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Making it REAL (2016 – 2023)



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1.0 Executive Summary

This Learning Journey tells the story of Lambeth Early Action Partnership's Making it REAL service. Learn how we improved the home-learning environment for young children and their parents living in areas of greatest deprivation. Find out about the local professionals we trained, the challenges we faced and the evidence that underpinned our early years literacy service.

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Who is this for?

These learnings provide a blueprint for those responsible for improving early literacy skills in their communities. This report will be useful for anyone with a professional or academic interest in communication and language development in early childhood.

The background

Children are at risk of school failure, low self-esteem and poor social skills without solid foundations in language and communication skills. There is evidence that children with ongoing language difficulty achieve lower academically.

Without effective help, a third of children with speech, language and communication difficulties will need treatment for mental health issues later in life. Children with poor vocabulary at age five are twice as likely to experience periods of unemployment as adults.

Children from the most disadvantaged groups have lower language skills than those in the least disadvantaged groups. Children who live in the most deprived areas are part of LEAP's priority population.

Children's learning is a result of interacting with people and their environment from birth. The quality of the home-learning environment has a major impact on a child's development.

Making it REAL (MiR) aims to **improve the home-learning environment** through building parent/carer knowledge and confidence about what they do with their young children to build early literacy skills. It focuses on four strands of literacy: oral language, environmental print, books and early writing.

LEAP offered MiR to all early years settings in the LEAP area. Most participants lived in areas of greatest deprivation, and most children were from Black, Asian and Multiple Ethnic groups.

Headline numbers

Key statistics about Making it REAL. Read more about them in our full Learning Journey:

- 83% (up from 54%) of parents helping children learn new vocabulary more than once a day
- 32% (up from 5%) of parents helping children paint or draw more than seven times a week
- 67% (up from 36%) of parents rhyming with their children more than seven times a week
- 99 practitioners trained to deliver Making It REAL and use REAL messages to inform their practice

2.0 Purpose of this document

LEAP developed this Learning Journey to capture the story of LEAP's Making it REAL service over its lifetime: from its inception to the end of its journey as part of the LEAP programme.

A key focus of a Learning Journey is on implementation: how we delivered the service and the different resources required to do this. Learning Journeys are service summaries, not service evaluations, and are part of a wider suite of LEAP research and learning projects designed to capture insights into our progress towards giving children in the LEAP area a better start in life.

Information contained within this report was taken from national policy and evidence as well as from a variety of internal LEAP documents including:

- service plans
- theories of change
- monitoring, evaluation and learning frameworks
- quarterly narrative reports and service data reports
- workforce and client feedback
- minutes from service reviews and team meetings

Learning Journeys were co-written between service leads and members of the LEAP team. The Key Messages were based on high-level reflections drawn from the available data and from insights gleaned over years of service delivery.

Learning Journeys will be shared with key stakeholders including: the National Lottery Community Fund; local early years commissioners and public health colleagues; service delivery partners; families; and via national public health networks as appropriate. Our hope is that the learning from the LEAP programme can inform future commissioning and programming decisions, and contribute to the wider evidence base about health improvement interventions in the earliest years.

3.0 Background

3.1 What is LEAP?

Lambeth Early Action Partnership (LEAP) is one of five local partnerships which make up 'A Better Start', a national 10-year (2015-2025) test-and-learn programme funded by the National Lottery Community Fund that aims to improve the life chances of babies, very young children, and families. LEAP is a 'collective impact initiative', which means that our services and activities link together and work towards shared goals to improve outcomes for very young children.

3.2 Why is communication, language and literacy development in the early years important?

The importance of early language development and communication in children is well-established: good communication and language skills are an essential part of early childhood development. Children with strong communication skills are better able to interact with others, make friends and have healthy interpersonal relationships.

Children are at risk of school failure, low self-esteem and poor social skills without solid foundations in language and communication skills, and there is evidence that children with ongoing language difficulty achieve lower academically.¹

There is also evidence that without effective help, a third of children with speech, language and communication difficulties will need treatment for mental health issues later in life.² Children with poor vocabulary at age five are twice as likely to experience periods of unemployment as adults.³

They are also more at risk of interacting with the criminal justice system. As many as 71% of sentenced children in the youth justice system between April 2019 and March 2020 had speech, language and communication needs.⁴ The Tickell Review emphasised that children's learning is a result of interacting with people and their environment from birth.⁵

3.3 Barriers and enablers to communication and language development (CLD)

The importance of the home learning environment (HLE) and its impact on child development has been well established.⁶ The quality of the home learning environment has a major impact on a child's development; what parents do is more important than who parents are.⁷

A child's socio-economic circumstances are recognised as a significant barrier to strong communication, language and literacy development. There is poor take up of free early education for two-year-olds and poorer quality early years provision, in parts of the sector, in disadvantaged areas of the UK.⁸ Three quarters of children who experience persistent poverty throughout their early years start school without the language skills they need for learning.⁹

There is "a clear social gradient for language, with children from the most disadvantaged groups having lower language skills than those in the least disadvantaged groups...those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are the least likely to catch up."¹⁰ This is particularly relevant for LEAP's context: those children who live in the most deprived areas are part of LEAP's target population.

With this link between socio-economic circumstances and language development established, it is also very relevant to consider the links between child poverty and ethnicity. Research from the Office of National Statistics explored the correlation between child poverty and educational outcomes, focused on ethnicity.

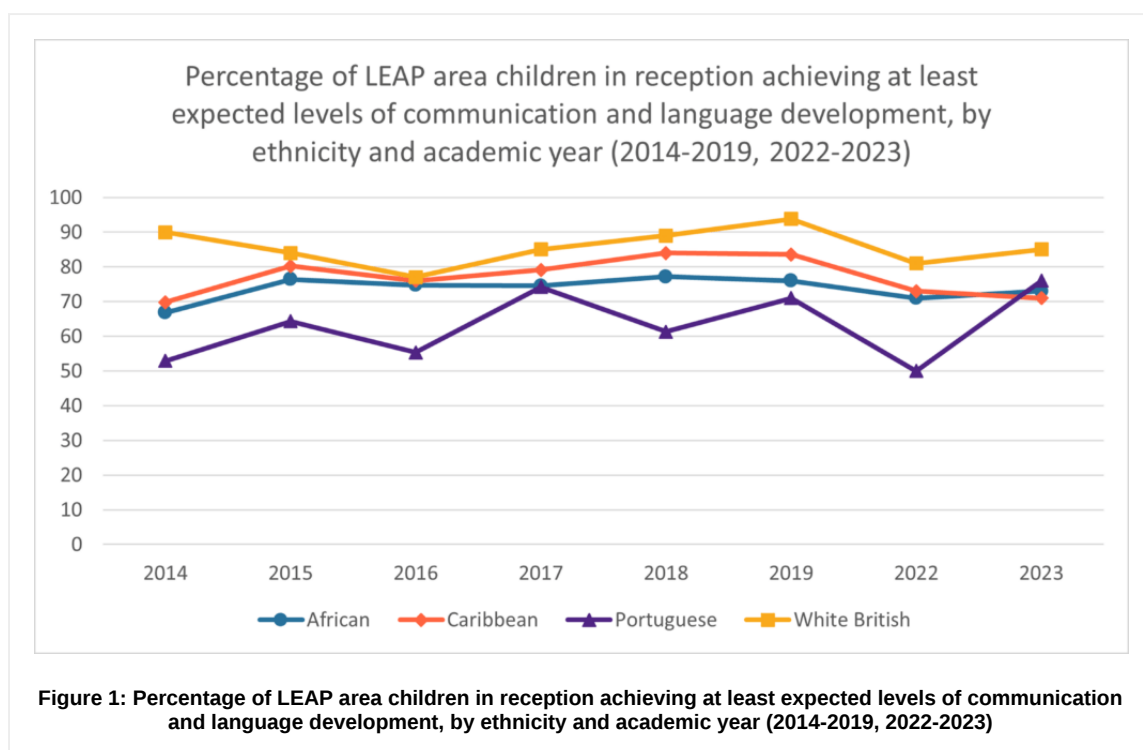
This report found that the likelihood for children in Black households to experience poverty is notable: 30% live in low-income households and 22% live in low income and material deprivation.¹¹ Similarly, Black, Asian and ethnic minority households in the UK are more than twice as likely to live in poverty as their white counterparts, and socioeconomic context has a huge impact on children's development.¹²

The quality of the home-learning environment has a major impact on a child's development; what parents do is more important than who parents are.⁶

3.4 Understanding the level of need

Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) data analysis from the years 2012-2013 to 2017-2018 demonstrates that children from Lambeth are significantly less likely to achieve at least expected communication and language development (CLD) at the end of Reception if they live in the LEAP wards than non-LEAP Lambeth wards. This same report also demonstrates that children eligible for pupil premium (e.g., those children eligible for free school meals) are significantly less likely to achieve at least expected CLD in Reception than children not eligible for pupil premium. Children of non-White British background are significantly less likely to achieve expected CLD than their White British peers.¹³

Figure 1 shows the percentage of children in reception in the LEAP area who achieved a 'good level of development' in CLD in 2014-2019 and 2022-2023.¹⁴ It clearly demonstrates the difference between ethnic groups. It is one example of how data is used to support LEAP's aim to prioritise families from Black, Asian and other minority ethnic groups.



4.0 LEAP's Making it Real (MiR) service

To address the barriers to good communication and language development in young children and to narrow the gap in outcomes, Making it REAL (MiR) was selected as one of the services that comprised LEAP's CLD strand of work.

Making It REAL (Raising Early Achievement in Literacy) is an evidence-based programme created by Professor Peter Hannon and Professor Cathy Nutbrown based on their research at Sheffield University.¹⁵

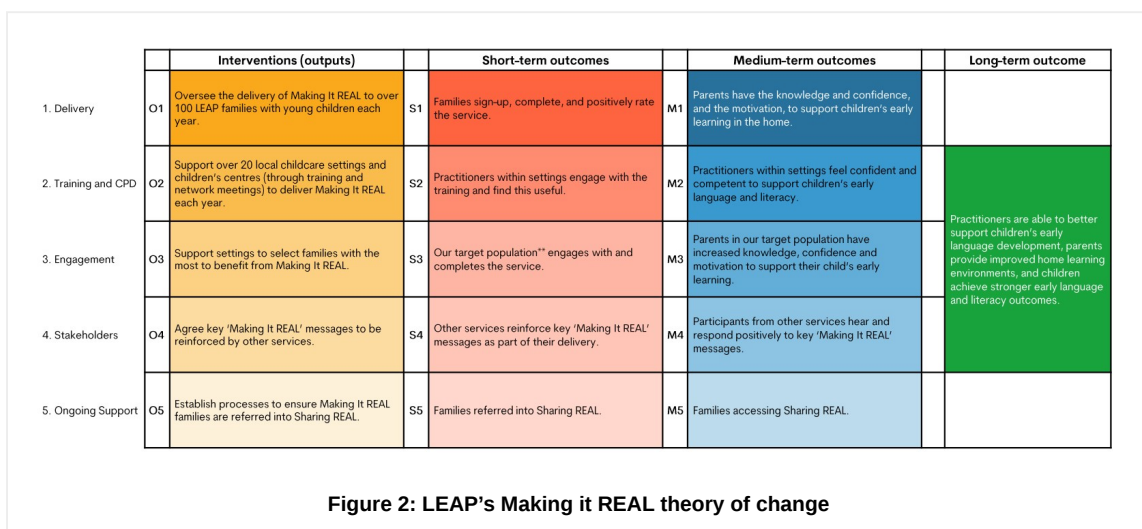
MiR aims to improve the home learning environment through building parent/carer knowledge and confidence about what they do with their young children to build early literacy skills. It focuses on four strands of literacy: oral language, environmental print, books and early writing. The ORIM Framework, which stands for Opportunities, Recognition, Interaction and Modelling, provides the framework for embedding the four strands of literacy.

To achieve this, practitioners:

- Identify families who would most benefit from the service
- Deliver four home visits with families in which parents are supported to implement the four strands of literacy using the ORIM framework
- Deliver literacy events, which consist of practical activities connected to the four strands of literacy, for identified families and all other families in those settings

LEAP offered the Making It REAL service to all Early Years settings within the LEAP area. It also offered it to those outside the area whose children reside within the LEAP geographical area boundaries. Making It REAL training is available nationally through the National Children's Bureau.¹⁶

LEAP developed a Theory of Change (ToC) for MiR (Figure 2) which identified three long-term outcomes for the service: practitioners are better able to better support children's early language development; parents provide improved home learning environments; children achieve stronger early language and literacy outcomes.



Two Lambeth Early Years Schools and Educational Improvement Consultants oversaw service delivery and acted as leads for LEAP's Communication and Language Development strand of work. A full list of colleagues involved in the planning and implementation of Making It REAL at LEAP is provided in the Appendix.

4.1 Further context for this Learning Journey

In recent years, the Early Years sector has had significant challenges, with COVID-19 having a long-term impact.

In December 2022, Ofsted's annual report noted that "As children return to early years settings, we are seeing the longer-term impact of the pandemic and the effect that missing early education has had on them.

It is now clearer where children have fallen behind, and what longer-term challenges providers face in helping them to catch up."¹⁷ The capacity of practitioners has been stretched by the increased needs (such as delayed speech and language or delayed development of age-appropriate social skills) of the children who attend their setting.

Alongside this, the Early Years sector has been facing recruitment and retention issues. Underfunding has led to low wages, which in turn has led to fewer people choosing Early Years education as a career path. Additionally, the number of Level 1 and Level 2 (more junior) qualified staff has increased in settings, with a decrease in the number of Level 3 (more senior) qualified staff.¹⁸

These ongoing staffing challenges have proved to be a barrier to implementing programmes, such as Making It REAL, within local settings. Ofsted's Annual Report reported ongoing challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified staff which were exacerbated by the pandemic.¹⁷

4.2 Service delivery

This learning journey will outline the implementation of Making It REAL from 2016-2023 in local settings and in Lambeth Children's Centres. MiR had four phases of service delivery over its lifetime at LEAP. These are:

- 2016-2017: Pilot phases 1 and 2
- 2017-2019: MiR in early years settings
- 2019-2021: the Covid-19 years
- 2021-2023: final phase

The report will also provide detail about delivering MiR in children's centres from 2016 – 2023, and about how this offer was widened post-pandemic.

This section will explain each phase and share key implementation reflections.

4.3 2016-2017: PILOTS 1 and 2

4.3.1 Overview of service delivery

The first pilot for Making It REAL was held within one of the LEAP-area children's centres. Seven staff were trained to deliver the service. Feedback from families and practitioners was positive, thus making the case for a second pilot to further test the model over an academic year and in different settings.

In the second pilot two days of training took place in October 2016. 15 practitioners were trained to deliver the service, and three children's centres and six Private, Voluntary and Independent nurseries (PVI) took part. All but one sustained the project to the end of the academic year; one PVI nursery was unable to continue due to the trained staff leaving. As an incentive, settings received £100 per child taking part in the project.

Network meetings, where early years practitioners met to discuss and review successes and areas for development, were introduced. These network meetings supported the quality of delivery.

4.3.2 Reach and Engagement

In the first pilot, 26 children were engaged to take part over a short period. Of these, 18 children had the one home visit offered, and 11 children attended the two literacy events held. One of these events, at Brixton library, attracted 20 REAL project children and families as well as an additional 20 families not receiving home visits.

In the second pilot with PVIs and Children's Centres, 46 children in total were registered to take part over an academic year. Of these, 18 children completed four home visits and attended two literacy events; in total, 128 home visits were undertaken. 26 children (57%) who participated in the service lived in the LEAP area. 48% of children lived in areas of greatest deprivation (IMD quintile 1), with a further 39% living in the 2nd IMD quintile.

4.3.3 Outcomes and feedback

During the second pilot, practitioners collected information from parents about their home learning environment using a detailed questionnaire written internally by NCB colleagues. This information, supplemented by written reports from practitioners, supported the overall progress of parents in relation to knowledge and levels of participation.

Parents who participated demonstrated improvements in the home learning environment they created for their children. Some of the progress is demonstrated in [Figure 3](#):

	Before taking part in Making It REAL	After taking part in Making It REAL
Parents report reading with children every day	33%	74%
Parents report never reading with children	18%	0%
Parents report making marks, making things, painting and drawing every day	29%	70%
Parents report never mark-making etc.	25%	0%

Figure 3: Percentage of parents and carers who reported daily reading with children and mark-making before and after taking part in Making it REAL

Feedback from parents who participated was positive and some said the following:

The home visits gave me lots of inspiration and tips about using the environment around me, like when I go shopping.

Very helpful for me, especially as my English is not very good.

We loved it! Can I be on it again next year with his little sister?

I feel this project has really helped both me and my child.

4.3.4 Strengths and challenges

Strengths

Most settings sustained the project until the end of the academic year, demonstrating their commitment to the approach.

Network meetings were well-received as practitioners used them to learn from and support each other.

Challenges

The quality of delivery varied across setting. Some required intensive support from LEAP's Lambeth Early Years Schools and Educational Improvement Consultant to sustain activity during this period.

4.3.5 Test and learn: changes made to improve delivery and engagement

As LEAP's priority audience is children aged 3 and under, it was necessary to develop MiR resources for this age group as the current resources were for children aged three and over. Draft materials were devised by staff from NCB's Early Childhood Unit (ECU) with support from LEAP's Lambeth Early Years Schools and Educational Improvement Consultants.

Case studies and content of home visits fed into these materials, which included new resource sheets on language development and books, plus new developmental jigsaws, which identify children's possible milestones. The new material was included in training for the 2017-2018 year.

These pilots also identified the crucial role of LEAP's Lambeth Early Years Schools and Educational Improvement Consultants in building relationships with practitioners, maintaining the project's momentum throughout the year and supporting practitioners in their planning and delivery of both home visits and literacy events. This was found to be particularly true of private nurseries.

During the pilots, it was identified that to have the greatest impact, a more rigorous approach was needed to ensure completion of four home visits and two events for all children; as a result the financial incentive (£100 per child) was tied more closely to the completion of the project. Expectations were set out clearly in written agreements and close monitoring of progress was done across the year.

For LEAP to report against progress for children with English as an additional language, an extra question about a child's first language was added to the child observation form. This enabled LEAP to report against progress for children with English as an additional language, to ensure the needs of this group were being met.

It was recognised that siblings were also present at home visits and literacy events and, as they were benefiting from the input, it was decided they needed to be included in participation numbers.

At this stage of the implementation, staff turnover at participating children's centres and nurseries was a risk to successful delivery. As noted later in this report, this risk did increase across the time of the programme at LEAP and had a significant impact on its delivery.

4.4 2017-2019: Making It REAL in early years settings

4.4.1 Overview of service delivery

Following on from the two pilots, the service was offered to over 20 settings who had children that lived in the LEAP area.

Phone and email contact was made with all eligible settings; an additional six settings signed up to participate in 2017. In 2018 there were the same number of settings as in the second pilot phase, although there had been some changes, with some settings dropping out due to staff capacity issues and some new settings joining.

There were 18 practitioners trained in October 2017. 14 took part in the project and four were unable to take on the project due to staff turnover.

Network meetings continued and were co-led by the nursery schools.

4.4.2 Reach and engagement

In this phase, MiR reached 41 children in early years settings in 2017-18, and 51 in 2018-19, the majority of whom lived in the LEAP area. [Figure 4](#) demonstrates the increase both in reach and the proportion of those reached who lived in the LEAP area from the first year of this phase to the second.

4.4.3 Outcomes and feedback

To measure the impact of the service, we asked parents and carers how often they read to their child ([Figure 4](#)), how often they taught them songs, poems or nursery rhymes ([Figure 5](#)), and the start and end of their participation. [Figure 4](#) shows a substantial improvement in the rate of parents/carers reading to children, with 94% reading at least several times per week after engaging with Making it REAL, compared with just 60% before engaging. The percentage of parents and carers reading to their children more than once a day remained unchanged.

[Figure 5](#) shows an improvement in the frequency with which parents taught their children songs, poems and nursery rhymes. There was a notable increase, from 27% to 47%, in parents and carers who reported that they did this seven times a week or constantly.

The contrast between this and the lack of change in the equivalent response for [Figure 5](#) may indicate the difference in the time demands that these activities place on the parent or carer, with reading typically being a standalone activity. Songs, poems and nursery rhymes can be taught in parallel with or as part of routine daily activities.

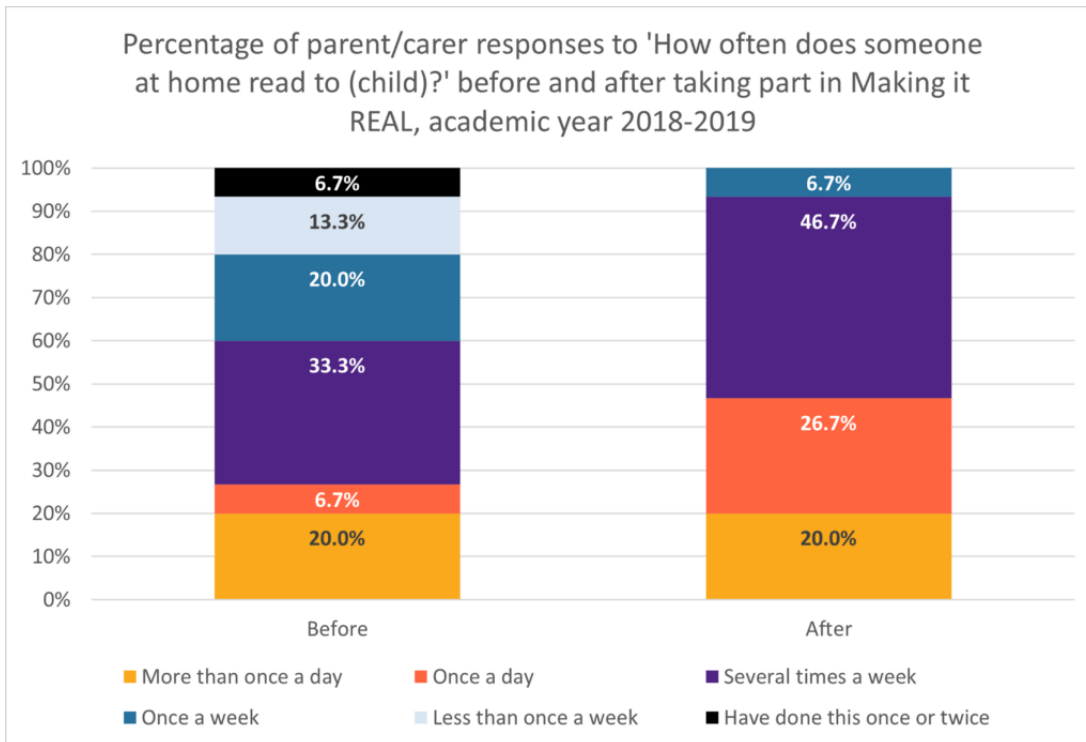


Figure 4: Percentage of parent/carer responses to 'How often does someone at home read to (child)?' before and after taking part in Making it REAL, academic year 2018-2019

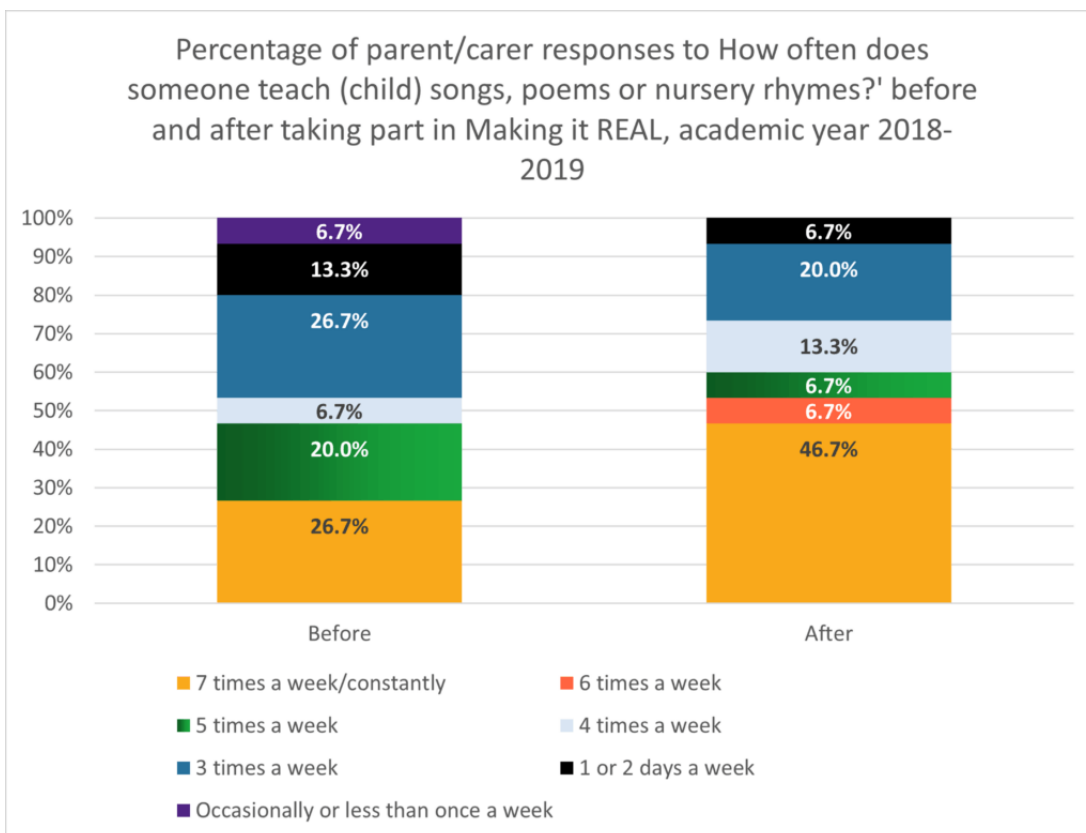


Figure 5: Percentage of parent/carer responses to 'How often does someone teach (child) songs, poems or nursery rhymes?' before and after taking part in Making it REAL, academic year 2018-2019

4.4.4 Strengths and challenges

Strengths

During this phase, cash incentives for settings were increased to £200 per child which was successful in helping to recruit settings. Funds were used for supporting release of staff, the purchase of equipment and enabling more creative events.

In 2018-2019, two high-quality maintained nurseries continued their participation in the project and took on some additional responsibilities, which included working with a higher number of families within their own settings, as well as supporting local PVI settings with the quality of their home visits and literacy events.

Network meetings were useful for supporting the quality of home visits as they provided a space for sharing good practice.

Challenges

1. Gaps in practitioner knowledge about best early literacy practice

This was a challenge reported regularly in routine reports and was primarily related to staff at PVI settings. The LEAP team addressed this through network meetings as well as by providing personalised support from staff from the two maintained nursery schools and the Lambeth Early Years Schools and Educational Improvement Consultants.

2. Staff capacity began to have an impact on Making It REAL's success at LEAP

The Lambeth Early Years Schools and Educational Improvement Consultants began to find that settings needed more persuading to take part. Staff mobility and capacity issues were already starting to affect the ability of practitioners to carry out home visits at this stage of the programme. The success of offering financial incentives to recruit settings lessened as issues around staff capacity began to have more of an impact on them.

4.4.5 Test and Learn: changes made to improve delivery and engagement

During these two years, it became evident that LEAP's CLD strand leads needed to work with settings to support implementation and the quality of delivery. To support this another member of staff was recruited to take on this specific role, which was established for the start of the 2019-2020 academic year.

Over these two years, discussions took place about the effectiveness of the measures used to assess impact. It has been consistently acknowledged that paperwork is a barrier to practitioner engagement and participation; for paperwork to be as effective and efficient, it needs to be as streamlined as possible.

Introduction of new measures

At the beginning of the 2018-2019 year, the measures used by Making It REAL were changed and practitioners began using the Home Learning Environment (HLE) Index. There were pros and cons about using the HLE Index, as it measured elements of the home learning environment that aren't part of Making It REAL. However, as it is a validated measure, it was decided to be most useful for assessing impact.

This continued to be used for the duration of the programme. A version of the HLE Index for ages 18 months to 3 years was also introduced at the beginning of the 2019-2020 academic year. The HLE Index measures the frequency with which children engage in each of the following activities: being read to, painting and drawing, going to the library, playing with letters or numbers, learning activities with the alphabet, learning activities with numbers or shapes, and playing with songs, poems or nursery rhymes.¹⁹

All families were asked to complete a HLE Index questionnaire at the beginning of the programme and at the end.

4.5 2019-2021: the Covid-19 years

4.5.1 Overview of service delivery

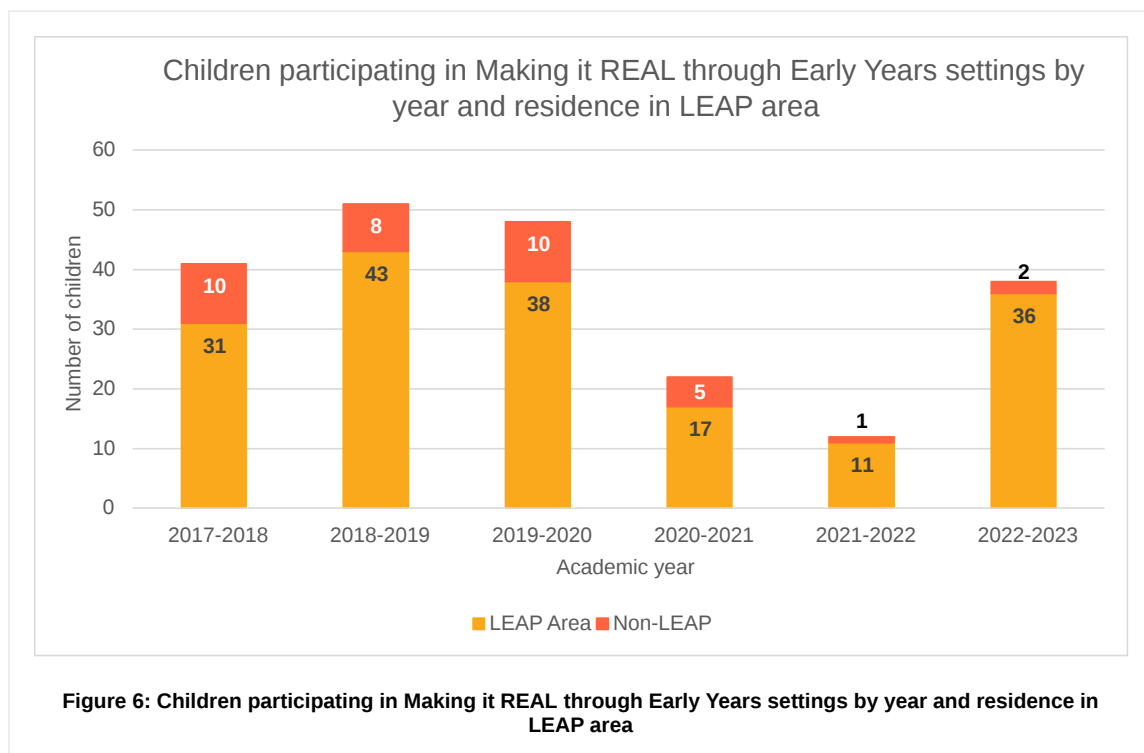
The 2019-2020 academic year began with a two-day training, delivered by an NCB associate, for practitioners new to Making It REAL. 14 practitioners attended. Nine settings continued and six new settings joined. A maintained nursery school continued to give support to other settings to strengthen the quality of home visits and events.

It was planned that 80 children would be enrolled in the programme, but in the 2019-2020 academic year only 48 children signed up. It was hard to sustain local momentum, build capacity and improve quality in local settings, especially for smaller PVI settings.

At the beginning of the academic year, LEAP's Early Literacy Quality Improvement Officer was appointed to add capacity to the team. Their role was to build up the capacity and professional knowledge of practitioners. This included facilitating all network meetings and supporting settings on a one-to-one basis when required.

4.5.2 Reach and engagement

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic led to significant changes in how Making It REAL was implemented. Home visits and literacy events were unable to take place due to the lockdown imposed by the UK government. Disruption continued throughout the 2020-2021 academic year, resulting in far fewer children attending settings which impacted the number of children able to engage with MiR. The decline in numbers of participating children is illustrated in [Figure 6](#).



4.5.3 Outcomes and feedback

Since home visits and literacy events did not take place, practitioners were asked to report on how the restrictions associated with the pandemic changed the way they worked with families. Some offered these reflections:

I actually had more participation from parent and child during the online session, as the parent stayed and didn't disappear to do household tasks.

Delivery of REAL was extremely difficult even with virtual meetings. I needed to keep it brief, engaging and purposeful.

Video story sessions, activity newsletters and craft packs with telephone calls to talk through possibilities and strategies for engaging children were some of the things we did to help overcome the challenges.

4.5.4 Strengths and challenges

Challenges

Home visits and literacy events did not happen from March 2020 until the start of the 2021-2022 academic year (September 2021). This had a considerable impact on the delivery of the programme. Families involved during these two years had a different experience than was intended. Some families did not engage in the online sessions offered by practitioners, due to other stresses associated with COVID-19 lockdowns and government restrictions.

Data collection from settings was extremely difficult. Practitioners struggled to complete the required paperwork with families and/or failed to submit the paperwork to LEAP. This led to an inaccurate picture of how families engaged with the service over these two years and the impact that was achieved in these difficult circumstances.

Strengths

Because of government restrictions, the delivery of the remaining home visits and literacy events were replaced by remote contact and support sessions by practitioners over phone or video calls. These were complemented by literacy activity packs, resourced and delivered by LEAP's Early Literacy Quality Improvement Officer.

As the COVID-19 pandemic progressed and national restrictions and lockdowns continued, training and delivery methods were adapted by an NCB associate, to facilitate remote, face-to-face and blended options. This agile approach to maintaining service delivery during a difficult time was a huge success for the service.

Recruiting the Early Literacy Quality Improvement Officer proved to be an effective way to support settings with delivery and it was evident that this role was having impact on practitioner knowledge.

Network meetings were continued online during this time and were well attended by practitioners.

4.5.5 Test and Learn: changes made to improve delivery and engagement

As a result of Covid-19 restrictions, children's centre staff were unable to undertake home visits and instead implemented 1:1 "high-quality contacts" which could take place within the children's centre or another local outdoor space.

4.6 2021-2023: the final phase

4.6.1 Overview of service delivery

The LEAP CLD strand leads reflected upon the Early Literacy Quality Improvement Officer role after it had been vacated. Because of its success, it was developed further. At the beginning of the 2021-2022 academic year (September 2021), LEAP's Communication, Language and Literacy Programme Manager role was created and appointed to. This role included taking responsibility for the planning and implementation of Making It REAL, including writing narrative reports and collecting, inputting and analysing data.

Very few settings had the capacity to undertake the programme, due to lack of permanent staff or low staffing capacity. They were unable to release staff to undertake home visits. Two settings participated independently for the full programme during this year. These settings had 7 children in total participate and complete the programme, which is far fewer than previous years.

LEAP's Shared Measurement System, which identified a common set of measurement tools across the whole LEAP programme was introduced in October 2021. This streamlined the required paperwork and made measurement of engagement and impact more uniform.

4.6.2 Reach and engagement

Engagement from families based in local settings was vastly improved, compared to the previous three years. 38 children participated in the programme, 36 of which lived in the LEAP area. Of the 24 children who had four home visits, 22 of them lived in the LEAP area. The number of children reached between 2022-2023 increased because LEAP's Communication, Language and Literacy Manager undertook the home visits instead of practitioners within the settings. This increase can be seen in [Figure 4](#).

4.6.3 Outcomes and feedback

Feedback from attendees of network meetings illustrates that they continued to be useful forums for sharing ideas and experiences. Two participants said the following:

Updates were clear and concise and it was purposeful.

...(I) felt informed and ready for next steps.

4.6.4 Strengths and challenges

Strengths

Engagement from families based in local settings in the academic year 2022-23 was vastly improved, compared to the previous two academic years.

All home visits were completed in person in 2022-23. Literacy events were well organised, with a high proportion of Making It REAL families attending and strong engagement from parents. Network meetings were successful opportunities for practitioners to share their ideas and experiences and develop their knowledge and understanding.

Delivery challenges

One of the settings that signed up for the new approach found it challenging to engage due to other pressures and staffing issues and did not complete the programme. Two of the three families, offered the programme, subsequently did not participate due to family or housing issues. The other family was moved into permanent housing outside Lambeth and was therefore unable to continue.

A change was made to how visits were recorded. An online spreadsheet was established for each practitioner, on which a summary of each visit was written. It was intended that practitioners would use this information to reinforce the learning in the setting. However, practitioners found it increasingly difficult to find the time to engage with this feedback.

Engagement challenges

Cancellation of visits had an impact on the programme timeframe and the time it took for the CLD Programme Manager to implement home visits over the year. Overall, 27 visits were cancelled and rescheduled for another time. This is an important factor in the consideration of time commitment required from practitioners. Staff within settings are far less likely to have flexibility to reschedule and will be working to a tighter timeframe. Cancellations were mostly made by those families who required 4pm visits due to work commitments. These families were also the least likely to engage in literacy events.

4.6.5 Test and Learn: changes made to improve delivery and engagement

The Communication and Language team, in liaison with NCB colleagues, needed to make changes to the way Making It REAL was offered to settings, due to low uptake.

The overall objective of the changes to the programme was to increase the number of families and children participating in the Making It REAL programme. LEAP's Communication, Language and Literacy Programme Manager was deployed into six settings, to work directly with families, which contrasts with the earlier approach of settings working directly with families.

Changes made:

1. LEAP's Communication, Language and Literacy Programme Manager would complete home visits with identified families.
2. LEAP's Communication, Language and Literacy Programme Manager would liaise with practitioners to build on what has happened at each home visit, therefore increasing practitioner professional knowledge.
3. LEAP's Communication, Language and Literacy Programme Manager would work with practitioners to plan and organise two literacy events, giving practitioners the opportunity to model the REAL principles that underpin the programme with their families.

Settings were approached in June and July 2022 to recruit them to the new approach. Settings were prioritised using the criteria of a high number of LEAP children and existing relationships with LEAP Communication and Language services. Having a balance between Private, Voluntary, and Independent settings (PVI)s, nurseries within primary schools, and maintained nursery schools, were also considered. It was also a requirement for a practitioner from each setting to attend the two-day training held in September 2022, and to attend network meetings.

Following this, these changes were trialled within two settings. The settings available to participate in the trial were limited to those with staff members trained in Making It REAL. Both settings found it very difficult to recruit families due to low staffing capacity and

availability of parents who work. This prevented the trial from going ahead in a way that would allow an evaluation of strengths and challenges before the new approach began with six settings in September 2022.

4.7 Children’s centres: widening the offer

Because children’s centres do not consistently see the same families, we reviewed their participation with MiR separately to other settings who provide care and education to the same families in an ongoing basis. MiR delivery in children’s centres ran from 2016 – 2023. From 2016 – 2020 it was run within LEAP-area children’s centres only and from 2020 – 2023 it was rolled out to all children’s centres in Lambeth.

4.7.1 Test and Learn: changes made to improve delivery and engagement

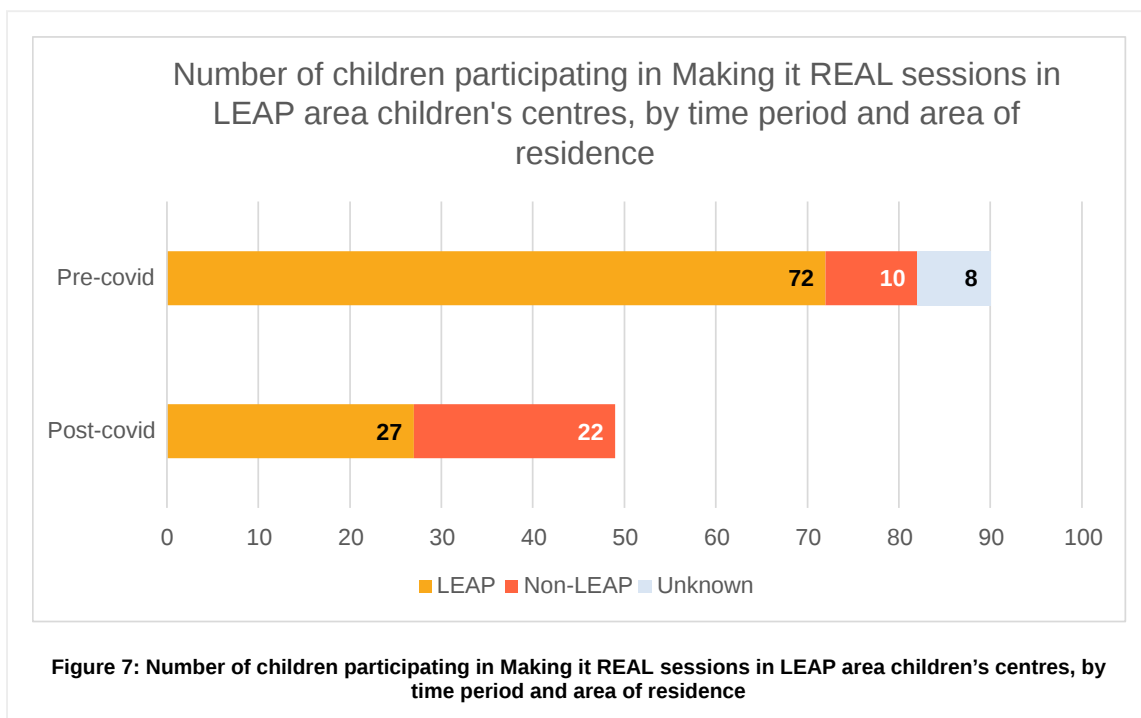
As a result of the pandemic and staffing capacity, there were changes to expectations around the implementation of the programme from 2020 onwards. Instead of visiting families in their homes, sessions were conducted in the children’s centres. These were termed as ‘high-quality contacts’ and criteria were agreed by staff at NCB to ensure fidelity to the Making It REAL model. These criteria were:

- Modelling an activity
- Provision of resources
- Quality discussion with parents

4.7.2 Reach and engagement

Over the span of the service delivered in children’s centres, 133 families took part, with 81 having four high-quality contacts with a practitioner, and 12 completing four high-quality contacts and three literacy events.

Figure 7 demonstrates a decrease in numbers of participating children from the three academic years prior to the pandemic (up to and including 2019-20) to those following the pandemic (2020-21 onwards).

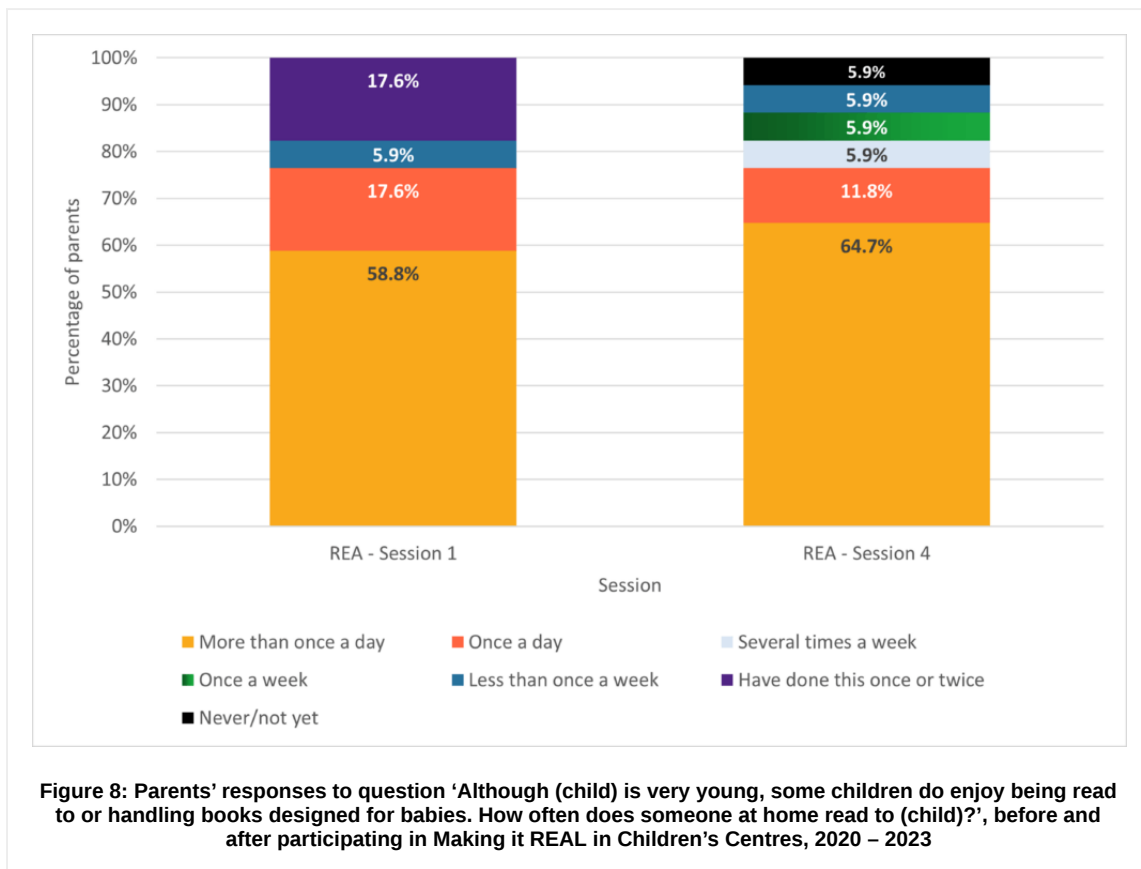


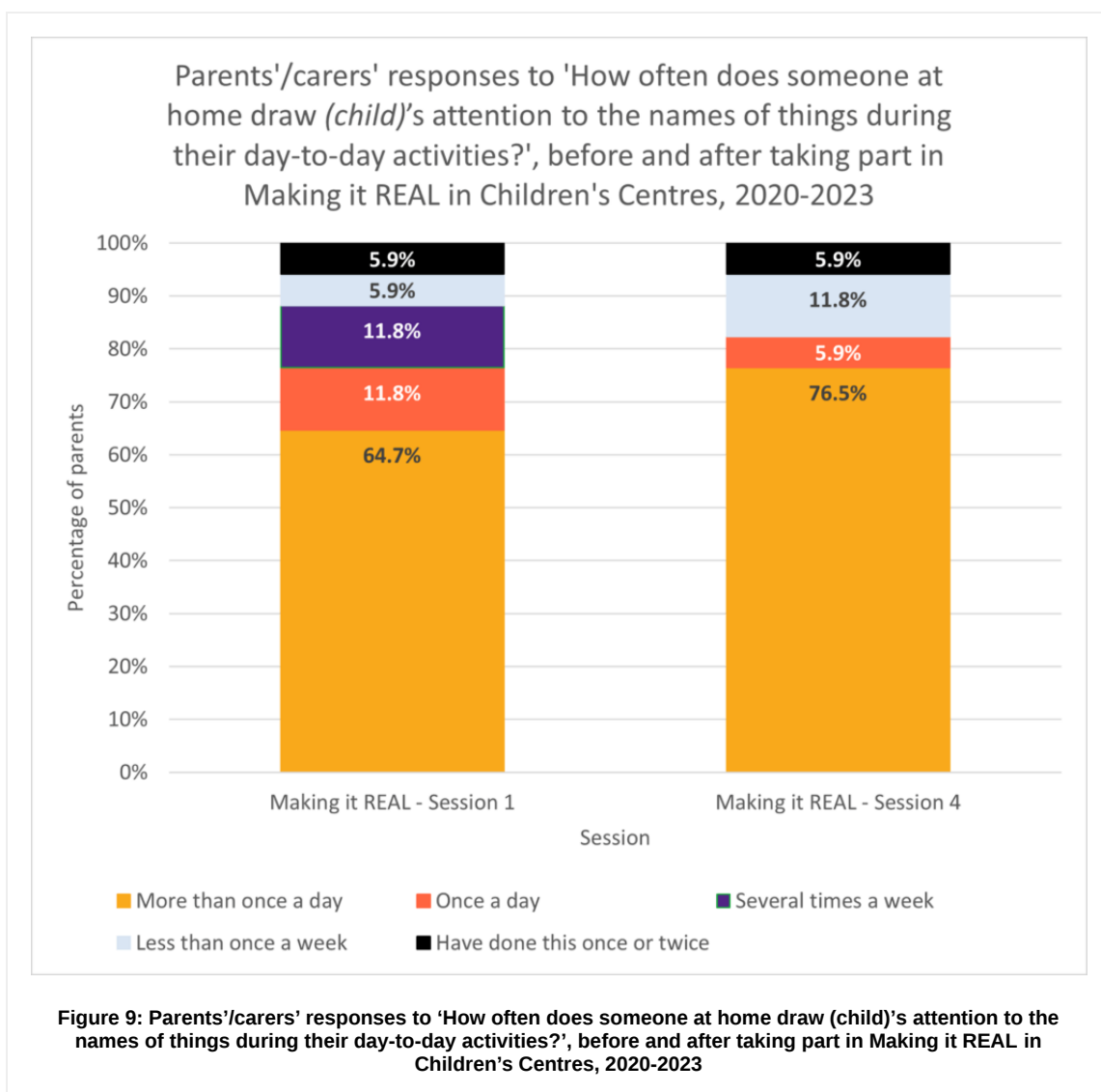
4.7.3 Outcomes and feedback

Based on the positive impact of the work, the Early Years Parenting and Commissioning Lead and Children's Centre Strategic Lead decided to make MiR a core offer for all children's centres in Lambeth.

Following involvement in the service there is an increase in the percentage of parents reading to their child more than once a day, from 59% to 65% (Figure 8). There is also an increase in parents drawing a child's attention to the names of things during their day-to-day activities more than once a day, from 65% to 77% (Figure 9).

There are discrepancies regarding other responses, with some parents appearing to have decreased their frequency of doing these activities. This could be due to different factors: a change of circumstances and/or other matters taking priority – or being more honest with practitioners after developing a trusting relationship with them.





4.7.4 Strengths and challenges

Strengths

All the children's centres were involved in the programme and not receiving LEAP funding. Consequently, they were able to work with a wider range of families who were from vulnerable target groups and/or living in vulnerable situations.

Literacy events were well organised and were carefully themed around the four strands of literacy. Often, practitioners planned and carried out literacy events together.

Initially, network meetings were well attended by staff from those children's centres that were involved.

Making It REAL continues to be delivered across Lambeth children's centres.

Challenges

Data collection from children's centre practitioners was a significant challenge. Often, practitioners found it difficult to prioritise paperwork submission due to time pressures. The process for practitioners to submit their LEAP paperwork was reviewed several times and simplified, however it remained a challenge throughout the programme.

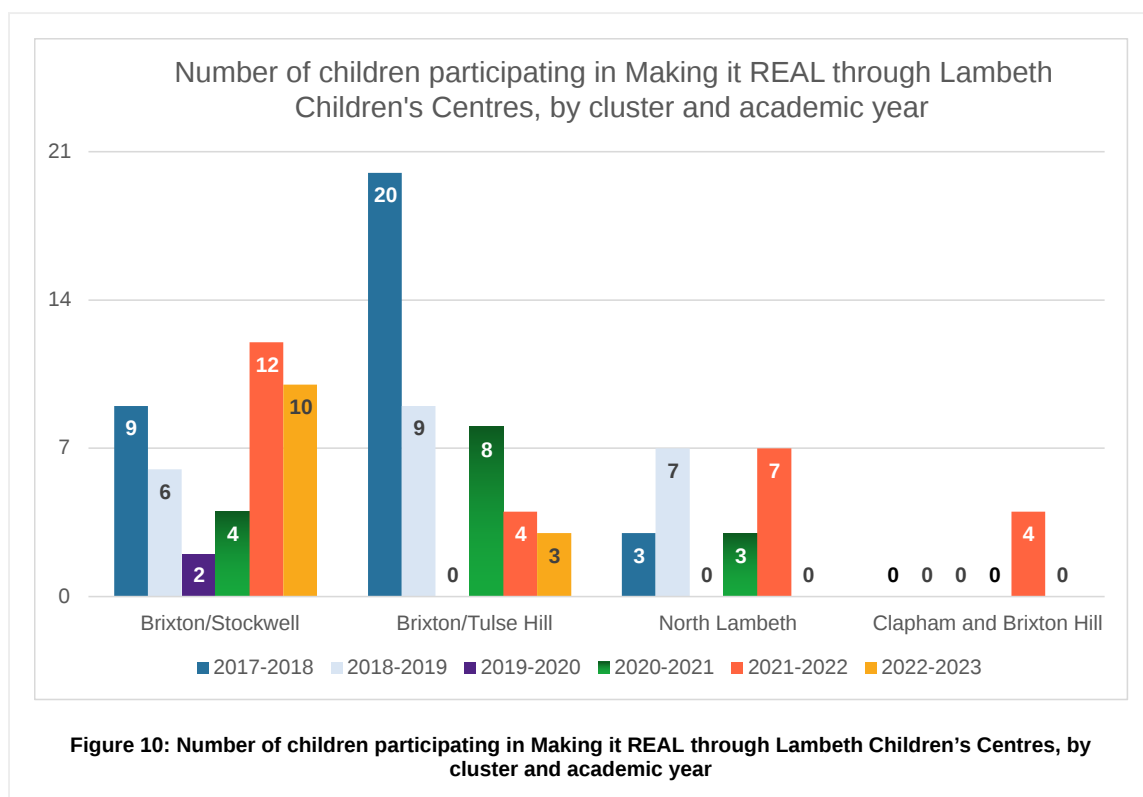
Budget has been an issue for children's centres and has had a considerable impact upon the quality of resources provided to families. Acknowledging Making It REAL's focus on 'low-cost' and 'no-cost' resources, provision of some resources is still central to the programme. Without budget ring-fenced for these purposes, this is difficult for practitioners to fully implement.

In 2019, the children's centres undertook restructuring, and staff capacity changed. This led to a decrease in attendance at network meetings.

There had been inconsistency in the use of the ORIM framework and the jigsaws of development, due to a lack of knowledge and confidence in their use. As these are key components to the programme, this had compromised the quality of sessions provided to families. More regular training and support is required.

Staffing capacity and staff absences have made a significant impact on the efficiency of delivery. The original expectation was that each cluster of children's centres would complete the programme with at least seven families.

Data indicates that this expectation was met inconsistently across the LEAP area. [Figure 10](#) demonstrates that clusters met this expectation in just one third of instances (8 of 24), although in a few instances they exceeded it by a considerable margin.



5.0 Overall service outcomes

LEAP's MiR service sought to achieve three longer-term aims as outlined in the Theory of change (Figure 2):

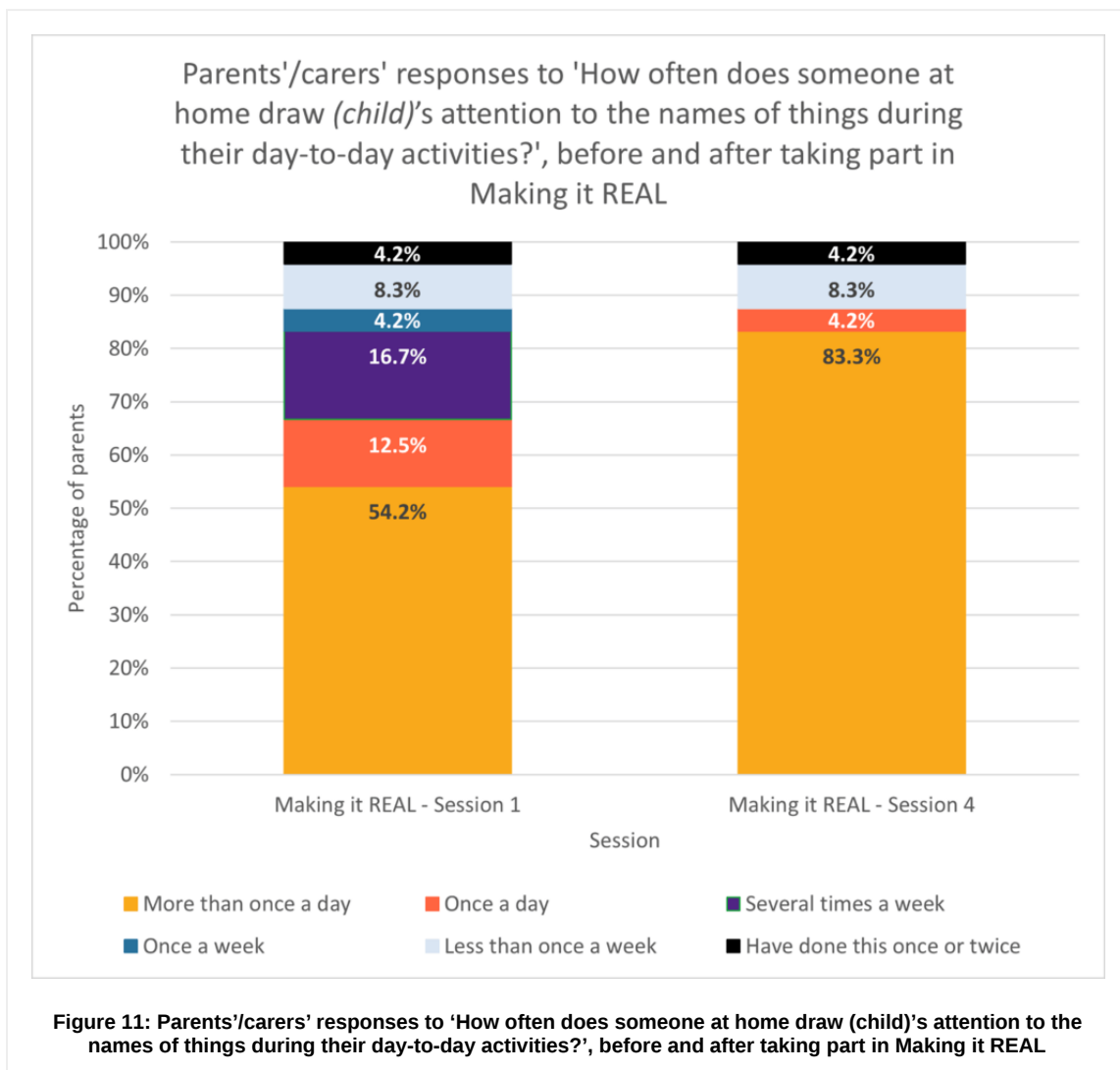
1. Practitioners are better able to better support children's early language development
2. Parents provide improved home learning environments
3. Children achieve stronger early language and literacy outcomes

Based on data collected over the lifetime of the service, it is possible to reflect on three of the five medium term outcomes identified in the ToC, which will help assess whether the service achieved its overall aims:

M1: Parents have the knowledge and confidence, and the motivation, to support children's early learning in the home

We measured this using the Home Learning Environment Index which asks parents and carers at the first and last sessions how often they engaged in behaviours identified as supporting children's early learning in the home. This included naming things around them to help children learn new vocabulary, creating opportunities for mark-making and singing songs and rhymes.

Following engagement with MiR, parents report an increase in naming things around them to help children learn new vocabulary more than once a day, from 54% at the first session to 83% at the last session (Figure 11). Parents report an increase in supporting their children to paint or draw at home more than 7 times a week, from 5% at the first session to 32% at the last session (Figure 12), and they also report an increase in teaching songs, poems and rhymes more than 7 times a week, from 36% at the first session to 67% at the last session (Figure 13).



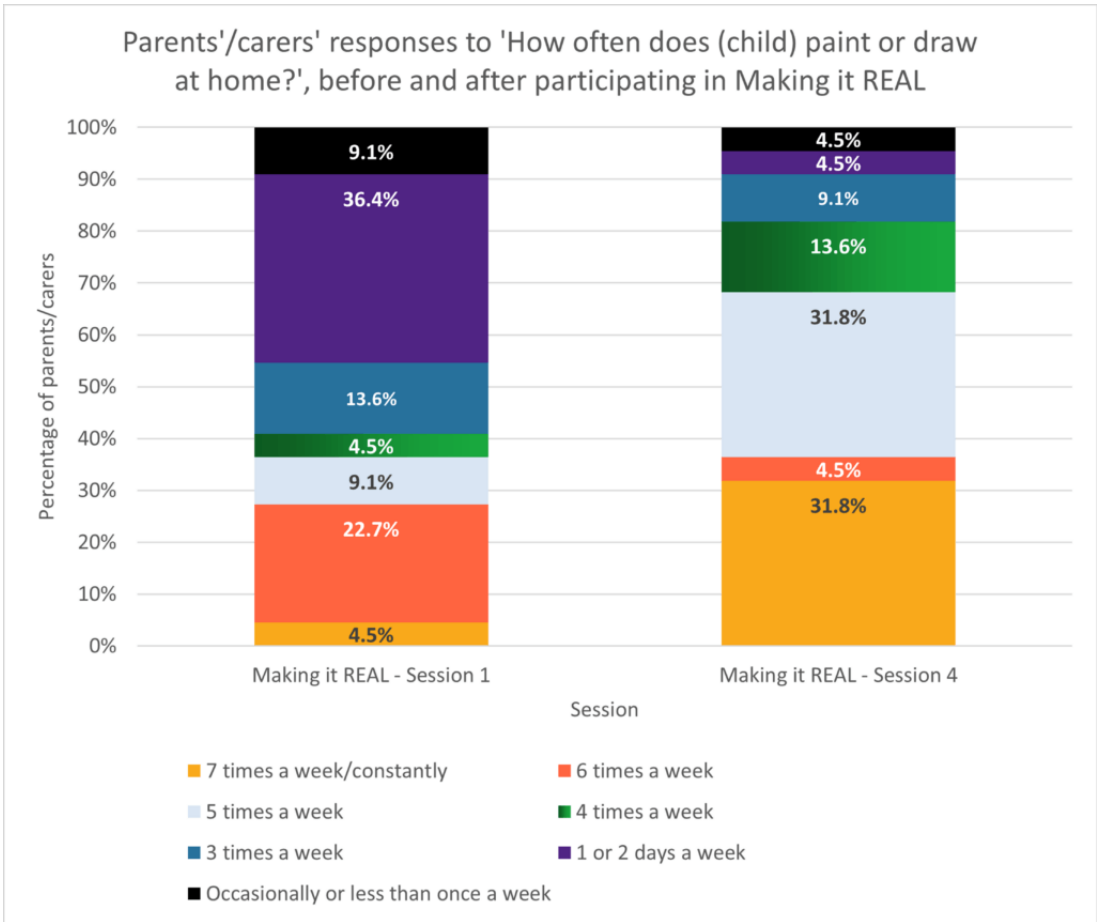
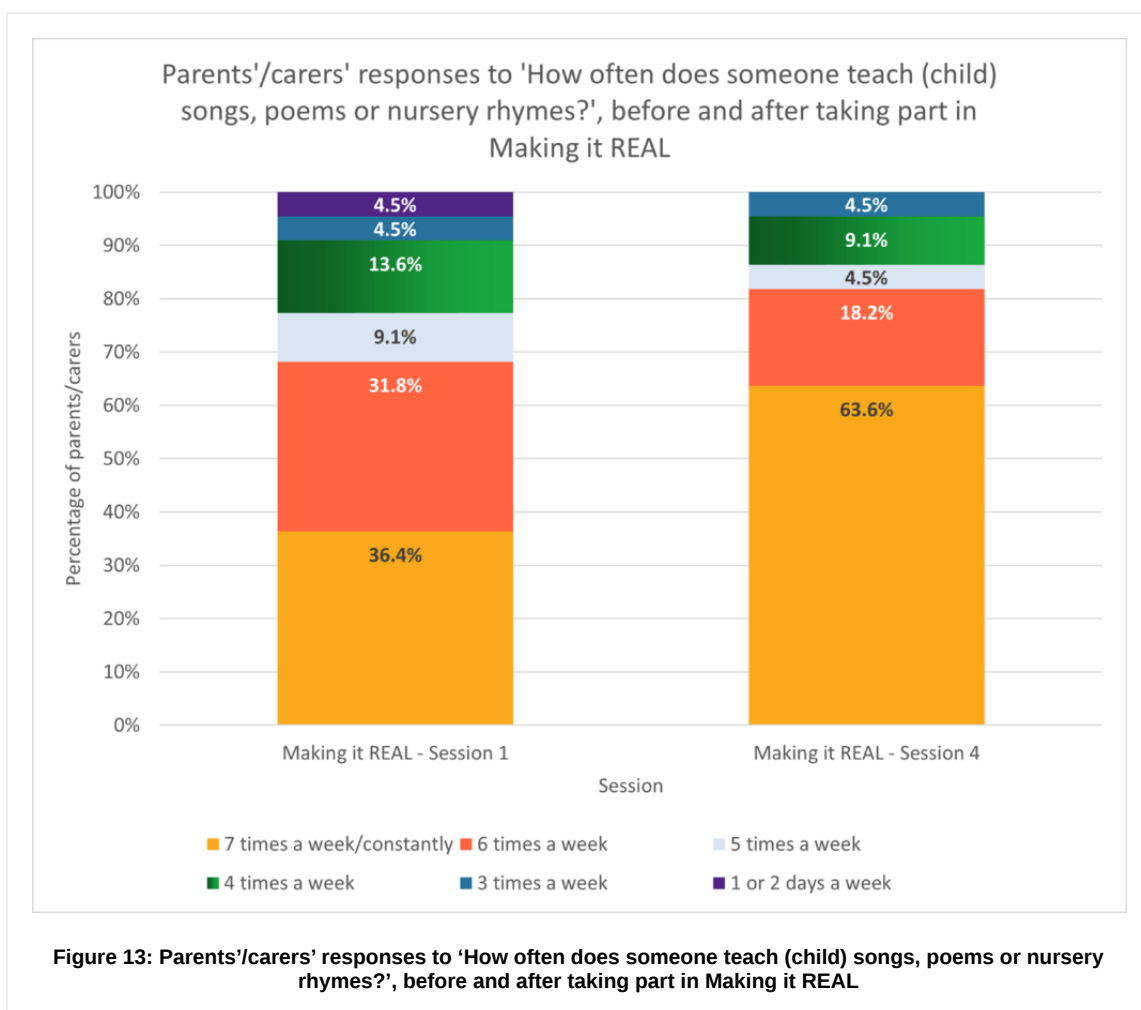


Figure 12: Parents'/carers' responses to 'How often does (child) paint or draw at home?', before and after participating in Making it REAL



M2: Practitioners within settings feel confident and competent to support children's early language and literacy

Feedback collected after training indicates that practitioners feel confident and competent in supporting children's early language development. 99 practitioners were trained to deliver Making It REAL and use REAL messages to inform their practice.

Some participants offered this feedback about MiR training:

Really detailed and useful and I am looking forward to applying what I've learned into practice.

This will be my first time doing home visits, after the training I feel more confidence of taking part on this great project.

Very enjoyable. Liked meeting other people in the EYFS workforce & coming together with advice and ideas.

I'm excited to get started now and start working with the families. I hope to see some improvements in their literacy skills both in the home visits then at nursery too.

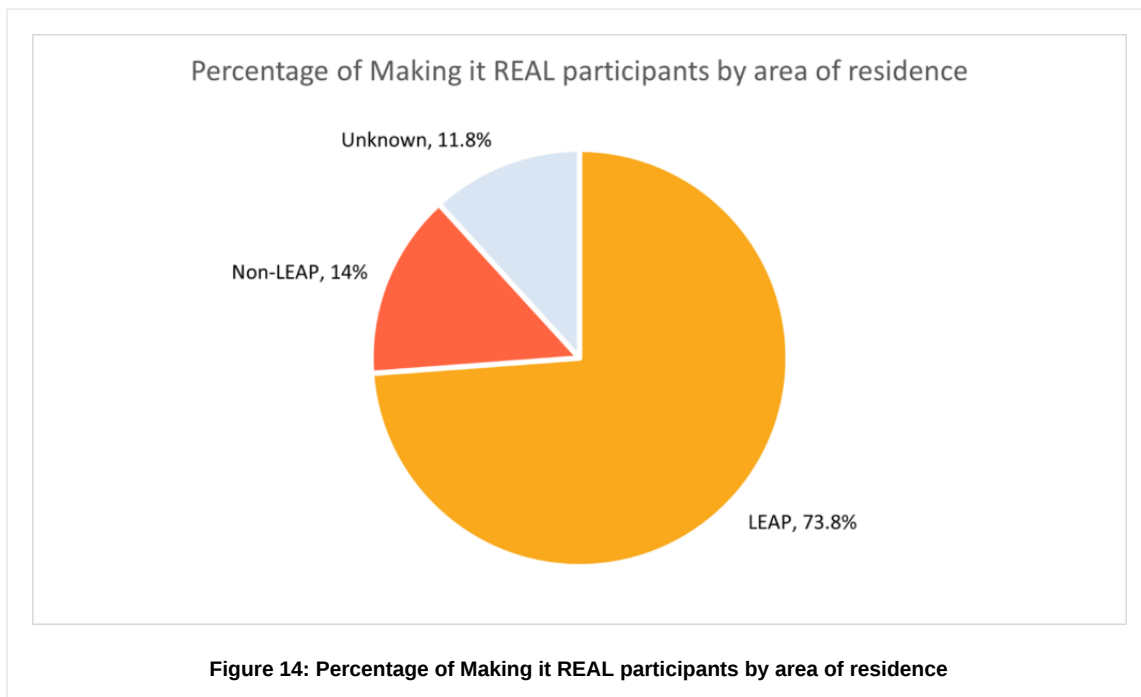
Both days were very important for develop the progress. It help clarify the logistics of the home visit and learning about ORIM was good.

ORIM made me reflect on my practices.

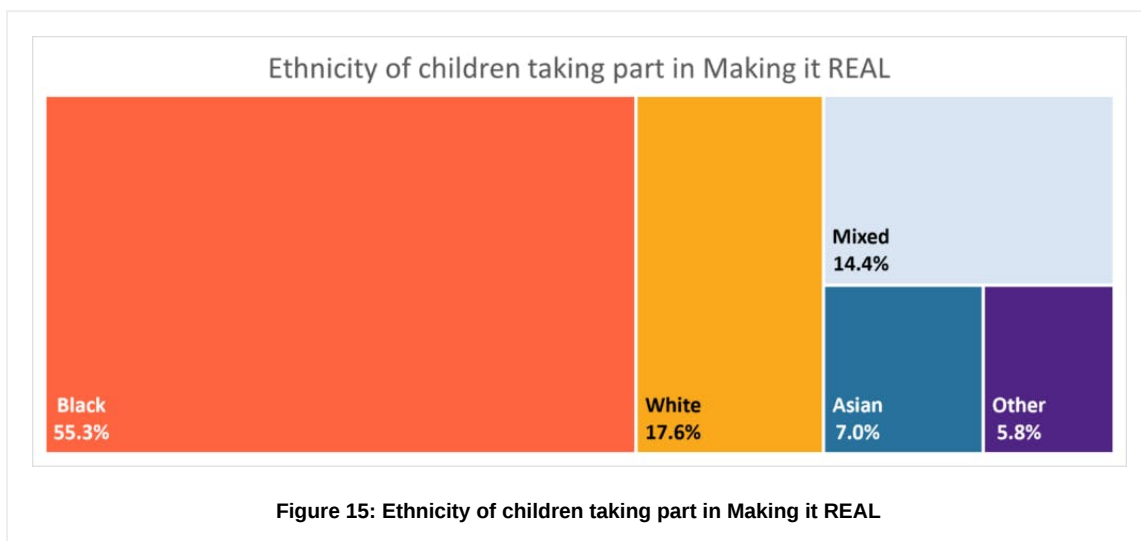
*I really enjoyed the interactive parts of the training....
Helped me to broaden my knowledge further and build my confidence further.*

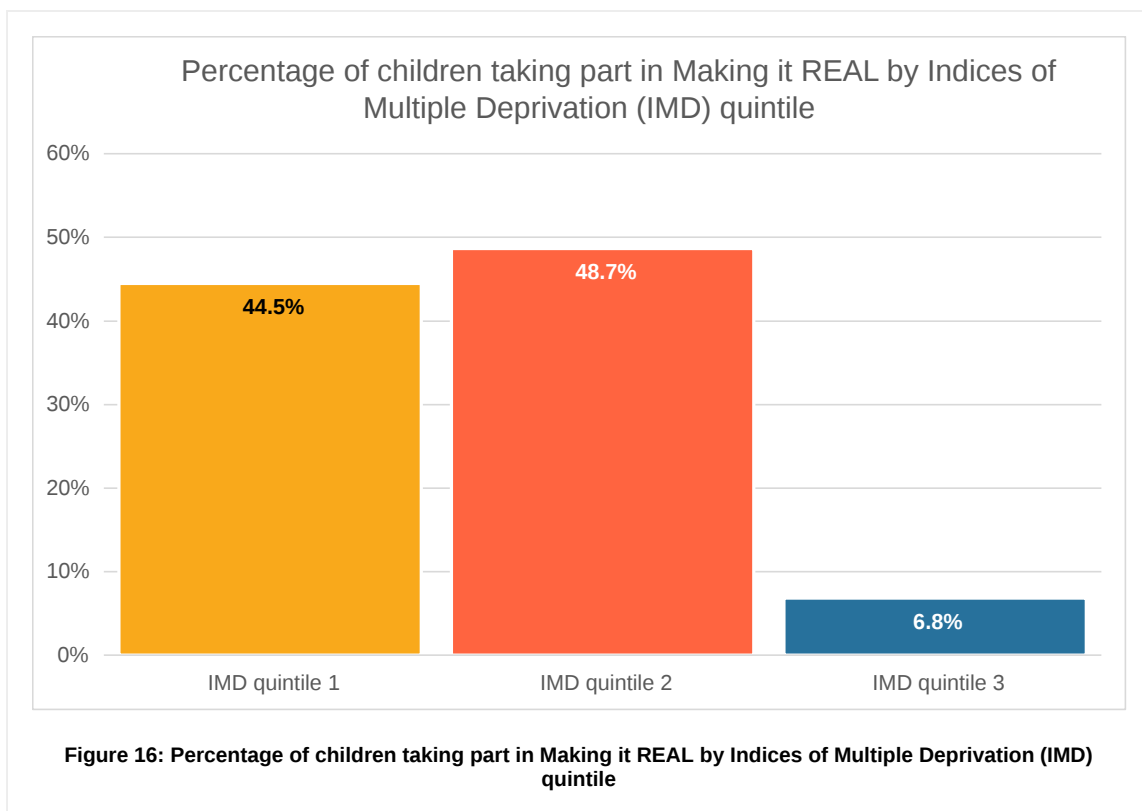
M3: Parents in our target population have increased knowledge, confidence and motivation to support their child's early learning

Demographic data indicates that the service was successful in reaching its target population. Across the lifetime of the service, 74% of Making It REAL participants lived in the LEAP area, as demonstrated in [Figure 14](#).



82% of families were from Black, Asian and Multiple Ethnic Groups, as demonstrated in [Figure 15](#), and 94% of participants lived in areas of greatest deprivation (IMD quintiles 1 and 2), as demonstrated in [Figure 16](#).





Over the lifetime of the programme, 20 children completed four home visits and attended three literacy events across the year of their participation. Of these 20 children, 100% lived in areas of greatest deprivation (IMD quintiles 1 and 2) and 90% were from Black, Asian and Multiple Ethnic groups. Of these, 80% were from Black or Black British: Caribbean or Black or Black British: African backgrounds.

Because of the different implementation phases, each with different approaches and challenges, data collection was fragmented. EYFSP data can help us look at population inequalities in communication and language development over time, but it's not possible to use this data to determine the contribution of the service at population level nor assess the extent to which the service achieved its long-term outcomes.

LEAP's Making it REAL service is evidence-based and effectively reached LEAP's priority population. Qualitative feedback from practitioners trained to deliver MiR was positive, and parents demonstrated improvements in the home learning environment.

6.0 Sustainability and next steps

Making It REAL has been selected by Lambeth Council to be part of their Start for Life offer. This means Making It REAL will continue to be offered through Children's Centres, supporting more families across the borough to provide improved home learning environments for their young children.

Whilst it is hoped that PVI settings, nurseries within primary schools and maintained nursery schools will carry on utilising Making It REAL methodologies as part of their practice, there is no specific support planned for this part of the early years sector in Lambeth.



7.0 Key messages

- LEAP delivered an evidence-based early years literacy service that was well-aligned with national policy and priorities. Participating parents reported improvements in knowledge, confidence and motivation to support children's early learning in the home.
- Making it REAL successfully reached our priority population. Most participants lived in areas of greatest deprivation, and most children were from Black, Asian and Multiple Ethnic groups.
- Providing ongoing training and support for all practitioners helped to ensure the quality of sessions with families and fidelity to the model.
- A lead person in each children's centre would support with implementation, quality of delivery, facilitation and overall coordination.
- A lead person from the local authority could support facilitation and overall coordination.
 - Having an external role focused on facilitating network meetings to share best practice and one-to-one coaching sessions with practitioners would support fidelity to the model and quality of delivery.
 - Having an external role focused on undertaking home visits would support settings to participate in the programme. This would mitigate the challenges related to staff turnover, and would support fidelity to the model.

8.0 Appendix

Colleagues at LEAP and National Children's Bureau who have been involved in the implementation of Making It REAL at LEAP:

Lambeth Early Action Partnership:

Laura McFarlane: Director

Jo Gordon: Lambeth Early Years Schools and Educational Improvement Consultant/CLD strand lead

Jacqui McDermid: Lambeth Early Years Schools and Educational Improvement Consultant/CLD strand lead

Angela Russell: Early Literacy Quality Improvement Officer

Catherine Keal: Communication, Language and Literacy Programme Manager

National Children's Bureau:

Joyce Connor: Early Childhood Unit

Helen Wheeler: Early Childhood Unit

Nick McKenzie: Early Childhood Unit

Sarah Creek: Early Childhood Unit

Paul Cutler: National Children's Bureau Training Associate

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