

# **Talking Takes Off: A system-wide approach to prioritise children's speech, language and communication needs**

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## ABSTRACT

Background: ‘Talking Takes Off’ is a local government programme designed to improve speech, language and communication outcomes in the early years, as supported by a system-wide approach. The overall aims of this study were to assess the progress that the programme made in its first year, especially in relation to its integration with the wider practice and its impact on the various stakeholders.

Objectives:

- 1) To investigate whether the training and resources offered to the workforce were effectively integrated into practice during its first year.
- 2) To explore professionals’ and parents’ views and experiences of the programme regarding their prioritisation, knowledge and skills concerning speech, language and communication needs.

Methods: A mixed methods design was employed. A pre and post training survey was sent out to the workforce (n = 398), followed by a three month follow up survey (n = 54). Semi-structured interviews with strategic and political leaders (n = 4), early years practitioners (n=8), and parents (n = 6) were conducted and analysed using Thematic and Framework analysis.

Findings: A prioritisation of speech, language and communication development was demonstrated, as were enhanced levels of confidence and skills regarding the identification and support of needs.

Conclusion: The findings are promising and suggest that Talking Takes Off has started to make a positive impact on parents’ and professionals’ priorities, knowledge and skills. Moving forward, Talking Takes Off need to sustain a strong foundation for continuing to implement their system-wide approach, addressing speech, language and communication needs across their capture area.

**KEYWORDS:** System-wide approach, Community-Based Participatory Research, Communication development, Language outcomes, Community intervention, Child Development, Community health research, Europe

## Introduction

The acquisition of language is seen to rapidly advance within the first five years of life and is a core achievement of early childhood (1, 2). It is therefore paramount that both parents and practitioners are able to identify speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) as early as possible (3). According to the Government led Bercow report (2018) (4), over 1.4 million children and young people in the UK have SLCN, the negative effects of which have wider economic impacts, affecting educational attainment and mental wellbeing. Such evidence highlights a need for early intervention and targeted support moving forward, yet the Bercow report (2018) (4) also shows a lack of awareness and prioritisation of SLCN within both local and national strategies, which ought to be addressed through a strategy for system change. In line with this, Law et al. (2013) (5) advocate that SLCN and SLT services be re-examined within a public health context which considers community action, supportive environments, and the development of skills.

Furthermore, it is also important to consider speech, language and communication (SLC) development within a socioeconomic context (6). A broad collation of evidence demonstrates considerable variation in SLC development relative to socioeconomic status (SES) (7, 8, 9), where children growing up in areas where there are higher levels of socioeconomic deprivation and a poorer standard of housing are more likely to experience enhanced SLCN (10, 11). There is also an overrepresentation of SLCN amongst ethnic minority groups when factoring in socioeconomic disadvantage (12), and a higher prevalence of boys with SLNC than girls (11). Such statistics are certainly reflective of Luton - an ethnically diverse town in the UK with a higher than average prevalence of SLCN and socioeconomic deprivation when compared to the UK average (13). Moving forward, there is scope to make a difference in Luton, where, with the right support at the earliest stage, many of these children could avoid persistent, long term SLCN.

### *Talking Takes Off*

By 2028, the UK government aims to have halved the proportion of children not achieving expected levels of SLC development by the age of five (14). As part of this ambition, the Children's Trust Board supported the delivery of the Early Outcomes Fund, which is there to facilitate more cohesive and collaborative relationships between local services which support early SLC outcomes for children (14). After Luton Council secured funding from this Early

Outcomes Fund, Flying Start - Luton's 'pregnancy to five' strategy for supporting child development across Luton – were able to develop and deliver the Talking Takes Off (TTO) programme, which aims to support children in Luton who are performing lower than the national average for SLC skills. Aligned with the Children's Trust Board's agenda, TTO employed a system-wide approach, working with a range of Luton partners including political and strategic leaders, speech and language services, and children's centres. The TTO programme allows referrals to be made to health clinics and SLTs for children displaying SLCN, and also offers a range of tools, resources, training workshops and groups to parents and professionals which aim to support SLC development.

### *The Theory of Change*

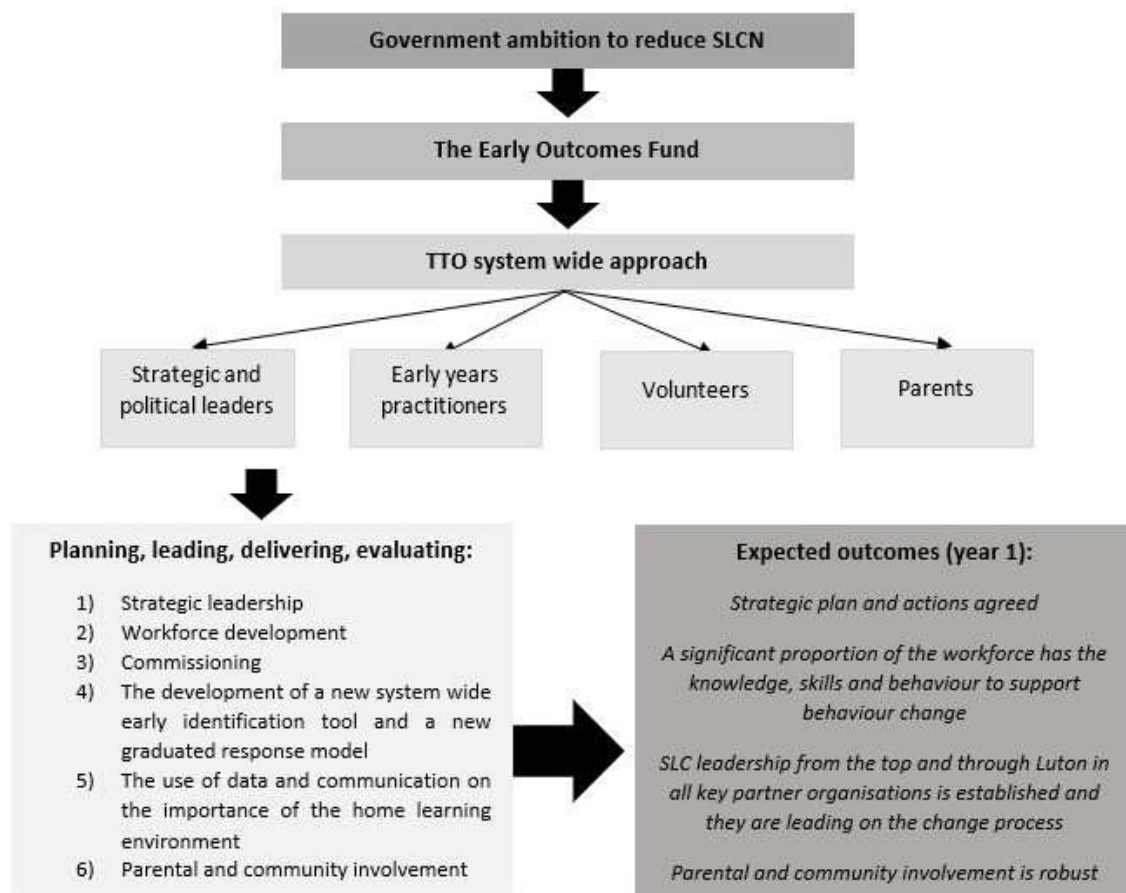
The fundamental basis of TTO's evaluation falls within the remit of community-based participatory research (CBPR), which seeks to generate and sustain social change through collaborative partnerships between researchers and community stakeholders (15). As such, a collaboration between Flying Start, the University of anonymous, and various Luton based stakeholders (including those mentioned) took place, in order to support TTO's overall goal of producing, and evaluating, a system-wide change in Luton. Concurrently, the Theory of Change is being used as a framework to plan, deliver and evaluate the overall impact of TTO, addressing the need for theoretical frameworks which provide evaluative targets in CBPR (16). More specifically, based on the Theory of Change, TTO have been able to map their long term goals, plotting their inputs, being the training and delivery of the programme, and their outputs, referring to the expected and actual outcomes for the first, second and third years of the programme in terms of; 1) professional and parent knowledge concerning SLCN, 2) their actions towards identifying and supporting these needs, and 3) overall improvements in the SLC development of children in Luton.

Progression towards these evaluative targets was then monitored through the Early Intervention Foundation's 'Speech, language and communication in the early years Maturity Matrix'; a tool specifically designed to support a system-wide approach. As part of this process, the involved researchers from the University of anonymous - which is situated in Luton and has maintained a collaborative relationship with Flying Stat since their formation - developed evaluative tools, discussed under the method, to assess the stakeholders' experiences of TTO during its first year, as well as their understanding of SLCN and how to support them.

*A system-wide approach*

As mentioned, various Luton based stakeholders were involved, as a means of ensuring that the importance of communication became a priority and shared responsibility across all services in Luton. Henceforward, anyone working directly or indirectly with families and their children were included in the system-wide approach. Universal and tailored training and resources were provided to the following, working top-down through: 1) the strategic and political leaders, who had a wider influence; 2) the early years practitioners, who were able to actually implement and assist the TTO programme through a ‘Train the Trainer’ model; 3) the volunteers, who were responsible for spreading the word of TTO and SLCN within the community and; 3) the parents, who received support and education through TTO.

**Figure 1: A whole systems approach towards supporting SLCN in Luton**



This article reports on the outcomes of TTO’s first year (figure 1); explored through surveys with the workforce, and interviews with strategic and political leaders, early years practitioners and parents.

## Method

### *Participants*

A pre and post training survey was sent out to various members across the workforce (n = 398), including managers and frontline staff from early years services, speech and language specialists, nursery workers, and social workers, followed by a three month follow up survey completed by a sample of the original workforce (n = 54). Three strategic leaders and one elected champion were interviewed (n = 4), and supplementary qualitative information was also gathered from early years practitioners who acted as ‘communication champions’ for a ‘Train the Trainer Model’ model (n=8), including; nursery managers (n=4), children centre managers (n=2), a preschool teacher (n= 1) and an early years advisor (n=1). Additionally, six mothers were interviewed (n = 6), from various ethnic backgrounds; English (n=2), Polish (n=1), Chinese (n=1), and Indian (n=2).

### *Measures*

#### *Pre and post training surveys with the workforce*

The training sessions offered to the workforce were designed around the Communication Trust’s Speech Language and Communication Framework (SLCF); a professional development tool used to assess the key skills needed to support SLC development and SLCN. This framework clearly sets out what is expected from the workforce at both a foundation and specialist level, and the training included looking at; what SLC development looks like, SLCN in the context of Luton, SLCN screening tools, SLCN referral pathways, how this links in with their services, the role of ‘communication champions’, and TTO resources. The evaluative pre and post survey was therefore mapped against this framework, and seven statements were devised encompassing the different components covered as part of the SLCF based training, assessing the participants’ understanding and awareness of SLCN, and their confidence in identifying and helping children with SLCN before and after the training. Each statement used a five point Likert scale ranging from one (not at all) to five (fully), and to evaluate whether the described changes in knowledge, skills and behaviours were sustained over time, the same participants were asked to rate the same seven statements three-months post training. This follow up survey also included open-ended questions addressing how useful the training had been and whether it had been used in practice.

### *Semi-structured interviews*

To form an understanding of how TTO may have changed the priority of SLCN at a strategic level, semi-structured interviews were conducted with strategic and political leaders. The questions were related to the training, the TTO model, the workplace and the promotion of TTO. Semi-structured interviews were also carried out with eight ‘communication champions’ from the workforce who received the training provided to all early years practitioners, as well as specific, further training regarding the ‘Train the Trainer Model’. A semi-structured interview guide was used covering topics relating to the impact of TTO in the workplace and how the resources and training had been used in practice. To explore whether TTO has made an impact on the home learning environment, parents who attended more than four TTO sessions were invited to take part in a short semi-structured interview to explore their views on the sessions, and the impact attending the group has made on their child’s SLC skills.

### *Statistical analysis*

For the workforce, pre and post training survey average scores per statement were calculated and compared. Scores ranged from one to five, with higher scores indicating advanced confidence levels and understanding. To determine whether the differences pre and post training were of statistical significance, Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were conducted using SPSS v22 software.

The interviews with the strategic and political leaders were analysed using Braun and Clarke’s (2010) recommended steps for Thematic Analysis, resulting in the following two key themes: 1) Usefulness of the TTO training; and 2) Raising the priority of SLCN. The interviews with the ‘communication champions’ were also analysed via Thematic Analysis, resulting in three key themes: 1) Impact of TTO; 2) Advocacy of TTO; and 3) Barriers to TTO. The interviews with the parents were transcribed and coded by the researcher using Framework Analysis. The following three themes were identified: 1) Impact on child development; 2) Impact on the home learning environment; and 3) Content and structure of the sessions.

## **Ethics**

The research study sought and obtained a favourable research ethics opinion from the University of anonymous Institute for Health Research Ethic committee (ref IHREC927) and the ethics panel committee at Luton Borough Council.

## **Findings**

### *The pre and post workforce training survey*

The mean scores, standard deviations (SD) and test results per statement are displayed in Table 1. The training survey was completed by 93% of the workforce and average scores per statement were calculated and compared before and after the training. The results illustrate that the aim of upskilling the workforce was successfully achieved, as the scores post training were significantly higher than before training for all statements.

Table 1: Average scores of the workforce before and after training (understanding and supporting speech, language and communication)

### *The follow up workforce training survey*

The mean score and standard deviation (SD) per statement is provided in Table 2. The follow up training survey was sent to 178 participants and completed by 54, meaning a response rate of 30.3%. The scores suggest that the increase of the workforces' competencies remained similarly high three-months post training. The results of the five further questions related to how the workforce had utilised the training in practice showed: 64.6% had used the learning in their work; 79% had shared the learning with colleagues; 86% recommended the training to others; and more than half (52%) had used the resources provided, such as the 'Early Years Toolkit'. The training also encouraged some of the workforce to become 'communication champions' and attend additional training, as they reported using the supplementary learning as guidance for planning and developing a TTO for communication group.

Table 2: Competencies of the workforce measured three months post-training

### *Interviews with strategic and political leaders*

#### *Usefulness of the TTO training*



The information concerning the importance of understanding the critical role that SLC plays in child development, and the impact delays or SLCN can have on a child's future was highly regarded by the champions. Hereafter, while the champions were aware of the importance of SLCN, the training was rated as “transformational” and “eye-opening”, and the role-play task, during which attendees experienced what it may be like to have SLC difficulties, was rated as particularly powerful with a long lasting impact:

*“I found it grounding to be sort of taken back to what it would feel like to have speech and language difficulties and communication issues. I think it was very important that key leaders across the organisations experienced that”.*

#### *Raising the priority of SLCN*

Collectively, the strategic and political leaders or ‘champions’ were fully on board with raising the priority of SLCN in Luton, which the strategic leaders saw as being part of the wider ambition to eradicate poverty in Luton. Although the interviews took place early on into the official ‘launch’ of TTO, it was evident that early communication and language development was on their agenda, as all provided evidence of promoting TTO and encouraging other operational leaders to attend the TTO universal training. Early communication and language development was not only prioritised within their organisations’ strategic plans but also linked with existing strategic plans; the head of children’s services, for example, ensures that TTO is referred to during strategic meetings, highlighting that it is now rooted in their way of thinking moving forward:

*“It’s certainly much more embedded in my thinking and therefore in my practices”.*

#### *Interviews with early years practitioners*

##### *Impact of TTO*

The impact of TTO in the workplace was predominantly evident in the raised confidence levels and feelings of empowerment expressed by the ‘communication champions’. Additionally, the training appeared to reaffirm the importance of SLC, increasing the workforces’ understanding of the developmental stages, and prioritisation of SLCN. In line with this, certain tools were mentioned as particularly useful when communicating with

parents and staff. Others noted that staff in their settings were now more likely to work with a child before referring them onto a SLT.

#### *Advocacy of TTO*

All champions mentioned actively promoting TTO; either encouraging their colleagues to attend the training or sharing their learning during staff meetings and information evenings. The champions reported confidence in delivering the training, having attended the ‘Train the Trainer training’, and had either already used, or intended to use, the materials provided to them. Conversely, some champions pointed out that a number of staff felt slightly unsure of how to use the screening tools and would have liked more guidance and practise in this area.

#### *Barriers to TTO*

The main barrier for TTO concerned parental involvement, as it was expressed that some parents view this domain to be the responsibility of the nursery. Champions also noted that parents do not acknowledge SLCN because of incorrect beliefs such as ‘my child will catch up’. Moreover, the high number of multi-lingual children in Luton was highlighted as a challenge, although they all noted that they felt supported by TTO when encouraging parents to speak in their native language.

#### *Interviews with parents*

##### *Impact on child development*

Five out of six mothers noted an improvement in their child’s speech as a direct result of TTO, predominantly attributing this to the sessions focus on the importance of talking. The mothers also noticed increased levels of confidence when their children talked to other children and adults, crediting the knowledgeable staff. The group size also meant the mothers were able to focus more attention on their children, providing them with an opportunity to really listen and talk. The structure of the sessions further helped their children with social skills, in addition to the included activities such as singing and reading:

*“We did a session here which was about music and how that can develop speech and actually I was really, really surprised with how that has worked with Lucas as well and the flow of the words has actually helped him a lot in his speech.”*

### *Impact on the home learning environment*

All six mothers reported improved skills, knowledge and/or behaviours for supporting SLCN at home as a result of TTO and three mothers said they felt more confident talking with their child moving forward. Moreover, a few mothers reported that their child's enjoyment of the activities included in the sessions, such as arts and crafts, were used as a discussion point for enhancing communication in the home. Additionally, each of the mothers reported using the games and songs they had learned during the sessions, further impacting their interactions with their children in a positive way. Encapsulating the above, another mother expressed the following:

*“There is a lot that I have learned from these sessions, so much. Just actually taking time, sitting down playing, and I do that anyway, but actually [to] do more of it, and as I say breaking things down for them in a childlike way, I wasn't used to that and simplifying words”.*

### *Content and structure of the sessions*

The mothers felt that the small group size gave them the opportunity to really talk and listen to their children, and the 'one- on-one' structure was very well received when compared to traditional 'stay and play' groups. One mother in particular was also very pleased that the staff were able to help with her other child, as she was consequently able to provide extra attention to her son. The mothers also noted that the social support element of the group was a benefit, as they enjoyed meeting other mothers. Furthermore, all six mothers stated that they liked the social aspect for their child, allowing them to interact with other children and adults.

## **Discussion**

Children and their families are significantly affected by SLCN (17), which are further exacerbated by socioeconomic and cultural differences (10, 11, 12), and shown to have wider economic impacts (4). As a means of targeting the widespread prevalence of SLCN, the Government led Becrow report (2018) (4) recommended the need for a system change, prioritising SLCN within local and national strategies. Addressing this need, this paper describes the first year outcomes of a programme (TTO) in Luton, UK, aimed at alleviating the burden of SLCN through a system-wide approach that worked top-down through strategic

and political leaders, early years practitioners, volunteers and parents. The evaluation of TTO's first year shows promising findings; over the first year, TTO have seen a strong willingness across the workforce to focus on the importance of speech, language and communication in the early years, at both the strategic and operational level. This therefore supports the Early Outcomes Fund's ambition to enhance collaborative relationships between local services as a means of supporting young children's SLC development (14).

Perhaps the early success of TTO can be attributed to the organisation that preceded, developed and implemented it, Flying Start, as they appear to have enabled an early integration of TTO within the local "ecology". As mentioned, Flying Start is Luton's 'Pregnancy to Five Strategy', a strategy which aimed to embed collaborative partnerships with all services for children and families (18). For this reason, TTO already received a boost from the previously established partnerships across Luton's early years workforce, where other local policy drivers have also been influential in pushing this concerted approach. Collectively, the positive outcomes of TTO's first year can be partly attributed to it fitting in with an already established agenda in Luton, therefore, demonstrating the need for both: 1) commitment across the board when establishing a system-wide approach in a community setting where it concerns SLCN; and 2) a specific, consistent 'programme' the workforce can rely on for training and resources to expand and develop their knowledge and skills.

Starting at the 'top' level, it appears that the strategic leaders have understood the importance of SLC as a result of TTO, successfully ensuring that this remain a priority in their plans and strategies moving forward. Following on from TTO's impact at a political and strategic level, the evaluation from the universal training shows significant improvements in the workforces' knowledge and skills, which was maintained three months post-training. As such, the TTO 'champion' model was also a success, offering additional capacity to spread the message across the wider workforce.

The feedback from the parents was also largely positive, indicating the importance of meaningful parental involvement when implementing a system-wide change for SLCN. More specifically, the findings demonstrate two major benefits of parental inclusion, in line with prior research advocating SLCN family-centred approaches that involve parents (19, 20). Firstly, in line with the Theory of Change, the findings suggest direct improvements in children's SLC skills, as parents felt better equipped and empowered to support their child's development through the knowledge, skills and behaviours they gained as a result of TTO.

Secondly, at a more strategic level, parental involvement in the development of resources has allowed TTO to implement a communication and marketing strategy which supports the importance of the home learning environment, allowing the promotion of key messages across the community. Moving forward, if TTO continue to listen to the views of Luton's diverse parental community, then they will be further equipped to develop resources in community languages. Parental engagement will also support TTO's ICAN Ambassador model of volunteers, who provide local families with key messages about the importance of SLC development in the early years.

### *Limitations*

There are several limitations worth noting regarding the sample size and measurement of long-term impacts. As mentioned, this article reports the year one outcomes of TTO, where the system-wide approach was first instigated and implemented through various training sessions provided to the workforce and parents. In line with this, it has been challenging to evaluate a 'system-wide change' when said 'system-wide change' is ongoing, and the long-term goals of TTO pertaining improved outcomes in SLCN are yet to be determined. Considering this is an ongoing process, the training and resources offered are continuously evolving and refining as TTO gains feedback from its trainees (as noted by some who described the materials provided to be in 'draft format'), thus the impact of specific elements of the training and resources are, again, hard to define. Concurrently, while the feedback presented in this article is largely positive, it is only reflective of a small number of strategic and political leaders, professionals from the workforce (i.e. 'communication champions') and parents. The feedback from parents regarding improvements in their children's overall SLC is particularly subjective, as this is based on opinion rather than the determined outcomes of a robustly measured, long-term observational study. As such, we will not be able to truly define the benefits and successes of TTO on SLCN through a system-wide approach until the programme has been fully integrated and validated for a significant period of time.

### *Conclusion*

The findings presented in this article suggest that TTO has started to make a positive impact on the home learning environment and parents' understanding of SLCN. Furthermore, all 'communication champions' appeared passionate about advocating the importance of SLC development in young children after the TTO training. Moving forward, the findings reported

on in this article have been instrumental in supporting TTO as they go into the second year of their system-wide approach. Hereafter, TTO are now working towards further aligning their services and developing a framework that will support commissioning going forward, allowing greater insight into the impact of their transformational change.

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Table 1: Average scores [of the workforce](#) before and after training (understanding and supporting speech, language and communication)

Statement addressing:	Mean score Before Training	Mean score After Training	Significant difference
Understanding of key terms.	3.47 (.72)	4.68 (.48)	Z=-16.68 P<.001
Understanding of typical stages in development.	3.31 (.79)	4.58 (.52)	Z= -16.59 P<.001
Ability to identify when a child is not developing as expected.	3.46 (.82)	4.50 (.56)	Z=-15.63 P<.001
Awareness of positive strategies to support development.	3.39 (.85)	4.55(.53)	Z= -15.80 P<.001
Understanding of the importance of parents and carers.	4.06 (.79)	4.83 (.37)	Z=-14.29 P<.001
Confidence identifying when child is not developing as expected.	3.41 (.84)	4.48 (.58)	Z=-15.75 P <.001
Confidence using and promoting positive strategies to support development.	3.34 (.88)	4.45 (.56)	Z=-15.55 P<.001

Table 2: Competencies of the workforce measured three months post-training

<b>Statement addressing:</b>	<b>Mean score After Training</b>	<b>3 month follow up</b>
Understanding of key terms.	4.68 (.48)	4.44 (.54)
Understanding of typical stages in development.	4.58 (.52)	4.28 (.57)
Ability to identify when a child is not developing as expected.	4.50 (.56)	4.30 (.58)
Awareness of positive strategies to support development.	4.55(.53)	4.31 (.68)
Understanding of the importance of parents and carers.	4.83 (.37)	4.71 (.47)
Confidence identifying when child is not developing as expected.	4.48 (.58)	4.26 (.72)
Confidence using and promoting positive strategies to support development.	4.45 (.56)	4.28 (.70)