It is unclear if/how schools' engagement with NELI would differ if Covid-related factors were absent or less pronounced, with implications for NELI delivery over the longer term.
- **The fact that DfE funding enabled NELI training and resources to be offered to schools for free facilitated school engagement.** This has implications for NELI delivery over the longer term, since additional funding would be required to maintain this level of support. DfE committed £8 million to supporting the NELI scale-up in the 2021–22 academic year, but at the time of writing funding from 2022–23 onwards is uncertain.
- With the cost of training and resources removed, the main barrier to school engagement was lack of staff time to participate in the training and deliver NELI sessions. Barriers to engagement related primarily to school-level factors (staff time, resourcing, finding a suitable space in school) rather than the recruitment process. Modifying the NELI intervention to make it less time and resource intensive for schools would depart from the model on which the evidence on programme effectiveness is based.

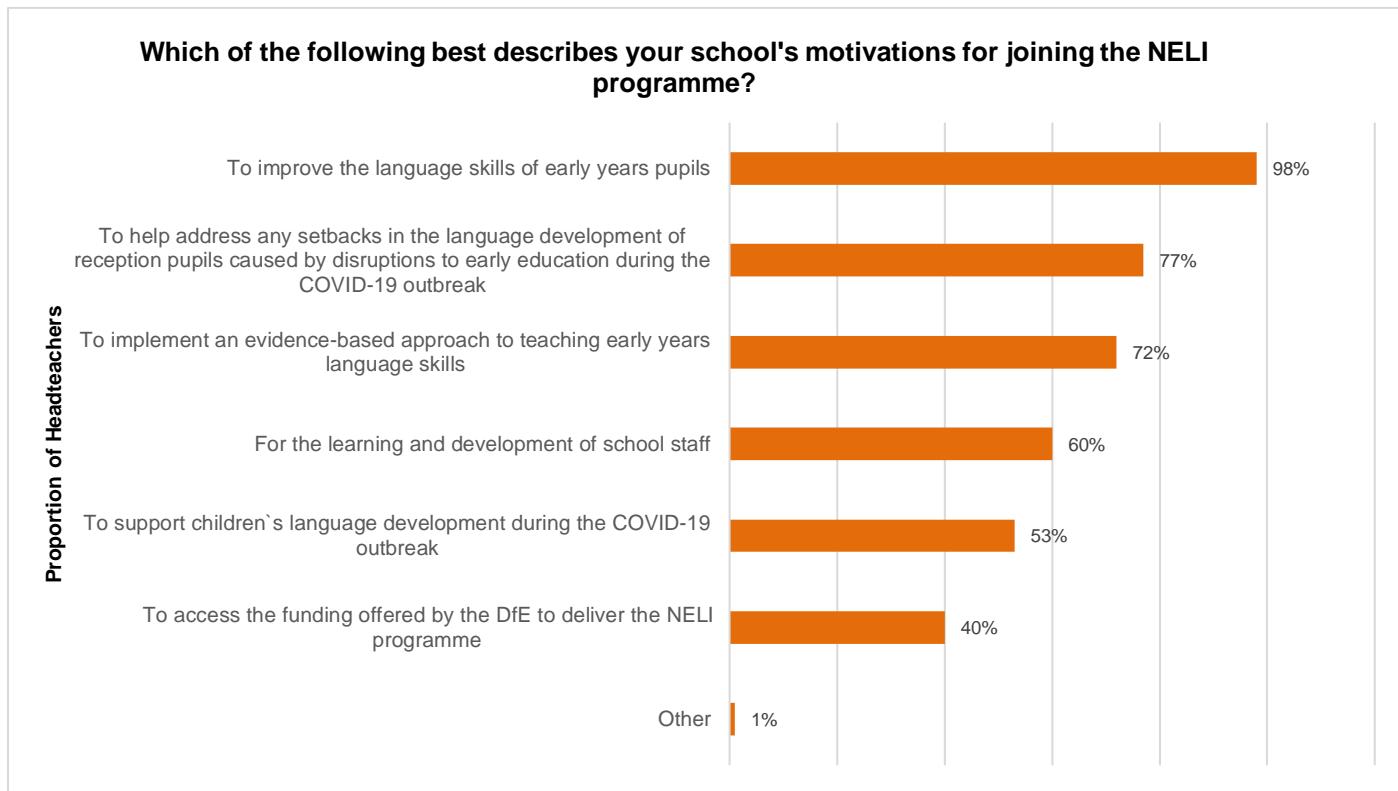
### 4.2 Why are schools attracted to NELI? (RQ 1.1)

**A key motivation of schools who signed up to deliver NELI was to address the impact of disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic on children's language abilities.**

Headteachers surveyed in March–April 2021 were asked about their schools' motivations for signing up to NELI (

Figure 4). Almost all Headteachers surveyed (99%) indicated that their school signed up to deliver NELI to improve the language skills of Early Years pupils. The impact of Covid-19 also emerged as a key motivating factor for schools. Headteachers indicated that they signed up for NELI to support children's language development during the Covid-19 pandemic (134 out of 252; 53%), and to address setbacks in the language development of Reception pupils caused by disruptions to education during this period (193 out of 252; 77%). Staff interviewed from the DfE engagement team (who were responsible for liaising with schools during the recruitment periods) also highlighted schools' desire to help pupils whose education had been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Figure 4: Motivations for signing up to deliver NELI, survey of Headteachers March–April 2021



**Note:** responses from  $n = 252$  Headteachers surveyed in March–April 2021. Respondents could select multiple options.

### Free NELI training and resources facilitated participation in the programme.

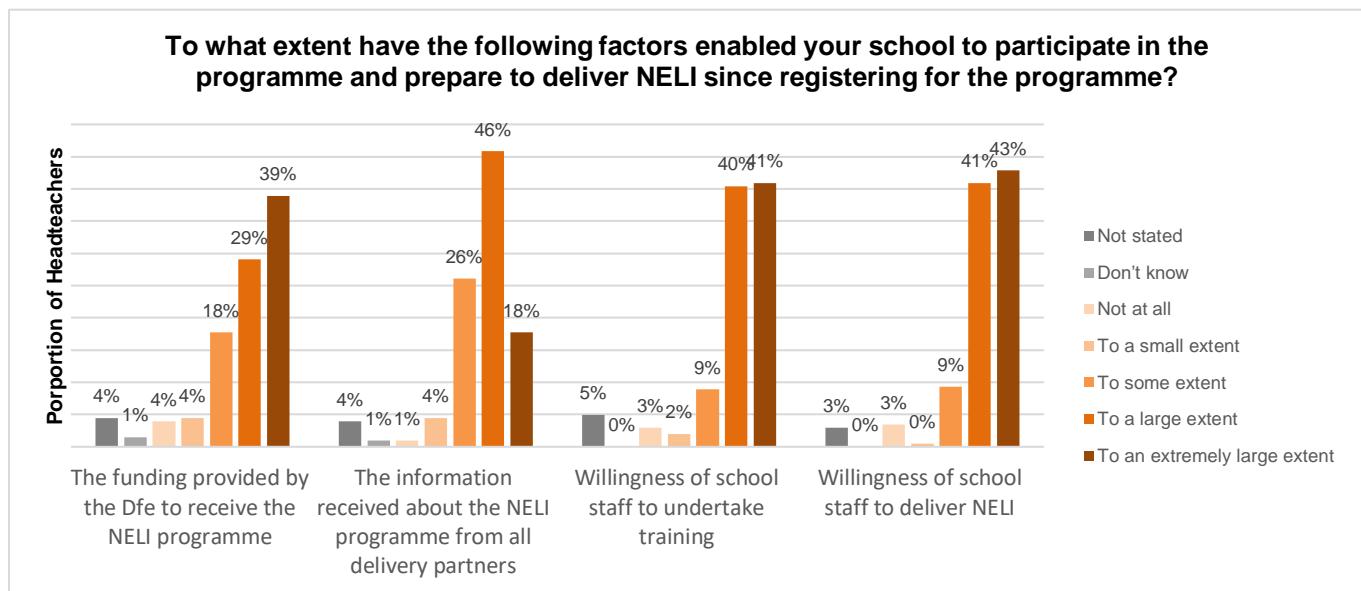
Cost can be a barrier for schools signing up to deliver programmes, as illustrated by this quotation:

'Funding is always an issue ... We have to think really carefully because costs are very tight, but this was backed [by DfE] so it was... a bit of a no brainer' (*Teacher from a case study school, interviewed September 2021*).

The training and resources required to participate in NELI were offered to schools free of charge. One in four (101 out of 252; 40%) Headteachers surveyed in March/April 2021 indicated that the funding offered by DfE to deliver the programme was a motivating factor for their school (

Figure 4). In this survey, Headteachers were also asked how far different factors had enabled their school to sign up to NELI. Around two thirds (172 out of 252; 68%) said the funding provided by the DfE had enabled their school to sign up to NELI to a large extent or an extremely large extent (Figure 5). Only 5% of Headteachers (12 out of 252) surveyed indicated that DfE funding was not an enabling factor for their school.

Figure 5: Factors enabling schools to participate in NELI, survey of Headteachers March–April 2021



**Note:** responses from  $n = 252$  Headteachers surveyed in March–April 2021

Members of the DfE engagement team commented on the importance of NELI training and resources being offered to schools for free, as illustrated by the following quotation. Delivery partners also noted that whilst the NELI training and resources were offered to schools for free, there could still be financial costs associated with delivering NELI, for instance costs associated with providing staff to cover for teachers/TAs away from the classroom.

*'It was going to be free. Schools need as much help as they can. We asked Headteachers what would sell other Headteachers to take part. They always said it was good to know it's free, and the efficacy' (Delivery partner, interviewed February 2021).*

The quotation above picks up on another important factor for schools, which is the strength of the evidence based behind NELI. Almost three-quarters of Headteachers surveyed (182 out of 252; 72%) indicated that their school signed up to deliver NELI to implement an evidence-based approach to teaching Early Years language skills (

Figure 4).

Almost two-thirds of Headteachers surveyed in March–April 2021 (151 out of 252; 60%) indicated that their school signed up to deliver NELI as a learning and development opportunity for staff (

Figure 4), which was also highlighted by delivery partners as a motivating factor for schools. The online NELI training for staff is covered in Section 5.

#### 4.3 Did NELI reach schools with a high proportion of FSM pupils? If not, why not? (RQ 1.2)

As described earlier in this report, a key aim for the first year of the scale-up was to prioritise schools with a high proportion of disadvantaged pupils (measured in terms of FSM) in recruitment activities. A staggered approach was taken to recruitment (described in Section 3.3), in which priority schools (i.e., schools with a high proportion of FSM pupils) were contacted first and invited to take part in the programme. There was no specific recruitment target set for priority schools, but recruitment figures for the 2020–21 academic year (see

Table ) show that schools in the highest FSM quartile accounted for over a third (35%) of schools who signed up.

*Table 10: Number of schools recruited in the 2020–21 academic year by FSM quartile*

| FSM quartile                           | Number of schools recruited in 2020–21 | Proportion of all schools recruited in 2020–21 |
|--|--|--|
| Quartile 1 (highest proportion of FSM) | 2,299                                  | 35%  |
| Quartile 2                             | 2,200                                  | 33%  |
| Quartile 3                             | 1,555                                  | 23%  |
| Quartile 4 (lowest proportion of FSM)  | 613                                    | 9%   |
| <b>Total</b>                           | <b>6,667</b>                           | <b>100%</b>                                    |

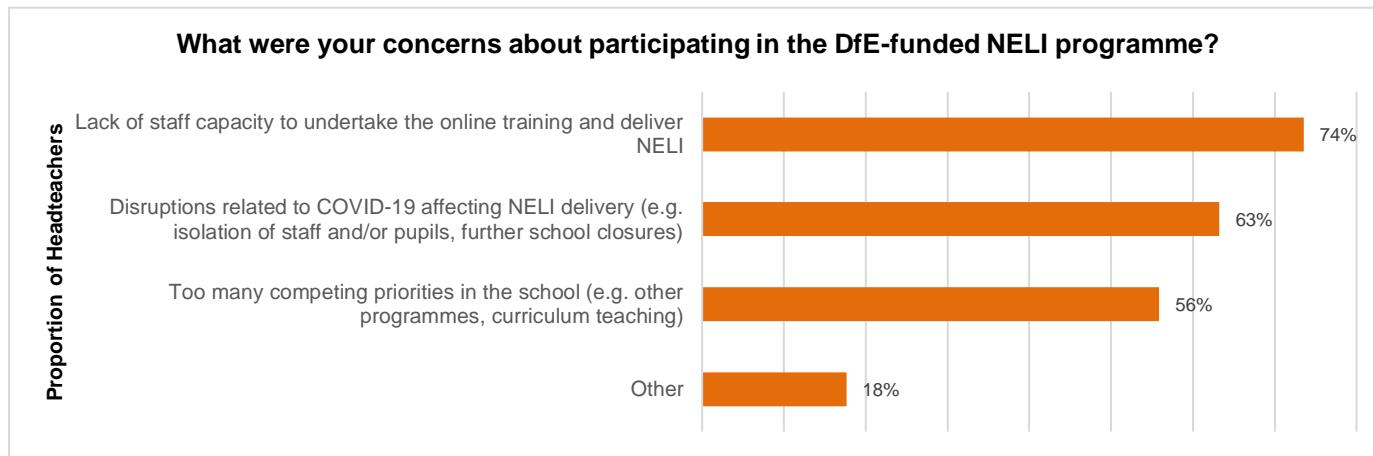
One member of the DfE engagement team commented that it was harder to recruit priority schools (i.e., those with a high proportion of FSM pupils) compared to other schools, but acknowledged that this observation was based on their perception rather than recruitment data. Another member of the team said they did not observe any differences between priority schools and other schools in terms of their level of engagement. Some delivery partners commented that priority schools faced greater challenges than other schools in terms of staffing and resources.

#### 4.4 With the cost of training and programme resources removed, what barriers remain to school engagement? (RQ 1.3)

**A key barrier to school engagement was the staff time required to undertake the training and deliver NELI sessions.**

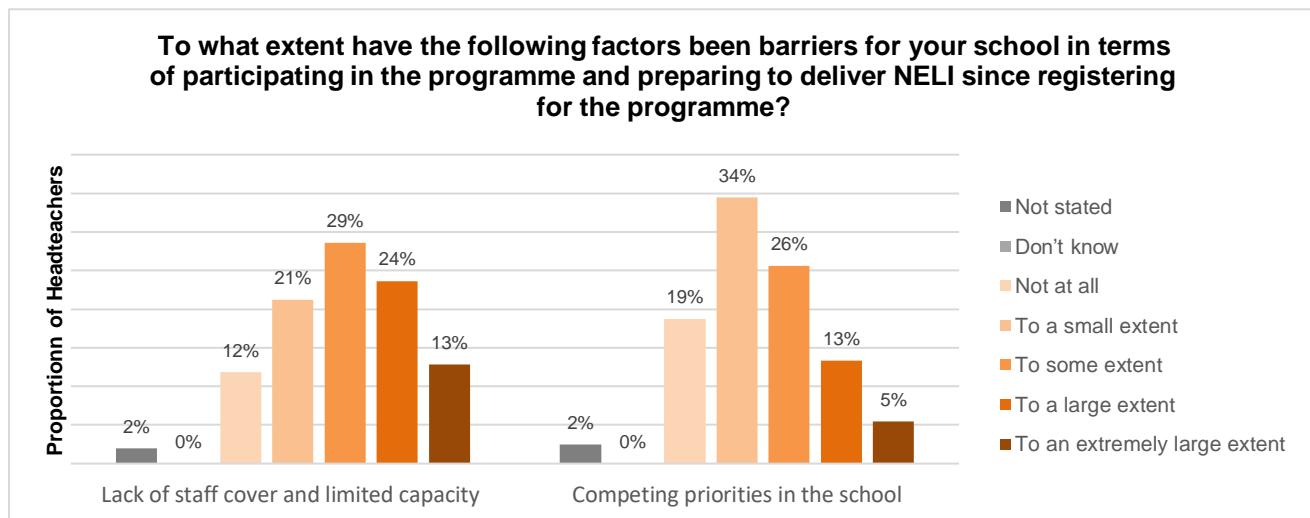
Headteachers surveyed in March–April 2021 were asked about whether they had any concerns about participating in the NELI programme. Nearly three-quarters of Headteachers who took part in the survey indicated that they did not have any concerns (184 out of 252; 73%), nearer to a quarter (68 out of 252; 27%) did have some concerns. Headteachers surveyed who had concerns were asked to provide more information about what these concerns were (Figure 6). The most commonly cited concern was a lack of staff capacity to undertake the online training and deliver NELI (50 out of 68; 74%), followed by concerns about disruption related to Covid-19 (43 out of 68; 63%). Around half (38 out of 68; 56%) of Headteachers who had concerns about their school participating in NELI indicated concerns about competing priorities in school (e.g., curriculum teaching, other programmes). A minority of survey responses described additional concerns under ‘other’: time-related concerns, concerns over the relevance of the programme to their special school setting and/or pupils and the implications of removing children from the classroom to participate in NELI.

Figure 6: Concerns about their school signing up to deliver NELI, survey of Headteachers March–April 2021



**Note:** responses from  $n = 68$  Headteachers surveyed in March–April 2021 who had concerns about their school signing up to deliver NELI. Respondents could select multiple options.

Figure 7: Barriers to delivery survey of Headteachers March–April 2021



**Note:** responses from  $n = 252$  Headteachers surveyed in March–April 2021

Headteachers surveyed in March–April 2021 were asked whether a lack of staff cover and limited capacity and competing priorities (e.g., other programmes) constituted a barrier for their school. Over a third of Headteachers (93 out of 252; 37%) surveyed indicated that a lack of staff capacity presented a barrier to their school to a large extent or an extremely large extent, as shown in Figure 7.

Headteachers surveyed in March–April 2021 were asked an open question about whether their school had faced any additional barriers to participating in NELI. Additional barriers identified by Headteachers in the survey included concerns about taking teachers/TAs out of the classroom and the implications of this for the wider Reception cohort as well as difficulties finding cover, challenges finding suitable space to deliver NELI sessions and costs (staff time) associated with undertaking the training (barriers related to Covid-19 are covered in Section 3.6).

**Some schools may have been reluctant to participate in NELI in the first year of the scale-up, preferring to wait until there was more experience implementing the programme.**

In addition to interviews with staff from schools who signed up to deliver NELI, interviews were conducted with schools who declined the offer to participate in NELI in the 2020–21 academic year. These interviews generally echoed barriers described by schools who did sign up to deliver the programme (see Box 4). These were a lack of staff time and capacity; concerns about finding sufficient space in school to deliver NELI sessions; and conflicts with other school commitments (particularly other language interventions that cover similar groups to NELI). However, these interviews also flagged some additional barriers, including the expectation from some schools that the intervention and/or delivery process would be improved over time.

*Box 4: Findings from interviews with schools who declined the offer to take part in NELI*

The amount of **time required to participate in NELI** was highlighted as a barrier to recruitment from schools who declined the NELI offer in the 2020–21 academic year. Concerns about the time commitment required to deliver NELI were exacerbated in the context of Covid-19, with school closures and increased staff absences. One staff member interviewed from a non-participating school explained that their school had delivered another intervention previously that had not gone well because it was too resource intensive. This interviewee commented that NELI might not have enough impact to make the commitment worthwhile, but they did not elaborate on why they thought this might be the case.

Interviews with non-participating schools also highlighted the **timing of recruitment** as an issue. One staff member commented that the beginning of the academic year was a busy time, and not ideal for making a decision about signing up to deliver an intervention. This interviewee mentioned that they were contacted multiple times by the DfE, which gave the impression that there was low interest and engagement in the NELI programme, putting this staff member off from signing up.

One of the non-participating schools interviewed had delivered NELI previously as part of a trial. The school had **switched to another Early Years language programme**, Talk Boost, on the advice of the Opportunity Area<sup>9</sup> speech and language team. Another school interviewed was also participating in Talk Boost rather than NELI. One interviewee felt that Talk Boost was more suitable for their school because it has a nursery as well as Early Years component. Another interviewee commented that the data did not indicate that improvements in pupils' language abilities would be greater for NELI than for Talk Boost. However, this interviewee later commented:

‘I am more interested [in NELI] this year because of the data that shows it is effective and once it’s been run for a year the pitfalls would have been ironed out as well’ (*Headteacher from a non-participating school, interviewed April–May 2021*).

The quotation above indicates that some schools may have been **waiting until the evidence base on NELI was clearer<sup>10</sup>** and/or greater experience had been built up in delivering the intervention at scale before signing up. One

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-mobility-and-opportunity-areas>

<sup>10</sup> Results from the effectiveness trial of NELI were published in Dimova et al. (2020) but school staff may not have found out about the findings until later.

staff member commented that after reading more about NELI, it seemed a more effective and flexible intervention than they had assumed.

**A lack of physical space in school to deliver NELI sessions** was also highlighted as a barrier. One staff member commented that they **preferred to train a larger number of staff** in interventions than was possible for NELI.

**The willingness of school staff to deliver NELI was a key factor facilitating schools' participation.**

*Most Headteachers surveyed in March–April 2021 indicated that the willingness of school staff to undertake the training (204 out of 252; 81%) and deliver NELI sessions (207 out of 252; 82%) were enabling factors for their school to a large extent or an extremely large extent – see*

Figure 5). In answering this survey question, Headteachers may have been thinking about the ability of their staff to deliver NELI as well as their willingness (e.g., the extent to which they were constrained by a lack of time). However, the interest and enthusiasm of school staff was highlighted by Headteachers as a factor enabling schools to participate in NELI (open survey question March–April 2021).

#### 4.5 What more could be done to improve the take-up of NELI? (RQ 1.4)

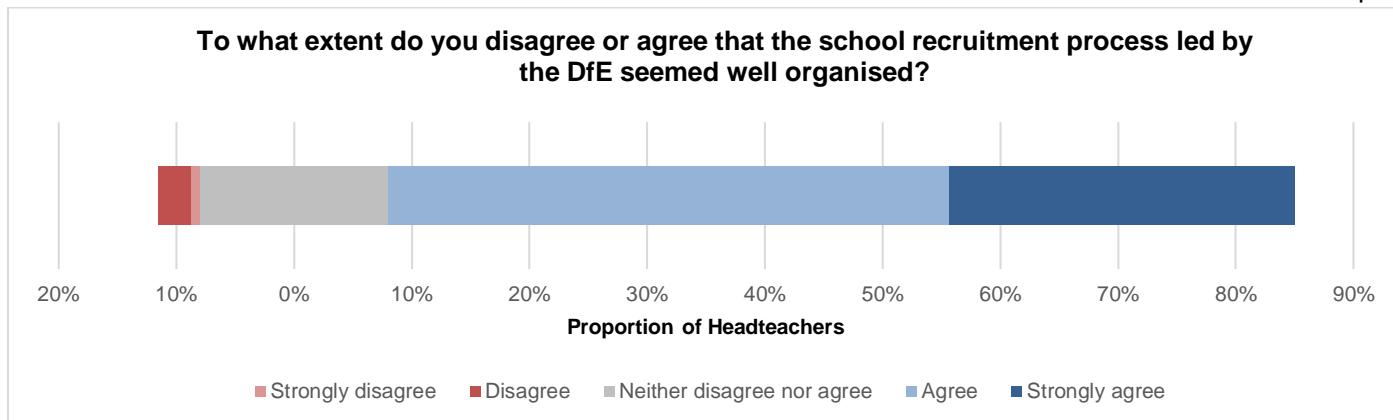
**Almost 7,000 schools across England took up the offer to deliver NELI in the 2020–21 academic year.**

**The total number of schools recruited to take part in NELI in the 2020–21 academic year was 6,667, close to the delivery capacity of 7,000. The level of interest from schools surpassed delivery partners' expectations.**

*'The total numbers looked like recruitment was a success and it overshot our understanding of appetite' (Delivery partner, interviewed July 2021).*

**There is no indication that the recruitment and sign-up process limited the take-up of NELI.**

*Figure 8: Views on the recruitment process, survey of Headteachers March–April 2021*



**Note:** responses from  $n = 252$  Headteachers surveyed in March–April 2021

Headteachers surveyed in March–April 2021 were asked about whether they perceived the recruitment process to be well organised. The majority of Headteachers surveyed agreed that the recruitment process was well organised (77% agreed or strongly agreed; 194 out of 252), as shown in

. Data from interviews conducted with Headteachers in case study schools suggest that the recruitment process was generally perceived as a positive experience. Headteachers indicated that it was simple to enrol into the programme and that communication arrived in a timely manner.

Although they were broadly satisfied, Headteachers who took part in the survey gave some suggestions for improving the recruitment process (open survey question, March–April 2021). Suggestions included greater clarity about the timeline and process for implementing NELI, and including members of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and other key staff (e.g., SENCO) in all correspondence with schools.

### Shifting the recruitment window earlier might have improved take-up of NELI.

Recruitment for the first year of the NELI scale-up ran from August to December 2020. Interviews with the DfE engagement team suggested that starting recruitment activities at the beginning of the academic year was perceived to be a barrier to recruitment for schools, because some had already signed up to deliver other programmes (e.g., WellComm, Talk Boost) or had already made hiring decisions for the year:

'Everyone saw the benefit in NELI. There was never any negativity towards it. The only pushback on it was timing. We started at the start of the academic year, at which point schools had already made their plans. Schools already knew they would have problems with language given the earlier disruptions. So, they had already made plans, hired people, or started other programmes like WellComm, Talk Boost ... It probably needed to be pitched to schools earlier so they could pivot away from other plans in good time' (*Delivery partner, interviewed February 2021*).

This aligns with the experiences of one of the schools interviewed for this evaluation who declined to take up the NELI offer in the 2020–21 academic year (see Box 4). The timeline for recruitment may have pressured some schools into making a quick decision. In an open survey question about how the NELI recruitment process might be improved (March–April 2021), one Headteacher commented:

'[The decision to take part in NELI] was made quickly, at a time of uncertainty. We didn't want to miss out but didn't have the time to explore how its implementation would impact us' (*Headteacher/SLT member, surveyed March–April 2021*).

### Take-up of NELI might be improved by making more use of existing school networks.

Members of the DfE engagement team saw cold calls and emails as necessary given the short timeframe for recruitment and the perception that some schools may not have the time to engage with online sources of information. Reaching

out to schools was time and resource intensive, but delivery partners felt this was the most appropriate approach to recruiting schools in the time available.

'There would always be an element of directly contacting schools. That part was not fruitless. Some schools do not have the time to engage in webpages. Direct contact was effective in engaging some schools' (*Delivery partner, interviewed February 2021*).

'Calling increased awareness of offer but it required a lot of manpower and was slower than other approaches' (*Delivery partner, interviewed July 2021*).

The DfE recruitment team experienced some challenges reaching the most appropriate member of staff in schools. As indicated by the following quotation, it could be challenging to bypass gatekeepers to speak with the most appropriate member of staff in schools.

'We were initially offered a set piece of wording. The downside is that it came across as a sales call. School staff were not convinced we were actually DfE. [...] The biggest obstacle was getting through to the right person. Required multiple calls, meetings etc. And with everything going on, meetings and calls were often cancelled' (*Delivery partner, interviewed February 2021*).

Interviews with the DfE engagement team suggested that engaging with MATs was an effective recruitment strategy. MATs were invited to register to the programme as an entire school system, which enabled the team to reach a large number of schools. The DfE engagement team did not tap into existing networks such as teaching school hubs and teachers' organisations, and delivery partners commented that this would have been beneficial (had there been more time) since school staff are more inclined to engage with information from other schools compared to external organisations:

'I do not think that system communicated well with school dissemination networks that exist. That is a powerful tool as schools listen to other schools more than other people. So, it could have been improved by tapping into this network' (*Delivery partner, interviewed July 2021*).

When asked how the NELI recruitment process might be improved (March–April 2021 survey), one Headteacher commented that the Early Years team at their Local Authority (LA) would have liked to have been better informed about NELI in order to more effectively support schools participating in the programme.

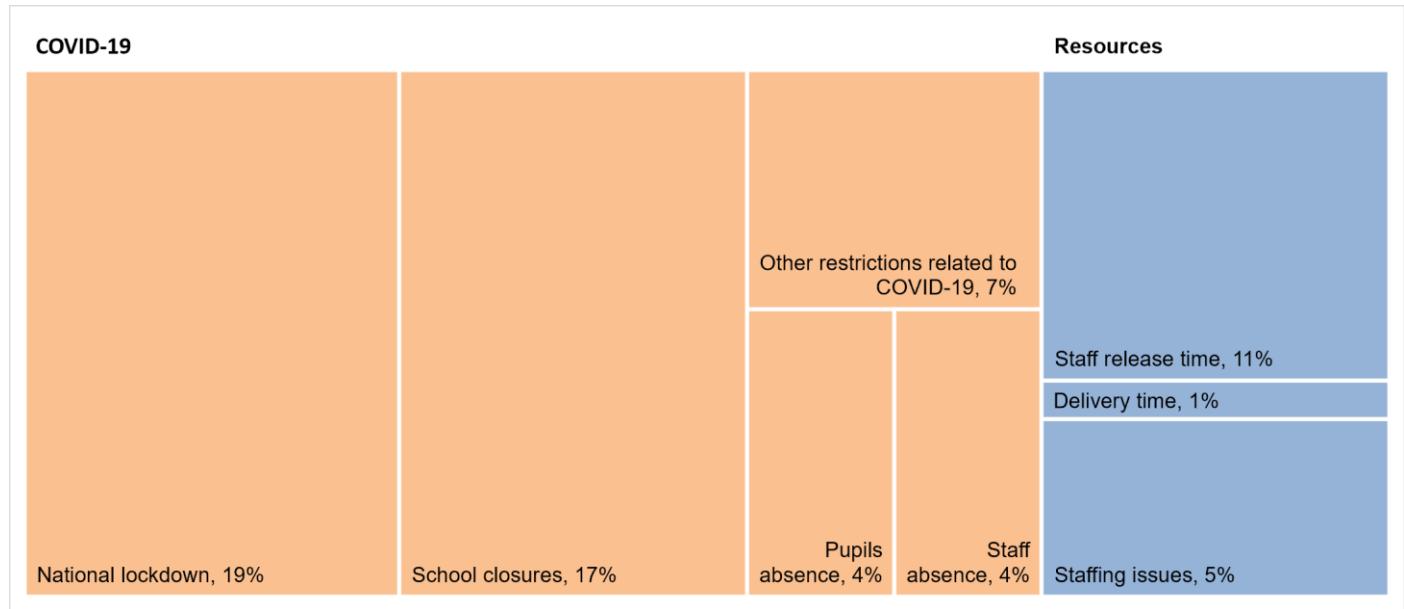
#### 4.6 How has the Covid-19 outbreak affected the recruitment of schools to the NELI scale-up? (RQ 1.5)

**Despite being a motivating factor for schools, in many respects the Covid-19 pandemic made it more difficult for schools to participate in NELI.**

*Headteachers surveyed in March–April 2021 were asked to describe factors that constituted barriers or facilitators in terms of participating in NELI and preparing to deliver the programme (open survey question). Survey responses indicated that Headteachers considered disruptions to education related to Covid-19 as a key barrier, as shown in*

Figure 9. National lockdowns, school closures, Covid-19 restrictions, Covid-related pupil and staff absences were all mentioned. Data from interviews conducted with case study schools also showed that the Covid-19 pandemic had caused significant delays in the start of the programme for some schools.

Figure 9: Headteachers' account of additional barriers to recruitment, survey of Headteachers March–April 2021



**Note:** responses from **n = 148** Headteachers surveyed in March–April 2021. Barriers to recruitment coded under 'resources' could have been affected or exacerbated by Covid-19, but this was not stated by survey participants.

Interviews conducted with delivery partners also highlighted Covid-19 as a barrier to recruitment. Members of the DfE engagement team observed that schools were under a lot of pressure due to Covid-19, dealing with a reduced level of staffing and constrained financial resources.

## 5 Fidelity within recruited schools

This section presents evidence on how NELI was implemented in schools who signed up to deliver the programme in the 2020–21 academic year. The section covers all elements of NELI delivery, including completing the online training, selecting pupils to participate in the programme, delivering individual and group NELI sessions, and monitoring pupils' progress. Section 5.1 focuses on the fidelity of implementation (i.e., whether different aspects of the NELI intervention were delivered as intended). Later sections focus on schools' experiences in a broader sense which may have a bearing on fidelity of delivery. One research question – *how has the Covid-19 outbreak affected the implementation of NELI within schools?* (RQ 2.8) – undercuts these topics and is addressed throughout the section.

### 5.1 Fidelity within recruited schools: key lessons

Key lessons in relation to the online NELI training:

- Participation in the online training was very high for TAs, but lower for teachers even if they were involved in delivering NELI sessions. Various factors may have contributed to this, including confusion about who was required to undertake the training, lack of time during the working day for training and a perception that the content of the training may already be familiar to teachers. Some teachers may have been delivering NELI sessions without being fully trained, perhaps relying on other staff members (predominantly TAs) to pass on information.
- **Teachers and TAs who participated in the online training overwhelmingly found this useful and felt well prepared.** Barriers to participation do not stem from the content of the training or the mode of delivery, but rather the amount of time required to complete the training.
- **Being able to complete the training during the working day was a key facilitator for school staff.** Most schools enabled staff to complete at least some of the training during working hours, but the amount of time freed up for this purpose varied. Schools freed up more time for TAs than teachers to complete the training, which may have contributed to lower participation for teachers.
- **Covid-19 was both a barrier and facilitator of school staff participating in the online training.** Working from home due to school closures or self-isolation periods enabled school staff to complete the training. This has implications for the sustainability of NELI since it is unlikely that similar conditions will be present in future years.

Key lessons in relation to selecting pupils to participate in NELI:

- **A clear majority of schools used the LanguageScreen app to select pupils to participate in NELI, as recommended.** School staff found the LanguageScreen app straightforward to administer and easy for pupils to understand and participate in. Around half the schools who took part in the survey took other considerations into account (e.g., SEN, EAL, behavioural factors) alongside LanguageScreen results when selecting pupils to take part in NELI.
- **Pupils selected to take part in NELI were generally regarded as suitable by school staff for the intervention.** However, school staff mentioned some instances where they were surprised by LanguageScreen results for specific pupils, which they would have expected to be higher or lower.

Key lessons in relation to delivering individual and group NELI sessions:

- **Most schools did not complete the full 20 weeks of NELI delivery during the 2020–21 academic year, as first intended.** When surveyed in June 2021, 63% of staff reported that their school had delivered 10 weeks of NELI or less. This was largely a result of Covid-related disruption, notably school closures between January and March 2021, but also ongoing disruption associated with the pandemic (for instance, increased staff and pupil absence).
- There were some spontaneous mentions within the (qualitative) interview and survey data expressing a perception that the phonics content of Part 2 is less relevant to pupils at the end of their Reception year (or older) when pupils are already

familiar with phonics. This was not captured in the school surveys, so it is unknown how widespread this perception is. However, this indicates that not all school staff were aware that the phonics element of NELI is intended to provide knowledge consolidated and over learning rather than to introduce new information.

- Not all schools participated in the extended delivery plan, but those that did regarded this as beneficial for pupils' confidence and language abilities. A range of reasons were identified for not continuing with NELI delivery into the 2021–22 academic year, including a perception that pupils no longer needed the intervention and difficulties delivering NELI to two cohorts simultaneously (if the school was also delivering NELI to the new cohort of Reception pupils).
- NELI individual and group sessions were delivered with a high degree of fidelity in terms of the number and length of individual and group sessions and the number of participants in group sessions.
- School staff generally felt well supported in delivering NELI. Resources in the NELI pack were widely regarded as useful by school staff. Not all school staff had accessed NELI support, but those that did generally found this useful. This suggests that the nature and extent of support available was not a major factor in the inability of some schools to complete the full 20 weeks of delivery.

## 5.2 Were all the aspects of the intervention delivered as intended as the scaling proceeded? (RQ 2.4) Were appropriate adaptations to NELI introduced on an as-needed basis? (RQ 2.1)

### Training staff to deliver NELI sessions

#### *Box 5: NELI online training: intended delivery*

The online training is intended for staff involved in delivering NELI. Training Course 1 is intended for all school staff involved in all aspects of NELI delivery, whereas Training Course 2 and Training Course 3 are directed at TAs or teachers involved in delivering NELI sessions. Class teachers not involved in delivering NELI sessions are asked to participate in Training Course 1 so that they can understand the importance of the intervention and support the TAs when required (e.g., by letting the TAs work with the selected children during class time). Training Courses 1 and 2 should be completed prior to delivery of NELI Part 1; Training Course 3 should be completed prior to delivery of NELI Part 2.

### **The vast majority of TAs involved in delivering NELI sessions completed the online training, but participation was lower for teachers.**

By March–April 2021, almost all TAs surveyed had completed Training Courses 1 (99%) and 2 (1,052 out of 1,064; 97%) (see Table 3). Just over half (345 out of 584; 59%) of TAs surveyed in June–July 2021 had completed Training Course 3, rising to 92% (108 out of 118) by February 2022. According to survey data, teachers were less likely than TAs to complete Training Course 1 (972 out of 1155 or 84% of teachers reported that they had completed the course when surveyed in March–April 2021 when schools should have started delivering the programme), even though this is designed for staff involved in all aspects of NELI delivery (see Box 5). Teachers were only asked survey questions about Training Courses 2 and 3 if they were involved in delivering NELI sessions, but even then, reported participation rates were low compared to that of TAs. Only 38% (435 out of 1155) of teachers surveyed who were involved in delivering NELI sessions had completed Training Course 2 by March–April 2021 and a similar proportion had completed Training Course 3 by June–July 2021 (59 out of 151; 39%). At the end of delivery in February 2022, less than half (28 out of 66; 42%) of teachers surveyed who were involved in delivering NELI sessions to Cohort 1 pupils had completed all three training courses.

Table 3: Participation in NELI training, school surveys March–April 2021, June–July 2021 and February 2022

| March–April 2021              |          | June–July 2021 |          | February 2022 |          |
|-------------------------------|----------|----------------|----------|---------------|----------|
| TAs                           | Teachers | TAs            | Teachers | TAs           | Teachers |
| <b>NELI Training Course 1</b> |          |                |          |               |          |
| Completed                     | 99%      | 84%            | N/A      | N/A           | N/A      |
| Started but not completed     | 1%       | 5%             | N/A      | N/A           | N/A      |
| Not started                   | 0%       | 11%            | N/A      | N/A           | N/A      |
| <b>NELI Training Course 2</b> |          |                |          |               |          |
| Completed                     | 97%      | 38%            | N/A      | N/A           | N/A      |
| Started but not completed     | 1%       | 4%             | N/A      | N/A           | N/A      |
| Not started                   | 2%       | 58%            | N/A      | N/A           | N/A      |
| <b>NELI Training Course 3</b> |          |                |          |               |          |
| Completed                     | N/A      | N/A            | 59%      | 39%           | 92%      |
| Started but not completed     | N/A      | N/A            | 6%       | 5%            | 3%       |
| Not started                   | N/A      | N/A            | 35%      | 56%           | 5%       |
| <b>Total</b>                  | 1,064    | 1,155          | 584      | 151           | 118      |
|                               |          |                |          |               | 66       |

**Note:** to ensure comparability, figures for February 2022 are based on teachers and TAs who were involved in delivering NELI to Cohort 1 pupils

Lower rates of participation in the training for teachers compared to TAs may not be quite as pronounced as indicated in Table 3. When asked follow-up questions about why they had not started the training course, some survey participants indicated that they were not required to participate in Training Course 2 (448 out of 693; 65%) and Training Course 3 (38 out of 286; 13%), indicating they were not actually involved in delivering NELI sessions (see Table A2 in Appendix F). Some participants may have interpreted survey questions about being involved in delivering NELI sessions quite broadly, indicating that they were involved in some capacity, even if they were not directly involved in delivering individual and/or group sessions. In these cases, teachers would rightly not have been required to complete more than Training Course 1. It is difficult to infer from these survey results how many Reception teachers who should have completed all three courses (i.e., those involved in delivering NELI sessions to pupils) did not do so. However, this does provide an indication that some teachers were delivering the intervention without completing the training in full.

**A key barrier to completing the online training was a lack of staff time, particularly if little or no working time was freed up for this purpose.**

Teachers and TAs who had not started or completed the training courses were asked why this was the case (additional data tables with full responses can be found in Appendix F). For some teachers and TAs, particularly those who had started but not completed the training, this was due to a lack of time. Qualitative survey responses (open-ended questions) indicated that a facilitator was being able to complete the training during working hours, for example:

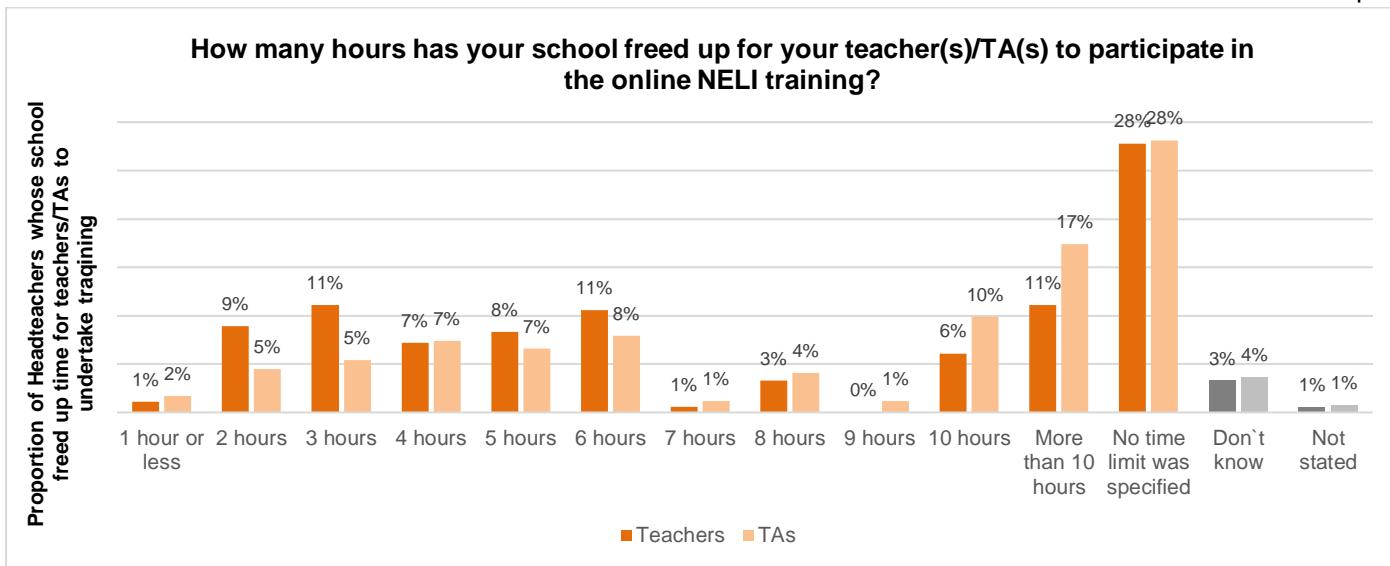
‘[Reason for not starting Training Course 3] We are not paid to do the training, and do not have time during school hours’ (TA, surveyed June–July 2021).

The vast majority of Headteachers surveyed in March–April 2021 (242 out of 252; 96%) indicated that their school had freed up time during school hours for staff to undertake the training. This was more common for TAs than for teachers: almost three-quarters (180 out of 252; 71%) of Headteachers said that was for both teachers and TAs; a quarter (62 out of 252; 25%) said this was for TAs only. This discrepancy may have contributed to lower rates of participation in the training for teachers compared to TAs. One Headteacher interviewed from a case study school indicated that it was challenging to free up staff time for the NELI training.

*When asked how many hours their school had freed up for teachers/TAs to participate in the online training (*

Figure 10), the most common response was that no time limit was specified (for teachers: 50 out of 180 or 28%; for TAs: 68 out of 242 or 28%). However, some schools allocated relatively little time for staff to undertake the NELI training. Approximately two in ten Headteachers (38 out of 180; 21%) who had allocated time for teachers to undertake the training indicated that this was 3 hours or less; the corresponding figure for TAs was 12% (28 out of 242). Slightly more time was allocated for TAs to complete the training compared to teachers: 17% of Headteachers (42 out of 242) indicated that their school allocated more than 10 hours for TAs to undertake the training, compared to 11% for teachers (20 out of 180).

*Figure 10: Working time allocated for teachers/TAs to undertake the NELI online training, survey of Headteachers March–April 2021*



**Note:** responses from Headteachers surveyed in March–April 2021 who had allocated time for teachers ( $n = 180$ ) and TAs ( $n = 242$ ) to participate in the training

**Covid-19 restrictions (school closures, self-isolation periods) could be both a barrier and enabler of staff undertaking the online NELI training.**

Survey data suggested that challenges related to Covid-19 prevented some teachers and TAs from starting or completing NELI training courses. Covid-related factors were identified as a barrier by 22% of teachers and TAs (28 out of 125) who had not started Training Course 1 by March–April 2021 and 63% (44 out of 70) of those who had started but not completed the course (see Table A1 in Appendix F).

At the same time, however, home working during the Covid-19 pandemic enabled some school staff to undertake the training. Headteachers surveyed in March–April 2021 mentioned allowing staff to undertake the training when they were working from home during Covid-19 lockdowns or during self-isolation periods as a factor that had enabled NELI delivery in their school (open survey question). Home working associated with Covid-19 was also mentioned by teachers and TAs in both interviews and surveys as a factor enabling them to complete the online training:

*'We were fortunate with lockdown – it gave extra time and space to get going with it [online NELI training]' (TA from a case study school, interviewed June–July 2021).*

*'Lockdown enabled the teaching assistants to complete the training which did not impact at all on time in the classroom, which was really useful' (Teacher, surveyed June–July 2021).*

One Headteacher from a case study school commented that it would have been difficult to find the time to undertake the training in normal circumstances (i.e., without Covid-19 restrictions). From this perspective, enforced working from home in a Covid-affected environment might have enabled some schools to offer staff more time to undertake the online NELI training than would otherwise have been the case.

**A small number of school staff reported experiencing technical issues with the online training.**

A small number of teachers and TAs surveyed had experienced technical difficulties accessing the training. Under 'other' reasons for not starting or completing the training courses, some school staff who participated in the survey described how they had requested but not received a link to the training. In the words of one survey participant:

*'Numerous times I emailed saying I was the [NELI] lead and needed the training, but the [link to access the] training was never sent to me' (Teacher, surveyed March–April 2021).*

Issues finding or being sent a link to access the training were also mentioned by one teacher from a case study school.

## Selecting pupils to participate in NELI

### *Box 6: Selecting pupils to take part in NELI: intended delivery*

Schools were advised to conduct baseline assessments of all Reception pupils using the LanguageScreen app to select pupils to take part in the programme. All schools delivering NELI in 2020–21 were given 200 free tokens for LanguageScreen, with each token translating into one pupil assessment. Use of the LanguageScreen app was strongly encouraged but not mandatory, and schools were free to consider other factors alongside or instead of LanguageScreen data. For instance, schools were advised that if children had such severe visual, auditory or behavioural difficulties that they would be unable to access NELI sessions, the NELI might not be right for them.

In addition to using LanguageScreen to screen pupils to take part in NELI, schools should conduct endline assessments of all Reception pupils using LanguageScreen after delivery is complete to monitor progress (and to compare progress for pupils who did and did not participate in the programme).

### **Almost all schools used the LanguageScreen app to select pupils to take part in NELI, often in combination with other factors.**

Teachers and TAs surveyed in March–April 2021 were asked how they selected pupils to participate in the NELI programme. A clear majority of staff participating in the survey whose school had selected pupils to take part in NELI had used the LanguageScreen app (992 out of 1,024; 97%) in line with the intended delivery model for selecting pupils (see Box 6). Just over half of survey participants indicated that their school selected pupils based only on LanguageScreen scores (567 out of 1,024; 55%), while 42% (425 out of 1,024) selected pupils based on a combination of LanguageScreen scores and other factors. This is consistent with the delivery of NELI in a trial setting, which found that school staff expressed a desire to use other information or their own discretion in determining which pupils would participate in NELI (Dimova et al., 2020). Speech and language ability, EAL and special educational needs (SEN) were the factors reported to be most frequently considered when selecting pupils to participate in NELI (open-ended survey question). Staff members from case study schools described how factors other than LanguageScreen data were used to select pupils to participate in NELI. This is discussed in more detail in Section 5.3.

## Delivering individual and group NELI sessions

### *Box 7: 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.

### **School closures in early 2021 introduced in response to the Covid-19 pandemic caused delays with NELI delivery.**

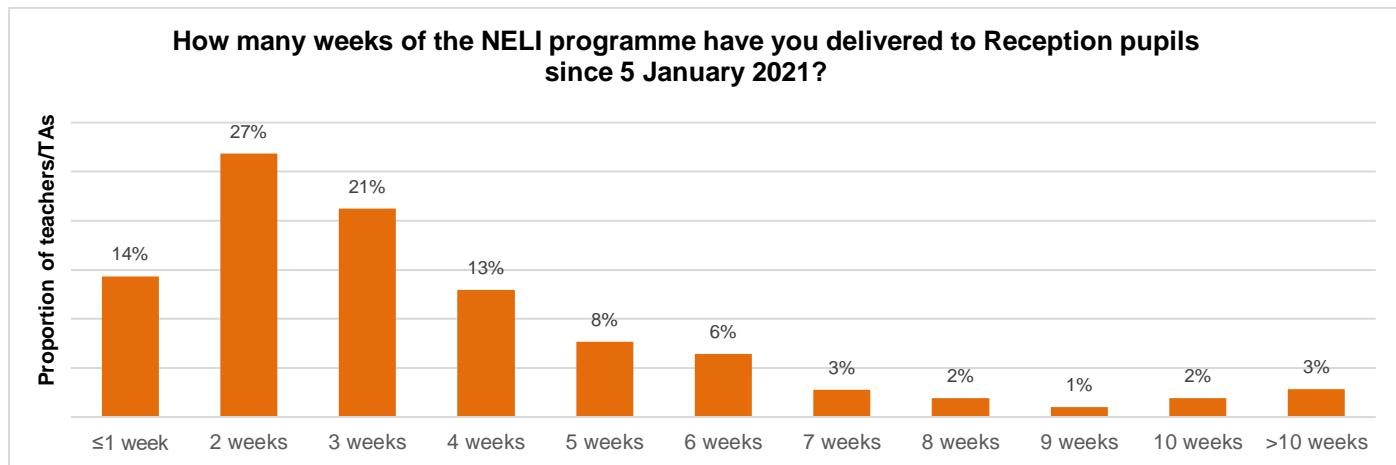
Covid restrictions meant that primary schools in England were closed from the Christmas holidays until 8 March 2021. Schools remained open for vulnerable children and children whose parents were key workers. Fewer than one in ten (116 out of 1,383; 8%) teachers/TAs surveyed in March–April 2021 reported that their school delivered in-person NELI sessions with pupils who continued to attend school during the lockdown in early 2021. An even smaller proportion of those surveyed – just 1% (17 out of 1,383) – said that their school delivered NELI sessions remotely during this period. Three-quarters (1,022 out of 1,383; 74%) of teachers/TAs surveyed in March–April 2021 reported that their school waited until all Reception pupils returned to school before starting to deliver NELI sessions.

One staff member from a case study school interviewed at the end of the 2020–21 academic year described how their school had delivered NELI in-person to pupils who were able to attend during the lockdown. This resulted in the school delivering NELI to a different group of pupils, some of whom might not have been identified as a priority if all pupils were taken into consideration. However, this staff member felt strongly that all children who had participated in NELI in their school had benefitted from the programme. A teacher from a different case study school described how their school had tried to deliver NELI sessions remotely during the lockdown, but attendance was poor despite calls and emails to parents.

**As a result of these delays, as well as the ongoing impact of Covid-19 on schools, few schools completed the full 20 weeks of delivery in the 2020–21 academic year.**

By the time they participated in the survey in March–April 2021, around two-thirds of school staff (863 out of 1,383; 62%) said their school had started delivering NELI sessions to pupils. Reflecting the fact that few schools delivered NELI sessions during the lockdown, by March–April 2021 most schools who had started NELI delivery had completed relatively few weeks of the programme (see Figure 11).

Figure 11: Number of weeks of NELI delivery to Cohort 1 pupils completed by spring 2021, survey of teachers/TAs March–April 2021

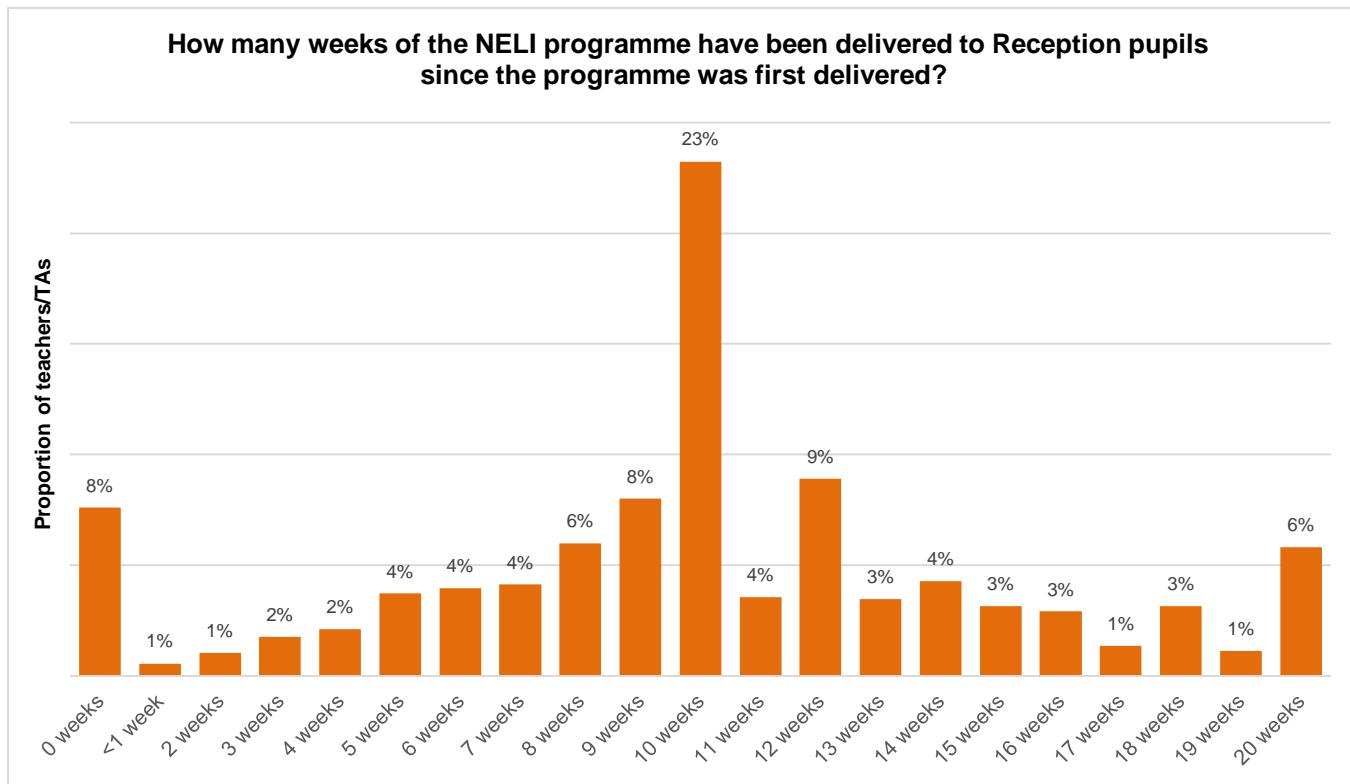


**Note:** responses from  $n = 872$  teachers/TAs surveyed in March–April 2021

By the end of the academic year (June–July 2021), over half of school staff who participated in the survey (754 out of 1,235; 61%) reported that their school had delivered at least ten weeks of NELI sessions (see

Figure 12). However, less than one in ten staff surveyed said their school (72 out of 1,235; 6%) had completed the full 20 weeks of NELI delivery. A small minority of school staff (94 out of 1,235; 8%) reported at the end of the 2020–21 academic year that their school had not started NELI delivery.

Figure 12: Number of weeks of NELI delivery to Cohort 1 pupils delivered by summer 2021, survey of schools June–July 2021



**Note:** responses from  $n = 1,235$  teachers and TAs surveyed in June–July 2021

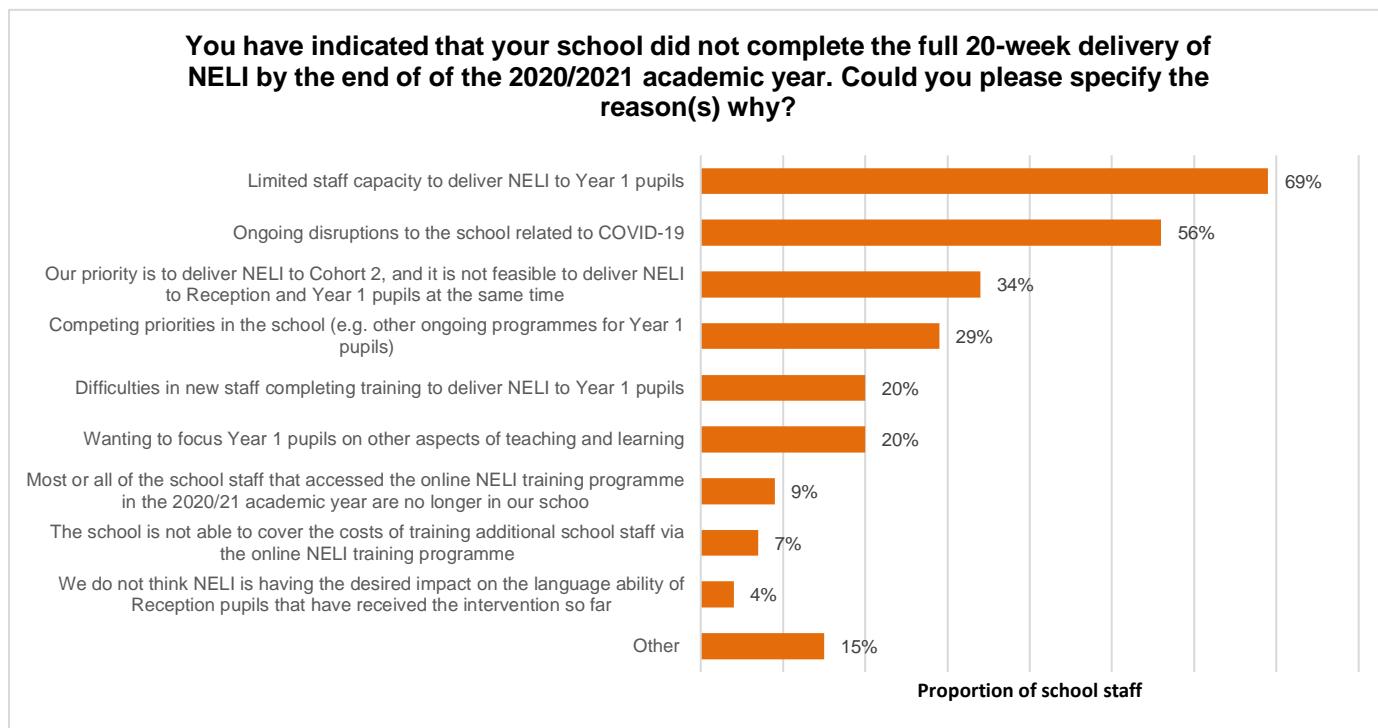
**Disruption linked to Covid-19 and a lack of staff capacity were key factors in schools not completing delivery during the 2020–21 academic year.**

In the survey conducted in February 2022, school staff were asked to reflect on why their school did not complete NELI delivery to Cohort 1 pupils in the 2020–21 academic year (see 13). The most common reason cited by survey participants for not completing the full NELI programme was limited staff capacity (selected by 183 out of 266 or 69% of school staff), a finding echoed in the interviews with case study schools. Staff from case study schools described difficulties finding sufficient time for staff to participate in NELI training and to prepare and deliver NELI sessions. Interviewees also commented on the amount of time involved in completing paperwork associated with NELI, including writing up notes or observations following sessions.

Over half (149 out of 266; 56%) of school staff participating in the survey selected disruption relating to Covid-19 as a barrier to completing the programme. Some school staff interviewed in case study schools felt that the impact of Covid-19 on NELI delivery in their school had been quite minimal, although this was not the majority view. A number of staff from case study schools described how Covid-19 had disrupted NELI delivery during the 2020–21 academic year, primarily due to absences for staff and pupils. This illustrates the fact that the impact of Covid-19 on schools was not limited to partial school closures and continued even when schools re-opened for all pupils.

Staff from case study schools described how putting all staff and pupils participating in NELI into the same ‘bubble’ helped to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on delivery. However, Covid-19 bubbles could also make delivery more difficult, for instance if staff delivering NELI were in different bubbles. Having to keep pupils in different Covid-19 bubbles separate could also make it challenging to find sufficient space to deliver NELI sessions.

Figure 13: Reasons for not completing the full NELI programme in the 2020/2021 academic year, survey of schools February 2022



**Note:** responses from n=266 school staff surveyed in February 2022 whose school did not complete delivery in the 2020/21 academic year but were not participating in the extended delivery plan. Answers may sum to greater than 100% because survey participants were allowed to select more than one option.

Difficulties in training staff (52 out of 266; 20%) and staff turnover (23 out of 266; 9%) were also cited as reasons for not completing NELI delivery to Cohort 1 pupils in the 2020–21 academic year. Only a small number of school staff (11 out of 266; 4%) indicated that their school did not complete delivery of NELI for Cohort 1 pupils during the 2020–21 academic year because they did not believe the intervention was having the desired effect.

**There was a perception voiced by some school staff that Part 2 of NELI was less relevant to older Reception pupils because phonics was covered in the Early Years curriculum.**

In terms of schools' progress with delivering NELI sessions by the end of the 2020–21 academic year (

Figure 12), there is a peak at 10 weeks. This may be related to the perception of some school staff that the content on phonics in Part 2 of NELI was less relevant to older Reception pupils who were familiar with this content already.

In explaining their school's reasons for not completing NELI delivery to Cohort 1 pupils in the 2020–21 academic year, one survey participant commented:

'We did not feel that Part 2 of the programme, that focuses on phonics, was relevant to this cohort as their phonics levels at the end of the year were very strong' (TA, surveyed February 2022).

The perception that NELI Part 2 was less relevant to older Reception pupils was also voiced by school staff interviewed from case study schools. One teacher from a case study school commented:

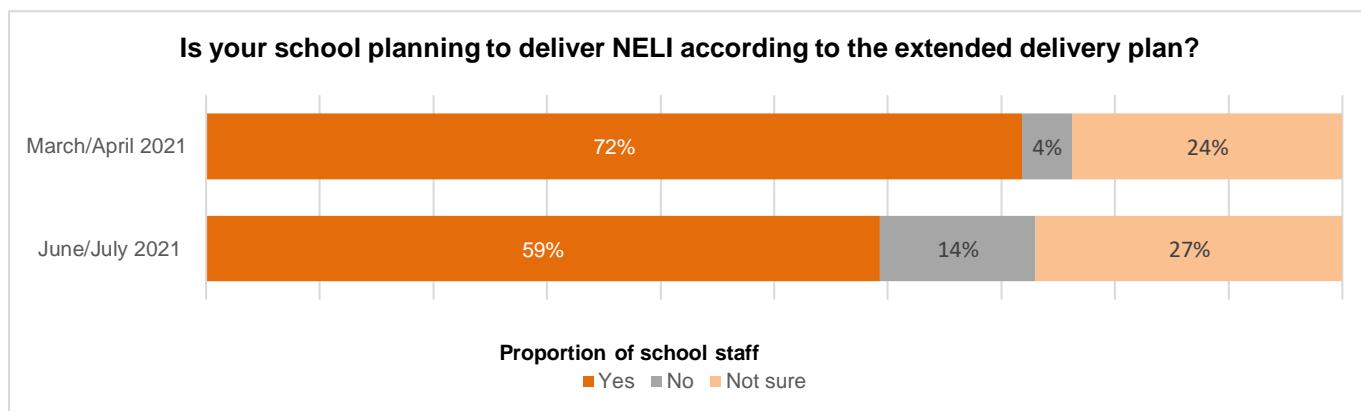
'It's very phonics focused in the second book and the children are fine with the phonics, so it's been a bit of a waste of time. It would have been easier if we'd done it [NELI Part 2] earlier on in the year' (Teacher from a case study school, interviewed June–July 2021).

Another teacher from a case study school commented that TAs in their school adapted NELI Part 2 to account for the fact that children already had knowledge of phonics by the time this was delivered.

It is hard to say how prevalent this perception is, since there was no dedicated survey item on this point.<sup>11</sup> The phonics content in Part 2 of NELI is intended to consolidate and reinforce children's knowledge rather than introducing new information. It may be that this aspect to Part 2 was not well understood by all school staff involved in delivering the programme.

**Not all schools who were unable to complete NELI delivery in the 2020–21 academic year were able to continue delivery in the 2021–22 academic year according to the extended delivery plan.**

Figure 14: Schools' intentions to deliver NELI to Cohort 1 pupils in the 2021–22 academic year (extended delivery plan), schools surveys in March–April 2021 and June–July 2021



**Note:** responses from  $n = 252$  Headteachers surveyed in March–April 2021 and  $n = 604$  school staff (NELI leads) surveyed in June–July 2021

**When surveyed in March–April 2021, around three-quarters (181 out of 252; 72%) of Headteachers said that their school planned to deliver NELI according to the extended delivery plan (see**

Figure 14). By the end of the academic year (June–July 2021), the proportion of school staff (NELI leads) indicating that their school intended to deliver NELI according to the extended delivery plan had fallen to 59% (358 out of 604). The proportion of schools not intending to deliver NELI according to the extended delivery plan rose from 4% in

<sup>11</sup> There were 12 mentions of this across all interviews and open survey questions (all spontaneous/unprompted).

March–April 2021 (11 out of 252) to 14% (83 out of 604) in June–July 2021. This shift may be because some schools had completed NELI delivery to Cohort 1 pupils in the 2020–21 academic year, although this applied to a relatively small number of schools, as shown in Table 4. The difference may also be linked to differences in the profile of survey participants answering this question across waves (Headteachers in March–April 2021 and NELI leads in June–July 2021). Of those school staff surveyed in June–July 2021 who indicated that their school was not planning to deliver NELI according to the extended delivery plan, only a small number indicated that their school had delivered the full 20 weeks of the programme in the 2020–21 academic year.

**A key challenge in delivering NELI according to the extended delivery plan was competing commitments, including delivering NELI to the new cohort of Reception pupils in 2021–22.**

Almost half of school staff surveyed in June–July 2021 whose school did not plan to continue with the extended delivery plan (or had not decided) said this was because of competing priorities between the needs of Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 pupils (Table ). One staff member described (under ‘other’) the reason for their school being undecided about delivering NELI to Cohort 1 pupils in the 2021–22 academic year:

‘The [pupils] ... selected have made significant progress and weren’t as low as we expected. We have new starters who will benefit significantly *more*’ (Teacher, surveyed June–July 2021).

Competing priorities in the school (such as other programmes) and a desire to focus Year 1 pupils on other aspects of teaching and learning were cited by a sizable minority of school staff surveyed as reasons why they had decided not to implement the extended delivery plan (Table ). Under ‘other’, some school staff mentioned that Year 1 pupils would benefit from other speech and language programmes (Talk Boost, Black Sheep).

Table 4: Reasons for not planning (or not deciding) to deliver NELI according to the extended delivery plan, schools survey June–July 2021

|   | Not planning to deliver NELI to Cohort 1 pupils in 2021–22 | Not decided whether to deliver NELI to Cohort 1 pupils in 2021–22 |
|---|--|---|
| <b>Our priority is to deliver NELI to incoming Reception pupils, and it is not feasible to deliver NELI to Reception and Year 1 pupils at the same time</b>                               | 45%  | 49%   |
| <b>Limited staff capacity to deliver NELI in Year 1</b>   | 45%  | 75%   |
| <b>Competing priorities in the school (e.g., other ongoing programmes)</b>  | 19%  | 29%   |
| <b>Difficulties in training new staff to deliver NELI in Year 1</b>   | 18%  | 48%   |
| <b>The full 20-week delivery of NELI to current Reception year pupils will be completed by the end of the 2020–21 academic year, so there is no need to continue delivery into Year 1</b> | 17%  | N/A   |
| <b>To focus Year 1 pupils on other aspects of teaching and learning</b>   | 15%  | 9%  |
| <b>Staff turnover</b>   | N/A  | 14%   |
| <b>Ongoing disruptions related to Covid-19</b>  | N/A  | 26%   |
| <b>Other</b>  | 28%  | 14%   |
| <b>Total</b>  | 83   | 163   |

**Some schools did not deliver NELI according to the extended delivery plan because they felt pupils had already made good progress.**

Some schools decided not to continue delivering NELI in the 2021–22 academic year because they felt pupils had made good progress in the 2020–21 academic year and no longer needed the programme (mentioned by some survey participants under 'other'). In some cases, this decision was informed by LanguageScreen results. One staff member who took part in the June–July survey indicated that initial LanguageScreen results prompted them to conclude that Cohort 1 pupils did not need to continue with NELI in the 2021–22 academic year:

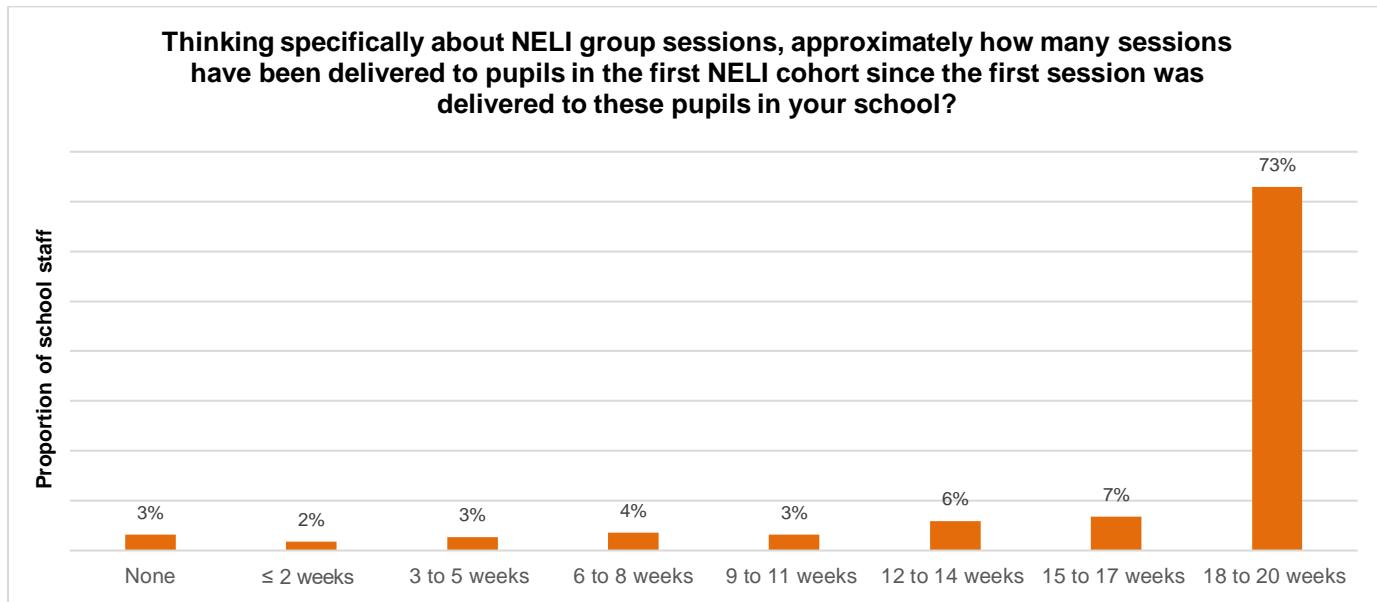
*'The children were not highlighted red anyway [on the LanguageScreen assessment, indicating that the child is suitable for NELI] and only 2 out of the 5 were amber. So, none of the children desperately need the full 20 weeks'*  
*(Headteacher/other SLT member, surveyed June–July 2021).*

**Not all schools who continued with NELI delivery into the 2021–22 academic year (the extended delivery plan) were able to complete the full 20 weeks of delivery.**

Around half (385 out of 724; 53%) of teachers and TAs surveyed in February 2022 indicated that their school had delivered NELI sessions to pupils in Year 1 in the 2021–22 academic year in line with the extended delivery plan. Of those schools surveyed who were delivering NELI according to the extended delivery plan, two-thirds (176 out of 267; 66%) had completed the full 20 weeks of delivery. A minority of staff surveyed reported that their school had progressed very little with delivering NELI group sessions to Cohort 1 pupils midway through the 2021–22 academic year (

Figure 15).

Figure 15: Schools' progress with delivering NELI to Cohort 1 pupils in the 2021–22 academic year, survey of schools February 2022



**Note:** responses from  $n = 222$  school staff surveyed in February 2022. NELI is designed to be delivered over a period of 20 weeks, with three group sessions per week (60 in total). To give an example, having completed nine weeks of delivery would equate to three weeks.

**For the most part, NELI individual and group sessions were delivered with a high degree of fidelity.**

The most common approach for schools delivering NELI to Cohort 1 pupils in the 2020–21 academic year who participated in the survey in June–July 2021 was to deliver three group sessions and two individual sessions per week for each pupil, as intended. As shown in Table 5, around two-thirds of school staff surveyed reported delivering NELI according to this schedule. A minority of school staff surveyed reported delivering fewer group and/or individual sessions than this. Almost a quarter (260 out of 1,141; 23%) of school staff surveyed reported that their school delivered one individual session per week on average for each pupil (see Table 5).

*Survey data indicated that most schools delivered NELI in groups of four to six pupils (see In the 2021–22 academic year, fidelity was somewhat higher in relation to the number of group sessions compared to the number of individual sessions, as shown in*

Figure 16. Over eight in ten (180 out of 215; 84%) staff surveyed whose school delivered NELI according to the extended delivery plan indicated that their school almost always (4 or 5 on a scale where 1 is not at all and 5 is completely) delivered three 30-minute group sessions during the 2021–22 academic year, as intended. Around two-thirds (134 out

of 215; 62%) indicated that their school almost always delivered two 15-minute individual sessions for each pupil per week, as intended.

Table ); around one in ten schools (139 out of 1,141; 12%) had more than six pupils in each NELI group. One interviewee from a case study school described how their school had four children in each NELI group, commenting that they would not have been able to run NELI for the first time with a larger group, implying that this might be possible when the staff were more experienced with the programme.

*Table 5: Average number of group and individual NELI sessions delivered per week for each Reception pupil in the 2020–21 academic year, survey of schools June–July 2021*

| Group NELI sessions  |              | Individual NELI sessions |              |
|----------------------|--------------|--------------------------|--------------|
| 1 per week           | 4%           | 1 per week               | 23%          |
| 2 per week           | 14%          | 2 per week               | 60%          |
| 3 per week           | 65%          | More than 2 per week     | 9%           |
| More than 3 per week | 16%          |                          |              |
| Don't know           | 1%           | Don't know               | 8%           |
| <b>Total</b>         | <b>1,141</b> |                          | <b>1,141</b> |

**Note:** shading illustrates intended NELI schedule

*In the 2021–22 academic year, fidelity was somewhat higher in relation to the number of group sessions compared to the number of individual sessions, as shown in*

Figure 16. Over eight in ten (180 out of 215; 84%) staff surveyed whose school delivered NELI according to the extended delivery plan indicated that their school almost always (4 or 5 on a scale where 1 is not at all and 5 is completely) delivered three 30-minute group sessions during the 2021–22 academic year, as intended. Around two-thirds (134 out of 215; 62%) indicated that their school almost always delivered two 15-minute individual sessions for each pupil per week, as intended.

*Table 6: Average number of NELI groups and average group size in the 2020–21 academic year, survey of schools June–July 2021*

| Less than 3 pupils | 3 pupils | 4 pupils | 5 pupils | 6 pupils | More than 6 pupils | Total |
|--------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|--------------------|-------|
|                    |          |          |          |          |                    |       |

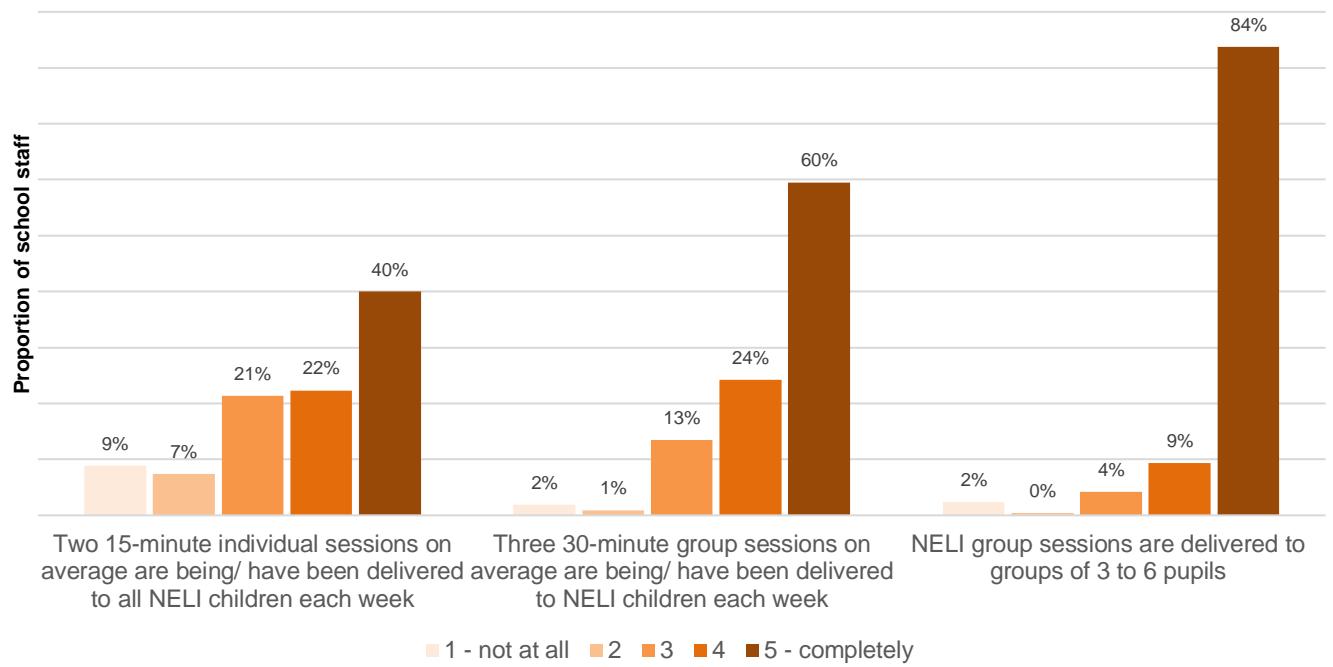
## Evaluation Report

| 1 group            | 2%        | 4%        | 10%        | 18%        | 13%        | 2%         | 49% |
|--------------------|-----------|-----------|------------|------------|------------|------------|-----|
| 2 groups           | 0%        | 2%        | 6%         | 11%        | 8%         | 6%         | 33% |
| 3 groups           | 0%        | 1%        | 2%         | 3%         | 3%         | 3%         | 12% |
| 4 groups           | 0%        | 0%        | 2%         | 1%         | 1%         | 1%         | 5%  |
| 5 groups           | 0%        | 0%        | 0%         | 1%         | 0%         | 0%         | 1%  |
| 6 groups           | 0%        | 0%        | 0%         | 0%         | 0%         | 0%         | 1%  |
| More than 6 groups | 0%        | 0%        | 0%         | 0%         | 0%         | 0%         | 0%  |
| <b>Total</b>       | <b>2%</b> | <b>7%</b> | <b>20%</b> | <b>34%</b> | <b>25%</b> | <b>12%</b> |     |

**Note:** shading illustrates the intended number of pupils in each NELI group

Figure 16: Fidelity of NELI delivery to Cohort 1 pupils in the 2021–22 academic year (extended delivery plan), survey of schools in February 2022

**On a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (completely), to what extent have the following taken place in your school since delivery of NELI sessions for Cohort 1 pupils resumed this academic year?**



**Note:** responses from  $n = 215$  school staff surveyed in February 2022

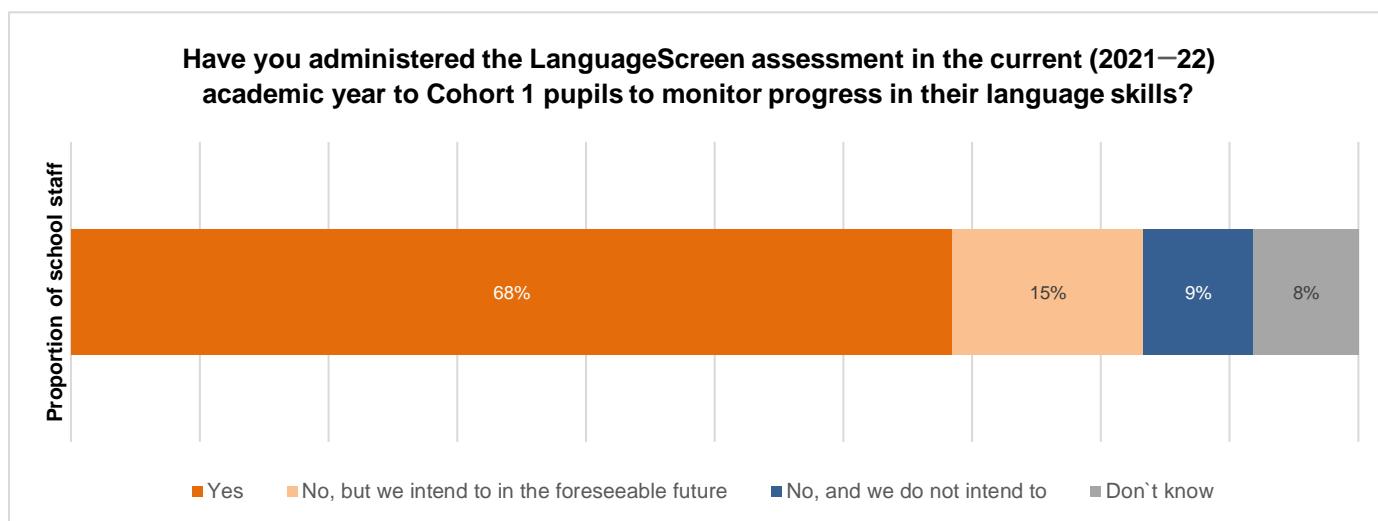
### Monitoring pupils' progress

**In addition to screening pupils to take part in NELI, most schools used the LanguageScreen app to monitor pupils' progress.**

School staff involved in the NELI delivery surveyed in February 2022 were asked whether they administered the LanguageScreen assessment in the 2021–22 academic year to monitor progress in pupils' language skills. Around two-thirds of staff responsible for delivery indicated that they had used LanguageScreen to monitor progress in pupils' language skills (176 out of 257; 69%) and a further 15% (38 out of 257) reported that they intended to do so in the foreseeable future (

Figure 17), reflecting the fact that not all schools had completed delivery by this point. Around one in ten staff (22 out of 257; 9%) indicated that they had not used LanguageScreen to monitor pupils' progress in the 2021–22 academic year and did not intend to do so in the future. However, in some cases this may be because they had completed delivery and conducted LanguageScreen assessments during the previous academic year (2020–21).

Figure 17: Use of Language Screen to assess the progress of pupils participating in NELI, survey of school staff February 2022



**Note:** responses from  $n = 257$  teachers/TAs surveyed in February 2022

### Barriers and facilitators of effective NELI delivery

#### **A lack of staff capacity and space in the timetable were highlighted as barriers to effective NELI delivery.**

The biggest barrier to effective NELI delivery identified by school staff surveyed in the June–July 2021 survey (see Figure 18) was the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Three-quarters (1,104 out of 1,498; 74%) of staff surveyed agreed that Covid-19 presented a barrier to NELI delivery in their school (Figure 18). The impact of Covid-19 was mentioned by staff participating in the survey as a reason for their school not delivering elements of NELI in the 2020–21 academic year (open survey question). Interviews from case study schools also highlighted the negative effect of staff absence due to Covid-19. One survey participant explained that due to Covid-19 and other staff absences their school had made little or no progress with NELI in the 2020–21 academic year and had decided to start in Autumn 2021 with a new cohort of Reception pupils:

*'Covid pushed us back and then a staff illness, so [we] plan to deliver [NELI] in Autumn 2021' (Teacher, surveyed June–July 2021).*

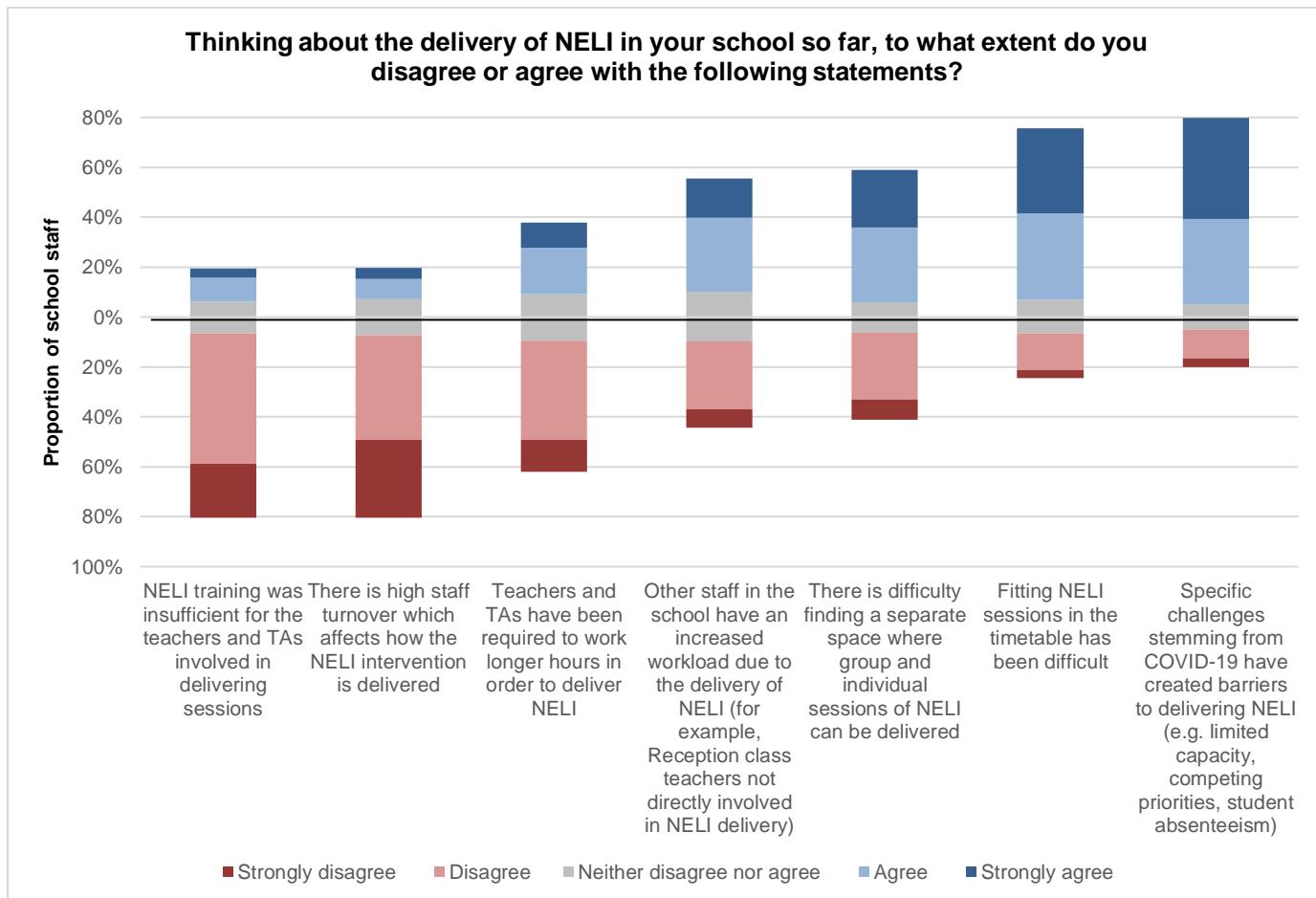
Another key factor that emerged from the research was fitting NELI sessions into the school timetable (1,018 out of 1,498; 68% of those surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that this was a barrier to implementation in their school). Commenting on factors that had facilitated the effective implementation of NELI in their school, one survey participant highlighted:

'Having NELI on my work timetable and being released from class duties to implement programme' (TA, surveyed June–July 2021).

Just over a quarter (420 out of 1,498; 28%) of school staff surveyed in June–July 2021 reported that teachers and TAs had to work long hours to deliver NELI (Figure 18), suggesting that a considerable amount of the work that went into delivering the intervention was untimetabled.

A recurring theme in this report has been the amount of staff time required to deliver NELI and how this made it more difficult for schools to sign up to the programme (Section 3.4), to participate in the training (Section 4.1), and to complete NELI delivery, whether in the 2020–21 academic year or the 2021–22 academic year (Section 4.1). Staff from case study schools described difficulties finding sufficient time for staff to participate in NELI training and to prepare and deliver NELI sessions. Interviewees also commented on the amount of time involved in completing paperwork associated with NELI, including writing up notes or observations following sessions. The survey question on barriers to effective NELI delivery (Figure 18) highlights a new dimension to this, which is the impact of NELI delivery on the workload of other teachers and TAs in the school. Over a third of school staff surveyed (666 out of 1498; 44%) agreed (or strongly agreed) that 'other staff in the school have an increased workload due to the delivery of NELI (for example, Reception class teachers not directly involved in NELI delivery).'

Figure 18: Barriers to NELI delivery (agree/disagree with each statement), survey of schools June–July 2021



**Note:** responses from  $n = 1,498$  school staff surveyed in June–July 2021

### Some school staff found it difficult to find a suitable quiet space in school to deliver NELI sessions.

Around half (784 out of 1,498; 52%) of those surveyed agreed (or strongly agreed) that there was difficulty finding a separate space where NELI sessions could be delivered, and this was also raised in discussions with case study schools. One interviewee described how it was difficult delivering NELI sessions in a corridor because it was distracting for the pupils. Another interviewee interviewed in the 2021–22 academic year commented that they do not have a dedicated

room for NELI Cohort 1 pupils and were delivering sessions when the other children were outside, but this was more difficult in winter because of the cold weather when the children were not always able to go outside to play.

### **Technological issues presented a barrier to effective NELI delivery for a small number of schools.**

A small number of school staff who participated in the survey in June–July 2021 identified technical issues as a barrier to the effective delivery of NELI (in responses to an open survey question about why their school had not been able to deliver certain elements of the intervention), for instance not having access to (up-to-date enough) iPads to access the LanguageScreen app. One staff member in a case study school described how limited Wi-Fi connectivity made it more difficult for their school to deliver NELI. Another interviewee from a case study school described difficulties logging in to FutureLearn. A small number of school staff who participated in the June–July survey mentioned not receiving parental permission to use LanguageScreen as a reason for not delivering elements of the NELI programme.

### **Support from colleagues and from the SLT enabled schools to deliver NELI effectively.**

Survey participants who answered this question also identified the commitment, skill and flexibility of staff as a facilitating factor, particularly staff members responsible for delivering NELI sessions (predominantly TAs). Survey participants commented on the value of having a dedicated and consistent staff member responsible for delivering NELI. In the words of one survey participant:

*'One TA delivering all the NELI sessions has enabled them to develop a deep understanding of the [NELI] programme and deliver it effectively' (Teacher, surveyed June–July 2021).*

Some schools hired a member of staff specifically to deliver NELI:

*'That we were able to employ a TA who was solely for interventions which has made a big difference to the frequency the sessions were delivered' (Teacher, surveyed June–July 2021).*

School staff also highlighted the importance of support from colleagues, in particular the SLT. One survey participant commented:

*'As it was a DfE project, senior leaders were very supportive of our involvement' (Headteacher/other SLT member, surveyed June–July 2021).*

Support from senior leadership in the school was also identified as an enabling factor in interviews with case study schools. This aligns with the wider literature on scaling-up interventions, which emphasises the importance of buy-in from leadership and those in positions of authority (Barker et al., 2015; Berry et al., 2018).

## **5.3 Did NELI reach the intended pupils? If not, why not? (RQ 2.6)**

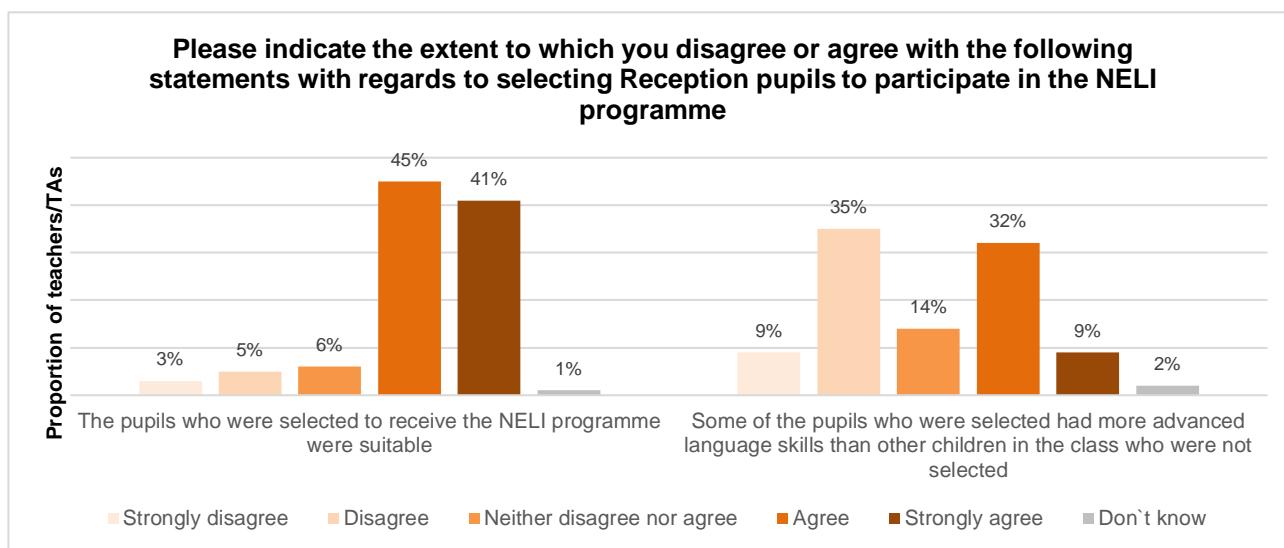
### **Pupils selected to take part in NELI were generally regarded as suitable for the intervention by school staff.**

Teachers and TAs involved in the NELI delivery surveyed in June–July 2021 were asked to what extent they agreed with statements about the suitability of the pupils they selected to participate in the NELI programme. The majority of teachers and TAs surveyed indicated that the pupils who were selected to receive NELI in their school were suitable (998 out of 1,164 86% strongly agreed or agreed) (LanguageScreen results were not always perfectly aligned with school staff's perceptions of pupils' abilities, as is to be expected with any screening tool (while no tool is 100% effective, language difficulties in children can be hard for teachers to spot, especially if the difficulties are with Receptive language skills. Moreover, teachers may base their judgements on imperfect or outdated information about pupil performance). Whilst children participating in NELI were widely perceived to be suitable for the programme, 41% of teachers and TAs surveyed (471 out of 1,164) agreed (strongly agreed or agreed) that some of the pupils selected to take part in NELI had more advanced language skills than other pupils in the class who were not selected (this finding relates to all methods used to select pupils to take part in NELI and not LanguageScreen specifically).

Figure 19). Staff members from case study schools – including those who had used LanguageScreen alone and in combination with other factors – were satisfied with the suitability of pupils taking part in NELI in their school.

LanguageScreen results were not always perfectly aligned with school staff's perceptions of pupils' abilities, as is to be expected with any screening tool (while no tool is 100% effective, language difficulties in children can be hard for teachers to spot, especially if the difficulties are with Receptive language skills). Moreover, teachers may base their judgements on imperfect or outdated information about pupil performance). Whilst children participating in NELI were widely perceived to be suitable for the programme, 41% of teachers and TAs surveyed (471 out of 1,164) agreed (strongly agreed or agreed) that some of the pupils selected to take part in NELI had more advanced language skills than other pupils in the class who were not selected (this finding relates to all methods used to select pupils to take part in NELI and not LanguageScreen specifically).

Figure 19: *Perceptions of the suitability of pupils selected to receive the NELI programme, survey of school staff June–July 2021*



**Note:** responses from  $n = 1,164$  teachers and TAs surveyed in June–July 2021 whose school had selected pupils to take part in NELI

One reason for this could be that schools using LanguageScreen felt that some children with low language ability were not picked up by the assessment. In interviews with case study schools, some staff commented that LanguageScreen results did not always align with their perceptions of the pupils who were most suitable for NELI. In some cases, LanguageScreen selected pupils who teachers and TAs did not consider below average language skills, while in others, it did not select pupils who teachers and TAs judged to have considerable language difficulties. Staff from one case study school described how two EAL pupils were not identified as in need of the intervention by LanguageScreen even though they lacked confidence with speaking. Staff members debated including these pupils in the NELI group but were not sure whether this was possible, and ultimately decided not to. Staff from another case study school described removing a pupil who they were surprised was identified as in need of the intervention from the group mid-way through NELI delivery because this pupil was not perceived to be benefitting from the intervention.

Data from case study interviews suggested that some pupils with EAL whom teachers and TAs considered for the programme because of their low confidence in speaking overall fared well in the LanguageScreen assessment.

Another reason for low ability pupils not participating in NELI could be because they were felt to be unsuitable for the intervention in other ways, for instance because of disruptive behaviour. As described in Section 4.2, many schools used other factors alongside LanguageScreen in selecting pupils to take part in NELI.

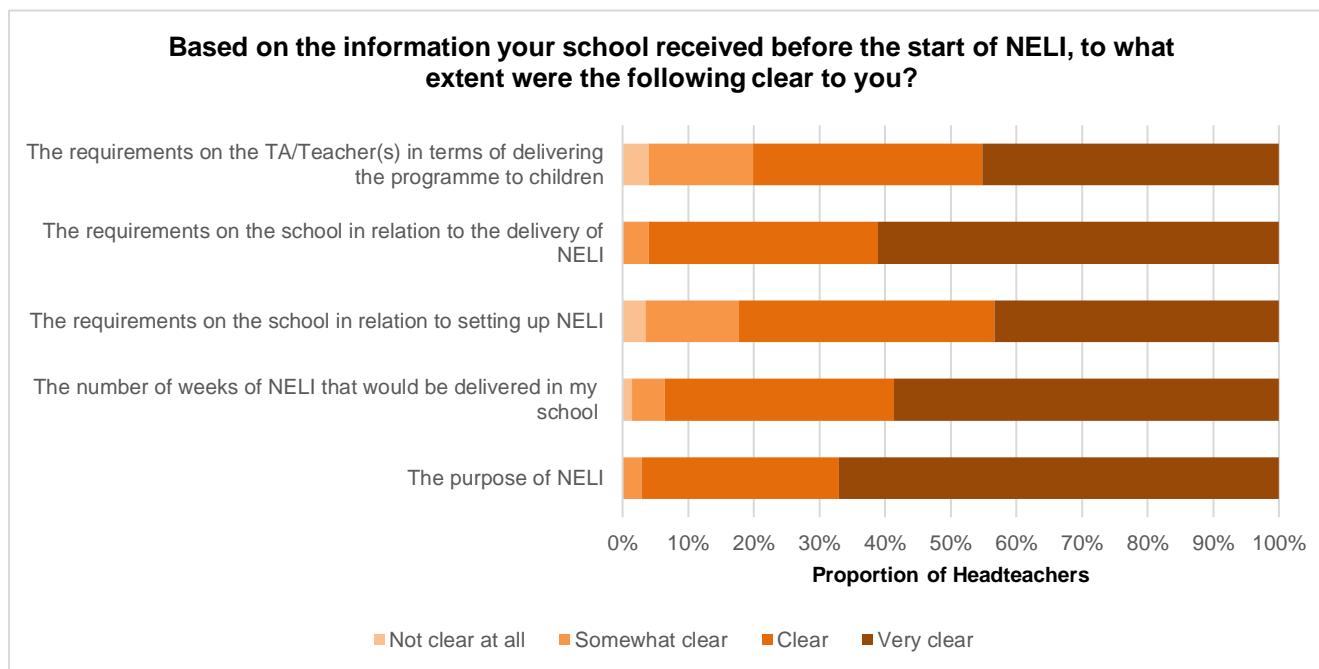
## 5.4 What was the schools' experience from sign-up to delivery? (RQ 2.2) What was the experience of schools who completed the delivery of NELI once pupils had begun year 1? (RQ 2.7)

### Preparing to deliver NELI

**After signing up to deliver NELI, most school staff had a good understanding of the programme, but the time commitment involved was not always well understood.**

Headteachers surveyed in March–April 2021 were asked about the extent to which aspects of the NELI programme were clear to them. The vast majority of Headteachers surveyed felt the purpose of NELI (241 out of 252; 96%) and the potential benefits for children (240 out of 252; 95%) were clear (or very clear) to them, as shown in Figure 20. Interviewees from case study schools also indicated that the information about the NELI programme was generally clear.

Figure 20: Understanding of the NELI programme, survey of Headteachers March–April 2021



**Note:** responses from  $n = 252$  Headteachers surveyed in March–April 2021

Most Headteachers who took part in the survey indicated that the requirements on the school in terms of setting up NELI (205 out of 252; 81%) and delivering NELI (215 out of 252; 85%), as well as the number of weeks that NELI would be delivered (232 out of 252; 92%) was clear (or very clear) to them. The requirements on teachers/TAs responsible for delivering the programme were also felt to be clear (or very clear) by most Headteachers surveyed (202 out of 252; 80%). However, some staff members from case study schools suggested that, based on the information provided, they were not prepared for the level of time commitment required to deliver NELI. One Headteacher explained that it would have been beneficial to know from the start of the programme estimates of the duration of the training for each person, or the staff time required to deliver NELI sessions and create teaching resources:

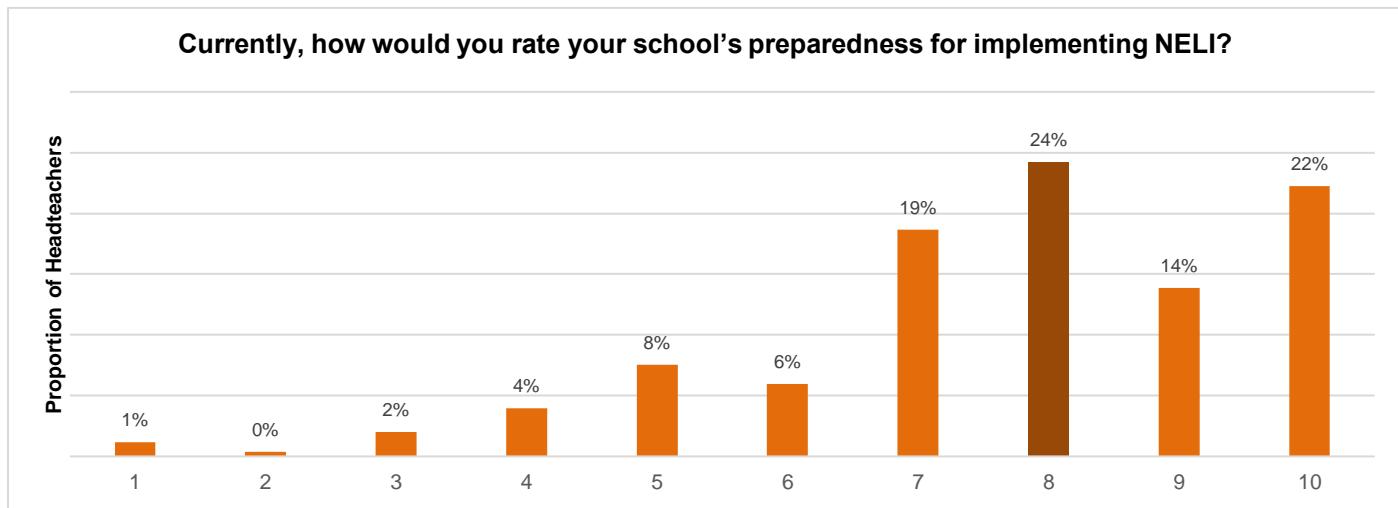
'There could have been a lot more clarity on the actual amount of resource needed – the length of training for each person – the fact that that they would be out of class for that amount of time. I wasn't prepared for the length of the training. There is then a considerable amount of time involved in actually creating the resources [for NELI sessions]' (*Headteacher/SLT member from a case study school, interviewed May 2021*).

**After signing up to deliver NELI, most Headteachers felt their school was well prepared to implement the programme.**

Headteachers surveyed in March–April 2021 were asked to rate the level of their schools' preparedness for implementing NELI on a 10-point scale (

Figure 21). On average, Headteachers who took part in the survey rated their school's level of preparedness for implementing NELI as 8 out of 10.

Figure 21: Preparedness for implementing the NELI programme, survey of Headteachers March–April 2021

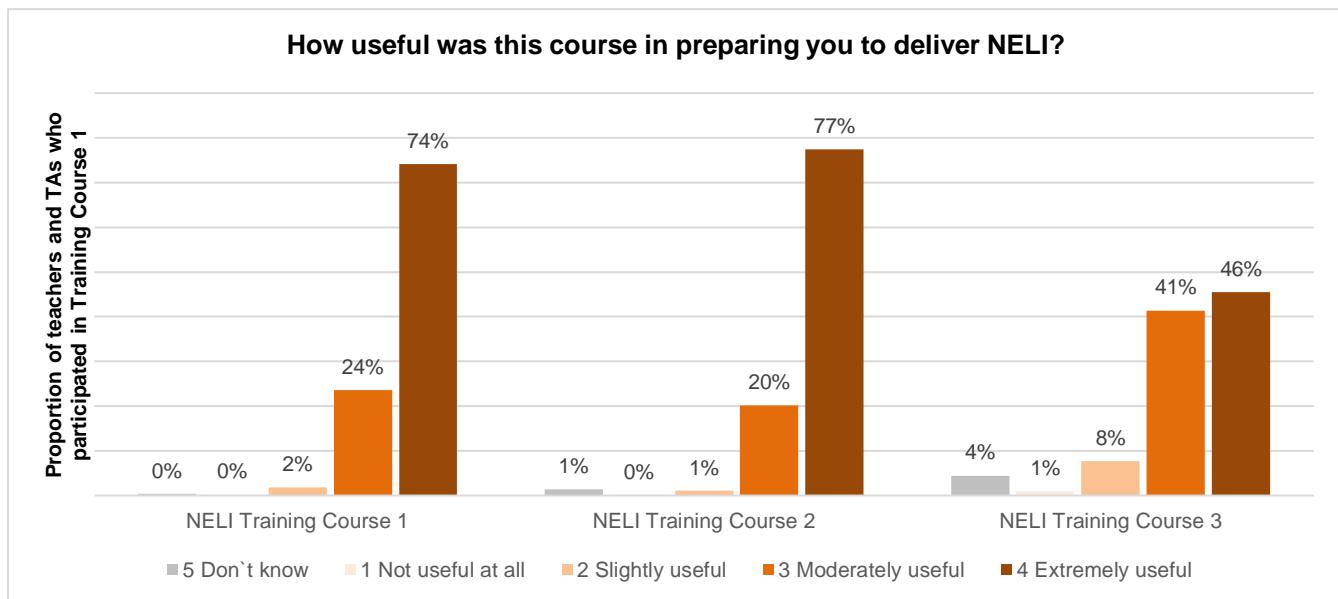


**Note:** responses from  $n = 252$  Headteachers surveyed in March–April 2021

#### Undertaking the online training

**The online NELI training was widely regarded as useful, although Training Course 3 was perceived as slightly less useful than the other two courses.**

Figure 22: Perceived usefulness of NELI Training Courses 1, 2 and 3, school surveys March–April 2021 and June–July 2021

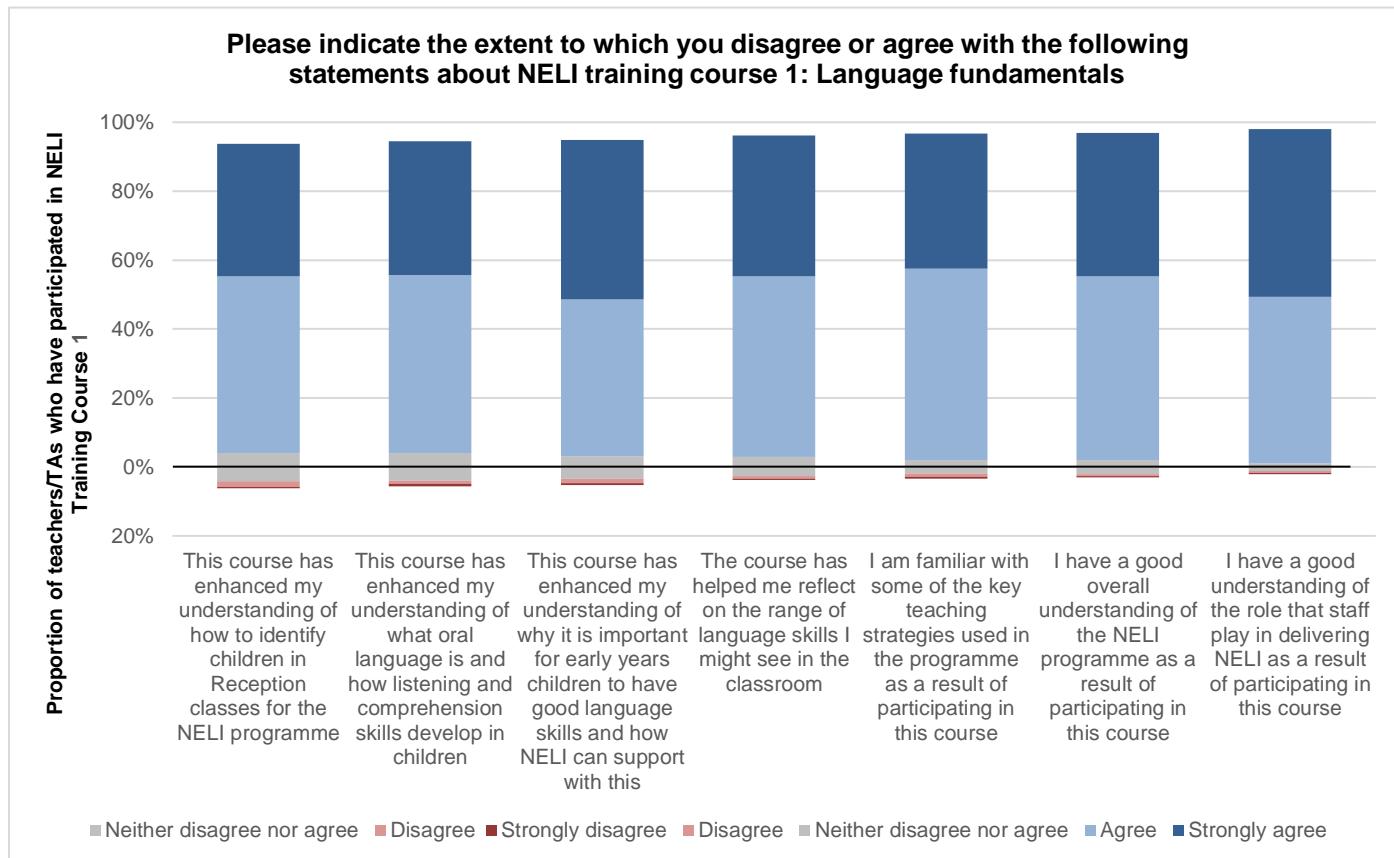


**Note:** responses from  $n = 2,094$  teachers/TAs surveyed in March–April 2021 for Training Course 1,  $n = 1,529$  teachers/TAs surveyed in March–April 2021 for Training Course 2 and  $n = 1,498$  surveyed in June–July 2021 for Training Course 3.

Teachers and TAs who had participated in the NELI training courses were asked how useful they found them in preparing them to deliver or to support colleagues in the delivery of NELI. As shown in Figure 22, the vast majority of teachers and TAs surveyed who participated in the training found it (moderately or extremely) useful. Perceived usefulness was lower for Training Course 3 than for Training Courses 1 and 2. This may be related to the focus on phonics in Training Course 3. Teachers and TAs surveyed in March–April 2021 were asked how the online NELI training might be improved (open survey question) and some participants recommended reducing the content on phonics because, as part of the national curriculum, this will already be familiar to teachers and TAs (particularly teachers).

**Teachers and TAs who participated in the training felt they had a good understanding of the purpose of NELI and how to implement the programme.**

Figure 23: Perceived impact of NELI Training Course 1 (proportion who agree/disagree with each statement), survey of teachers/TAs March–April 2021



**Note:** responses from  $n = 2,094$  teachers/TAs surveyed in March–April 2021 who had participated in (started or completed) Training Course 1; responses do not sum to 100% because neutral and don't know are omitted from the chart

A clear majority of teachers and TAs surveyed who had participated in Training Course 1 by March–April 2021 agreed that they had a good understanding of the NELI programme (1,982 out of 2,094 or 95% agreed or strongly agreed) and the role that staff play in delivering NELI (2,018 out of 2,094; 96%) (After participating in Training Course 2, the majority of teachers and TAs surveyed agreed (agreed or strongly agreed) that they had a good understanding of the structure of NELI (1,444 out of 1,529; 95%), NELI group sessions (1,444 out of 1,529; 95%) and NELI individual sessions (1,361 out of 1,529; 89%) (see **Error! Reference source not found.**). Over nine in ten (1,406 out of 1,529; 92%) of teachers and TAs surveyed felt they were familiar with the NELI course materials and how to use them as a result of participating in Training Course 2. The majority (1,350 out of 1,529; 88%) of teachers and TAs surveyed felt confident in their ability to deliver NELI after participating in Training Course 2.

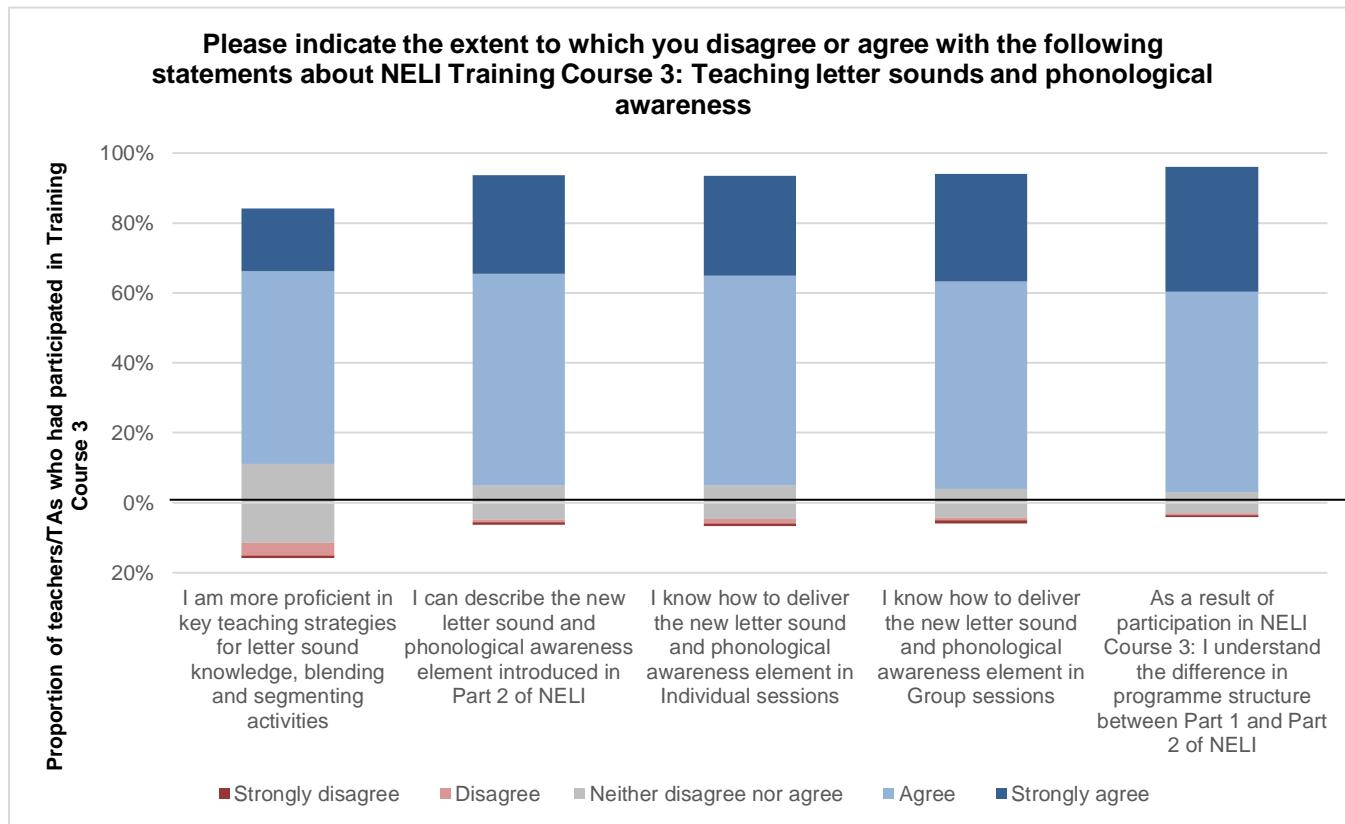
Most teachers and TAs surveyed who had participated in NELI Training Course 1 by March–April 2021 agreed (or strongly agreed) that they were familiar with some of the key teaching strategies used in delivering NELI (1,975 out of 2,094; 94%) and that the course had enhanced their understanding of how to identify children to participate in NELI (1,866 out of 2,094; 89%). In the words of one interviewee from a case study school:

*'We got a good understanding of how the programme works and the timetable. I felt after the training [NELI Training Course 1] we were confident why we were doing it and how we could carry out those sessions' (Teacher from a case study school, interviewed June–July).*

NELI Teaching Course 1 also helped teachers and TAs to develop their contextual understanding of language skills in Early Years children. Most teachers and TAs surveyed agreed that Training Course 1 enhanced their understanding of what oral language is and how listening and comprehension skills develop in children (1,891 out of 2,094; 90%) and why it is important for Early Years children to have good language skills and how NELI can support this (1,907 out of 2,094; 91%). Teachers and TAs surveyed also felt they had a good understanding of the range of language skills they might see in the classroom after participating in Training Course 1 (1,953 out of 2,094; 93%).

After participating in Training Course 2, the majority of teachers and TAs surveyed agreed (agreed or strongly agreed) that they had a good understanding of the structure of NELI (1,444 out of 1,529; 95%), NELI group sessions (1,444 out of 1,529; 95%) and NELI individual sessions (1,361 out of 1,529; 89%) (see **Error! Reference source not found.**). Over nine in ten (1,406 out of 1,529; 92%) of teachers and TAs surveyed felt they were familiar with the NELI course materials and how to use them as a result of participating in Training Course 2. The majority (1,350 out of 1,529; 88%) of teachers and TAs surveyed felt confident in their ability to deliver NELI after participating in Training Course 2.

Figure 24: Perceived impact of NELI Training Course 3 (proportion who agree/disagree with each statement), school survey June–July 2021 (teachers/TAs)



**Note:** responses from  $n = 404$  teachers/TAs surveyed in June–July 2021 who had participated in (started or completed) Training Course 3

**Teachers and TAs who had participated in the online training valued the ability to stop and start the training on the FutureLearn platform, picking up where they left off.**

Teachers and TAs surveyed in March–April 2021 were asked for their views on the FutureLearn platform (Teachers and TAs who took part in the survey in March–April 2021 were asked for their views on which aspects of FutureLearn were particularly useful (open survey question). They commented on ease of use and navigation; clear information about progress; the ability to stop and start training as and when needed (working at your own pace, fitting the training around other responsibilities); returning automatically to the point where you left off; the ability to go back and revisit sections as a refresher (including after completion and/or prior to a test); comments and discussions (learning from peers); and the ability to ask questions to the NELI mentors (and to see responses to questions asked by others). Some of these points are illustrated by the quotations below:

‘Being able to dip in and out and it, remember where you are up to, in school’s time is always precious and you can’t always do things in one sitting as things come up!’ (Teacher, surveyed March–April 2021).

‘I did find reading comments from other people online [on FutureLearn] a great help. You can see what others are doing and when you struggle you can see others have too’ (TA, surveyed March–April 2021).

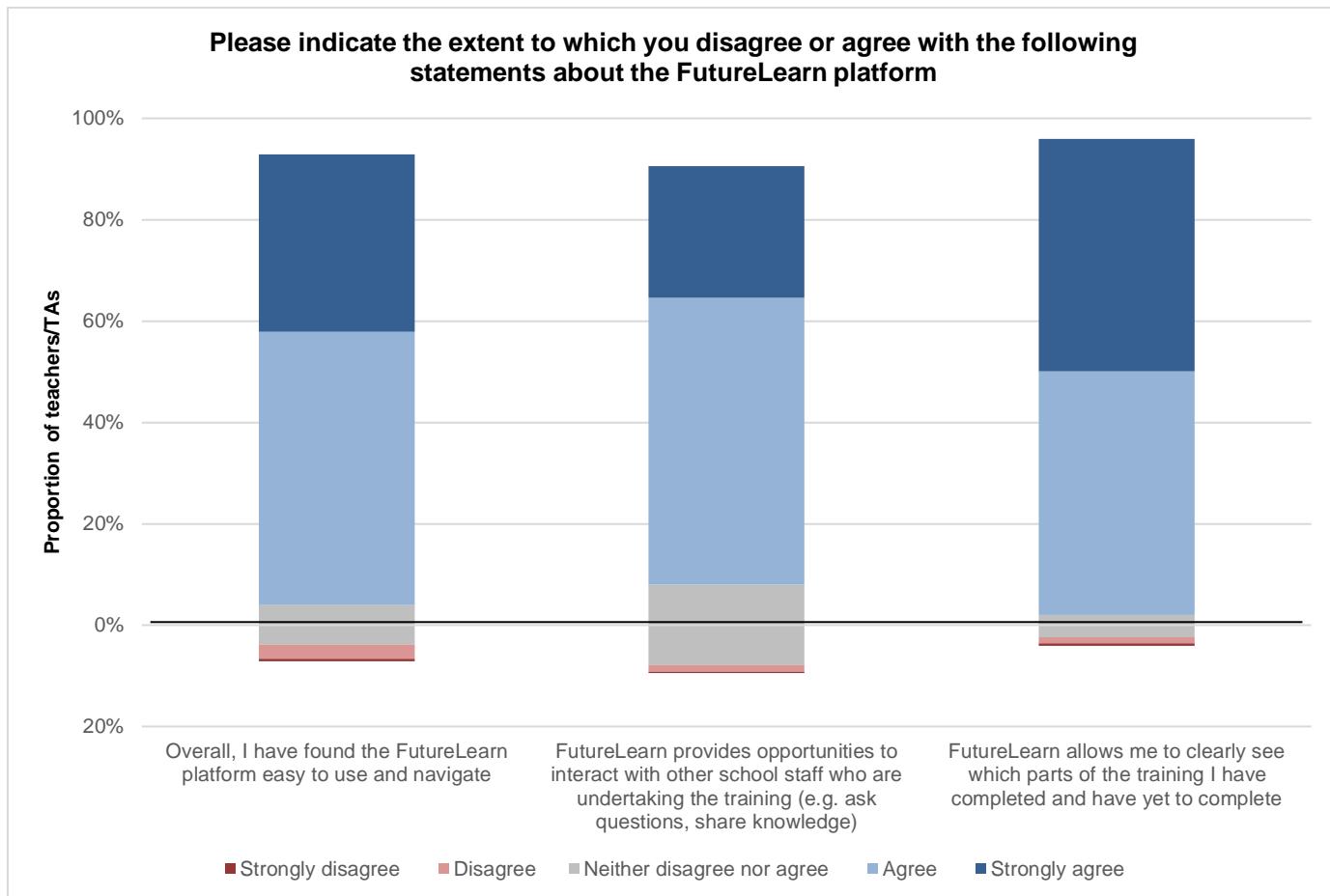
Figure 25). The vast majority of those surveyed agreed (or strongly agreed) that FutureLearn allowed them to clearly see which parts of the training they had completed (1,950 out of 2,085; 94%) and that the platform was easy to use and navigate (1,887 out of 2,120; 89%). Most teachers and TAs surveyed agreed that FutureLearn provides opportunities to interact with other school staff who are undertaking the training (1,625 out of 1,967; 83%).

Teachers and TAs who took part in the survey in March–April 2021 were asked for their views on which aspects of FutureLearn were particularly useful (open survey question). They commented on ease of use and navigation; clear information about progress; the ability to stop and start training as and when needed (working at your own pace, fitting the training around other responsibilities); returning automatically to the point where you left off; the ability to go back and revisit sections as a refresher (including after completion and/or prior to a test); comments and discussions (learning from peers); and the ability to ask questions to the NELI mentors (and to see responses to questions asked by others). Some of these points are illustrated by the quotations below:

‘Being able to dip in and out and it, remember where you are up to, in school’s time is always precious and you can’t always do things in one sitting as things come up!’ (*Teacher, surveyed March–April 2021*).

‘I did find reading comments from other people online [on FutureLearn] a great help. You can see what others are doing and when you struggle you can see others have too’ (*TA, surveyed March–April 2021*).

Figure 25: Views on the FutureLearn platform, survey of teachers/TAs March–April 2021



**Note:** the number of survey participants able to comment on each item (i.e., excluding ‘don’t know’ and ‘not applicable’) is as follows: Overall, I have found the FutureLearn platform easy to use and navigate ( $n = 2,120$ ), FutureLearn provides opportunities to interact with other school staff who are undertaking the training (e.g. ask questions, share knowledge) ( $n = 1,967$ ), FutureLearn allows me to clearly see which parts of the training I have completed and have yet to complete ( $n = 2,085$ )

Teachers and TAs were also asked to comment in the survey on what might have improved their experience of using the FutureLearn platform (open question). Many survey participants did not respond to this question or used it to state that they liked the FutureLearn platform and/or would not change anything. There were some suggestions for how to improve the platform, including a chat room (to discuss ideas with mentors or other practitioners in real time); clearer communication that you have to press a button to confirm that you have read or completed each page; and the ability for NELI leads to track staff members’ progress with the training. There were a small number of comments about the platform being hard to navigate or not user friendly. Some survey participants used their answer to this question to suggest improvements that were not directly related to the FutureLearn platform, such as improving or widening access to the training (e.g., by inviting NELI leads to participate in all three training courses), more personalised support (e.g., phone number for NELI mentors or other support) and offering face-to-face rather than (or alongside) online training.

**Teachers and TAs valued the variety of different types of content in the NELI training, in particular the videos which were easy to understand and brought the content to life.**

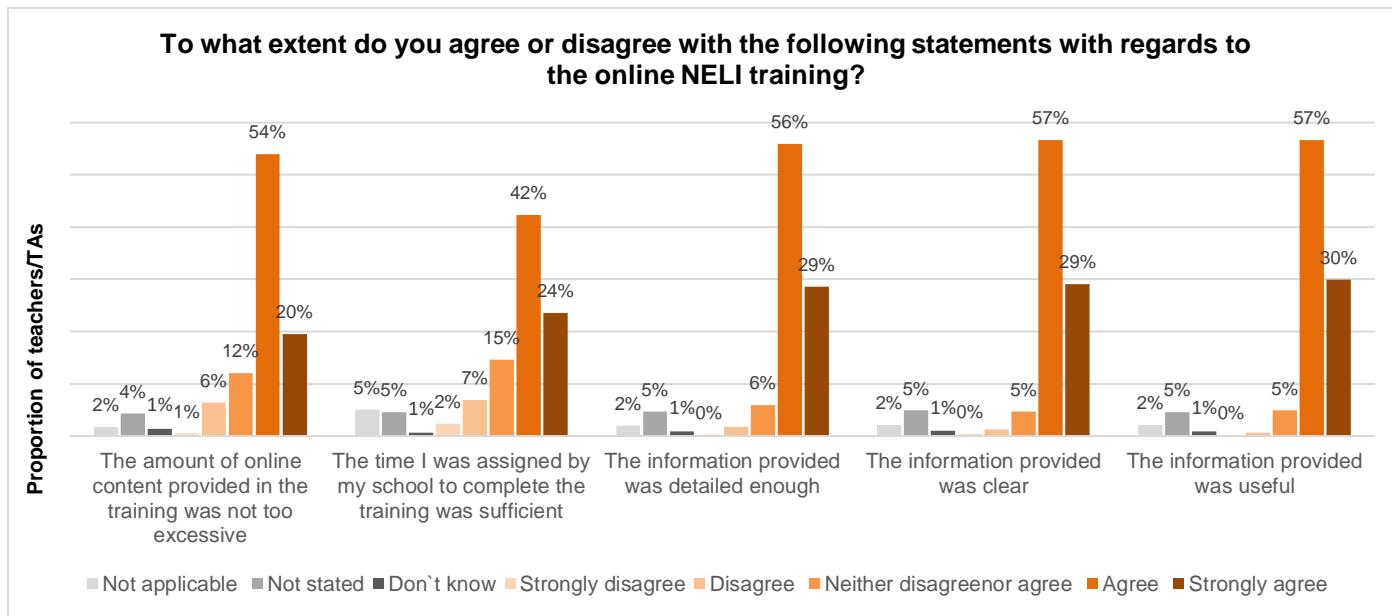
Teachers and TAs surveyed in March–April 2021 who had participated in the training generally agreed (agreed or strongly agreed) that the information was useful (1,918 out of 2,219; 87%), clear (1,901 out of 2,219; 86%) and detailed enough (1,876 out of 2,219; 85%) (see Figure 26). One NELI mentor commented that the training was pitched such in a way as to be accessible to those without prior knowledge.

Two-thirds (1,462 out of 2,219; 66%) of teachers and TAs surveyed felt the amount of time assigned by their school was sufficient to undertake the training. However, a minority (203 out of 2,219; 9%) disagreed (or strongly disagreed) with

this statement. Some staff interviewed from case study schools indicated that the online training had taken a lot of time, in some cases more time than they had envisaged. One interviewee from a case study school commented that being able to complete the training in multiple sessions was beneficial:

*'It's broken down into small chunks for you and obviously being in a school, you can't always sit and read for an hour, so it's nice to be able. You could read a chunk, put it down, go and do something else, and come back to it'* (Teacher from a case study school, interviewed October–December 2021).

Figure 26: Teachers/TAs' overall views on NELI training, survey of teachers/TAs March–April 2021



Note: responses from **n = 2,219** teachers and TAs surveyed in March–April 2021

Teachers/TAs surveyed in March–April 2021 generally found the types of content in the online training useful as shown in Figure 27 (perceptions of teachers and TAs who had accessed each type of content) and Table A7 in Appendix E (perceptions of all teachers and TAs surveyed). The teaching Handbooks, used by 1,850 out of 2,219 of those surveyed (83%), were widely regarded as useful by survey participants: 83% of those who had used the Handbooks (1,613 out of 1,850) reported that this was extremely useful (see Figure 27). Videos, accessed by 2,085 out of 2,219 survey participants (94%), were described as extremely useful by 75% of those who had accessed them (1,573 out of 2,085). Staff from case study schools also identified the videos as a particularly useful element of the training because they gave a model for delivery and enabled information to be easily digested.

Most teachers and TAs surveyed had accessed the quizzes on FutureLearn (1,917 out of 2,219; 86%) and around half of these survey participants described them as extremely useful (1,024 out of 1,917). One interviewee from a case study school commented that the quizzes worked well as a summary of the content. Another interviewee from a case study school felt the final quiz at the end of Training Course 3 was not well linked to the course content:

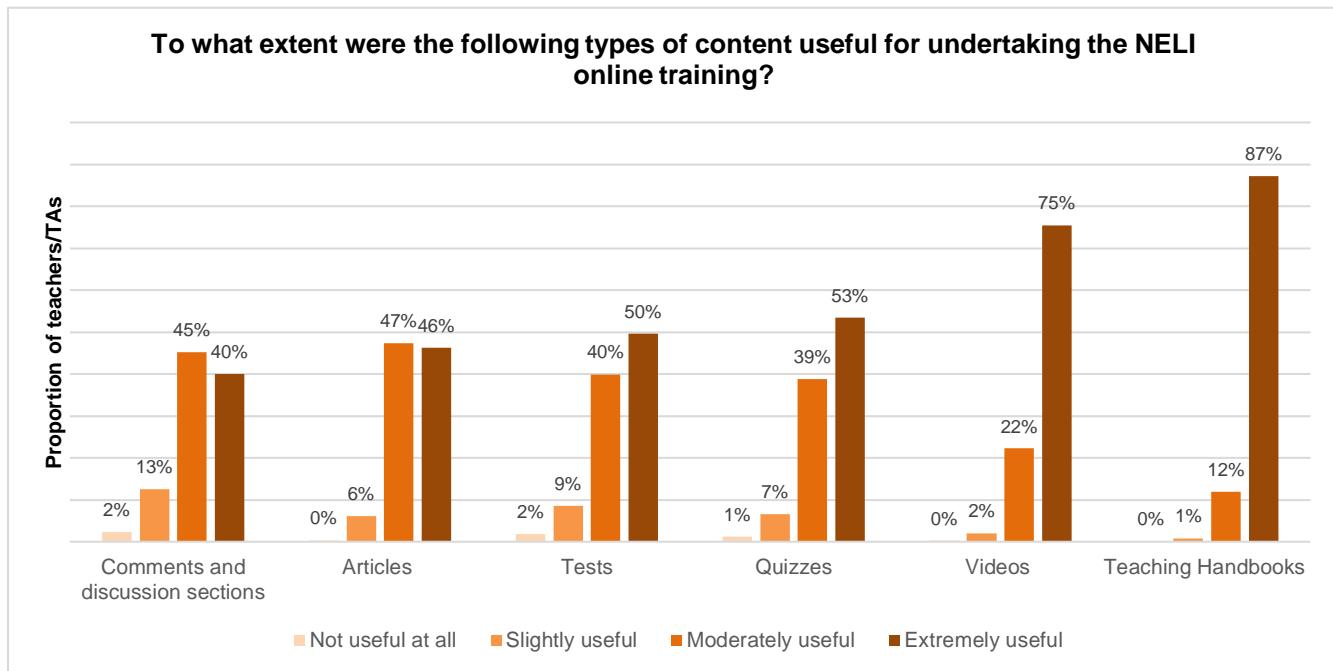
*'The questions in this final quiz did not seem to be related to anything you just learned. It was too simplistic compared to the quizzes you took throughout the course'* (Teacher from a case study school, interviewed June–July 2021).

One NELI lead from a case study school commented that staff in their school had worried about the tests as part of the online training but felt the tests had been useful in encouraging people to focus on the training. One NELI mentor interviewed commented that some school staff were nervous about taking the tests. However, one member of staff from a case study school felt the quizzes as part of the NELI training were only slightly useful because they were too easy.

Some interviewees from case study schools indicated that they valued the combination of different types of content in the NELI training, which made it more engaging:

'The different methods – the videos, the text to read – it wasn't a monotonous course' (*Teacher from a case study school, interviewed June–July 2021*).

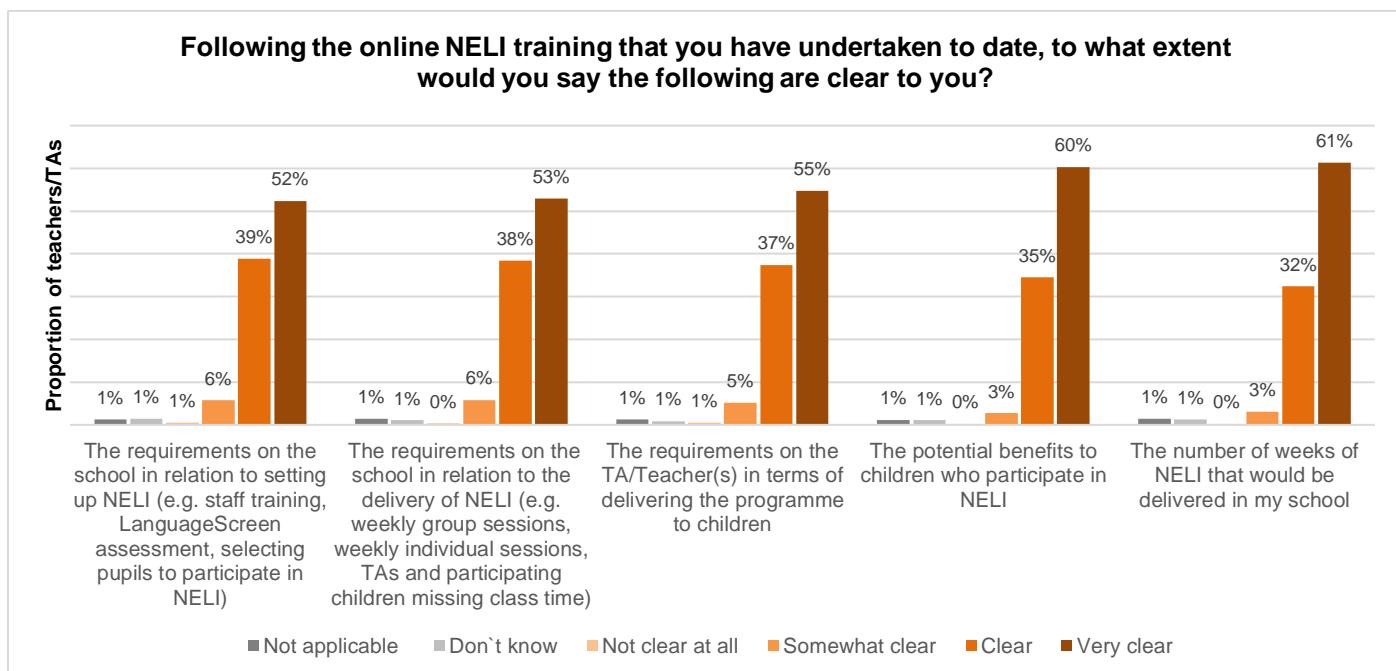
Figure 27: Perceived usefulness of different types of content in the online training (by those who had used them), survey of teachers/TAs March–April 2021



**Note:** responses from teachers and TAs surveyed in March–April 2021 who had accessed each type of resource: **n = 1,784** for comments and discussion sections, **n = 1,900** for articles, **n = 1,911** for tests, **n = 1,917** for quizzes, **n = 2,085** for videos and **n = 1,850** for teaching Handbooks

The majority of teachers and TAs surveyed in March–April 2021 who had participated in the training felt that the benefits of NELI to children and the requirements on the school in relation to delivering the programme were clear, as shown in Figure 28.

Figure 28: Understanding of NELI following the online training, survey of teachers/TAs March–April 2021



**Note:** responses from **n = 2,219** teachers and surveyed in March–April 2021

**Suggestions for improving the online training included adding additional content on individual NELI sessions and making the training more interactive.**

Headteachers and teachers/TAs surveyed in March–April 2021 were asked how the online NELI training might be improved (open survey questions), and this was also discussed in interviews with case study schools. Some survey participants felt the training did not need to be improved:

‘I personally thought it [the online training] was perfect’ (TA, surveyed March–April 2021).

Improvements suggested by survey participants included more or different examples (videos) of individual and group NELI sessions; in particular, example videos of full NELI sessions, videos including pupil–teacher interactions and videos incorporating strategies for specific groups such as pupils with English as an additional language (EAL).

Some survey participants would have liked the training to include more (detailed) information about individual NELI sessions, which were felt by some to be less well covered in the online training than group sessions. For instance:

‘The online training was very detailed for group sessions, but I think the planning for the individual sessions was unclear’ (TA, surveyed March–April 2021).

One survey participant found additional information about individual NELI sessions from informal sources of information and support (Facebook):

‘A lot of information (particularly about individual sessions) has been found in discussions in the [unofficial] Facebook group, rather than through the [official NELI] training’ (TA, surveyed March–April 2021).

Some teachers and TAs surveyed felt the online training should have been shorter and/or less detailed. There were some comments about the training being repetitive; in particular, Training Course 3 repeating content from the first two courses.

‘An abridged version [of the training] would have made the course manageable to complete’ (Teacher, surveyed March–April 2021).

‘It [the online training] could have been a bit shorter. It seemed a bit repetitive’ (TA, surveyed March–April 2021).

Some survey participants felt the NELI training was more useful for TAs than for teachers, since some of the content would likely already be familiar to teachers. The view that NELI training was less useful for teachers than TAs may have contributed to lower participation rates for teachers (

Table 10). There were some suggestions that the training could be tailored or condensed for teachers:

'A different approach for [training] teachers and TAs (a lot of the content was information that teachers would already know)' (*Teacher, surveyed March–April 2021*).

'For an experienced teacher, the sections were quite long and repetitive. However, I am aware that the TAs that trained found the sessions valuable' (*Teacher, surveyed March–April 2021*).

Another suggestion for how to improve the online training was to create 'live' elements such as virtual teaching sessions, webinars or live chats with staff delivering NELI in other schools. Some survey participants expressed a desire to undertake the training at the same time as their colleagues, to enable discussion and peer learning. The possibility of making the training more interactive was also discussed in a case study interview.

Some survey participants expressed a preference for face-to-face training rather than online, and this was also mentioned in interviews with case study schools. However, other interviewees highlighted benefits associated with online training, such as being able to stop and start as needed.

'Face-to-face [training]! Obviously not possible at the moment, but always preferable to online' (*Teacher, surveyed March–April 2021*).

'Face-to-face training ... I don't think you can beat that sort of training. The online training has been put together really well. But human interaction, group discussions and idea sharing is missing. However much you try on an online platform, it doesn't quite have the same effect' (*NELI mentor, interviewed January–February 2021*).

### Using the LanguageScreen app

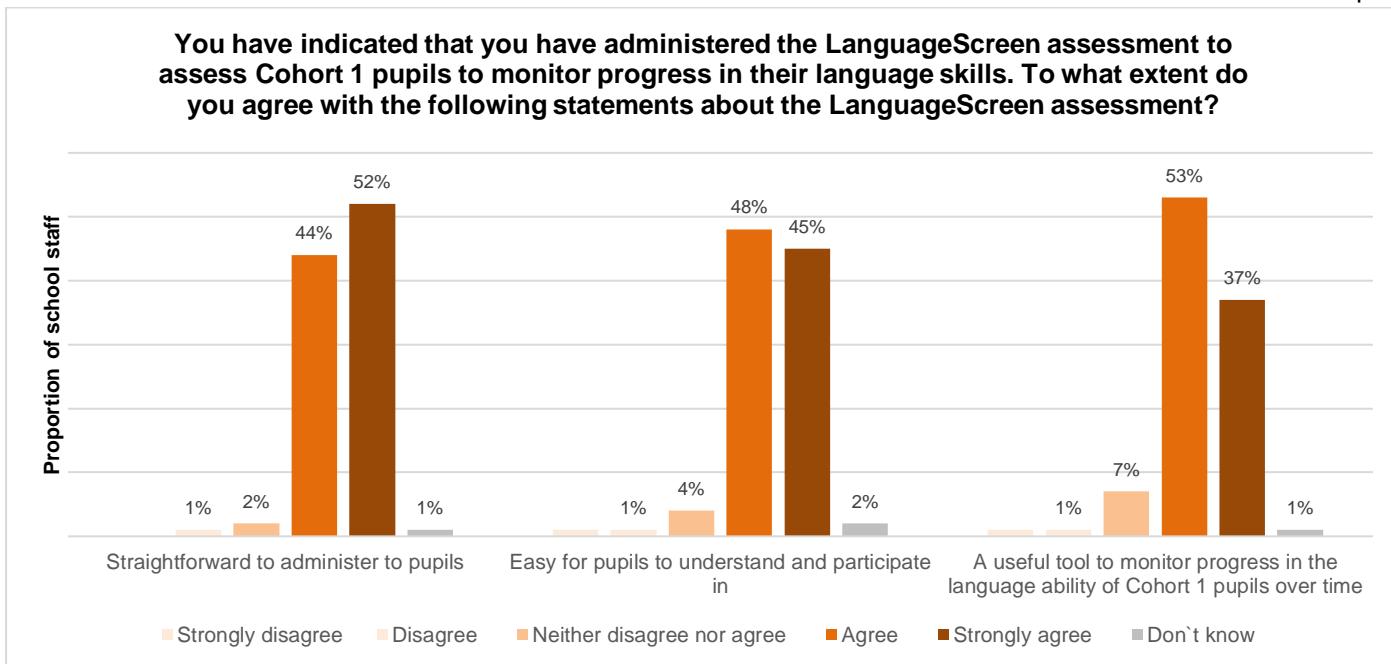
#### **Staff felt the LanguageScreen app was a useful tool for monitoring pupils' progress.**

Most school staff surveyed in February 2022 who had used LanguageScreen<sup>12</sup> agreed (or strongly agreed) that the app was an appropriate measure of pupils' language abilities (150 out of 176; 85%) and a useful tool for monitoring progress (159 out of 176; 90%) (Figure 29). Overwhelmingly, school staff surveyed found the LanguageScreen app straightforward to administer (169 out of 176; 96%) and easy for pupils to understand and participate in (163 out of 176; 93%).

Figure 29: *Perceptions of LanguageScreen, survey of school staff February 2022*

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<sup>12</sup> This survey question related to assessing pupils' progress rather than screening pupils to take part in NELI. However, the process of conducting the LanguageScreen assessment is the same in both contexts.



Note: responses from  $n = 176$  teachers/TAs surveyed in February 2022 who had used LanguageScreen to conduct endline assessments

### Delivering individual and group NELI sessions

**Staff involved in delivering NELI saw the value in both individual and group sessions and viewed them as complementary.**

Interviews with staff from case study schools highlighted the value of both individual and group NELI sessions. The group format enabled discussion and peer learning and helped pupils to feel encouraged and supported by one another:

'I think sometimes they [pupils] learn more from their peers as well because it's not being talked at them' (*Teacher from a case study school, interviewed October–December 2022*).

Individual sessions were used to build on group sessions, with content tailored to meet the needs and abilities of the pupil. Individual sessions revealed how much pupils had understood from the group sessions, as illustrated by the quotation below:

'I think you need both [individual and group NELI sessions], definitely, because I suppose it depends on the character [of the child] ... we've got some [pupils] that will sit back and let others lead or take over. It doesn't mean they're not absorbing it, but until you do the individual sessions, you can't be 100% sure how much they're taking on and how much they're just copying others or letting others take over. But I think the group sessions are good because they do bounce off each other and sort of competitive element or just enjoying some of the activities together. But I do find that I need the individual [sessions] just to be sure what each one is picking up' (*Teacher from a case study school, interviewed October–December 2021*).

### Individual and group NELI sessions each brought specific challenges with delivery.

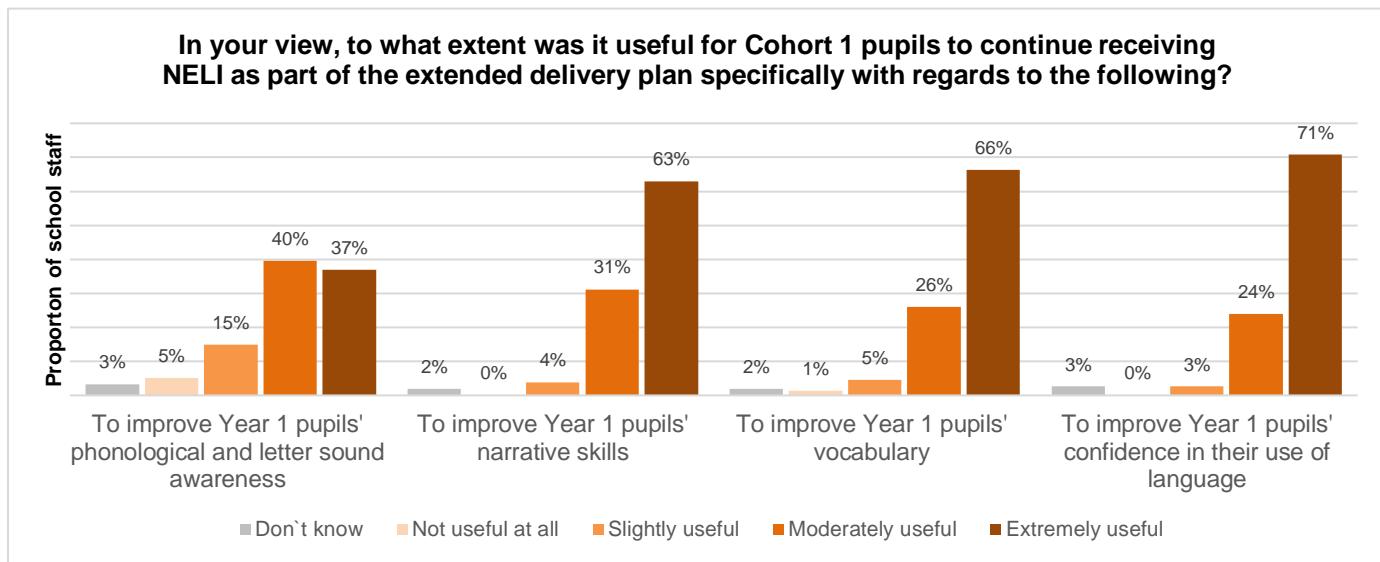
Staff from case study schools observed that individual NELI sessions posed greater challenges in terms of securing staff time compared to group sessions, and this may be why fidelity was slightly lower for individual sessions compared to group sessions (as described in Section 4.2).

Some interviewees from case study schools commented that 30 minutes was quite long for a group session and some pupils struggled to maintain concentration, particularly in later sessions which were described by one interviewee as more dry and less engaging for the pupils. Another interviewee mentioned that their school had struggled to get through the content for group sessions in 30 minutes, in some cases having to run over or drop elements of the session.

## Participating in the extended delivery plan

**Delivering NELI sessions to Year 1 pupils in the 2021–22 academic year (extended delivery plan) was widely regarded as beneficial for pupils' confidence and language abilities.**

Figure 30: Perceived usefulness of delivering NELI to Cohort 1 pupils in the 2021–22 academic year (extended delivery plan), survey of schools in February 2022



**Note:** responses from  $n = 154$  school staff surveyed in February 2022

A large majority (138 out of 154; 90%) of school staff surveyed in February 2022 who participated in the extended delivery plan felt it was moderately or extremely useful for Cohort 1 pupils to continue to receive NELI in Year 1. Perceived usefulness was highest in relation to improving pupils' confidence in their use of language: 95% (146 out of 154) of school staff surveyed thought delivery to Year 1 pupils had been moderately or extremely useful in this regard. The vast majority of those surveyed also felt that delivery to Year 1 pupils had been moderately or extremely useful in relation to improving pupils' vocabulary (142 out of 154; 92%) and narrative skills (145 out of 154; 94%).

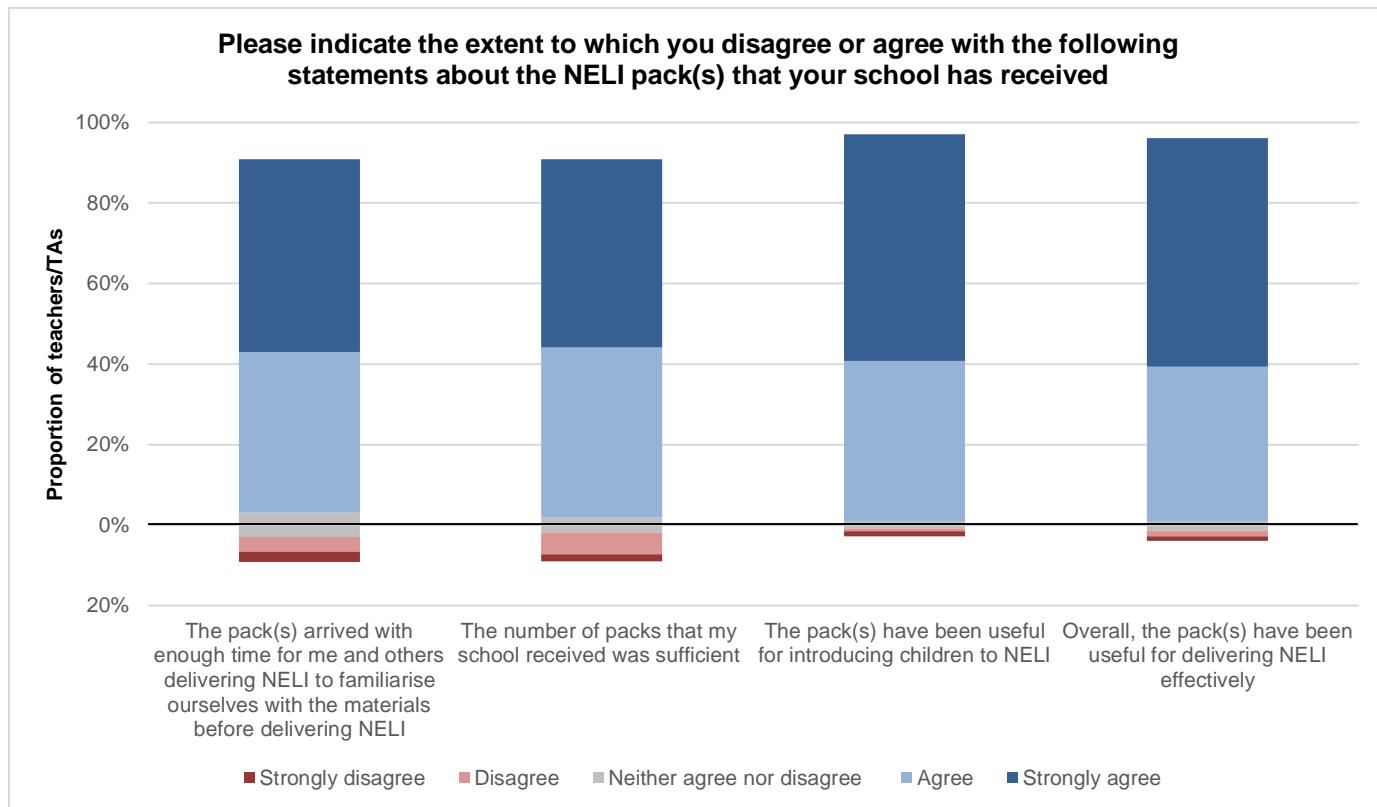
Around two-thirds (118 out of 154; 77%) of those surveyed felt delivery to Year 1 pupils had been useful in improving phonological and letter–sound awareness. However, a minority of survey participants saw this as only slightly useful (23 out of 154; 15%) or not useful at all (8 out of 154; 5%). This may relate to the point raised earlier in relation to schools' reasons for not completing NELI delivery in the 2020–21 academic year (see Section 4.2), where qualitative data indicated that the components of NELI related to phonological and letter–sound awareness were less relevant to pupils at the end of their Reception year and beyond because this content had already been taught as part of the school curriculum.

## 5.5 Did staff and schools feel confident and well supported to deliver the intervention? (RQ 2.5)

Support was made available to schools via the NELI Delivery Support Hub, a repository of information and resources (e.g., videos of NELI sessions, discussion forums) available on the FutureLearn platform. A team of experts – the NELI mentors – responded to schools' questions about delivering NELI, sharing the answers with all schools on FutureLearn. Schools could also email and phone the NELI team with any queries. Schools were provided with a NELI pack (at least one for each Reception class) containing a Handbook, picture cards and other resources.

**Most school staff reported receiving sufficient NELI packs in a timely manner.**

Figure 31: Perceptions of NELI packs (agree and disagree), survey of schools June–July 2021



**Note:** responses from  $n = 695$  teachers and TAs surveyed in June–July 2021. Responses do not sum to 100% because don't know responses are omitted from the chart

Teachers and TAs surveyed in June–July 2021 were asked about materials and resources for implementing the NELI programme. Around three-quarters of teachers and TAs (545 out of 735; 74%) reported receiving one NELI pack per Reception class in the 2020–21 academic year. Only a small proportion of schools – 8% (59 out of 735) – reported receiving less than one NELI pack per class. The majority (613 out of 695; 88%) of teachers and TAs surveyed agreed (or strongly agreed) that their school received sufficient NELI packs (

Figure 31). Nine out of ten (630 out of 695; 90%) of teachers and TAs surveyed agreed (or strongly agreed) that they had all the information and resources that they needed to deliver NELI sessions to pupils.

Most teachers and TAs surveyed agreed (or strongly agreed) that the NELI pack(s) arrived in a timely manner (603 out of 695; 87%) (

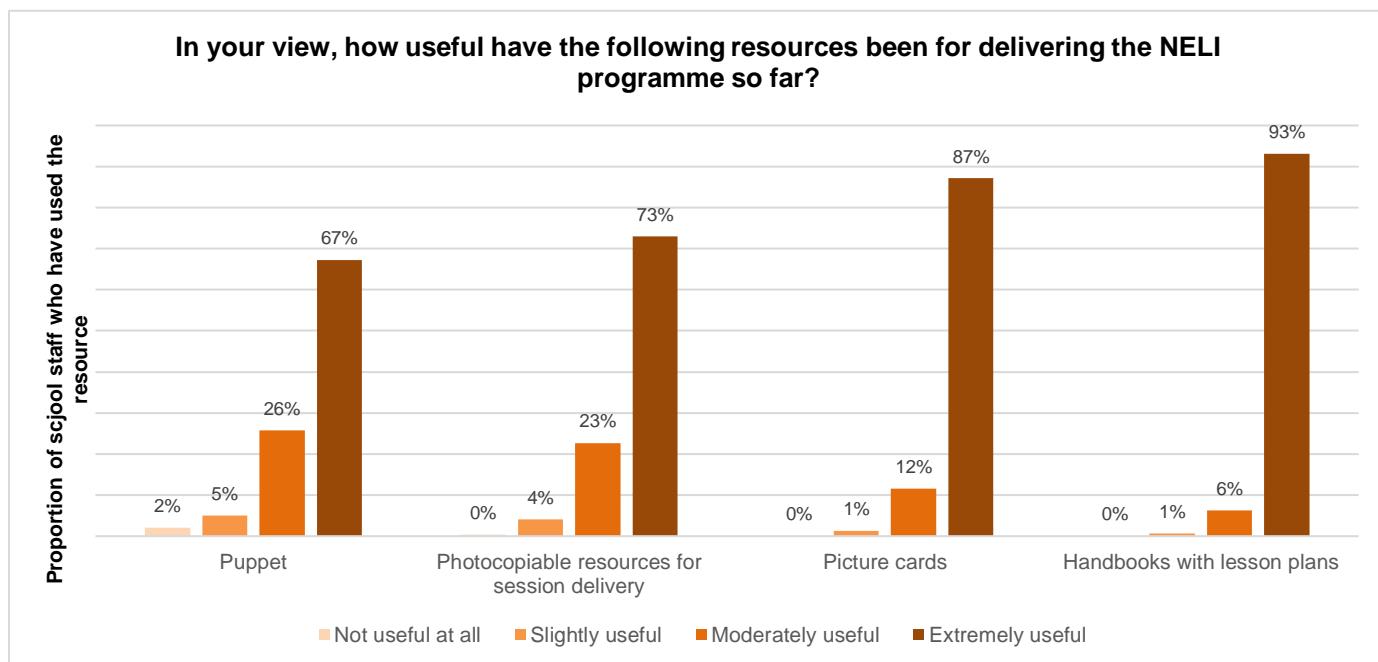
Figure 31), despite the fact that some schools received their NELI pack(s) after the online training was launched (see Section 6).

#### **Resources in the NELI pack were widely regarded as useful by school staff involved in delivering NELI sessions.**

Most school staff agreed (or strongly agreed) that NELI packs were useful for delivering the programme (93%) and introducing children to NELI (95%) (

Figure 32). Interviewees from case study schools commented positively on NELI resources. One interviewee commented that it was good that the school did not need to purchase any additional materials or resources with NELI.

Figure 32: *Perceptions of NELI resources (from school staff who have used each resource), survey of schools June–July 2021*



Note: responses teachers and TAs surveyed in June–July 2021 who had used each resource: **n = 615** for the puppet, **n = 613** for photocopyable resources, **n = 605** for picture cards and **n = 622** for Handbooks with lessons plans.

*Handbooks and picture cards in particular were viewed as useful by teachers and TAs, as shown in*

Figure 32. One NELI mentor interviewed commented that some school staff wanted an electronic version of the Handbook, but this was not possible for copyright reasons.

A small minority of teachers and TAs – 2% (13 out of 615) – did not find the puppet helpful. One interviewee from a case study school observed that the puppet was not helpful because the children were ‘easily excited’. However, other interviewees and survey participants observed that their pupils responded really well to the puppet:

'Ted in particular is an essential part [of the NELI programme]; he really helps the children to focus and has given some of the children more confidence' (*TA, surveyed June–July 2021*).

**Resources in the NELI pack made it quicker and easier for school staff to prepare to deliver NELI, but it could still be time-consuming to prepare materials.**

In the survey at the end of the 2020–21 academic year, school staff were asked to describe factors that facilitated the effective implementation of NELI (open survey question). NELI resources were described as making it easier for schools to implement the programme and reducing the time commitment required of staff:

'All resources provided making it easy to deliver. All sessions very clearly planned out which ensures minimal additional workload' (*Teacher, surveyed June–July 2021*).

However, interviewees from case study schools described how preparing the resources took up a large amount of staff time, in some cases more than they had originally envisaged. In the words of one interviewee:

'There are some things I would like to change with resources; for example, the paper they printed, because we had to spend lots of time reorganising resources, cutting them and then laminating them. Because we found that our little ones like to hold them, lick them, cough on them. And then, especially during these *Covid* times, that was just not acceptable. So we had to laminate every single one of them. Make sure that we can at least clean them' (*Headteacher/SLT member from a case study school, interviewed June–July 2021*).

Interviewees from case study schools gave some suggestions for improvement to NELI resources including making some of the pictures clearer (some children had difficulty identifying objects).

**Most teachers and TAs did not use the NELI Delivery Support Hub, but those that did generally found the information very useful.**

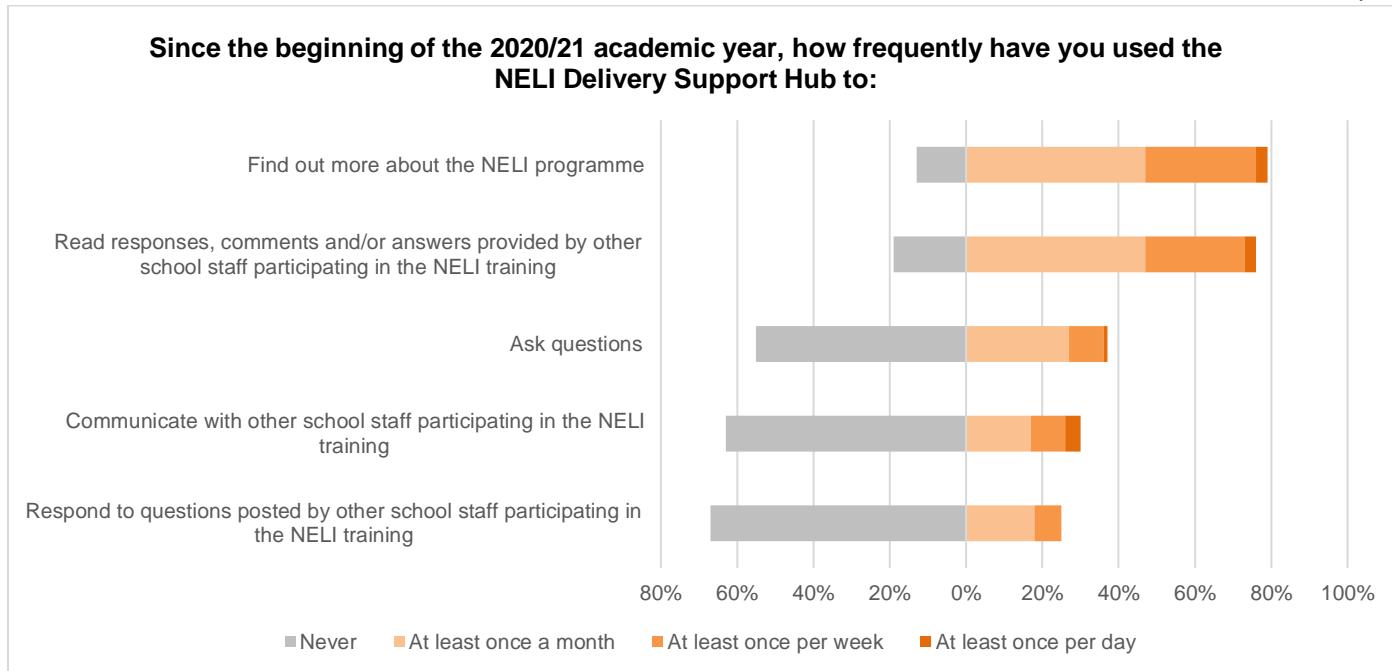
Teachers and TAs surveyed in March–April 2021 were asked about whether they had used the NELI Delivery Support Hub since the beginning of the 2020–21 academic year. Less than a third of survey participants reported that they used the NELI Delivery Support Hub (638 out of 2,219; 29%). Around two-thirds of those surveyed (1,513 out of 2,219; 68%) had not used the NELI Delivery Support Hub and the remainder (68 out of 2,219; 3%) were not sure. Data from school surveys conducted in June–July 2021 and in February 2022 indicated that the reported level of use did not substantially change over time.

Staff from case study schools who had not used the NELI Delivery Support Hub indicated that this was because they did not need any additional information and support:

'I don't think we've used the delivery support hub. We've used the training and the manual. It was quite straightforward. I knew it was there – just didn't feel like I needed it' (*Teacher from a case study school, interviewed June–July 2021*).

Other factors were also highlighted by interviewees as reasons for not engaging with the information and support available on the Hub, including lack of time and capacity and low awareness of this resource.

*Figure 33: NELI Delivery Support Hub frequency of use (for teachers and TAs had used it), survey of teachers/TAs March–April 2021*



**Note:** responses from  $n = 638$  teachers/TAs surveyed in March–April 2021

Teachers and TAs surveyed in March–April 2021 who indicated that they used the NELI Delivery Support Hub were asked about the frequency with which they used it for different purposes since the beginning of the 2020–21 academic year (**Error! Reference source not found.**). The two most frequent purposes for using the NELI Delivery Support Hub were to find out more about the NELI programme and to read responses, comments and/or answers provided by other school staff participating in the NELI training (**Error! Reference source not found.**). The NELI Delivery Support Hub was used less frequently for asking and responding to questions and for communicating with other school staff participating in the training.

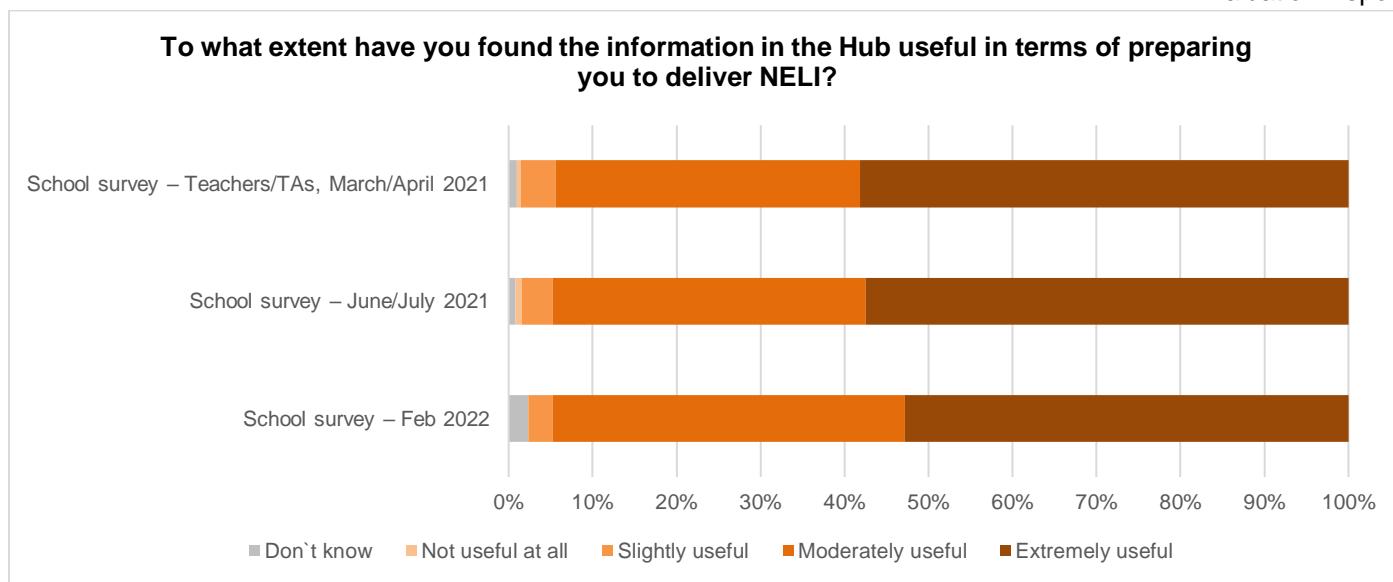
Staff interviewed from case study schools also described how they had used the NELI Delivery Support Hub for learning about other schools' experiences:

'And it was nice to be able to see other people's comments and questions of how they've been getting on things ... and struggles' (*Teacher from a case study school, interviewed October–December 2021*).

Teachers and TAs were also asked about the frequency with which they used the NELI Delivery Support Hub for different purposes in subsequent survey waves in June–July 2021 and February 2022. The reported frequency of use of the NELI Delivery Support Hub did not markedly change and results are not reported here.

Teachers and TAs who had used the NELI Delivery Support Hub were asked to rate the extent to which they found the information useful. In all three surveys, most staff who had used the Hub indicated that they found it moderately or extremely useful, as shown in Figure 34. Staff from case study schools also reported that they found the information provided in the NELI Delivery Support Hub useful.

Figure 34: Perceived level of usefulness of the NELI Delivery Support Hub, school surveys in March–April 2021, June–July 2021 and Feb 2022



**Note:** responses from **n = 638** teachers/TAs surveyed in March–April 2021, **n = 247** in June–July 2021 and **n = 210** in February 2022

Teachers and TAs from case study schools described how they found it reassuring to hear that other schools had similar questions and problems with regards to the FutureLearn training and the programme delivery. Teachers and TAs used comments provided by other school staff participating in NELI to answer their questions and to solve their problems:

'Not so much checking things, but like seeing what other people were doing, I found it reassuring that other people were struggling with some saying things that she was struggling with. [...] We had lots of problems with people being away and then having other people talking about things and talking about how they were adapting things and what they were doing and workload wise. Hearing how people were able to kind of do the paperwork and fit it in' (*Headteacher/SLT member from a case study school, interviewed October–December 2011*).

In terms of how the NELI Delivery Hub might be improved, staff from case study schools suggested creating a line of direct contact with a dedicated member of staff from the support team via email or phone:

'It would be useful to have someone we could phone or email and get a response within 24 hours – a direct contact' (*TA from a case study school, interviewed June–July 2021*).

#### **A minority of school staff accessed support from the NELI mentors, but satisfaction was high for those that did.**

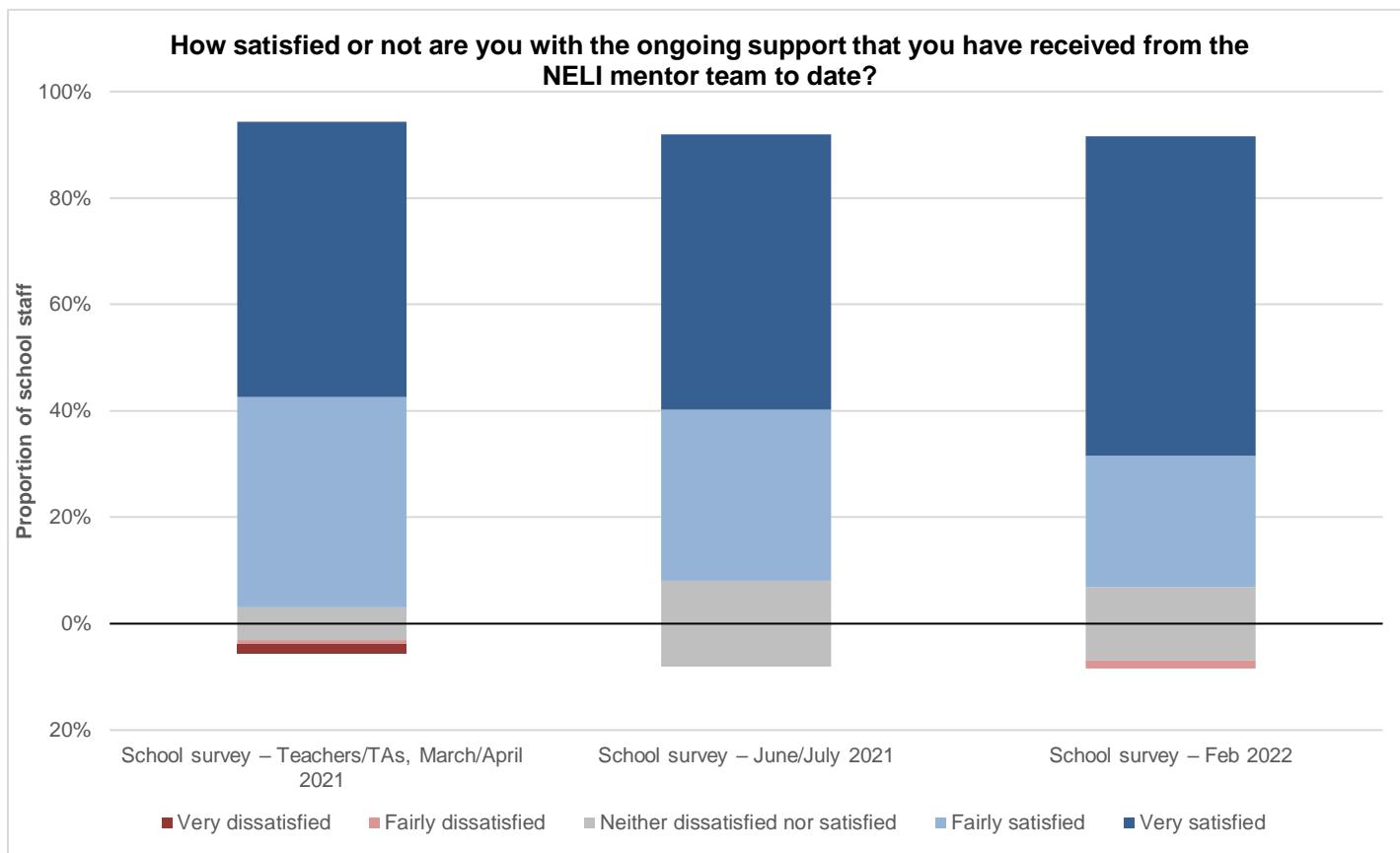
School staff surveyed at all survey waves were asked whether they received support from the NELI mentors via the FutureLearn platform. A clear majority respondents reported that they did not receive support from NELI mentors as presented in Table .

**Table 7: Whether school staff had accessed support from the NELI mentors, school surveys in March–April 2021, June–July 2021 and February 2022**

|                   | School survey – Teachers/TAs, March–April 2021 | School survey – June–July 2021 | School survey – February 2022 |
|-------------------|--|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <b>Don't know</b> | 9%   | 11%                            | 10%                           |
| <b>No</b>         | 82%  | 81%                            | 85%                           |
| <b>Yes</b>        | 9%   | 8%                             | 5%                            |
| <b>Total</b>      | 2219   | 735                            | 724                           |

School staff who had accessed support from the NELI mentors were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with this support. Most survey participants indicated that they were satisfied with support from the NELI mentors, as shown in Figure 35.

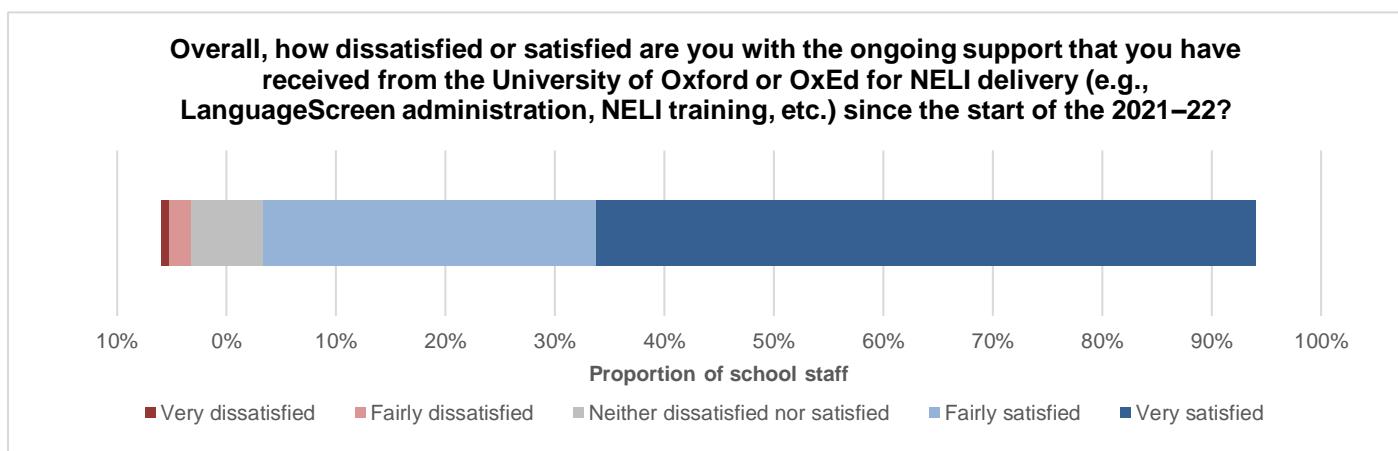
Figure 35: Satisfaction of support received from NELI mentors, school surveys in March–April 2021, June–July 2021, and February 2022



**Note:** responses from  $n = 114$  teachers/TAs surveyed in March–April 2021,  $n = 58$  school staff surveyed in June–July 2021,  $n = 66$  school staff surveyed in February 2022

**Most school staff members who had accessed support from the University of Oxford or OxEd were satisfied with the support they had received.**

Figure 36: Satisfaction with support received from University of Oxford / OxEd, survey of schools February 2022



**Note:** responses from  $n = 151$  school staff surveyed in February 2022

**School staff surveyed in February 2022 were asked whether they received any other support from the University of Oxford or OxEd for NELI delivery (e.g., LanguageScreen administration, NELI training, etc.). Less than a quarter of survey respondents (151 out of 724; 21%) had received support from the University of Oxford or OxEd. Most had not accessed support (505 out of 724; 70%), the remainder (68 out of 724; 9%) did not know. School staff who had received support from the University of Oxford or OxEd were asked to rate their level of**

**satisfaction with the support. A clear majority of respondents indicated that they were satisfied (fairly satisfied or very satisfied) with the support received (137 out of 151; 90%), as shown in**

**Figure 36.**

## 6 Perceived programme impacts

Whilst this evaluation does not include an impact assessment, this section presents findings on the *perceived* impact of NELI.

### 6.1 Perceived programme impacts: key lessons

- **Most teachers and TAs involved in delivering NELI felt the programme had a positive impact on pupils' language abilities.** In addition to the impact on pupils' language abilities, school staff commented on the positive impact on children's confidence in their use of language. This suggests that NELI may be effective even if it is delivered in a way that departs from the intended delivery model, although conclusions must remain tentative due to the nature of data collected as part of this evaluation (i.e., small, non-representative, potentially biased sample with no counterfactual, focused on perceptions and self-reported data).
- **Not all pupils were perceived to benefit to the same degree from participating in NELI.** To some extent, this reflected differential abilities going into the programme (as perceived by school staff, pupils who were more advanced at the beginning of the programme might benefit less). However, some school staff expected that pupils with special educational needs (SEN) would benefit less from the intervention than others.
- Delivering NELI is viewed as beneficial for the professional development of school staff, particularly TAs.

### 6.2 What is the perceived impact of NELI on pupils' language skills based on teachers' and TAs' perceptions? (RQ 3.1) What is the perceived impact of NELI on pupils' confidence in their use of language based on teachers' and TAs' perceptions? (RQ3.2)

**Teachers and TAs felt that NELI had a substantial impact on pupils' progress, particularly in relation to confidence.**

Teachers and TAs surveyed at the end of the academic year (June–July 2021) were asked to assess the impact of NELI on participating pupils. Although an improvement in confidence is not identified as an outcome for the logic model of NELI delivered at scale (Figure 1), this had been an outcome of NELI identified in effectiveness trials (West et al., 2022). In their overall assessment of the impact of NELI, teachers and TAs surveyed were more likely to agree or strongly agree that they had observed an increase in pupils' confidence in their use of language (585 out of 706; 83%) than in their language ability (480 out of 706; 68%), as shown in Interviewees from case study schools commented positively on the impact of NELI on participating pupils, highlighting the impact of NELI on participating pupils':

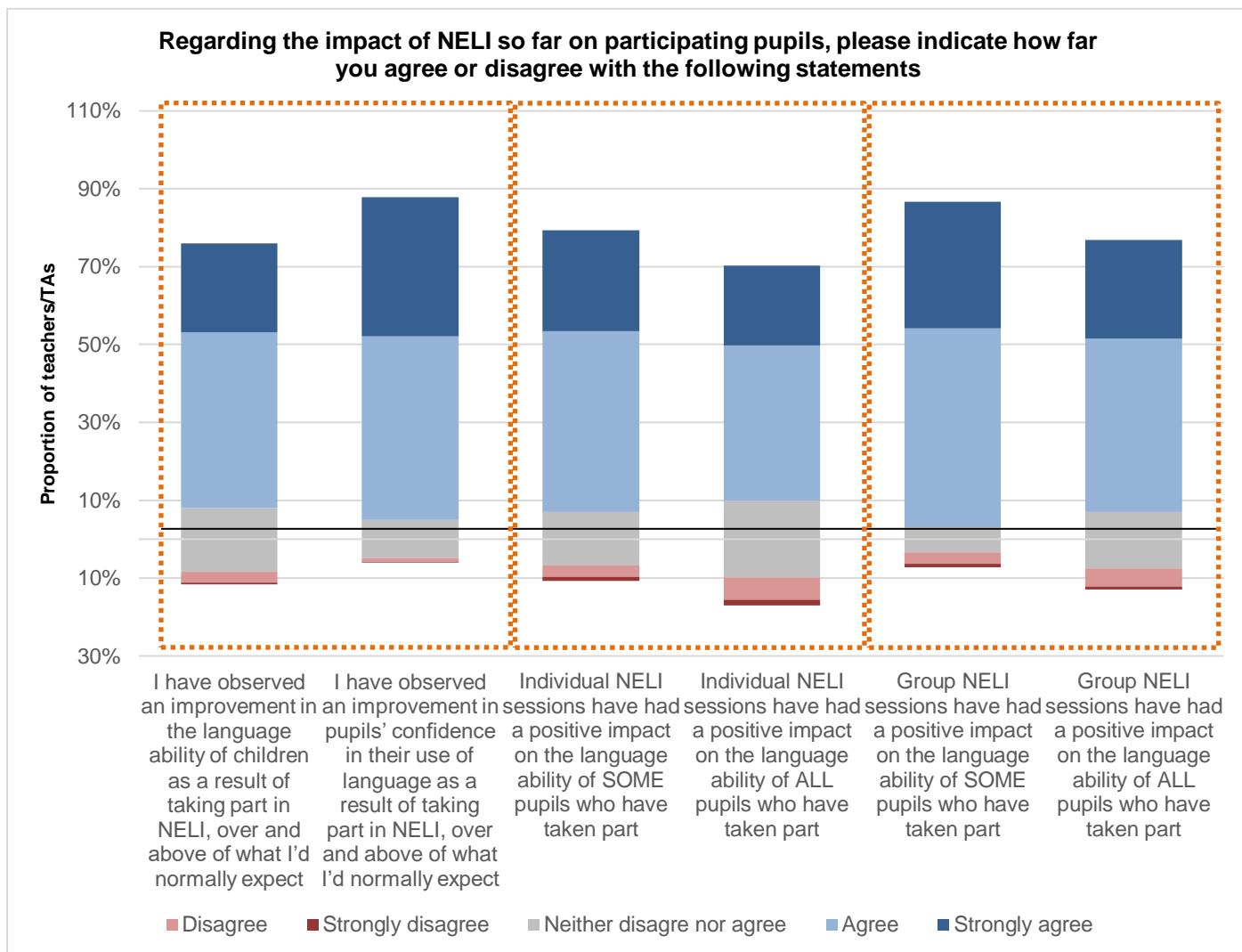
- speaking skills
- listening skills
- vocabulary
- confidence, including in relation to speaking in class and speaking to adults
- engagement and participation
- comprehension and understanding.

Figure 37. Only a small proportion of those surveyed (22 out of 706; 3%) did not feel they had observed improvement in the language ability of children taking part in NELI (above and beyond what would be expected over the course of the academic year). Some teachers and TAs surveyed in June–July 2021 felt it was too early to assess the impact of NELI on pupils' language ability (66 out of 706; 9%) and confidence (37 out of 706; 5%) (for a summary of responses including 'too early to tell' see Table A10 in Appendix F), reflecting the fact that many schools did not complete delivery to Cohort 1 pupils in the 2020–21 academic year.

Interviewees from case study schools commented positively on the impact of NELI on participating pupils, highlighting the impact of NELI on participating pupils':

- speaking skills
- listening skills
- vocabulary
- confidence, including in relation to speaking in class and speaking to adults
- engagement and participation
- comprehension and understanding.

Figure 37: Perceived impact of NELI on pupils' language ability and confidence, survey of school staff June–July 2021



**Note:** responses from **n = 706** teachers and TAs surveyed in June–July 2021. Responses do not sum to 100% because some responses ('too early to tell' and 'don't know') are omitted from the chart.

The quotations below from interviewees from case study schools describe the perceived impact on participating pupils' confidence as well as their language abilities.

'I had to prompt them at the beginning – if I asked a question it was very much one-word answers at the start. Now they'll put their hands up. They're now putting them into sentences, pretty much grammatically correct. I noticed the difference quite quickly – a couple of weeks in [...] Even the routine of putting hands up and valuing what each other are saying – even that has improved' (*Teacher from a case study school, interviewed June–July 2021*).

'I was just doing an individual session with the narrative today and I've just been looking back on what they've done when we first started and I was lucky to get a word or a phrase out of them for each picture and today I had full sentences and the story made sense and they might have needed a little bit of prompting, but compared to where they started, it was just amazing' (*Teacher from a case study school, interviewed October–December 2021*).

'Two children wouldn't even answer the register but now they're speaking in full sentences' (*Teacher from a case study school, interviewed June–July 2021*).

One interviewee from a case study school observed that pupils participating in NELI in their school had not made as much progress as they had hoped. This interviewee did note that their school was less than halfway through delivering the programme and that it might be too soon to observe an impact. Another interviewee also felt it was too soon to comment on progress. One member of staff from a case study school commented that it was difficult to assess the impact of NELI because pupils would have improved even without the intervention.

A small number of interviewees from case study schools discussed the impact of the school delivering NELI on the wider cohort of pupils (i.e., including those not participating in the programme). One interviewee felt it had a beneficial impact on the wider cohort, although this effect was small. Another interviewee felt the programme had a negative effect on non-participating pupils because the TA spent less time in the classroom.

**Not all pupils are perceived to benefit from NELI to the same extent.**

For both individual and group sessions, the proportion of school staff who agreed that NELI had a positive impact on the language ability of all pupils was lower for **all** pupils than for **some** pupils ([Error! Reference source not found.](#) see Interviewees from case study schools commented positively on the impact of NELI on participating pupils, highlighting the impact of NELI on participating pupils':

- speaking skills
- listening skills
- vocabulary
- confidence, including in relation to speaking in class and speaking to adults
- engagement and participation
- comprehension and understanding.

Figure 37), indicating a perception that not all pupils participating in NELI benefitted from the programme to the same degree. Some interviewees from case study schools discussed differential progress across the NELI cohort in their school. In one case study school that had delivered NELI sessions remotely during lockdown, some pupils made less progress because of low attendance. An interviewee from another case study school observed that the impact of NELI was less pronounced for pupils whose language abilities had been higher to begin with, some of whom they had not expected to be identified by LanguageScreen as in need of the intervention.

**The impact of NELI on pupils' language abilities is perceived to be slightly greater for group sessions compared to individual sessions.**

As shown in Interviewees from case study schools commented positively on the impact of NELI on participating pupils, highlighting the impact of NELI on participating pupils':

- speaking skills
- listening skills
- vocabulary
- confidence, including in relation to speaking in class and speaking to adults
- engagement and participation
- comprehension and understanding.

Figure 37, the impact of NELI on pupils' language abilities was perceived to be higher for group sessions compared to individual sessions. Over eight in ten (591 out of 706; 84%) school staff surveyed felt that group NELI sessions had a positive impact on the language ability of at least some of the pupils, compared to 72% (511 out of 706) for the individual sessions.

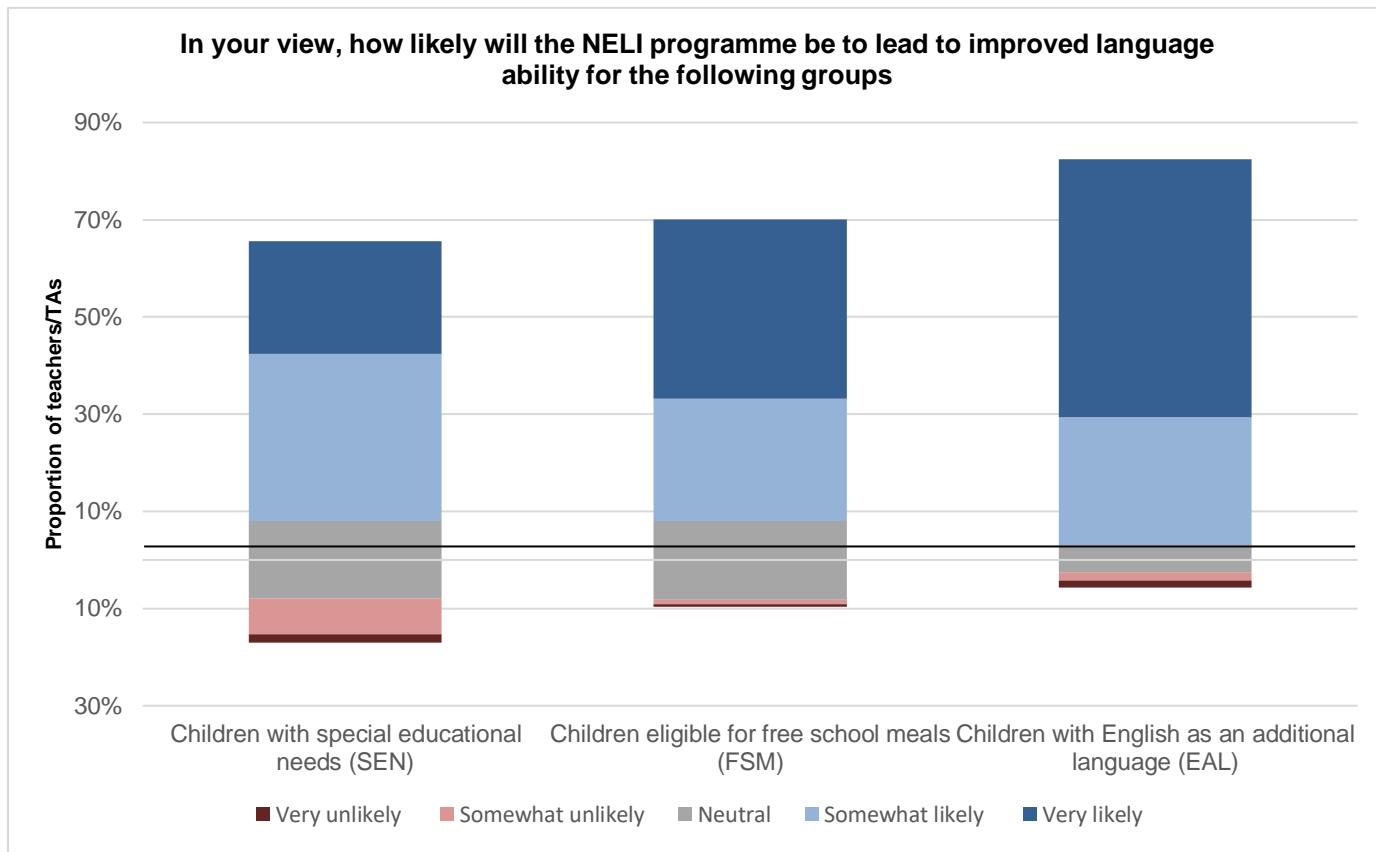
**School staff highlight the value of NELI for EAL, SEN and FSM pupils, but some believe SEN pupils may see less progress than others.**

Most teachers and TAs surveyed in June–July 2021 thought that participating in NELI would improve the language abilities of children with SEN (407 out of 706 or 58% said an improvement in language ability was very or somewhat likely for this group), EAL (561 out of 706; 79%), as well as those eligible for FSM (438 out of 706; 62%) (Figure 39). Interviewees from case study schools highlighted the impact of NELI on EAL pupils, with one interviewee commenting that working one-to-one and in small groups was particularly beneficial for EAL pupils.

The perceived or expected impact of NELI was somewhat lower for SEN pupils (Error! Reference source not found.). Almost one in ten (64 out of 706; 9%) of teachers and TAs surveyed thought it was unlikely (very or somewhat unlikely) that NELI would lead to improvements in language ability for children with SEN compared to 3% (22 out of 706) for EAL pupils and 2% (11 out of 706) for FSM pupils. One interviewee from a case study school observed that, in their school, SEN pupils had made less progress than others because of disruption caused by behavioural problems. However, another interviewee emphasised the positive impact of NELI on SEN pupils relative to not participating in the programme:

*'The opportunity [to] work in a smaller group in a quiet area, has helped special needs children. They are participating more than they would do in the classroom' (Teacher from a case study school, interviewed June–July 2021).*

Figure 38: Expected impact of NELI on the language ability of EAL, FSM and SEN pupils, survey of school staff June–July 2021



**Note:** responses from  $n = 706$  teachers and TAs surveyed in June–July 2021. Responses do not sum to 100% because some responses ('too early to tell' and 'don't know') are omitted from the chart.

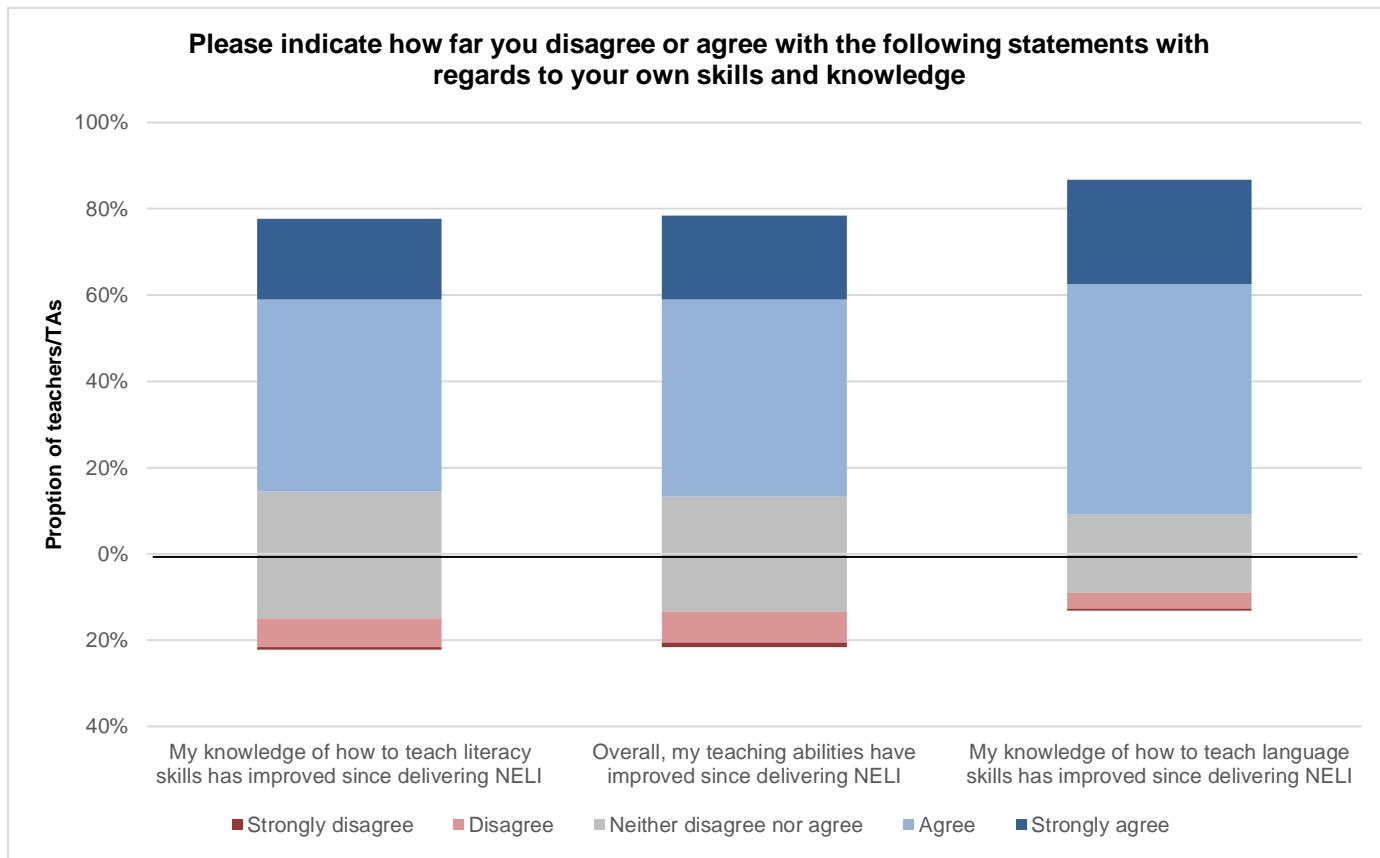
### 6.3 What is the perceived impact of NELI with regard to TAs/teacher literacy skills and knowledge based on teachers' and TAs' views? (RQ 3.3)

#### **NELI is perceived to benefit staff involved in delivering the programme, particularly TAs.**

Teachers and TAs surveyed in June–July 2021 were asked how far delivering NELI had improved their own skills and knowledge (Figure 39 and Figure 40). Around three-quarters (537 out of 706; 76%) of those surveyed agreed (or strongly agreed) that their knowledge of how to teach language skills had improved since delivering NELI. This was higher than the proportion who agreed (or strongly agreed) that their knowledge of how to teach literacy skills had improved since delivering NELI (431 out of 706; 61%). Around two-thirds of teachers and TAs surveyed (449 out of 706; 64%) agreed that their overall teaching abilities had improved since delivering NELI. In all of these respects, the reported impact of NELI on staff was greater for TAs than for Reception teachers, as shown in Figure 40.

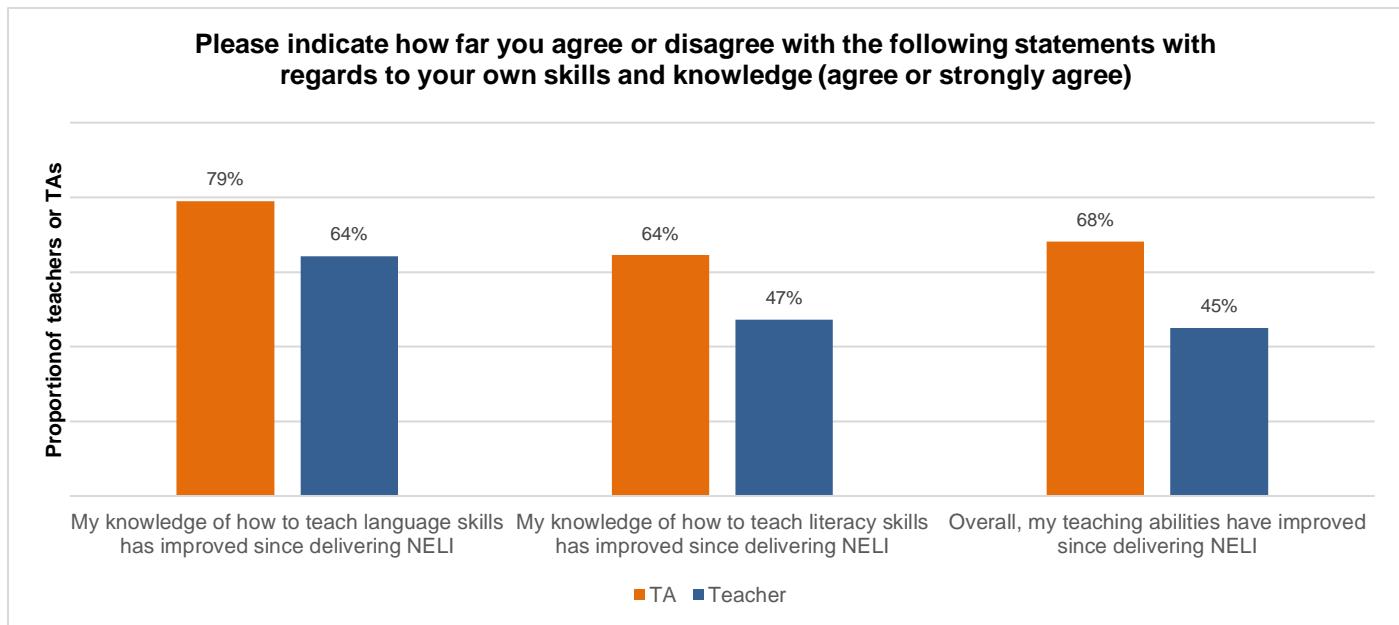
Interviewees from case study schools commented on what they felt they had learned from delivering NELI so far. Interviewees talked about how they had a better understanding of the importance of language in the Early Years and how much time children need to learn new vocabulary. Another learning identified by teachers and TAs was the importance of repetition for teaching language skills. Other aspects of knowledge and skill highlighted by interviewees were identifying children with language delays and effectively asking questions.

Figure 39: Perceived impact of NELI on the skills and knowledge of school staff, survey of school staff June–July 2021



**Note:** responses from **n = 706** school staff surveyed in June–July 2021

Figure 40: Perceived impact of NELI on the skills and knowledge of teachers and TAs (proportion agree or strongly agree), survey of school staff June–July 2021



**Note:** responses from **n = 566** TAs and **n = 140** teachers surveyed in June–July 2021

Interviewees from case study schools commented on what they felt they heard had learned from delivering NELI so far. Interviewees talked about how they had a better understanding of the importance of language in the Early Years and

how much time children need to learn new vocabulary. Another learning identified by teachers and TAs was the importance of repetition for teaching language skills. Other aspects of knowledge and skill highlighted by interviewees were identifying children with language delays and effectively asking questions.

Interviewees from case study schools described how the knowledge and skills learned delivering NELI would have broader applicability in their role (i.e., outside delivering the programme). Some interviewees commented that delivering NELI had made them more conscious of the language they use with children. Another interviewee talked about taking away from NELI the importance of spending more time introducing topics with their class and using visual aids such as pictures:

'We spent a lot longer with the whole class before we start a topic making sure they actually understood what we were talking about and what these words mean and giving them pictures so that they could see what we mean by that' (*Teacher from a case study school, interviewed October–December 2021*).

## 7 Sustainability of NELI

This section relates to the sustainability of NELI as an intervention delivered at scale across England. It presents data on whether schools intend to deliver NELI to future cohorts of Reception pupils and the barriers and enablers that affect decision-making. The research question *Do schools continue to deliver NELI in the academic year starting September 2021? (RQ 5.1)* is covered earlier in this report in relation to the extended delivery plan. Delivery to the new Cohort of Reception pupils (as opposed to intended delivery) in the 2021–22 academic year will be covered in the forthcoming report for the second year of the evaluation.

### 7.1 Sustainability of NELI: key lessons

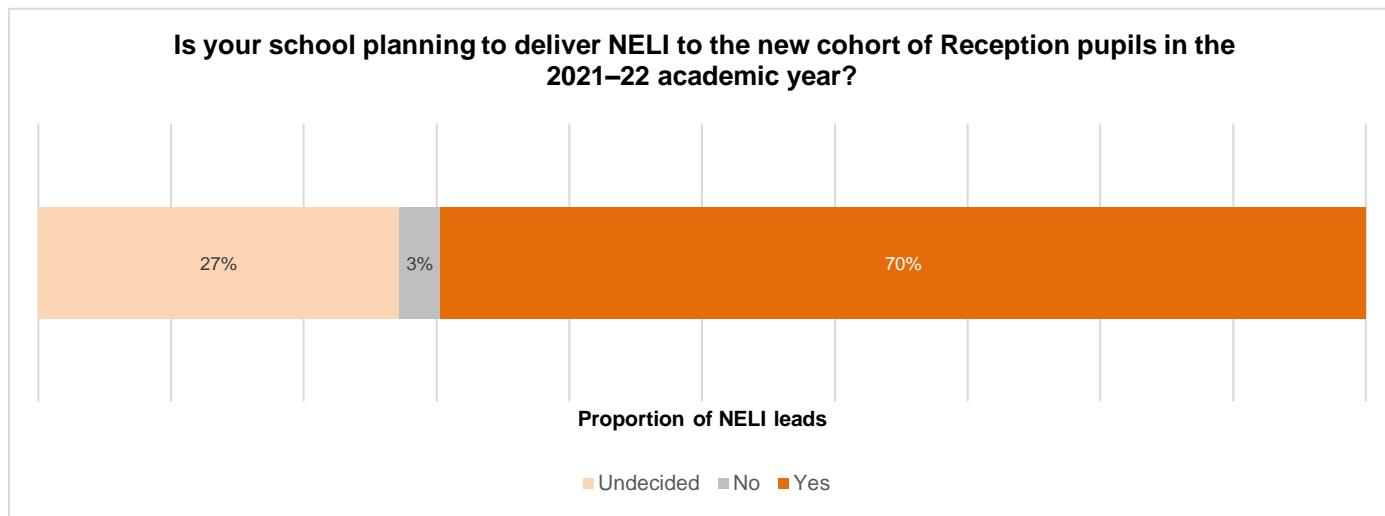
- **Most schools intended to continue with NELI delivery to Reception pupils in the 2021–22 academic year.** This indicates that most schools feel well-equipped to continue delivery, despite ongoing challenges associated with Covid-19.
- Schools who signed up to deliver NELI in the 2020–21 academic year faced time-limited barriers to sustained delivery linked to Covid-19. Some schools were unsure about continuing with delivery, at least in the immediate term, because they had not completed delivery to the initial cohort of pupils participating in the programme.
- Most barriers to sustained delivery related to school capacity and financial and practical resources (e.g., staff time and having a suitable space to deliver the intervention) rather than the NELI programme or support available (training, resource packs, LanguageScreen, ongoing support with delivery). However, there was some suggestion that schools' decision-making would be dependent on whether funding is made available for future years of NELI delivery.

### 7.2 Do schools intend to deliver NELI to the new cohort of Reception pupils in the academic year starting September 2021? (RQ 5.2)

**At the end of the 2020–21 academic year, most schools planned to deliver NELI to the new cohort of Reception pupils in the 2021–22 academic year.**

NELI leads surveyed in June–July 2021 were asked whether their school was planning to deliver NELI to the new cohort of Reception pupils in the 2021–22 academic year (Cohort 2 pupils). Only a small minority of NELI leads (19 out of 604; 3%) said their school was not planning to deliver NELI to the new cohort of Reception pupils (Figure 41). Almost three-quarters of NELI leads surveyed (421 out of 604; 70%) said their school planned to do so. However, around a quarter (164 out of 604; 27%) of NELI leads indicated that their school was undecided about delivering NELI to Cohort 2 pupils.

Figure 41: Intention to deliver NELI to Cohort 2 pupils in the 2021–22 academic year, survey of school staff June–July 2021



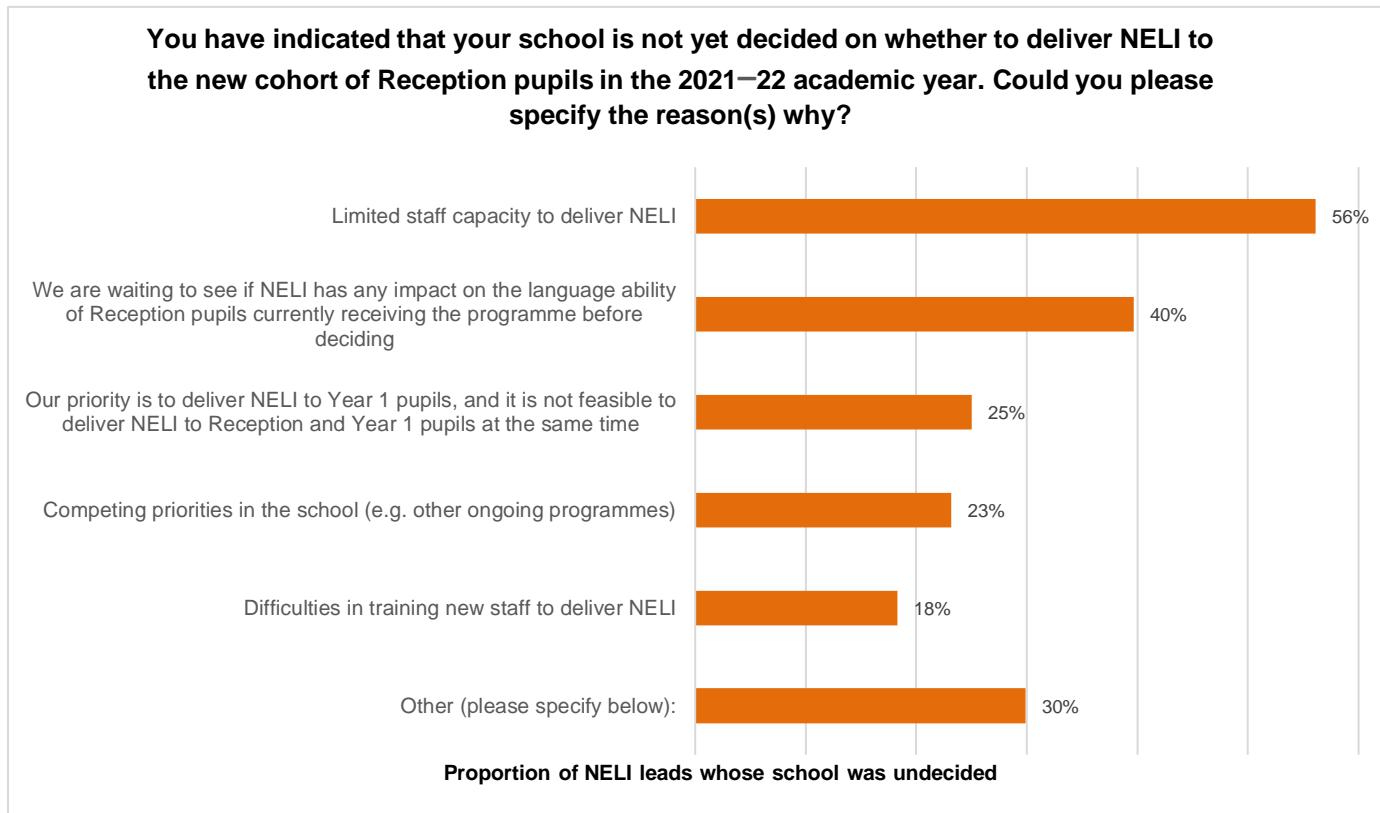
Note: responses from  $n = 604$  NELI leads surveyed in June–July 2021

## 7.3 What are barriers and facilitators to the delivery of NELI to future cohorts of Reception children? (RQ 5.4)

### Delays with NELI delivery for Cohort 1 pupils made it more difficult for schools to decide about delivering NELI to Cohort 2 pupils.

NELI leads from schools who were undecided about delivering NELI to the incoming cohort of Reception pupils in 2021–22, or who had decided not to, were asked in the survey to explain why this was (Figure 42). The most common factor selected by survey participants was limited staff capacity to deliver NELI, which was selected by just over half (92 out of 164; 56%) of NELI leads from schools who were undecided.<sup>13</sup> Some NELI leads (30 out of 164; 18%) highlighted difficulties in training new staff to deliver NELI, which may indicate concerns about the school's ability to continue with NELI should key members of staff leave. Echoing barriers to delivering NELI discussed elsewhere in this report, under 'other' some NELI leads mentioned concerns about finding suitable space in school to deliver NELI sessions, and this was also mentioned by an interviewee from a case study school.

Figure 42: Reasons for being undecided about delivering NELI to a new cohort of Reception pupils in the 2021–22 academic year, survey of school staff June–July 2021



**Note:** responses from  $n = 164$  NELI leads surveyed in June–July 2021

Four in ten (65 out of 164; 40%) NELI leads surveyed whose school was undecided about delivering NELI to Reception pupils in 2021–22 indicated that they were waiting to assess the impact of NELI on the current cohort of Reception pupils before deciding. A quarter (41 out of 164; 25%) of NELI leads who took part in the survey in June–July 2021 were unsure

<sup>13</sup> Reasons for deciding not to deliver NELI to Cohort 2 pupils are not charted due to the small sample size ( $n = 19$ ).

about delivering NELI to a new cohort of Reception pupils because of difficulties delivering the programme to two cohorts of pupils simultaneously. In the words of one survey participant:

*'Small cohort starting [four children] in September. Language Screen/teacher observations will determine whether or not new EYFS pupils would benefit from NELI vs. continuing with current group to complete the full 20 weeks. Have not got the staff/space to do both' (Teacher, surveyed June–July 2021).*

In some respects, decision-making about continuing to deliver NELI was shaped by factors that were unique, or at least particularly pronounced, for schools who signed up to deliver the programme in the 2020–21 academic year. Delays associated with Covid-19 meant that not only had most schools not completed delivery to Cohort 1 pupils by the end of the year, but many were faced with the prospect of delivering NELI to two cohorts in the same academic year. Schools' decision making may differ in future years if delivery is able to progress with greater speed.

#### 7.4 To what extent do schools feel equipped to continue delivering NELI to new Reception cohorts? (RQ 5.3) What resources and support are needed to support schools to deliver NELI to future cohorts of Reception children? (RQ 5.5)

**Some level of continued funding may be necessary to enable schools to continue with NELI, even if they are already set up to deliver the programme.**

Schools who signed up to deliver NELI in the 2020–21 academic year should have everything they need to continue with delivery, although over time they may need additional resources (e.g., replacement NELI packs or components of NELI packs, help with queries, continued access to the online training for new staff members). Under 'other' (see Figure 42) some school staff mentioned the availability of funding as a factor affecting their ability to continue to deliver NELI in the 2021–22 academic year and beyond. Aside from financial support, however, challenges faced by schools in sustaining NELI delivery mostly relate to school resources (staff time, commitment and enthusiasm of staff, quiet space in school to deliver NELI sessions) rather than the NELI intervention or the way it is implemented. The fact that staff turnover is a concern for some schools from the perspective of long-term delivery suggests that continued access to NELI training may be important.

# Conclusions

This section summarises the main findings and conclusions from this study. Key conclusions from the first year of the NELI scale-up evaluation are shown in Table 8. The section then reflects on evidence to support the logic model (Section 8.1) and implications and recommendations for NELI and other education interventions (Section 8.2).

## 8.1 Key conclusions

Table 9: Key conclusions

| Key conclusions  |
|--|
| <b>1 School recruitment and engagement:</b> There is a high level of interest from schools in delivering NELI as a means of supporting children with poor language skills, an issue exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.  |
| <b>2 Scale-up approach and processes in a Covid-affected environment:</b> Despite the speed and scale at which NELI was rolled out and the fact that it occurred in a Covid-affected environment, delivery largely progressed as intended and as described in the logic model. |
| <b>3 Fidelity of delivery:</b> Delivering NELI training online rather than face-to-face worked well: most school staff felt well prepared to deliver NELI after completing the training.   |
| <b>4 Fidelity of delivery:</b> Pupils selected to take part in NELI were generally regarded as suitable by school staff for the intervention.  |
| <b>5 Fidelity of delivery:</b> Delivery of NELI in schools was delayed due to Covid-19; most schools who signed up to deliver NELI in 2020–21 did not complete delivery within the academic year as originally intended.   |
| <b>6 Fidelity of delivery:</b> Schools were encouraged to continue NELI delivery in the 2021–22 academic year when pupils were in Year 1. Not all schools did so, but those that did regarded this as beneficial for pupils' confidence and language abilities.                |
| <b>7 Fidelity of delivery:</b> NELI individual and group sessions were delivered with a high degree of fidelity.   |
| <b>8 Fidelity of delivery:</b> School staff generally felt well supported in delivering NELI.  |
| <b>9 Perceived programme impacts:</b> Most teachers and TAs involved in delivering NELI felt the programme had a positive impact on pupils' confidence and language abilities.   |
| <b>10 Sustainability of NELI:</b> Most NELI leads indicated that their school would deliver NELI to the new cohort of Reception pupils in 2021–22, indicating that most schools feel well equipped to continue delivery.   |

## 8.2 Implications and recommendations

Key findings from the evaluation and corresponding implications/recommendations for future delivery of NELI and other educational interventions are presented in

Table 10. Key findings are structured according to the five topic areas for this evaluation.

Table 10: Key findings and implications/recommendations

| Topic area                        | Evaluation finding   | Implications and recommendations for scale-up   |
|-----------------------------------|--|---|
| School recruitment and engagement | The process of recruiting schools to deliver NELI in the 2020–21 academic year achieved the desired outcomes, but the speed and scale of the process created challenges for delivery partners. Cold calling schools was effective but resource intensive; it was often difficult for the DfE engagement team to bypass gatekeepers to speak to the right member(s) of school staff. Engaging with multi-academy trusts (MATs) was felt to be an effective recruitment strategy and a means of reaching schools with a higher proportion of FSM pupils.   | Recruiting schools to participate in NELI (or other education interventions) might benefit from reduced reliance on cold calling, placing greater emphasis on tapping into existing networks, facilitating information sharing between school staff rather than accessing schools via gatekeepers (receptionists). In cases where a cold-calling approach is taken, endorsement from the relevant funder(s)/authorities is important to bypass gatekeepers and reach the right staff members in schools.  |
|                                   | Conducting recruitment at the beginning of the academic year made recruitment more challenging because this was a busy time for schools, and some had already signed up to deliver other Early Years language programmes.  | The optimum recruitment window for NELI (and other education interventions) is likely to be during the spring/summer of the previous academic year.   |
| Fidelity within recruited schools | Feedback from schools and delivery partners indicates that this online training worked well. Most staff who participated in the training felt they had a good understanding of the purpose of NELI and how to deliver the programme. School staff commented favourably on the ease of use of the FutureLearn platform, and valued being able to stop and start the training as desired. A key barrier in relation to staff undertaking the online training was a lack of time, particularly if staff were not allowed to complete the training during working hours. Some school staff felt there was a lack of clarity on the time commitment required to undertake the online NELI training. Participation in the training was lower for teachers compared to TAs. | The online NELI training provides a promising model for the provision of training for education interventions delivered at scale. However, whilst self-reported data on participation in the online training and perceived usefulness is encouraging, this evaluation does not compare online and face-to-face provision, so it is not possible to draw conclusions about their relative effectiveness. To maximise engagement and participation, online training should be concise and able to be completed in multiple sittings; the duration of training should be clearly communicated. |
|                                   | Due to delays associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, schools were encouraged to continue delivering NELI to Cohort 1 pupils in 2021–22 when they were in Year 1. Around half of schools did so, and those who did felt this was useful in improving pupils' confidence and language abilities.   | Extending the delivery timeline for education interventions in exceptional circumstances (e.g., continued impact of Covid-19 or future pandemics) may still be beneficial for pupils, even if it departs from the intended delivery model.  |
|                                   | Part 2 of NELI, which focuses on phonics, is intended to consolidate pupils' prior knowledge rather than to introduce new information, but this was not always well understood by school staff, some of whom felt this aspect of NELI was less relevant to Reception pupils, particularly pupils at the end of their Reception year (or older).  | Communication could be strengthened around the rationale and purpose of including phonics in Part 2 of NELI.  |
|                                   | Schools' fidelity of NELI delivery was high in terms of group size and the number of individual and group NELI sessions per pupil per week. School staff saw the value in both individual and group NELI sessions, seeing them as complementary.   | This format (combination of group and individual sessions) and schedule is a promising model for education interventions delivered at scale and can be effectively implemented despite the pressures on school staffing and resourcing.   |
|                                   | Sources of ongoing support for NELI delivery (the NELI Delivery Hub, NELI mentors, email and phone support) were rated highly by school staff who used them (although many chose not to). The NELI Delivery Hub was used primarily to find out information and ask questions rather than to interact with staff delivering NELI in other schools. However, school staff who had used the NELI Delivery Hub for   | Teams responsible for delivering education interventions at scale (including NELI) might consider how to facilitate 'horizontal' communication (i.e., communication between staff in different schools) orientated towards sharing experiences rather than accessing information and advice.  |

|   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
|   | this purpose found this peer communication very helpful.  |   |
| Perceived programme impacts                                     | Most teachers and TAs involved in delivering NELI felt the programme had a positive impact on pupils' language abilities. In addition to the impact on pupils' language abilities, school staff commented on the positive impact on children's confidence in their use of language. NELI was also widely perceived to have a positive effect on the professional development of school staff, particularly TAs.   | Education interventions may be adapted in exceptional circumstances (such as Covid-19) whilst still having a (perceived) impact on outcomes (for pupils and staff).   |
| Scale-up approach and processes in a Covid-affected environment | <p>The scale of delivery for the 2020–21 year was unknown at the beginning of the delivery period, and the cap on the number of schools who could sign up increased from 4,000 to 7,000. The large number of schools who signed up created some challenges for delivery partners, for instance a large number of information and support requests were received, and it was not possible for all schools to receive NELI packs before the online training was launched, as intended.</p> <p>Some delivery partners questioned the approach to extend the recruitment window to enable as many schools as possible to participate, because this made delivery more complex.</p>  | <p>At any time (i.e., not specific to operating in a Covid-affected environment), effective delivery of educational interventions at scale is facilitated by clarity and consistency in the number of schools/pupils to be targeted/reached, as well as clear timelines for delivery.</p> <p>Establishing clarity on these points early in the process is more difficult in exceptional circumstances such as Covid-19 (or a potential future pandemic) where there is greater urgency and need for the intervention.</p> <p>Recruitment targets should balance the need and demand for the intervention with practical constraints. There may be trade-offs between the scale of delivery (and therefore the number of schools/pupils who can benefit from the intervention) and the need to establish clear expectations and timelines at the start of the delivery period.</p> |
|   | Systems and processes in place for communication and data sharing across delivery partners were introduced rapidly and improvements are planned for future years of delivery. Delivery partners highlighted challenges relating to information management, compounded by the high volume of queries. Information relating to school registration and information and support queries had to be inputted manually rather than using automated processes, creating inefficiencies and increasing the risk of human error. To a large extent, these issues were a product of the compressed timeline for the NELI scale-up; improvements are planned for future delivery. NELI delivery at scale was aided by clear and effective communication between delivery partners. | Delivering education interventions at scale, particularly if multiple organisations are involved – requires clear communication and effective systems and processes for data management, but this requires sufficient time upfront for planning and implementation before the intervention is rolled out. This was challenging given the need to scale-up NELI at speed in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The NELI scale-up shows that it is possible to implement educational interventions at scale in challenging circumstances and demonstrates the need for agility and ongoing improvement to streamline and improve processes.  |
| Sustainability of NELI  | <p>Schools who signed up to deliver NELI in the 2020–21 academic year should have everything they need to continue with delivery, although over time they may need additional resources (e.g., replacement NELI packs or components of NELI packs, help with queries, continued access to the online training for new staff members). Some school staff mentioned the availability of funding as a factor affecting their ability to continue to deliver NELI. The fact that NELI is offered to schools for free (other than the staff time required to deliver the intervention) is a key motivating factor for schools.</p>   | Some level of continued support is likely to be necessary to enable schools to continue with NELI, even if they are already set up to deliver the programme. Some schools may need NELI resources such as training, LanguageScreen and ongoing support with delivery to continue to be free or subsidised to continue with delivery.  |
|   | Aside from funding, resources and support needed to sustain delivery are located at the school level, namely human resources (staff time) and a suitable  | General investment in education is needed to support the long-term delivery of NELI and other education interventions.  |

|  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
|  | space to deliver NELI sessions. A key barrier to the sustainability of NELI is insufficient staff time and capacity to deliver the programme.   | Delivery organisations should make the requirements for participating schools, particularly the time commitment involved, clear from the outset.             |
|  | The delivery of NELI in the 2020–21 academic year was exceptional because of the scale of disruption caused by Covid-19. In many respects, effective delivery of NELI may be easier for schools participating in the programme in future years, since hopefully the impact of Covid-19 (or other exceptional factors) will be less pronounced. At the same time, however, Covid-19 drove interest in the NELI programme and made it easier for some school staff to undertake the training. | Future research is required to understand if and how NELI delivery at scale differs in a school environment where the impact of Covid-19 is less pronounced. |

### 8.3 Future research and publications

In February 2021 the Department for Education (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 2021–22 school year. Funding was made available to schools who did not receive DfE-funded NELI resources in the first year of the scale-up in 2020–21, as well as enabling schools who signed up in Year 1 to continue to access these resources. In light of the new funding from DfE for schools delivering NELI in the 2021–22 academic year, the EEF commissioned an extension of the evaluation conducted by RAND Europe. The evaluation for the second year of the NELI scale-up will focus on delivery of NELI in the 2021–22 academic year, prospects and challenges for the sustainability of NELI in the future, and wider lessons for implementing education interventions at scale.

The EEF has also commissioned NFER to complete an impact assessment of NELI delivered at scale in the 2021–22 school year (Worth et al, 2023).

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