

Oldham Council
Information Use Project

Summary:

Substantial numbers of children, particularly in disadvantaged areas in England have language delay and do not meet the expected levels of development when starting preschool and school, with poverty being one of the pivotal factors. Developmental gaps in early language emerge early in children's life; they persist and can become more difficult to address as children go through their life span, affecting their school readiness, and their chances for success in life. Increased concerns around children's early language development following the pandemic, links between social disadvantage and early language skills, and the cost-of-living crisis with surging poverty, are putting high pressure on services to offer support for early communication and language development.

In response to the current situation, Oldham Council want to renew its efforts to ensure that all young children are growing up in language and communication supporting environments, that all families are engaged in their young children's language learning, and that support is in place as early as possible when there are concerns.

Project goals

Oldham Council want to improve how information on speech, language and communication in families with babies and toddlers is collected and used. By focusing on the wider factors related to children's early communication supporting environments, the aim is to enable earlier identification of concerns and more continuous monitoring of communication support that young children experience. By focusing on better listening to parents and carers, and their involvement in early conversations with staff in services, the project aims to explore and develop new ways to document, share and use meaningful insights that families and professionals who work with families have. The project will also explore how identification of concerns should lead to decision-making and action that better ensures all children are experiencing the communication support they need, right from the start. Improved information will also provide an earlier and more holistic picture of existing communication needs, which will help the planning and commissioning of services that are better able to meet varying levels of needs.

Project steps

In a first step of Phase One, we will map out which information on early communication support and development is currently collected from families and across services, from the antenatal phase to age two. We will do this by having conversations, group discussions and observations with families, practitioners in midwifery, health visiting, family support and early education, and those in leadership roles in the local authority. An essential part of this process will be to explore where and how the voices of children, families and professionals are currently included in and about the collection and use of information, and where this should be strengthened. We will also map out where and how relevant information is shared between professionals with different roles, and where enhanced, ethical sharing of information could improve a wider understanding of communication support in families. Building on these steps, researchers and staff will develop and introduce new mechanisms to flag up concerns around early speech, language and communication. Over several cycles of work, researchers, staff, and parents and carers will then implement, trial and improve the developed system to flag up early concerns, and put into place and trial decision- and action-routes that respond to the early identification of concerns.

IUP vision:

1. Well specified in terms of the five practices:

a. Data (including the collection, linking and analysis of statistics)

The IUP is focused on information that relates to the provision of communication supporting environments, and is collected across different services for families from pregnancy to age two, including midwifery, health visiting, speech and language therapy services, early education, family support. Topics we are interested in include: infant and toddler speech, language and communication (SLC) skills; the home learning environment; parental beliefs and knowledge around communication development and support; parent child relationship; family risk factors related to language development in the family (e.g. identified language delay, English additional language (EAL), material deprivation, maternal wellbeing and social support, referral to specialist services); child risk factors related to language development (e.g. socio-emotional needs, physical health); and recommendations for and access of support (universal, targeted, and specialist services). We will explore what data are currently collected and how they can contribute to developing a mechanism to flag up concerns for communication development and support. We will also seek to identify how relevant information is brought together across different sources, and where there are gaps in the collection and sharing of information.

b. Voice (the views, perspectives and experiences of children, families, practitioners, professionals, and wider community organisations)

An essential part of the IUP will be to map out where the voices of children, families and practitioners are integral to the collected information, and to explore how enhanced ongoing conversations about communication support and development can maximise:

- Parent and carer voices – through increased participation in language assessment procedures, and beyond that through conversations with practitioners across sectors and services, right from the start (i.e. starting with the first midwifery appointments, and leading on into health visiting home visits, Right Start stay and play groups and targeted family support, early years settings, and speech and language therapy).
- Child voices – through and increased focus on eliciting babies' and toddlers' communication experiences with parents and carers, by concentrating on their non-verbal expressions, and through exploring how their voices can be recorded in documents and digital records.
- Professional judgement – through the knowledge and insights into families' SLC needs, the broader developmental needs, and the environment needs affecting the provision of communication support.

In conversation with practitioners, and parents and carers we will explore what meaningful information should include to help the identification of concerns around communication development and those factors that can support it, and how this could be collected, recorded and used to inform processes of decision-making, recommendations, and actions for support.

c. Ethics (how principles of individual privacy, social justice and public good are applied to data and voice work)

The IUP will include engagement with families with babies and toddlers, staff (practitioners and data analysts) to discuss how information is or should be recorded used and shared to make decisions and inform services. Focus will be given to identifying ways to listen to and consider the voices of infants and toddlers, and how to address the challenges of engaging them in consultation processes and decision making.

d. Information use (how data and voice are used in practice to inform and shape policy and practice)

The Theory of Change of Oldham details two pathways through which the IUP will inform policy and practice at both individual and aggregate levels. At individual level, conversations around infants' and toddlers' communication development and support between staff, and parents and carers will: i) help to flag concerns around SLC needs that will inform decision-making around recommendations for targeted support; ii) ensure that individual communication support and the child's developmental needs are better understood by parents and carers, and practitioners; iii) help to raise parents' and carers' awareness and strategies they use to support their child's early communication; and iv) ensure that the support offered to families is more appropriate to their needs. At the aggregate level, the collection of meaningful information around communication support and development will mean that needs for additional communication support can be better understood, recorded, analysed, and documented in Oldham (e.g. by ward or population group). This can inform service planning and commissioning of services more adequate to the varying needs of families. Findings on more meaningful information around needs for early communication support can also be used to inform national policy.

e. Learning (testing and evaluating how new initiatives are working)

Testing will involve the trialing of a new mechanism for flagging concerns, and resulting pathways for recommendations, referrals, and actions. Evaluation questions will assess changes in the documentation of early concerns around SLC, changes in resulting recommendations for and up-take of services (including those at the universal, targeted and specialist levels). More ambitious plans should also aim to evaluate changes to the fit of the service offer, and changes to parents' and carers' knowledge, awareness and practices around early SLC development and how to support these. In the long run, evaluation should assess improvements to children's SLC development, and improvement in commissioning, and the resources provided for services at universal and targeted level. Evaluation planning will start in Phase One, with a focus on establishing baseline measures.

2. Has relevance and traction locally

Recent years have seen an increased focus on supporting children in Oldham by raising local educational standards, with the early years being one of the identified priority areas. As one of the 12 Opportunity Areas in the UK, Oldham received additional government funding to work towards this aim, and a range of projects were implemented, with a strong focus on family literacy, parent involvement in early learning, and improving SLC skills for all children. The fact that young children in Oldham record lower levels of general development than their peers in Greater Manchester (GM) and across England is driving Oldham's strategy for early years, with a commitment to improve outcomes and reduce inequalities in health and education through continued support through good quality accessible services from conception to age five. One of the strategic priorities of GM is to increase the number of children starting school ready to learn. The GM early years delivery model (EYDM) includes several pathways focused on universal and targeted provision that supports early intervention. The current programme of work focuses on developing and strengthening new and existing pathways. Work is also taking place to further embed existing pathways, notably speech, language and communication.

3. Has feasible impact on lives and experiences

The activities of the IUP will be implemented with the aim to improve an understanding of where early support for babies' and toddlers' communication development is needed, and what the concerns around the communication supporting environment are. We plan to make changes by developing new ways to flag up early concerns, by exploring ways to share this information across staff in different services, and by enhancing ongoing conversations that maximise the voices of families. This should lead to improved signposting, improved family awareness of issues around their child's early communication, and improved understanding of SLC needs. The aim is that these processes will enable individual level and service level support for families to ensure all children receive support that fits with their specific needs. Longer term, this should make a difference to children's lives by contributing towards improvements in SLC outcomes and children's school readiness in Oldham.

4. Stable and deliverable

Key members from across Oldham and the GM Combined Authority have been involved in the project since the outset. The Head of Early Years in Oldham (Paula Healey) meets monthly with members of the research team (Professor Leon Feinstein and Dr Katharina Ereky-Stevens Rees Centre, University of Oxford). There are also monthly meetings between members of the research team and the school readiness project manager (Miriam Loxham), and Katharina Ereky-Stevens is part of the SLCN steering group in Oldham, led by Amber Burton. Project up-dates are shared with the School Readiness Board, the SLCNs Steering Group, and the Oldham senior leadership team.

5. Includes improved voice and data information relevant to baseline

An essential part of the IUP will be to establish meaningful measures to flag early concerns around SLC. Developed in Phase 1, and captured at the onset of implementation, these could be used as a baseline measures, and changes over time can be captured, in relation to service use and child SLC outcome measures.

6. Of wider policy interest

Recent reports, including those by the All-party Parliamentary Group for Conception to Age 2, the House of Commons Education, and Health and Social Care Committee, and the government's Early Years Healthy Development Review, have highlighted the significance of the period from conception to age two, and the need to improve services for the youngest children in England and their families. Speech, language and communication support is one of the priority areas, and the Public Health England and the Department for Education's Best Start in Speech, Language and Communication Programme aims to improve the rate of early identification of need in the early years and increase the number of children who are ready for school by age five.

7. Having a whole child approach

Existing research evidence links closely with the aims of the Oldham IUP. Appropriate targeting is essential and so are offers proportionate to those who need it most. Yet, identifying which children and families will benefit from SLC interventions is not straightforward. This project is aiming to address the need to base identification of concerns and signposting not solely on measures of SLC skills. This is in line with what we know about the high degree of variability in children's language trajectories in the early years, and because of existing reliability issues with universal screening instruments. In response, the project is aiming to drive forward the inclusion of wider measures,

including social-risk factors that might affect children's everyday communication experiences. This is based on the understanding that the development of early communication is situated within the social contexts; plentiful, socially meaningful, and contextually rich interactions between children and their parents and carers are needed to optimise early development. The aim is also to consider the identification of SLC concerns in the light of other child vulnerabilities, including socio-emotional difficulties. This is based on our knowledge that in the early years, difficulties in either children's language development and their socio-emotional and mental health development appear to be related, and difficult in one area can exacerbate difficulties in the other.

8. Is putting plans in place for substantial development for the enhanced pilot to follow

Project planning will be carried out collaboratively with the main stakeholders in Oldham – those leading the delivery of services and working directly with families with babies and toddlers (including Right start services, health visiting and midwifery, early education, and early intervention services), those in charge of managing, analysing and reporting on data (across early years, education and health), and those making decisions around the commissioning of services for families with young children. The project will consider plans to develop, implement and improve new mechanisms to flag up concerns around early speech, language and communication, as well as putting into place and trialling decision- and action-routes that respond to the early identification of concerns.