

National Early Language and Communication Project

Phase 1 Project Report

October 2023-September 2025

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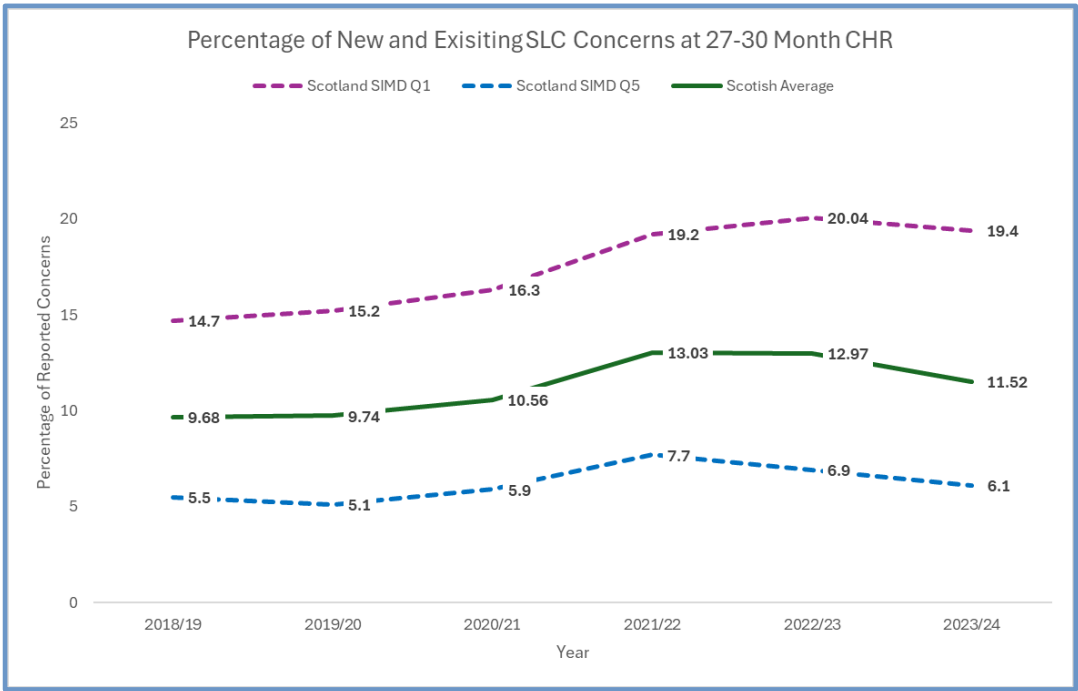
Introduction

Background

Scottish Ministers have set an ambition for our country: that Scotland is the best place to grow up and bring up children. As part of this, they have set out a national aim to reduce early child development concerns at 27-30 months by a quarter. Speech, language and communication is the most common concern reported in the 27-30 month child health reviews, affecting two thirds of children where a concern is identified.

The poverty-related equity gap in children’s achievement is well documented. “Growing up in Scotland: Changes in child cognitive ability in the pre-school years” (2011) identified a gap of around 13 months in the vocabulary between those in the least and highest income households. Children’s speech, language and communication (SLC) have been particularly affected since the onset of the Covid pandemic. This increase in identified concerns has been sustained to date, with a widening gap between the most and least disadvantaged families. This paper refers to ‘parents’ throughout, acknowledging that some children may have different caregiver relationships within their home environments

Figure 1: Percentage of new and existing SLC concerns identified at the 27-30 month child health review 2018/19 to 2023/24



In 2023 a team of 6 whole-time equivalent speech and language therapists was funded by Scottish Government and hosted within Education Scotland as National Early Language and Communication (NELC) leads. The NELC project aims to facilitate a sustainable whole systems approach to early SLC from pre-birth to school entry with a focus on prevention.

Project Governance

The team has been supported by and is accountable to a project Senior Sponsorship Group, a Project Advisory Group and the National SLC Stakeholder Reference Group.

The project was supported by a suite of project tools including a project charter, logic model, log frame with key outputs and outcomes, measurement plan, stakeholder analysis, communications plan and risk register.

The Children and Young People's Improvement Collaborative (CYPIC) has provided vital support to the team in their development of project tools and outcomes.

Project Partners

The NELC team engaged with a diverse range of partners across the system, creating opportunities to collaborate, building new connections and strengthening existing relationships with a focus on shared outcomes.

The NELC team was hosted by Education Scotland where they received a warm and supportive welcome. Being located with Education Scotland supported connections with education partners and created opportunities to understand and engage with national improvement activity linked to early years education.

Figure 2 – An illustration of the breadth of connections made by the NELC team



Information gathered from semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders was analysed and detailed in a draft conversation analysis report. Key findings from this analysis contributed to the development of project outcomes and activities and are referenced throughout this report.

Project Outcomes – executive summary

The NELC project has been a catalyst for the development of a National Early Years SLC Action Plan. The team has worked alongside Scottish Government to shape the content and structure of the plan, which is scheduled for publication in autumn 2025. The extent and nature of involvement of the NELC team in the plan's implementation will depend on the duration, capacity and scope of phase 2 of the project, details of which are to be confirmed.

The 5 outcomes detailed in this phase 1 report reflect short- and medium-term goals identified by the project team in collaboration with governance partners and achieved through the systematic implementation of project activities as specified in figure 3 below.

Figure 3 summary of outcomes, activity and impact

Project outcome	Project activity	Impact
Outcome 1: increased understanding of shared responsibility for early SLC development across the system	Strengthening of system wide connections	Breadth of connection across all levels of the system raised awareness of SLC concerns and the impact of SLCN across the lifespan.
	Communications with the system	The position of SLC and early SLC support were strengthened within national guidance and policy frameworks.
	Ministerial connections and policy influence	
Outcome 2: improved collaborative system-wide leadership of early speech, language and communication support	Engagement with system leaders	Bringing together strategic leaders to jointly consider SLC needs and services in their area supported multi-agency self-evaluation and planning. The team influenced a fourfold increase in the number of local forums with responsibility for SLC planning at a strategic and multi-agency level.

Project Outcome	Project Activity	Impact
Outcome 3: an early years' workforce that is knowledgeable and confident in supporting speech, language and communication	Development of a SLC Knowledge and skills matrix	Targeted workforce learning and development opportunities were delivered to over 800 practitioners.
	Development of a Language and Communication Supportive Environment (LCSE) guide for Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) settings	Partnership working and collaboration strengthened SLC content within existing national family support offers.
	Influencing National Occupational Standards (NOS)	Creation of an evidence based SLC Knowledge and Skills Matrix and LCSE guide addressed workforce development concerns raised by the system.
	Delivery of learning offers to workforce groups	
	Embedding SLC in existing learning offers	
Outcome 4: Local decision making and planning is evidence-informed and utilises national and local data	Influencing data use across the system	Improved system-wide collaborative use of health inequality and SLC data. Work with Public Health Scotland promoted accessibility and use of existing and future data sets.
	Understanding and sharing evidence across the system	An evidence review identifying risk and opportunities to improve SLC outcomes was created and disseminated.
Outcome 5: families receive consistent national messaging in relation to developing SLC	Development and dissemination of "Chatting Together" key messages for early SLC	"Chatting Together" messages have been incorporated into a wide range of national family support offers
	Enhancement of SLC content in targeted family supports	The NELC team shared findings on the unique risks to SLC development of early screen exposure for babies and young children.
	Contribution to 'screens' cross-policy working group	

Outcome 1: Increased understanding of shared responsibility for early SLC development across the system

Setting the Ambition

Supporting babies' and children's developing SLC is a responsibility that cuts across health, education, social care, communities and families and the third sector. Evidence from the NELC conversation analysis report, along with wider strategic engagement, suggested limited understanding of SLC as a public health crisis and of the need for shared responsibility and joined up, strategic planning across the system.

Early SLC needs are known to have lasting impacts across the lifespan in areas including academic achievement, mental wellbeing and employment.

Project Activity and Impact

Introduction

The NELC team built a strong network of connections with national and regional stakeholders involved in the support of early SLC development from pre-birth. This strategic engagement raised awareness of early SLC concerns as a priority across the system and helped to identify and share good practice.

The NELC team established:

- system wide connections
- communications with the system
- ministerial connections and policy influence

Systems-wide Connections

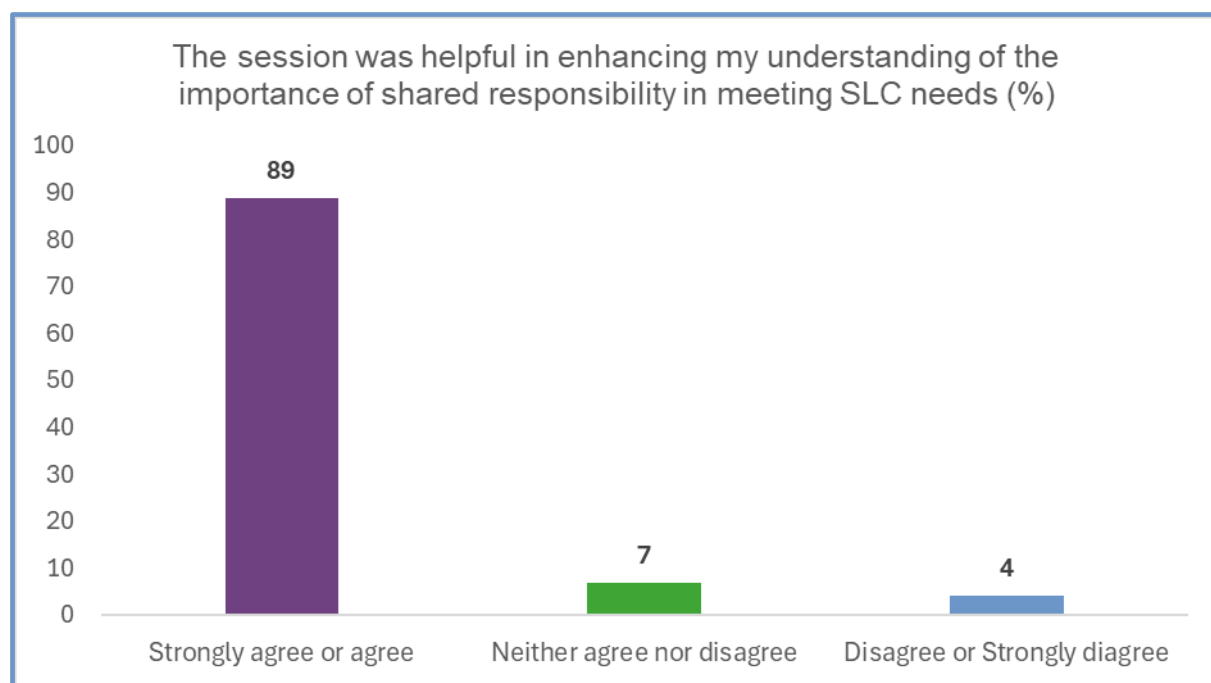
Evidence of the impact of the NELC project can be seen in strengthened system wide connections, the establishment of a national multi-agency professional network for SLC and an associated increase in national multi-agency practice sharing. Network members appreciated the opportunity to learn from others and to adopt or adapt locally tested effective practice.

“[The National Network for Early Language and Communication] is reinforcing the value in multi-agency work that is in its infancy in our authority. It has given me many ideas of ways to extend the work that we are already doing.” – **network member**

Connections were established and consolidated through a range of local, regional and national multi-agency and single-agency meetings and engagement events involving representatives from all 14 health boards, 32 local authorities and 31 health and social care partnership areas. This breadth of connection across all levels of the system, with reach into education, health and third sector, has raised awareness of SLC concerns, the impact of SLCN across the lifespan and opportunities for prevention.

“This collaborative relationship has been valuable to our work as it's enabled us to reach wider audiences and helped us build connections across Scotland.”
– **Producer, BBC Tiny Happy People**

Figure 4: Engagement event feedback: enhanced understanding of shared responsibility for SLC needs



Practice Example: UNICEF Baby Friendly Initiative Accreditation

Engagement of the NELC team with directors from UNICEF UK Baby Friendly Initiative resulted in substantive changes to the content of accreditation resources with an increased emphasis on early communication:

"The community audit tool [now] includes 'responsiveness to baby's cues, talking/singing/reading...', as an example of how to encourage close and loving relationships.

[The connection with the NELC team] has influenced some of the training update we are currently undertaking with the responsive feeding section now including that cues for feeding and comfort are a baby's early attempts at communication. Parents' responsiveness to these cues support brain development including speech, language and communication development."

– UNICEF Baby Friendly Initiative Deputy Programme Director

Communications with the system

Communications from the NELC team included executive level stakeholder project updates, quarterly reporting, stakeholder newsletters and the establishment of an information and practice-sharing website hosted through Glow Blogs. A communication plan ensured appropriate and targeted information sharing with all levels of the system.

The project maintained regular posts on X through the Education Scotland Early Learning and Childcare account, which has 10.2K followers consisting mainly of EL practitioners and leaders.

- Individual posts on X have achieved over 5000 views and up to 477 engagements.
- As of June 2025, the NELC Glow Blogs website had received over 10,000 visits.

- A NELC project blog was published on the AHPScot platform in July 2024 with reach to over 6000 subscribing Allied Health Professionals (AHPs).

The team engaged with national organisations and professional bodies including the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES), the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT).

The NELC team also established a close working relationship with BBC Tiny Happy People resulting in the commissioning by the BBC of a Scottish workforce testimonial video, illustrating how early SLC can be supported by all members of the early years' workforce. Published on the BBC Tiny Happy People website in May 2025, the [video](#) has been shared by the NELC team through professional networks across health and education.

Ministerial connections and policy influence

The NELC team has contributed to ministerial briefings for several Scottish ministers, including the Minister for Children and Young People and The Promise, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, the Minister for Public Health and Women's Health and the Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport. In May 2024, the team hosted a ministerial visit with the Minister for Children and Young People and The Promise with a focus on national SLC concerns and on the NELC team's unique opportunity to identify national priority actions through engagement across the system.

Early contributions and communications from the NELC team secured a role with the cross-policy Early Child Development (ECD) Transformational Change Programme and subsequently with a Promoting Positive Digital Behaviours cross-policy working group. There have also been opportunities to strengthen the position of SLC and early SLC support within national guidance and policy frameworks including:

- the Quality Improvement Framework for Early Learning and Childcare sectors
- the Play Vision Statement and Action Plan
- the Health Visiting Action Plan
- the Population Health Framework

The lead for Promoting Children and Families Wellbeing, Scottish Government described the impact of NELC team involvement as follows:

[The NELC team] "helped to raise the profile of Speech Language and Communication and the pivotal role it plays in early child development"

[The team provided] "a specialist critical eye on our policy development...showing a real awareness of the policy landscape and parameters that we work in."

A member of the Child Health and Wellbeing Scottish Government policy team also commented as follows:

"The [NELC] team have been proactive in advertising their work across wider teams and in doing so have built valuable working relationships across different aspects of policy and delivery. We have certainly felt the benefit of that in relation to health visiting policy."

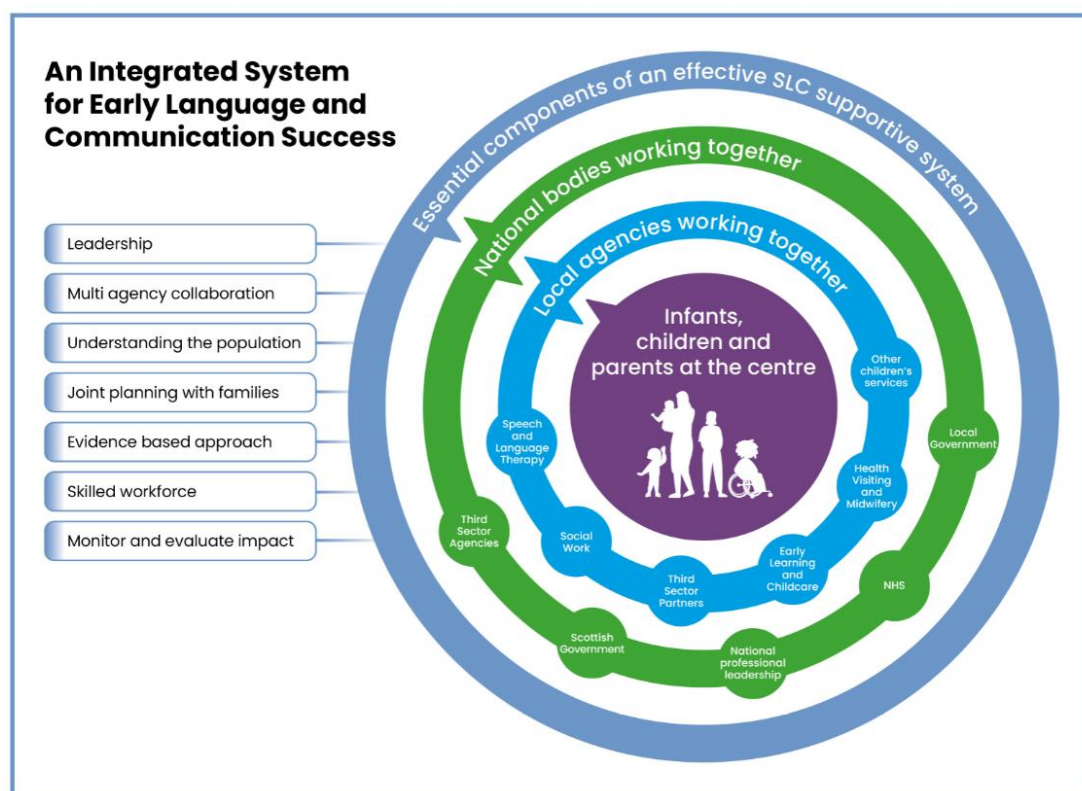
The impact of the contribution of the NELC team in partnership with the ECD Transformational Change Programme and Scottish Government is seen in the inclusion of the Early Years Speech, Language and Communication Action Plan in the Programme for Government 2025-2026.

Outcome 2: Improved collaborative system-wide leadership of early speech, language and communication support

Setting the Ambition

Given the pervasive impact of SLCN and the multifactorial causative factors, the NELC team responded to the clear need for a multi-agency, integrated, outcomes focused and sustained response.

Figure 5: An Integrated System for Early Language and Communication Success (NELC project 2025)



Project Activity and Impact

Introduction

The NELC team has been successful in bringing together strategic leaders from health and education to jointly consider SLC needs and services in their area, moving towards multi-agency self-evaluation and planning. In particular, the project team has influenced a fourfold increase in the number of local forums with responsibility for SLC planning at a strategic and multi-agency level.

The NELC response under this outcome has included:

- engagement with leaders across the system
- support for local self-evaluation
- a drive for local multi-agency planning for early SLC

Engagement with leaders across the system

In response to early engagement with leaders from health visiting, speech and language therapy and early education, the NELC team identified a need for increased connection between services and agencies and for the establishment of local strategic multi-agency planning processes.

National events

Strategic leaders from education, speech and language therapy, health visiting and the wider health, education and public health workforce came together in May and June 2024.



Attendees rated the event overall very highly (4.5 out of 5). They also valued hearing the national SLC data and practice examples. Attendees shared the following reflections and intended actions:

“The opportunity to talk and the regional recognition that this is a crisis and we need to take a proactive approach to it.”

[We will be] “meeting again with local colleagues and bringing wider multi-agency team on board to aim for representatives from all key agencies.”

Support for local self-evaluation

With reference to the current research and evidence base the NELC team developed a self-evaluation tool focusing on local system supports for early SLC development. The tool is framed around four key system components: **leadership**, **collaborative teams**, **skilled workforce** and **children and families at the centre**.

Local multi-agency leadership teams were invited to use the tool to identify strengths and areas for improvement within their system. 30 local authority areas shared their completed self-evaluations with the NELC team. Over 75% of authorities identified both leadership and collaboration as ‘important’ or ‘urgent’ priorities.

“It has re-ignited discussion and interest and kick started the road to improved governance.”
– **SLT lead**

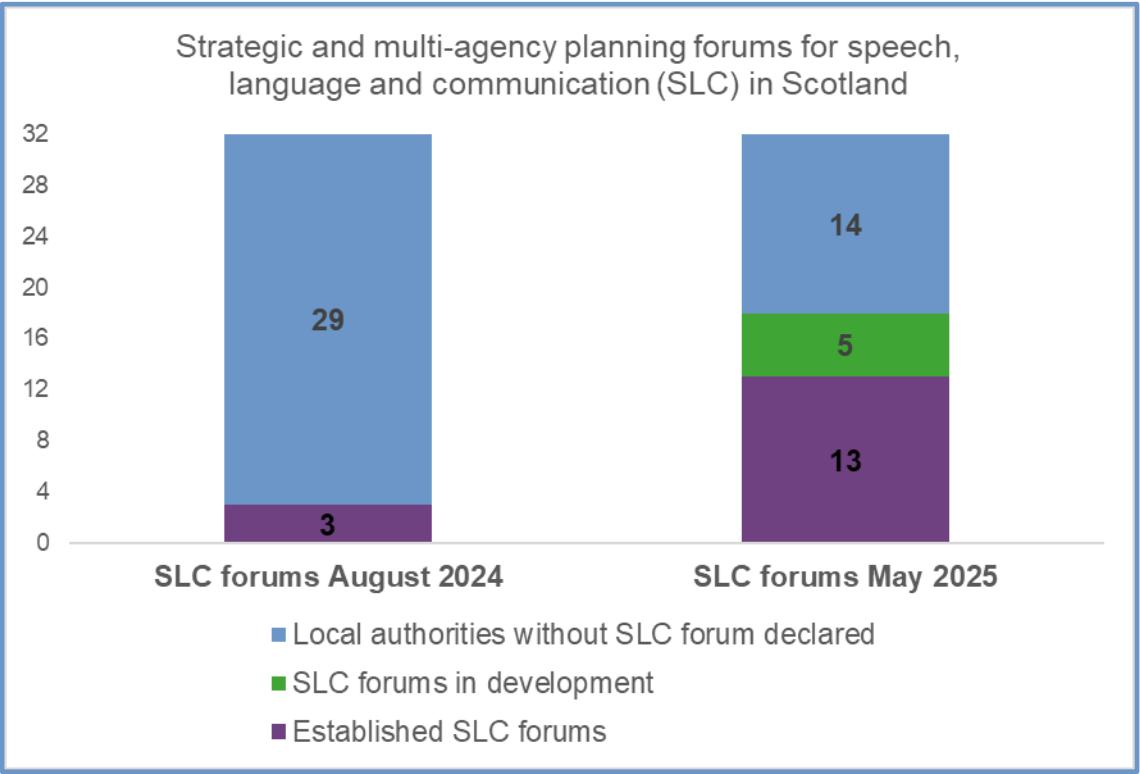
“What was really reassuring was confirmation that we are on the same page and want to improve support for early language and communication.” - **SLT lead**

Local multi-agency planning

“The national work has been pivotal in creating opportunities for agencies to come together and collectively reflect on our working practices for supporting children and their families living with communication differences in the early years” - **SLT Team, West Dunbartonshire**

Through the influence of the NELC project, the number of strategic and multi-agency planning forums in Scotland that include a remit for SLC, has increased from 3 to 13, with a further 5 in development.

Figure 6: Increase in the number of local authority forums for discussion of early SLC



Outcome 3: An early years' workforce that is knowledgeable and confident in supporting speech, language and communication

Setting the Ambition

The early years workforce includes a broad range of professionals and volunteers who support families and young children from pre-birth.

The early years workforce is the primary route by which parents¹ receive trusted support, information and the resources they need to nurture their baby or child's SLC development. Families identify their health visitor as one key source of this information and support. In addition to their role with parents, ELC practitioners also contribute to early SLC development through their direct role with babies and children.

Leaders from health and education raised concerns about SLC knowledge, skills and confidence across the early years' workforce and identified a need for high-quality foundational knowledge of SLC.

Project Activity and Impact

Introduction

To shape a national approach to professional development for SLC, the NELC team undertook an options appraisal. This served to understand the professional learning landscape and identify essential components that underpin effective professional learning.

The team engaged with key voices across the sector to understand workforce needs, explore existing national resources and professional development frameworks, and assess their relevance to speech, language and communication. This process highlighted gaps in pre-registration training and the need for an evidence-informed approach to practice change.

This process of exploration and analysis led the NELC team to:

- develop an SLC Knowledge and Skills Matrix for the early SLC workforce
- develop a language and communication supportive environment guide for ELC settings
- influence National Occupational Standards (NOS)
- deliver learning offers to workforce groups
- support existing learning offers

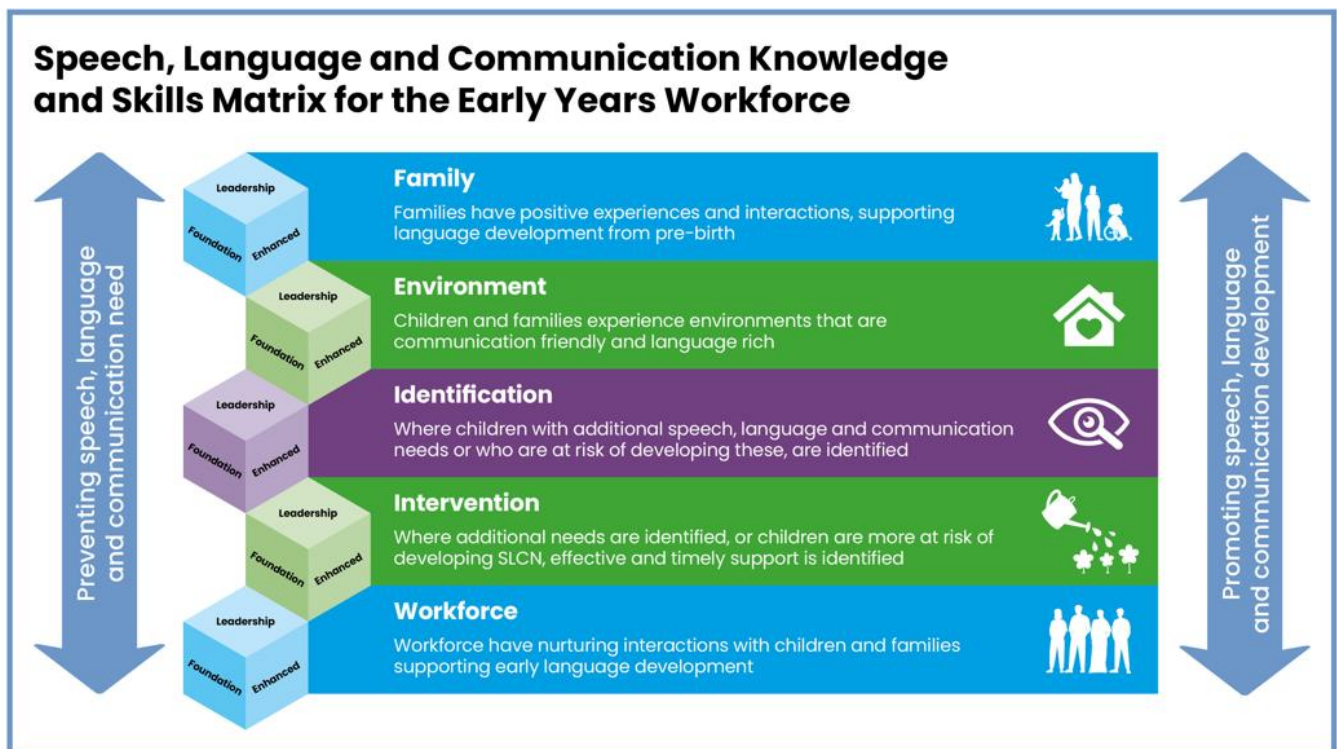
¹ This paper uses the term 'parent' throughout, acknowledging that some children may have different caregiver relationships

SLC Knowledge and Skills Matrix

An [early SLC Knowledge and Skills Matrix](#) was developed for use across the early years' workforce. Practitioner feedback helped to shape the content of the matrix. Reviewers identified opportunities to use the matrix in a variety of ways, including to support individual, team and authority level self-reflection and to benchmark existing learning offers.

“this will help consistency in the workforce and identify key knowledge that practitioners need in their roles” – **reviewer feedback**

Figure 7 – Early SLC Knowledge and Skills Matrix (NELC 2025)



Language and communication supportive environment (LCSE)

In response to a request from the system, the NELC team developed a [guide to LCSE](#) based on research evidence and best practice. The guide identifies aspects of interactions, experiences and spaces that support early SLC development for all babies and young children and supports settings to identify areas for improvement, scaffold staff development and track progress.

The updated shared Quality Improvement Framework for ELC sectors will include a link to the LCSE guide. Input from the NELC team ensured an increased focus on responsive interaction and early SLC within the quality indicators of the Quality Improvement Framework.

Influencing National Occupational Standards (NOS)

The NELC team contributed to the UK wide review of the childcare, learning and development NOS that inform the content of Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) for the early years' workforce. Recommendations for additional and clearer content in relation to SLC were approved for inclusion in the updated NOS.

Learning offers to workforce groups

The NELC team delivered professional learning to over 800 individuals from across the workforce. Sessions have raised the priority of SLC across the system from pre-birth, focusing on the essential and protective role of responsive adult-child interactions and opportunities to embed SLC messages and support across the early years' workforce.

To date, input has been provided to:

- HMIE and Care Inspectorate
- Health Visitors and Health Visiting Workforce
- Family Nurse Practitioners
- Equity and Excellence Leads
- Scottish Childminders Association members
- Third sector workforce

Evaluations of impact have been positive, with 96% of all respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that sessions were useful, and 92% agreeing or strongly agreeing that the session had increased their confidence to enhance the communication friendly environment in their own context. Following engagement with the health visiting workshop, 93% of attendees reported an improved understanding of how to help parents by promoting responsive interactions.

“Great resources - excited to share with the families I work with.” - **Health Visitor**

“Being introduced to the resources by experts who are clearly so knowledgeable and passionate about them has really inspired me today” - **Family Nurse Practitioner**

Equity and Excellence Leads also reported an increase in their knowledge and skills of language and communication as an outcome of attending the session provided by the NELC team.

“Very informative session, I now feel more confident in supporting the staff within my setting”
– **Equity and Excellence Lead**

Supporting existing learning offers

The NELC team worked in partnership with service providers, identifying strengths and highlighting opportunities to strengthen SLC content of existing workforce learning offers.

Opportunities for influence have been wide-reaching, and have included:

- **Infant Feeding**
 - NHS Education for Scotland infant feeding modules and workbook
 - UNICEF Baby Friendly Scotland and UK
 - Training input to a local Breastfeeding Peer Supporters Network

The NHS Education for Scotland (NES) infant feeding mandatory modules and clinical skills workbook sit alongside the UNICEF Baby Friendly Initiative (BFI) accreditation process in Scotland. Chatting Together key messages were integrated into the modules, encouraging practitioners to support parental responsiveness as part of early feeding.

“Working with colleagues from the NELC team has been insightful and beneficial. Changing small words within our resources to reinforce and strengthen key messages around early language and communication has strengthened our messaging regarding positive early relationships.” - **NES Infant feeding lead**

- **“Speech Language and Communication: Giving Children the Best Possible Start in Life” (NHS Education for Scotland)**

Recommendations made by the NELC team ensured that prevention and early intervention were highlighted in the update of this resource for health visitors and family nurses. The updated SLC resource will include the GIRFEC “SLC My World Triangle” and “Chatting Together” national early language key messages developed by the NELC team.

- **“Learning to Read in the Early Years” professional learning resource (Education Scotland)**

The NELC team was invited to review and contribute to the content of this professional learning resource with a focus on aspects of SLC development that underpin early literacy development.

Outcome 4: Local decision making and planning is evidence-informed and utilises national and local data

Setting the Ambition

Child development data is essential to local and national strategic planning and decision making for SLC. The NELC conversation analysis report found inconsistencies in the use of data at local authority level, with issues of limited data sharing and a lack of connection between local data and planning for SLC. Improved collaborative use of SLC data in relation to health inequalities was identified as a priority at both local and national level.

Robust evidence exists to support a prevention and early intervention approach to early SLC needs associated with social inequality and wider determinants of health.

Project Activity and Impact

Introduction

The NELC team responded to opportunities to promote and share available data and evidence to raise awareness of considerations such as incidence, impact and risk of SLC and to highlight opportunities for a coordinated approach to supporting early SLC across the system.

Examples are given below of ways in which the team has acted to:

- influence data use across the system
- understand and share evidence across the system

Influencing data use across the system

The NELC team worked with Public Health Scotland, to promote the accessibility and use of existing and future data sets.

Through system connections, the team highlighted relevant public health data and promoted its effective use across all levels of the system with a focus on prevention. This included the development of a [NELC PHS dashboard guide](#), supporting workforce access to SLC specific data from PHS online early child development dashboards.

Data and evidence sharing with the ECD Transformational Change Programme raised awareness of the incidence and impact of SLC in relation to achievement of the ECD Transformational Change Programme aim.

Data sharing was a key element of regional events planned and delivered by the NELC team in May and June 2024. Multi-agency leaders from the early years' workforce had the opportunity to share their local data and to understand the national picture. Attendees were asked what they would do differently following the event:

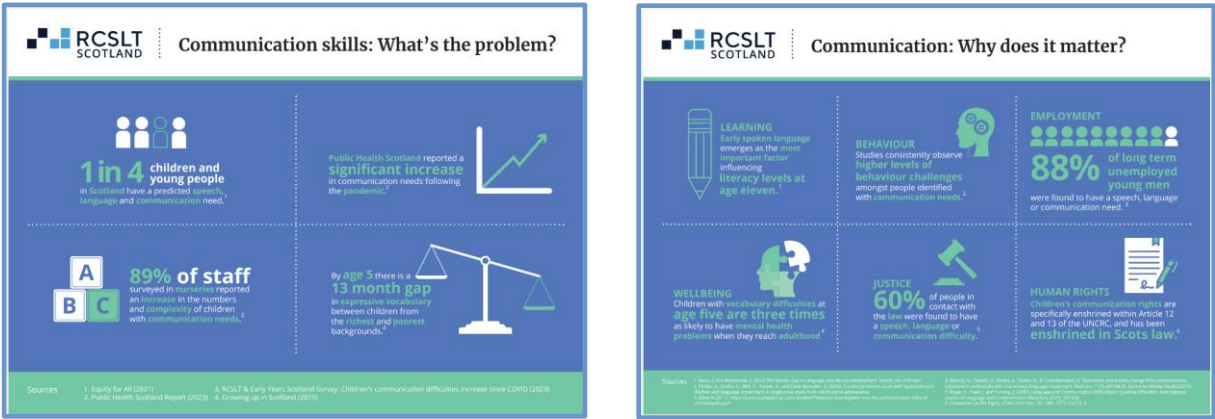
“use data to identify gaps and evidence progress”

“[lead] discussions around how we can share our data effectively to ensure a collective understanding of needs and the work being achieved across professions”

Child health review data on SLC concerns has been shared at national events for practitioners and leaders from across health, education and social care, including the Women Children Young People and Families “Child Poverty in Scotland” and “AHP Public Health” webinars hosted by NES.

The NELC team worked with the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) to create and disseminate data informed [infographics](#) about the impact of SLC needs across the life-course.

Figure 7: Early SLC infographics

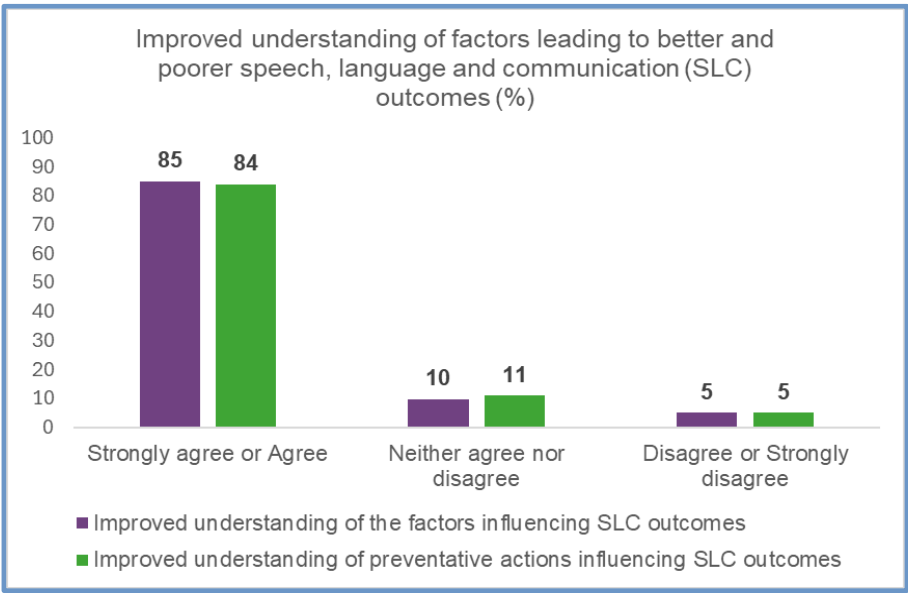


Understanding and sharing evidence across the system

The NELC team produced an [evidence review](#) with a focus on factors associated with better and poorer SLC outcomes for babies and young children. Complex factors influence the early SLC development of babies and children, with an association between wider social determinants of health and higher incidence of early SLC needs. There is evidence that responsive parenting approaches can mitigate risk and improve SLC outcomes for babies and young children.

The review has been shared directly with over 350 leaders and practitioners from the wider early years' workforce, as well as with Scottish Government policy teams. Attendees at a range of engagement events delivered by the NELC team, identified an increased understanding of factors influencing SLC outcomes and an improved understanding of preventative actions influencing SLC outcomes.

Figure 8 – Feedback from engagement events: understanding of factors associated with better and poorer outcomes



When members of the National Network for Early Language and Communication were asked about the evidence paper, 100% of respondents agreed that they would use or had already used the evidence paper, sharing its key messages with colleagues from their own profession and across the wider workforce.

In one local authority area, the evidence around parental responsiveness was impactful, leading to the inclusion of local SLT services in a revision of the local Play Strategy.

Engagement with Speech and Language Therapy (SLT) services

SLT leads were identified as key contributors to the inclusion of prevention and early intervention within local SLC action plans. 69 SLT leads attended leadership workshops with the NELC team, with representation from all 14 Scottish Health Boards.

“Excellent session confirming what we’ve known before but with far more solid foundations and evidence to take to our partners. I’m excited to see where this can lead us!”

- SLT Lead

88% of attendees strongly agreed/agreed with the statement that they were likely to extend collaboration to other parts of their system to support SLC.

90% of attendees agreed or strongly agreed that they are likely to increase their use of data for decision-making and planning regarding SLC and health inequalities.

National impact

The team created a [GIRFEC My World resource](#) identifying factors needed to improve SLC outcomes. This tool integrates the evidence around SLC development into the familiar framework of the GIRFEC National Practice Model. The SLC My World Triangle supports practitioners to focus on factors associated with better and poorer SLC outcomes within any local GIRFEC assessment. The resource has received positive feedback from stakeholders:

“The My World Triangle is fantastic and really reflects some of those conversations about easily accessible resources to support the workforce. Brilliant!”

– Head of Workforce Policy and Planning, Scottish Social Services Council

Learning from the evidence review has also influenced the 2025 Scottish Government [Health Visiting Action Plan](#), as can be seen in action 1.4:

“Health Visitors provide a vital role in identifying and understanding health needs and risk factors for families and have the clinical and observational skills to recognise and respond to factors associated with preventable SLCN.”

Outcome 5: Families receive consistent national messaging in relation to developing SLC

Setting the Ambition

All parents and parents-to-be have the right to know how to support their child's early SLC development, as enshrined in article 18 of the [UNCRC](#). This requires access to high quality, trustworthy information, with the option to access additional advice and support when required.

Early engagement with system leaders identified a particular need for increased information and support for parents-to-be and parents of babies and children under the age of two. Respondents recognised the need for SLC support to be targeted more directly at those babies and children most affected by the consequences of health inequalities from pre-birth to school entry.

It is recognised that SLC public health messages for parents must be delivered in ways that are sensitive, inclusive, and tailored, particularly for groups who may face barriers to accessing support. Parent engagement data shows that parents value community-based, relational, face-to-face support from trusted providers. Families in Scotland are most likely to receive this support from health visitors and third-sector organisations.

“My health visitor, can walk in and sit in the kitchen, be like, are you OK? Because she knows I'm not OK. She's built that relationship, so they should be seeing you. You almost don't have to tell her, she knows you well enough to see.” - **parent**

“I'd be looking for resource that can be used within the community when and if needed. And that is like a drop-in clinic that you talk about support and guidance.” – **parent**

“Baby massage, things like that, where you go and you attend. There's a social aspect not only for you, but for your baby as well, I think. Also what it does is it prompts the parent to be out so that then improves their mood that they're engaging, they're socialising.” - **parent**

Early years leaders noted a lack of consistency in early SLC messages shared with parents and missed opportunities to embed key messages in the universal pathway from pre-birth. Parent feedback to the NELC team also identified a lack of consistent and clear information. Some parents said they had not heard early SLC key messages before and would have liked to receive this information from trusted professionals. Some parents were unsure how to support early SLC development or felt they had received mixed messages.

“I haven't heard these messages before, I've not heard face to face or copy his sounds.”
- **parent**

“Sometimes you get mixed messaged on what is best for them” - **parent**

Parent feedback to the NELC team also identified a lack of consistent information and guidance about screens use. Both parents and early years professionals expressed concern about the potential impact of screen use by babies and young children, and by their parents.

“I find putting my phone away very difficult and it affects my interaction with my children”
- **parent**

Project Activity and Impact

Introduction

In response to the identified need, the NELC team:

- developed and shared “Chatting Together” national key messages for supporting early language and communication development from pre-birth
- enhanced SLC content in existing national targeted family support offers
- contributed to a Scottish Government cross-policy working group on the use of screens

Chatting Together

Chatting Together messages are evidence informed and provide guidance on how to support early SLC from pre-birth. Feedback from workforce partners, parents and carers helped to shape the language and appearance of the messages to ensure these were acceptable and readily understood by parents.

Accessible posters and postcards have been made available to parents and to the workforce through the Parent Club website and NELC team Glow Blogs website.

Impact and influence across the system can be seen in the inclusion of Chatting Together messages in a range of resources including:

- the Child Development Record (red book)
- the updated NES SLC resource for Health Visitors and Family Nurses
- NES infant feeding workbooks
- Family Nurse Partnership intensive home visiting programme

In addition, an early version of the Chatting Together messages influenced the content of messages on the Scottish Baby Box Experience cards.

A Gaelic translation of Chatting Together serves to make Chatting Together fully accessible to Gaelic speaking families and to children who attend the approximately 56 Gaelic medium ELC settings in Scotland.

Figure 8: Example Chatting Together postcard (Bump to Baby stage)



Practice Example: Chatting Together in Perth and Kinross

In Perth & Kinross Chatting Together messages were integrated into a pilot programme called “Story Safari”. This 5-week programme brought together funded 2-year-old children and their families for fun, playful learning experiences in their ELC setting. Almost all parents who responded to the evaluation reported they would use the Chatting Together ideas at home and that they felt more empowered to support their child’s language skills.

“I like that I can look this up online and I feel more confident in chatting with my child and how this helps him to develop his language skills.” - **parent**

Family support offers

The NELC team identified and responded to the opportunity to work with third-sector organisations to strengthen SLC messaging within existing family support offers that focus on areas such as parenting, play, language and learning.

The team also worked closely with the Parent Club team to enhance the website content in relation to early SLC.

The NELC team met with senior staff from third-sector organisations and in some cases attended practitioner training and/or family support sessions. Engagement with Scottish Book Trust, Peeple and Smart Play Network resulted in development and enhancement of existing resources and content, supporting the delivery of these messages to families.

“We’ve really valued the positive expertise you’ve brought...making more explicit the importance of responsiveness in language development, the focus on serve and return interactions, and how timely responses can support language growth. We’ll be making sure these messages come across even more clearly in future training”

– **Scottish Book Trust Senior Early Years Trainer**

Connection with the Scottish Book Trust also resulted in an opportunity to co-design new SLC activity cards for the Bookbug for the Home programme, which encourages practitioners who work with families to inspire and support them to share stories, songs and rhymes in the home.

Figure 9: Example Bookbug for the Home card with text provided by the NELC team



Share

Let's look at one of the books in the kit together and talk about what we see in the pictures. We don't need to read the words. Pause as you read to build anticipation, and to see if I join in to fill in a word or a line.

Watch and wait

What am I interested in? Do I point or gesture to any of the pictures, or make sounds or animal noises?

Respond

Copy my sounds and words, pausing to let me take a turn. Shall we make up our own story about what we see or sing a song about one of the animals or characters I pointed at? I might want to read the book to my teddy or the dog.



Share a story



Images shared with permission from Scottish Book Trust

Contribution to cross-policy working group on the use of screens

In response to professional concerns about screen use by babies, young children and their parents the NELC team contributed to the Scottish Government Promoting Positive Digital Behaviours working group.

The NELC team has been influential in highlighting the need to understand the particular risk and impact of screentime for the early years' population. The involvement and evidence sharing by the NELC team led the working group to commission a gap analysis which confirmed the lack of policy and guidance on screentime for parents of babies and infants under the age of 1.

“The evidence reports collected and issued by the NELC team have been really helpful in our development of policy proposals.” – **Scottish Government lead for Promoting Children and Families Wellbeing**

Next steps

Project continuation

Extension of the NELC project beyond August 2025 into phase 2 will create opportunities for continued communication, connection and influence at all levels of the system.

Within phase two, priority will be given to supporting implementation of identified local and national actions in the Early Years Speech, Language and Communication (SLC) Action Plan, due to be published by Scottish Government in autumn 2025. The action plan is structured around the pillars of **leadership and accountability**, **families and communities** and **skilled and supported workforce**, with a focus throughout on prevention, equity and partnership.

In addition to the activities and impacts described in this phase 1 report, the NELC team has identified some specific connections and impact areas that were not fully explored or developed during phase one, some examples of which are included below.

Inclusion of any of these areas in phase 2 will depend on the capacity of the team and on priority actions determined by the team in collaboration with Scottish Government and in consultation with the agreed hosting organisation.

Future connections

The development of connections and relationships across the system has been a key element of the NELC project. The NELC team engaged with a wide variety of partners at all levels of the system, seeking opportunities to align the wider early years workforce around support for early SLC and to highlight opportunities to support early SLC within existing pathways and family support offers.

In phase 2 of the project, the NELC team would seek to strengthen connections with midwifery, infant mental health services and to explore opportunities to connect with social work services and locally funded third sector and community groups.

Scotland's Health Visiting Action Plan clearly identifies the vital role of Health Visitors in early prevention and intervention of SLC needs. Within phase 2, the NELC team may seek to progress this action in partnership with strategic leaders, considering how to embed SLC key messages in the universal health visiting pathway and exploring opportunities created by the action plan.

In the area of infant and perinatal mental health the NELC team is aware of local and UK wide improvement work focusing on the use of infant behavioural observation by health visitors and infant mental health practitioners. There may be opportunities to highlight and build on connections between early attachment, emotional development and infant voice, and the central role of loving and responsive adult-infant interactions.

Responding to the Early Years SLC Action Plan

Planning for phase 2 of the project will involve balancing the opportunities mentioned above with those from the Early Years SLC Action Plan, due for publication in autumn 2025. This might include further engagement with Public Health Scotland around SLC data, further integration of "Chatting Together" messages into existing services and resources and exploration of opportunities to improve targeted support to under-served families through co-production and community engagement.

In the area of workforce development, the team will focus on implementation and evaluation of workforce development resources including the SLC Knowledge and Skills Matrix and the Language and Communication Supportive Environment guide within a framework of greater strategic alignment of professional learning and standards. The specific nature of what is developed, and the role of the NELC team in phase two will be agreed and undertaken in collaboration with Scottish Government, Education Scotland, NHS Education for Scotland and the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC).

In addition, continued policy engagement will be supported through an agreed alignment between the NELC project and the ECD Transformational Change Programme, with opportunities to extend reach to additional policy areas.