

**Decision Session – Executive Member for  
Children, Young People and Education**

**8 November 2022**

Report of the Assistant Director, Education and Skills

**Update on the progress of Early Talk for York**

**Summary**

1. Early Talk for York continues to make good progress and is showing signs of closing the disadvantaged gap it set out to tackle. This report asks the Executive Member to note the outcomes of Early Talk for York and to support the full rollout of the Early Talk for York approach.

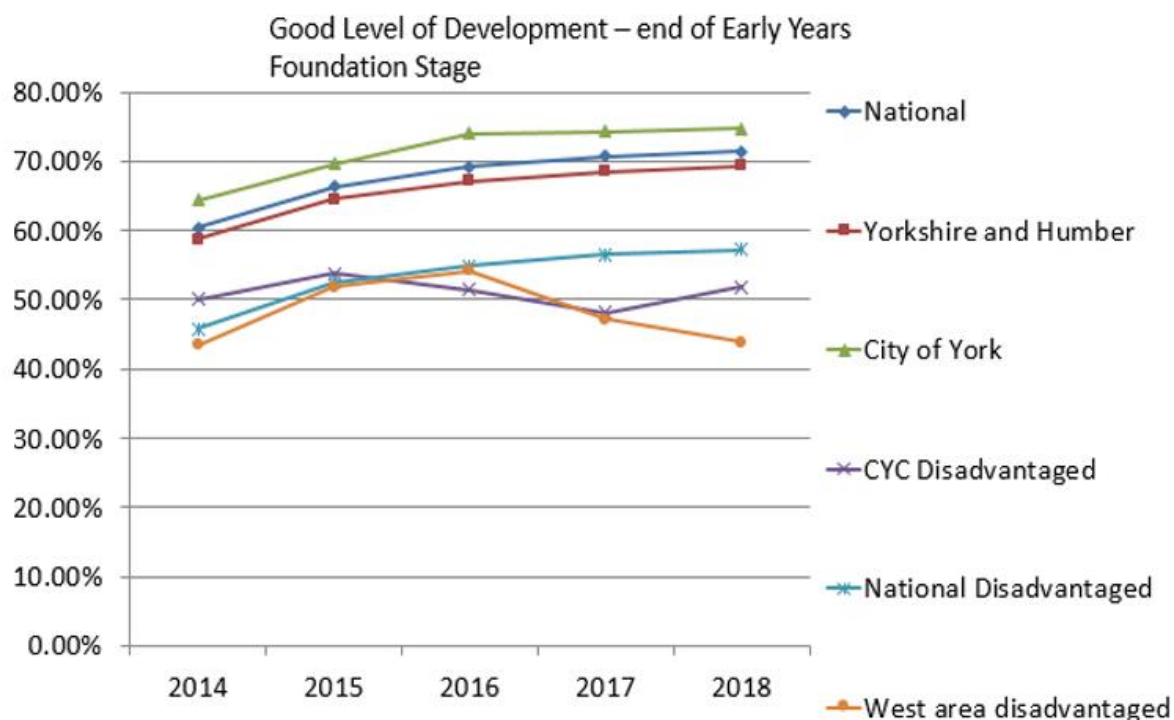
**Recommendations**

2. The Executive Member is asked to consider:
  - 1) To support the full rollout of Early Talk for York across the city. This is the recommended option.

Reason: Early Talk for York is demonstrating impact on improving children's outcomes in line with the original Theory of Change. Of particular note is that children's outcomes have continued to improve in the Early Talk for York area during the pandemic window whilst those in other areas have declined. This is particularly so for those children who are disadvantaged. As this work has demonstrated Early Talk for York appears to be an effective way of improving outcomes, particularly for the disadvantaged cohort, a roll out across the city is recommended so more children can benefit from this approach.

**Background**

3. York has a significant and longstanding gap in outcomes between disadvantaged children and their non-disadvantaged peers. This gap starts at age 5 and, in 2017, the gap at age 5 – as defined by a Good Level of Development - was the largest of any local authority area in England. This data is shown in the graph below.



Early Talk for York aims to improve the communication and language outcomes for children aged 0 – 5 years. Good communication skills at five years of age are strongly associated with a range of positive whole of life outcomes; including literacy levels, employment, mental and physical health and wellbeing. Early communication and language development is particularly important in the ambition to tackle outcome inequalities.

Early Talk for York set out with three headline strands of focus:

1. Strategy and commissioning – uniting the early years sector around a common outcome to develop better partnerships, strategic decision making and commissioning arrangements.
2. Workforce development – ensuring those working with children and families have the knowledge, skills and tools to provide the right level of support at the right time.
3. Communications and community – sharing Early Talk for York with parents and carers so they could support the aims of the project in the home learning environment.

Activity undertaken through Early Talk for York so far has included:

- training practitioners through an accredited training programme and supporting them to cascade the training.
- using a standardised tool for assessment and diagnosis of needs.
- ongoing support from other professionals, including speech and language therapists.
- working in partnership with parents and carers.
- developing a strengths-based communications campaign.

A pilot area was set up in 2019 to investigate the feasibility and impact of the Early Talk for York approach. Partners from across the programme worked together to evaluate Early Talk for York using a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods- including a school-based assessment for children aged five years - against an evaluation schedule. A 'control group' of schools was matched as closely as feasible against the Early Talk for York group by number of pupils, proportions of pupils eligible for free school meals and previous outcomes.

Through the process of evaluation, the group identified six 'active ingredients'; elements that are fundamental to the success of the approach:

1. A relentless focus on speech, language and communication as a top priority that impacts on whole of life outcomes.
2. Investment in high quality training that is sustained and quality assured.
3. Supported cascading of training to influence the development of whole teams.
4. Universal screening of children's needs using a standardised tool.
5. Ongoing support of specialists who are proactive in responding to emerging needs.
6. Peer and social support and accountability on delivering the elements above, including working in partnership with parents/carers.

Currently, a total of 29 schools, settings and childminders across the city are involved in the full Early Talk for York approach. These organisations between them serve a total of approximately 1200 children aged 2 – 5 years and many also serve more children aged 0 – 2 years. More than

half of these settings have now achieved 'Communication Friendly Setting status' meaning that their whole staff team have taken part in accredited, quality assured training and that their practice and provision has been independently audited. The majority of the others are on track to achieve this during the early part of 2022 – 23. These schools and settings have worked tirelessly on the Early Talk for York approach using the core offer as a starting point from which they develop models and ways of working that suit their context. For example, one setting has employed a member of their team to lead on this work across their team, whilst another is exploring a model that would allow a team member to be spending more time working directly with parents and carers on supporting children's speech language and communication at home.

91 (76%) schools and group-based settings in York are now using the standardised screening tool to universally screen children (the first step of Early Talk for York) with many childminders also doing the same via a library lending service. These settings serve at least 3500 children aged 2-5 years and many also serve many more children aged 0 – 2 years

7 schools have worked closely with City of York Council's Family Learning team to work directly with families to support the development of the home learning environment. This work has been independently evaluated by Huntington Research School and this shows a promising model emerging around parental engagement and this work will continue in 2022-23.

City of York Council's Healthy Child Service has continued to develop its practice in line with the Early Talk for York principles and has now trained all practitioners in the use of the Early Language Identification Measure which is being used to universally screen all 2 years olds at the mandated contact. The team is currently working with approximately 60 families where speech, language or communication difficulties have been identified through screening.

The University of York continues to support Early Talk for York by providing volunteer, specially trained student placements to support the implementation of Early Talk for York. Autumn 2022 will see more than 40 'York Students in Schools' students placed in early years settings across the city. The University is also exploring how placements in Early Talk for York schools and settings can be embedded into some of their relevant taught programmes.

The Early Talk for York team continues to work closely with specialist services at York Teaching Hospital to further develop ways of working to ensure best use of limited specialist support and resources.

More about Early Talk for York can be found at [www.york.gov.uk/earlytalkforyork](http://www.york.gov.uk/earlytalkforyork)

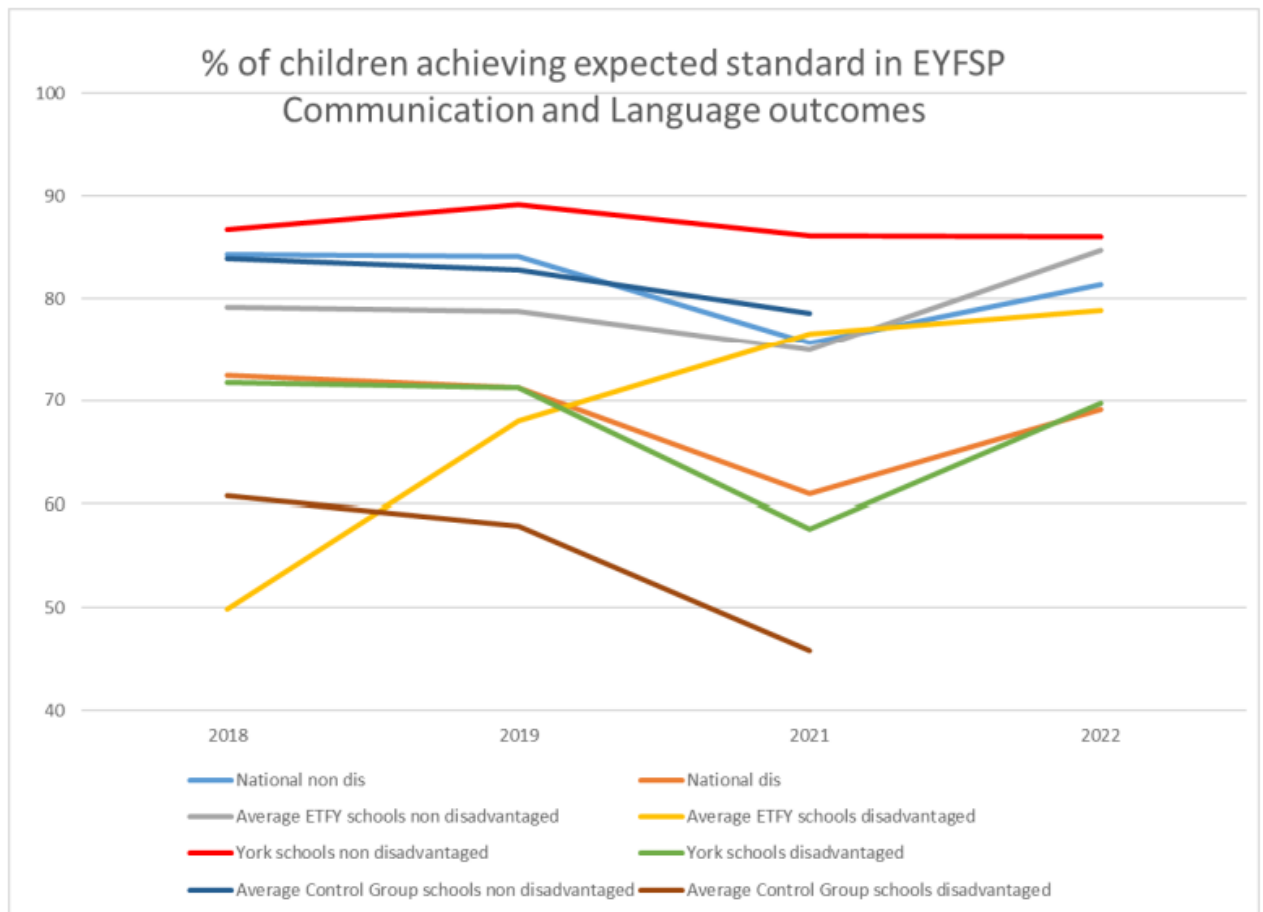
### Impact

Early Talk for York has seen impact at system, organisational, practitioner and child level.

*One professional reported: “Our staff in (Early Years Foundation Stage) are now more confident in identifying when children may have a speech and language need, which is allowing us to support the children, with relevant interventions. The staff are now more confident at knowing how to support these children, and when they should refer them to a speech and language therapist.”*

We continue to track the impact of Early Talk for York using the statutory assessment of children’s development at age 5 using the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP). This framework changed in 2022 and children were assessed against revised criteria. This has implications for exact year on year comparisons, however the trends and comparisons between groups remains useful for us to understand more about the impact that this approach is having.

As seen in the graph below, outcomes in the Early Talk for York area have improved for all children. Of particular note is that the ‘gap’ between non disadvantaged children nationally and disadvantaged children in the ETFY area has reduced from 34.5% (2018) to 2.5% (2022) This data provides further confidence that Early Talk for York is meeting its primary objective of improving outcomes in speech, language and communication for all children with a particular positive benefit for disadvantaged children in the city. These improved outcomes are a huge credit to those working every day with children in the schools and settings involved in the Early Talk for York approach as they make a demonstrable and meaningful difference to improving children’s outcomes.



There is more work to do in relation to how the home environment can support children’s development of speech, language and communication skills and in particular for children aged 0 – 2 and development work in this regard is ongoing and links with other key work streams at the Local Authority, such as the development of Family Hubs.

### Consultation

4. No formal consultation process has been carried out in relation to this proposal, however a fundamental element of the Early Talk for York approach is working with the diverse early years sector across the city to build upon the many strengths that exist. To this end, the Early Talk for York team continue to engage regularly with a wide range of stakeholders to inform next steps of development.

### Options

5. The Executive Member is asked to note the outcomes being demonstrated by early Talk for York and asked to consider whether or not to support the full roll out of the Early Talk for York approach across the city.

## **Analysis**

6. As the model appears to be meeting its primary objective of improving outcomes for children, and in particular for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, supporting the full roll out of the approach would enable more children to benefit from this way of working.

It is widely accepted that when 'interventions' are scaled up that a loss of fidelity is almost inevitable, and this is likely to apply in this case. Whilst the team would take significant steps to mitigate for this, it must be acknowledged that it is unlikely that the same level of impact will be seen right the way across the city.

In order to mitigate for challenges around fidelity reduction, models are being developed to provide support across the city which remain true to the 'active ingredients' (the core components that cause the model to be successful). These include drawing upon the additional expertise and capacity that has been developed in the system by those who have been working in this way for a number of years and a number of organisations have already offered additional capacity to help facilitate this. As well as this, the proposal to work at scale would take incremental steps to doing so in order to be able to continue to test and learn and respond dynamically to this developing model.

The Early Talk for York budget has capacity to facilitate much of the scale up activity. However, a significant element that needs to be addressed is the ongoing commissioning of support from speech and language therapy services. The current arrangement with the NHS expires in August 2023 and work is underway with partners in health to secure this to continue in the longer term.

## **7. Implications**

### **Financial**

- The Early Talk for York project to date has been funded almost entirely by an award of funding (£265k) from the York Schools and Academies Board (YSAB) utilising funding delegated to the board which is currently held within the Central Services Schools Block of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG). This funding has been increased with small one-off contributions from other budgets.

- The development and initial costs of the project are all covered within this funding envelope.
- The estimated cost of securing an on-going speech and language therapy service is estimated to be £57k annually. The funding for this has not yet been identified.

### **Human Resources (HR)**

There are no HR implications.

### **Legal**

- The commissioning of the relevant training packages and the speech and language therapist support will be subject to the Council's Contract Procedure Rules ("CPRs") and the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 ("PCRs"). Any competition will require a PCR and CPR compliant tender process. The legal and procurement teams will advise and guide accordingly.

### **Crime and Disorder**

There are no crime and disorder implications.

### **Information Technology (IT)**

There are no Information technology implications

### **Property**

There are no property implications

### **Other**

### **Equalities**

### **Risk Management**

9. As stated above, the scale up of any successful intervention comes with the risk of reduced fidelity and therefore impact. Early Talk for York is a dynamic approach and the team have navigated the work through the pandemic window, responding to emerging and differing challenges. There is broad and significant support for this work and a desire across the sector to replicate the success. Coupled with the experience and skill of the core team overseeing the delivery of Early Talk for York, steps will be taken to mitigate this risk as much as possible.



## Council Plan

10. This links directly to the Council Plan 'A better start for children and young people' and the ambition to '*Continue to prioritise gaining improved outcomes for our most disadvantaged children and young people in the city*' as well as in the 2021 update to '*Evaluate the potential scalability of the Early Talk for York scheme*'  
It supports the aims to have a '*strong quality early years sector*' that '*engages our most vulnerable children*' and '*The attainment gap between our most disadvantaged children and young people and their peers will have reduced*'

## Contact Details

**Author:**  
**Rob Newton**  
Social Mobility Project  
Manager  
Education, Skills and Send  
07789653669

**Chief Officer Responsible for the report:**  
**Maxine Squire**  
Assistant Director, Education Skills and SEND

**Report**  **Date** 31 October 2022  
**Approved**

**Wards Affected:** [List wards or tick box to indicate all]

**All**

**For further information please contact the author of the report**

**Background Papers:**  
None

**Annexes**  
Annex 1 Equalities Impact Assessment