

# BRIDGE Project:

An expanded offer to improve outcomes for families

Final evaluation report

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## Executive summary

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The **BRIDGE Project**, funded by the Westminster Foundation and delivered by the London Institute of Early Years (LIEY) within the London Early Years Foundation (LEYF), offers timely and compelling evidence about what happens when Early Years provision is designed around need rather than parental employment status.

Delivered across four Westminster nurseries, the two-year project provided an expanded offer to 12 children with additional needs and their families with:

- 30 hours per week of high quality early education (during term time);
- a free nutritious daily lunch;
- additional staff capacity in each nursery to support observation, assessment, intervention and family engagement.

The evaluation shows that this was not simply an increase in childcare hours, but a targeted, relational and pedagogical intervention that improved outcomes for children, families and LEYF Teachers simultaneously.

The project focused on children with emerging or identified SEND and those experiencing complex family circumstances, including poverty, parental mental health difficulties, bereavement, refugee status, domestic abuse and language barriers. These are the children who stand to benefit most from sustained, high quality early education, yet are often excluded from the current 30-hour entitlement.

The findings suggest that when children with additional needs spend more time in a well-supported nursery environment, and when staff have the capacity to work more intentionally with them and with their families, impacts are significant. LEYF Teachers reported better quality observations, earlier identification of needs, more effective planning, improved SEND knowledge and greater confidence in their practice. Crucially, they were able to move from reactive “firefighting” to more proactive, reflective and pedagogical practice. This shift strengthened everyday teaching, improved job satisfaction and created better conditions for early intervention.

For children, the benefits were wide-ranging. The report identifies improvements in participation, attendance, communication, confidence, independence, social relationships, health and wellbeing. Full-day attendance supported settling, belonging and stability, while extended time allowed staff to better understand children’s needs. Language and communication gains were particularly notable, including among children with autism, developmental delay and English as an additional language.

## Executive summary

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A critical enabling factor was additional staffing. This was not an add-on but a core condition for impact. Staff could deliver one-to-one and small-group interventions, support children to regulate, facilitate play, accompany outings, adapt activities and sustain routines. Evidence from year one suggests that extended hours alone are insufficient; impact is maximised when additional time is matched with additional capacity.

Families benefited too, and in ways that matter deeply for policy. The additional hours created time, stability and breathing room for parents who were often carrying multiple burdens. Parents reported improved wellbeing, reduced stress, greater confidence and more capacity to support their child's learning and development at home. The project strengthened relationships between parents and LEYF Teachers, making conversations more regular, more trusting and more useful. LEYF Teachers who were co researchers were better able to share strategies about communication, behaviour, toileting, routines and learning at home, while parents felt more supported and less judged. This mattered especially for families navigating SEND, where consistent approaches across nursery and home are often crucial.

The report also makes a strong case for seeing nutrition as part of early education rather than an optional extra. Daily cooked lunches supported not only children's physical health, but also their language, social development and relationship-building. Mealtimes became spaces for conversation, connection and confidence. For some children with highly restricted diets or sensory issues around food, lunch became a site of remarkable progress.

At a system level, the findings raise important questions about current Early Years policy. England's 30-hour entitlement is designed to support working parents, but in doing so it excludes many children with the greatest need. The **BRIDGE Project** provides evidence that a more targeted, needs-led model can generate substantial developmental, familial and workforce benefits.

Overall, the **BRIDGE Project** presents a persuasive case that targeted investment in inclusive Early Years provision delivers layered returns. It improves child development, strengthens family resilience, enhances workforce capability and may reduce longer-term costs associated with late intervention in education, health and social care. Its message is crisp and resonant: if government is serious about inclusion, social mobility and early intervention, it must redesign Early Years funding around equity, quality and family need, not only labour market participation.

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# 1. Introduction

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The Westminster Foundation has funded the London Institute of Early Years (LIEY), part of the London Early Years Foundation (LEYF), to conduct a two-year project across four LEYF nurseries in the City of Westminster. **BRIDGE. Better Research, Influencing Development, Generating Evidence** (from now on the **BRIDGE Project**) is the second phase of LEYF's collaboration with the Westminster Foundation. The initial work, undertaken during the Covid period, was titled *Doubling Down* ([see linked report here](#)).

The **BRIDGE Project** provided 30 hours of high quality ECEC per week during term time to children who would otherwise not qualify for the additional 15 hours of Government-funded childcare. It also introduced new elements to strengthen its impact, with a stronger focus on children with additional needs, because of emerging or established Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), or because of complex family circumstances.

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## How children were chosen for the BRIDGE Project

The focus of the **BRIDGE Project** is on children with additional needs. In this case, additional needs is meant in the broader sense of children needing support to learn because of SEND or because of challenging family circumstances.

### Children and their families were chosen according to the following criteria:

- children had known or emerging SEND as they were already on an internal pathway for referral and support, and/or had a diagnosis
- children were experiencing a particularly challenging home environment, e.g. domestic/substance abuse, refugee status, significant bereavement and/or parental mental health challenges.

In 2024/25, year 2 of the **BRIDGE Project**, LEYF was able to provide the expanded offer to 12 children thanks to the Westminster Foundation's contribution. However, many more were identified as eligible and in need.

Beyond its direct aim of supporting LEYF children with additional needs and their families, the project also sought to generate learning for other Early Years settings, Local Authorities and the Government. It aimed to explore effective strategies for increasing access to ECEC for children with additional needs and ensure they can fully benefit from these experiences.

This work is especially important in light of the rising number of children with SEND, the insufficient ECEC provision for this group (*Hodges, Shorto & Goddard, 2024*), and the growing evidence that many settings lack the capacity to support children with more complex needs, resulting in exclusion from early education (*La Valle et al., 2024*).

# 1. Introduction

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## In year 2, the BRIDGE Project provided:

1. an additional 15 hours (for a total of 30 hours per week during term time) of high quality ECEC and care for 12 children and families who would otherwise not be eligible for the 30-hour entitlement for working families;
2. a free, nutritious lunch every day;
3. an additional staff member in each nursery to support these children and enable LEYF Teachers to have more time to bridge the learning into the home, to observe the children and record progress data.

LIEY commissioned Sara Bonetti and Ivana La Valle to carry out action research to evaluate the **BRIDGE Project** in 2024/25, with findings shared across the wider ECEC sector, with a view to inform best practices.

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## 1.1 Research aims and methodology

### The action-research project was guided by the following aims:

1. To work with LEYF staff to identify best practice in Early Years settings and effective strategies to bridge learning in the setting with learning at home.
2. To build research sustainability by empowering LEYF staff to become confident co-researchers and by disseminating findings for potential replication across the ECEC sector.
3. To generate learning for other settings, Local Authorities and Government on what can be done to support children with additional needs and their families to ensure they can fully benefit and enjoy their early education experiences.



# 1. Introduction

## 1.2 Research methods

### The following research questions (RQs) shaped the methodology:

**RQ1:** How does practice in a nursery improve by giving LEYF Teachers more time to observe and assess children with additional needs, and to identify and implement suitable strategies?

**RQ2:** How do children benefit from a 30-hour (per week during term time) place in a nursery where staff have the capacity and capability to meet their additional needs?

**RQ3:** How do parents facing multiple challenges benefit from a 30-hour nursery place giving them: **a)** the knowledge and confidence to better support their children's additional needs and **b)** the time to improve their wellbeing, employment prospects and family finances?

Extended nursery hours means more time for children to benefit from high quality practices while at the setting, as well as an enhanced opportunity for LEYF Teachers and parents to establish strong relationships. This project provides an opportunity to explore the skills and practices LEYF Teachers use to effectively support SEND children and their families, along with the strategies they employ to engage parents and help transfer learning into the home environment.

Children with SEND or challenging family circumstances have complex and varied needs, making their outcomes equally difficult to measure. To address this, we adopted an exploratory research approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the different ways children with diverse challenges benefit from the **BRIDGE Project**. This included examining the mechanisms that support these outcomes, such as increased staff capacity and capability, and parents feeling more empowered to support their children at home.

Our approach also enabled us to identify both expected and unexpected outcomes, ensuring the findings are relevant and applicable across a wide range of Early Years settings. In addition, we used an action-research model that actively involved LEYF staff in shaping the lines of inquiry, as well as the analysis and implications of the research. This collaborative method ensured the research remained grounded in practice and responsive to the realities of Early Years provision.



# 1. Introduction

## 1.2 Research methods

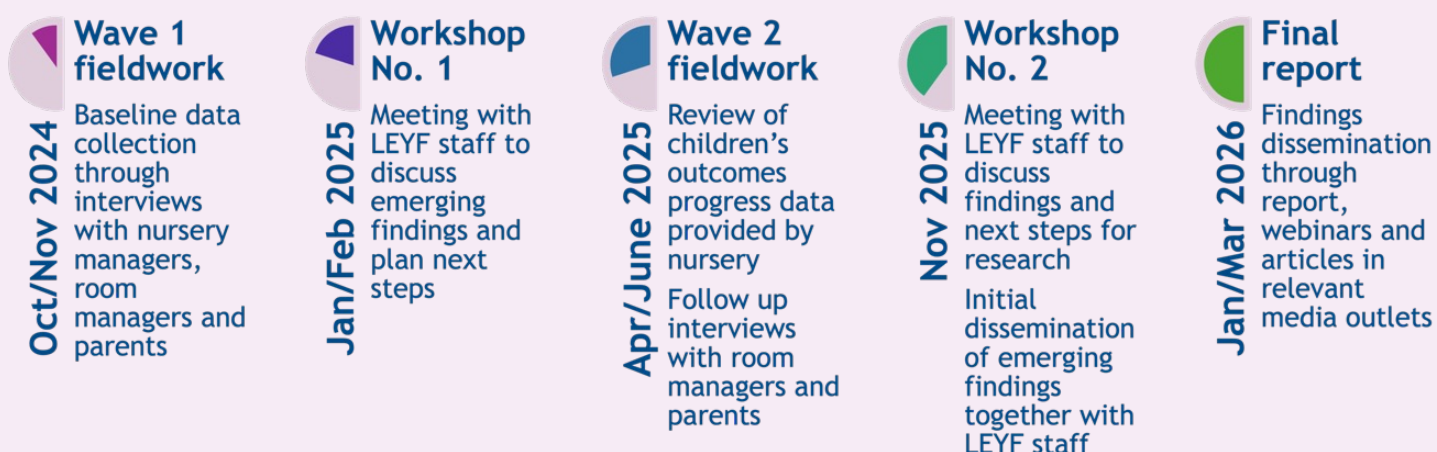
### The data sources and methods used to gather participants' experiences and outcomes included:

- **A rapid literature review:** A rapid review of existing research on ECEC, SEND support and parental engagement to establish a theoretical foundation.
- **Semi-structured interviews:** Interviews with nursery staff at the start of the project and towards the end to understand their experiences with the BRIDGE children and families, and explore practices for bridging the setting and home learning.
- **Qualitative interviews:** Qualitative interviews with parents to explore parental perspectives on the project and their role in supporting their child in the setting as well as home learning.
- **Workshops with LEYF Teachers and Nursery Managers:** two sessions with staff who have been working more closely with the BRIDGE children to provide the space for reflection on the project and its impact.
- **Child observations and progress reports:** discussion with staff about each child's baseline and progress reports created by LEYF Teachers tracking children's behaviour, learning progress and socio-emotional development during the year.

This structured methodology allowed for an in-depth exploration of how the BRIDGE Project is shaping children's learning experiences and influencing parental engagement.

The research project unfolded across multiple phases, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Project timeline**



# 1. Introduction

## 1.3 Background

High quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has been shown to contribute significantly to long-term social mobility and can help break cycles of poverty (*Stewart and Waldfogel, 2017; Carneiro, Cattan and Ridpath, 2024*). However, families from disadvantaged backgrounds face a range of barriers to accessing such quality ECEC provision (*New Economics Foundation, 2023; Outhwaite, La Valle & Crawford, 2023; Sutton Trust, 2021; Sylva & Eisenstadt, 2024*). This challenge is even more pronounced for parents of children with SEND (*La Valle et al., 2024*).

The 30-hour funded entitlement is offered only to children of working parents<sup>1</sup>, locking out the most disadvantaged children and families. Yet, research shows that access to additional hours of high quality provision can be particularly beneficial to those children from disadvantaged backgrounds who are currently missing out (*Bonetti & Blanden, 2020; Sutton Trust, 2021*).

In recent years, there has been a notable increase in the complexity of children's needs, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, and a rising proportion of children with SEND (*Centre for Educational Neuroscience, 2022; Department for Education, 2024*).

<sup>1</sup>The 30-hour entitlement is only available to families where all parents in the child's household are working and they are (both in two parent households) earning more than £195 a week

This evolving landscape underscores the need for:

- specialised skills among Early Years professionals
- a more holistic, systemic approach at the setting level
- sustained, multi-layered interventions, rather than one-off initiatives.

At the same time, research consistently underscores the importance of the home learning environment (HLE) in shaping children's early development. The ways parents engage in their child's learning—through conversation, play, reading and daily routines—have lasting effects on language, cognitive and socio-emotional development (*Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2011*).

In this perspective, Early Years settings are not only places where children socialise and learn, but also key spaces for empowering parents to support their child's development at home (*Desforges & Abouchar, 2003*). This is particularly vital for children with additional needs, as strong partnerships between parents and educators can provide continuity and targeted support. However, despite widespread recognition of its importance, there is limited research on what makes partnerships between early educators and families truly effective (*Goodall & Vorhaus, 2011*).

Identifying best practices for supporting and empowering parents, especially those facing barriers to involvement, remains an essential area for further exploration.

The **BRIDGE Project** is specifically designed to respond to this gap by evaluating innovative practices and providing examples of good practice for enhancing Early Years provision.

In LEYF nurseries, supporting home learning is a fundamental priority because it plays a crucial role in giving children the best start in life. As a social enterprise committed to reducing the impact of poverty and deprivation, LEYF recognises that home learning is one of the most powerful ways to improve the educational outcomes of disadvantaged children. That is why parental engagement is a key pillar of LEYF's pedagogical approach and the **BRIDGE Project** will help identify what the best strategies are that settings can use to support home learning.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.4 Supporting home learning at LEYF nurseries

Supporting home learning is a key element of both LEYF's Pedagogy and the **BRIDGE Project's** intention. LEYF follows Department for Education (DfE) guidance, which emphasises the value of a variety of methods to support parents in enhancing their child's learning at home. This includes formal activities, such as workshops and stay-and-play sessions, as well as informal strategies like daily pedagogical conversations between LEYF Teachers and parents. Research shows that a strong home learning environment (HLE) significantly impacts children's early development, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Given the additional seven challenges **BRIDGE** families face, strengthening the connection between nursery learning and home learning is a critical component of the project.

LEYF's approach is based on a partnership that promotes trust, appreciation and collaboration with parents and carers, ensuring that home learning strategies are tailored to diverse family circumstances. Below, we summarise key strategies mentioned in LEYF's documents and guidance on their broader approach to home learning and working in partnership with parents:

- **Training staff** on the LEYF home learning approach to ensure consistency across staff, but also on how to be aware of unconscious bias and support parents sensitively.
- **Key person system**, where Teachers build strong relationships with specific children and their parents/ carers and provide tailored learning suggestions.
- **Stop! Look! Listen! approach** to encourage meaningful daily interactions between parents and children.
- **Pedagogical conversations**, which are purposeful, goal directed and structured that aim to develop mutual learning and ultimately to help parents extend their child's learning at home.
- **Dialogic reading** to enhance literacy through shared reading experiences.
- **Home learning resources**, including online activities and recommendations tailored to children's interests.
- **The Five A Day Approach**, which promotes daily activities such as talking, reading, playing, exploring and learning through household tasks.
- **A mobile app** that facilitates communication between parents and Teachers, enabling the sharing of learning experiences in a two-way format.
- **Parent evenings**, twice-a-year meetings to provide formal opportunities for parents to discuss their children's development.
- **Workshops** covering topics like potty training, toddler behaviour and transition to school.

The evaluation of the **BRIDGE Project** was not focused on the impact on the home learning environment. Therefore, we only used these elements as a guide to understand possible entry points of impact, rather than a specific list of items to collect data on. For example, building on these well-established parental engagement strategies, the **BRIDGE Project** focuses on enhancing home learning by:

- Providing more structured, consistent schedules - Enabling parents to establish stable routines that support learning at home.
- Enhancing Teacher-parent relationships - Additional staff in the nursery allowing for more dedicated time to discuss learning strategies with parents and to build a two-way relationship.

- Embedding home learning strategies into everyday interactions - LEYF Teachers actively guiding parents on how to extend their child's learning at home through simple, evidence-based methods.

Research suggests that access to high quality ECEC can contribute to long-term social mobility and help close educational gaps, particularly for disadvantaged children. The **BRIDGE Project** aims to fill an existing evidence gap on how to bridge learning between nursery and home environments effectively.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.5 Supporting LEYF Teachers to be confident co-researchers

The London Institute of Early Years (LIEY) is committed to training and supporting LEYF Teachers to become confident co-researchers, strengthening the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between research and practice. Within this approach, **co-researchers** are active partners in inquiry whose lived experiences and professional insights shape research questions, methods, interpretations and outcomes.

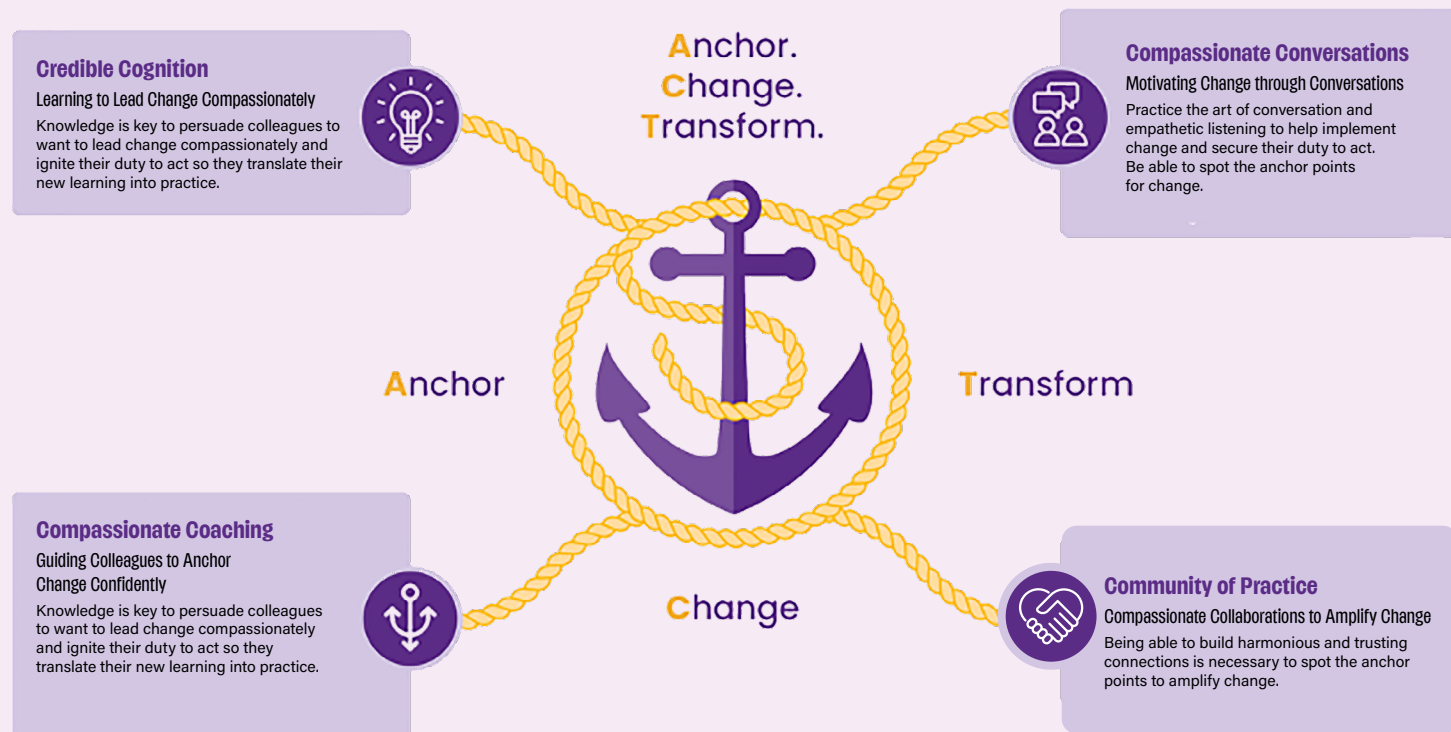


Through ethical, inclusive and relational research practices, co-research challenges traditional hierarchies of knowledge and generates context-rich understanding grounded in everyday educational settings. By anchoring evidence within daily pedagogy, and allowing practice to continuously inform inquiry, a powerful synergy is created between knowing, doing and improving.

This work is underpinned by the **4 Cs framework**: Credible Cognition, Compassionate Conversations, Compassionate Coaching, and Communities of Practice. Together, these elements cultivate compassionate leadership, meaningful collaboration and deep reflective practice, empowering educators to lead change with confidence, purpose and professional agency.

**Figure 2. The 4 Cs model**

### A duty to act with compassion



This research project used the 4Cs model in training and supporting LEYF staff to become confident co-researchers.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.6 Healthy eating at LEYF nurseries

LEYF takes a holistic and inclusive approach to healthy eating and nutrition, recognising the vital role that good food plays in children's overall development and wellbeing. Their philosophy is rooted in educating young children about making healthy choices from an early age, encouraging a lifelong positive relationship with food.

LEYF Chefs are trained at the LEYF Early Years Chef Academy to provide freshly prepared, nutritious meals and snacks each day, using seasonal and locally sourced ingredients where possible. Meals are designed to meet the dietary needs of growing children, including vegetarian and culturally appropriate options.

In addition to providing healthy meals, LEYF promotes food education as a key part of the curriculum. Children are engaged in activities such as cooking, gardening and food exploration to build awareness of where food comes from and how it fuels their bodies. These activities are led collaboratively by Teachers and the chefs. Staff also work closely with families, offering guidance and support on nutrition to ensure consistency between home and nursery. This approach reflects LEYF's commitment to nurturing happy, healthy children through a balanced diet and positive eating experiences.

Importantly, the role of the meal at LEYF, and particularly within the context of the **BRIDGE Project**, extends well beyond its nutritional value. A central element is its pedagogical role: shared mealtimes offer rich opportunities for social and emotional development, as well as for language skills development. The more intimate conversations that take place around the table among children, and between children and staff, support communication skills, relationship building and a sense of belonging. These exchanges often extend beyond the meal itself, fostering ongoing dialogue between Teachers and parents, and strengthening connections between home and nursery.



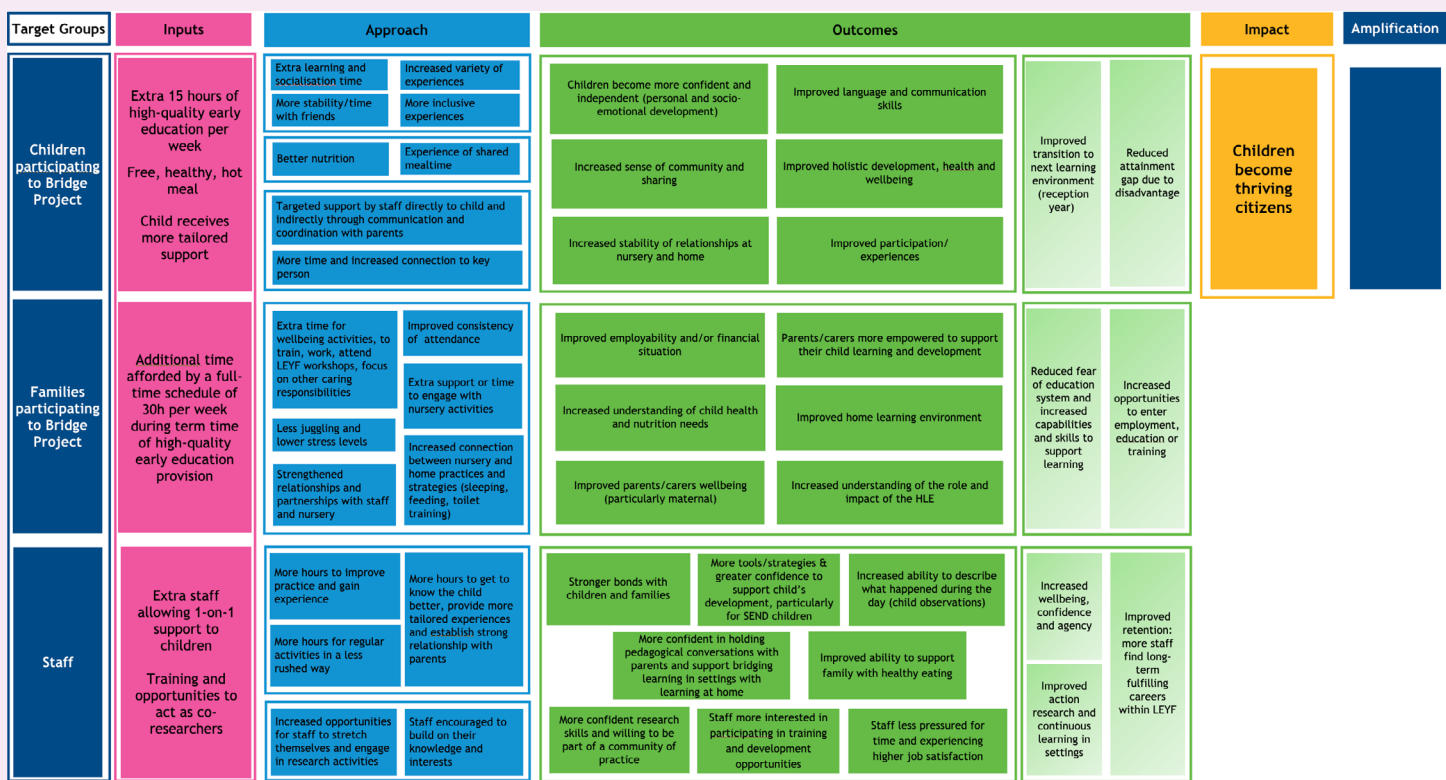
# 1. Introduction

## 1.7 How change happens

The BRIDGE Project is underpinned by a Theory of Change (ToC) that is aligned with LEYF's broader framework to ensure a holistic, evidence-based approach to ECEC. The ToC (see Fig. 3) outlines how targeted inputs, such as additional hours in high quality provision, free nutritious meals and dedicated staff support, translate into meaningful outcomes for children, families and Teachers.



**Figure 3. The BRIDGE Project's Theory of Change**



By fostering positive relationships, improving employability, increasing parental engagement and enhancing children's socio-emotional and cognitive development, the project aims to break cycles of disadvantage and create long-term impact. The ToC was co-developed with the project team and refined iteratively to ensure it accurately reflects the needs, challenges and aspirations of all stakeholders involved.

Section 2 outlines the key characteristics of the people and settings involved in the project before moving on to the key findings in the following sections.

## 2. Setting the stage

### 2.1 Where is the BRIDGE Project delivered?

In 2024/25, the **BRIDGE Project** was delivered across four LEYF nurseries in Westminster: Katharine Bruce Nursery and Pre-School, Royal Oak Nursery and Pre-School, Micky Star Nursery and Pre-School, and Angel Pre-school.

The first three nurseries share many characteristics: they operate Monday to Friday from 8am to 6pm, 51 weeks a year, and cater to children ages zero to five. Their capacity varies, Katharine Bruce offering 54 places, Micky Star 62 places, and Royal Oak up to 65. Angel Pre-School differs both in structure and intake. It is open from 9am to 4pm and offers 46 places to children ages two to five. Unlike the other settings, it features an open-floor design with mixed-age provision, therefore offering a distinctive environment.

Despite some operational differences, the four nurseries share a consistent ethos and practices, reflecting LEYF's broader purpose.

#### **Key commonalities include:**

**Diverse demographics:** Each nursery serves a multilingual, multicultural community, with both children and staff reflecting the rich diversity of the local area.

**Support for disadvantaged families:** All settings work closely with families who face barriers to accessing ECEC. Often, families arrive at the nurseries for the disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement<sup>2</sup> (recently rebranded as Early Learning for 2-year-olds) and stay until the child moves to Reception year. Many are single parent households and have external professionals involved in the family life, such as social workers, speech and language therapists, and mental health support professionals if the concern is for the parent.

**Strong ethos of inclusivity:** LEYF nurseries are highly inclusive and welcome many children with SEND, even in baby rooms (for example, at Royal Oak). Angel Pre-School stands out in this regard, with almost half of its enrolled children having SEND.

**Community-based approach:** All nurseries are well known and have strong ties with the local community. For example, they have good partnerships with the local schools, take children on regular outings to the local library and shops, or to visit the care home for elderly people.

These shared characteristics, as well as the involvement of LEYF staff in shaping the research and informing the findings and its implications, provide a strong foundation for the **BRIDGE Project**, ensuring that its insights and best practices are applicable across diverse settings.

<sup>2</sup>Although sometimes nurseries need to limit the proportion of funded-only children to ensure financial viability.

## 2. Setting the stage



### 2.2 Who are the BRIDGE children and their families?

In the 2024/25 academic year, 12 children — nine boys and three girls — benefited from the **BRIDGE Project** across the four nurseries<sup>3</sup>. Interviews with nursery managers and Teachers clearly highlighted that the need for additional support for these children and their families was undeniable, and that there were more children who met the eligibility criteria and could have benefited from this project, but resources only allowed funding for 12 children.

At the start of the research in September 2024, all children were either 3 or just turning 4 years old. They had previously attended Early Years provision, though their pathways varied: some had been in a different nursery, others in another LEYF setting and some were already attending their current nursery.

All 12 children initially accessed Early Years provision through the 15-hour entitlement for disadvantaged 2-year-olds, and some started accessing 30 hours a week from the age of 2.

All children were offered to be part of the **BRIDGE Project** because of their additional needs either in terms of their development or because of challenging family circumstances. Most children presented signs of SEND, including difficulties with speech and language, ranging from not being verbal at all to speaking but with unformed sounds or repetitive language and needed support with broader socio-emotional development and regulation. Some had an autism diagnosis or were close to having one. All children are from families facing a range of challenges, **with a combination of the following factors**:

- poverty;
- single-parent household;
- migrant or refugee background;
- English as Additional Language (EAL) or not speaking English at all;
- bereavement;
- parental mental health difficulties.

In the next chapters we consider the impacts of the **BRIDGE Project**. We start by exploring how more hours of ECEC and more staff supported LEYF Teachers and their practice, and how this in turn benefited **BRIDGE** children and their families.

<sup>3</sup>In presenting the findings, we have taken care to remove information that can identify children and their families.

## 3. How Teachers benefited from the BRIDGE Project

As outlined in the Theory of Change, the **BRIDGE Project** was expected to have substantial and multidimensional impacts on Teachers and their practice.

### The evidence shows that the project:

- helped Teachers be the best Teachers through improved child observation and assessment, enhanced skills, knowledge and confidence in working with children with SEND;
- strengthened support for professional development;
- deepened partnerships with parents;
- reduced staff stress and improved job satisfaction.

These changes not only greatly benefited **BRIDGE** children, but also strengthened both everyday practice and long-term professional growth.



### 3.1 Supporting Teachers to be the best Teachers

#### The BRIDGE Project supported staff in three main ways:

- by improving the quality of child observation and assessment;
- by developing deeper SEND knowledge and understanding, including greater awareness of the range of tools available to support children with additional needs;
- by supporting their ongoing professional development.

#### 3.1.1 Improved child observation

Teachers reported that involvement in the **BRIDGE Project** increased both the quality and depth of child observations. Observations were described as richer, more reflective and more informative, supporting earlier identification of needs and more effective planning.

Additional staffing enabled Teachers to step back from day-to-day pressures, allowing time to process, reflect on and discuss observations with colleagues. This improved both the accuracy of observations and Teachers' confidence in interpreting them. Teachers also described increased opportunities for coaching, role-modelling and guided practice in observation techniques.

A deeper understanding of **BRIDGE** children's needs, developed through improved observations, led to more comprehensive assessments, better informed intervention strategies and stronger relationships between Teachers and children.

## 3. How Teachers benefited from the BRIDGE Project

Attendance for 30 hours a week (during term time) further strengthened observations. Teachers reported that increased time in the setting made it easier to see 'the real child' beyond masking, revealing behaviours and needs that might not emerge in shorter sessions, including early indicators of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). **As this Teacher explained:**

*"It's a lot easier for them [children] to mask for three hours than it is for six. So ... a [BRIDGE] boy from last year. We had his older brother with us [but] for only three hours a day and we didn't identify that he had ADHD ... once he went into school, it all came out ... The reason we gave his younger brother the 30 hours was to do with his family situation [and] because of speech and language delays. But then once he was with us for six hours, we started seeing a lot more signs of ADHD, ASD ... so that then meant the referral could happen ... there was early intervention [before the child started school]"*

### 3.1.2 Improved understanding, skills, tools and confidence

Teachers consistently described how the project helped them to develop new techniques, deepen their understanding, build skills and increase their confidence and effectiveness in supporting children with additional needs. These benefits were reported across all settings, including a nursery with a high proportion of children with SEND and staff who already had considerable prior experience.

Teachers highlighted having the time to research and trial new strategies, including adapting staged attention approaches to meet children's individual needs. They also reported learning new practical skills, such as Makaton.

Additional staffing enabled Teachers to run bucket time, language groups and SEND interventions more regularly than would otherwise have been possible. These activities were also more effective because they could be delivered one-to-one or in small groups with children who had similar needs.

Attendance for 30 hours allowed staff to make more effective use of repetition, with activities introduced in the morning and reinforced in the afternoon, supporting improved engagement and confidence among BRIDGE children.

Teachers described how the additional hours helped them move away from 'firefighting' towards more proactive planning for children's needs:

*"It helps us be on the front foot rather than constantly on the back foot ... because we've got that little bit more time, we're able to be a little bit more prepared. So we're not firefighting, which is something you do when you've high levels of SEND in your nursery ... You're being reactive rather than actually planning for what may happen."*

New learning and expertise were shared with colleagues, particularly through rotated roles in which different Teachers were assigned responsibility for supporting BRIDGE children. This helped to spread SEND expertise across teams and reduced the isolation sometimes associated with one-to-one work.

Teachers reflected that learning from the past year had substantially increased their confidence in supporting children with complex needs, **as illustrated by the quotes below:**

*"...being able to spend a bit more time with them [BRIDGE children], doing observations, ... researching what might work for them. It's about becoming a better Teacher, developing skills that are beyond helping that child, and then you can use with other children..."*

*"...[The project helped to] give the Teachers that independence and for them to take over and create an enabling environment, how to lead in pedagogy, how to help children with SEND."*

## 3. How Teachers benefited from the BRIDGE Project

### 3.1.3 Improved professional development

The project created both time and motivation for staff to pursue further training and professional development. For example, **additional staffing**:

- enabled Teachers to attend SEND-related training organised by the Local Authority, as well as internal LEYF training;
- freed-up time, which was used to research strategies for supporting children, reflect on new approaches and discuss their effectiveness with colleagues.

The number of Teachers expressing interest in becoming SENCOs, including staff involved in the **BRIDGE Project**, was reported to be considerably higher this year than in previous years.

Teachers emphasised that opportunities for training and professional development are particularly important when working with children with SEND, given the evolving and complex nature of additional needs. For example, staff reported an increase in children presenting with Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA):

*“So it’s more about having the time to think about what are the specific needs of this group of children because they’re constantly changing, ... the cohort this year is so different to the cohort last year.”*

Participation in the project and the reflective conversations it enabled with colleagues and researchers supported Teachers to reflect on their practice and consider how research evidence can inform their development.

#### For example:

- Teachers reported increased confidence in articulating observations, reflecting aloud and analysing patterns in children’s learning and behaviour.
- Staff had opportunities to explore how conversational AI assistants and large language models (LLM) could support recording, reflection and assessment. While one nursery involved was already using a conversational AI assistant, this represented a new opportunity for staff in the other three nurseries.
- Staff expressed interest in greater sharing of strategies to support children with additional needs across LEYF nurseries, including discussions about setting up a SENCO WhatsApp group.

A member of staff involved also reported enjoying contributing to a Nursery World article on early findings from the project and presenting research findings to a national audience at an online conference.

Overall, the project appears to have supported Teachers to become more reflective with increased confidence in contributing to research, sharing learning and participating in Communities of Practice.

## 3. How Teachers benefited from the BRIDGE Project

### 3.2 Bridging learning from nursery to the home

Teachers reported significant improvements in confidence, clarity and depth in their conversations with BRIDGE parents. The project appears to have strengthened partnerships with parents, improved mutual trust and made pedagogical conversations more empathetic and productive.

Additional staffing meant Teachers could schedule more frequent and meaningful meetings with parents, rather than limiting formal discussions to twice-yearly assessments. Teachers also had more time to provide detailed feedback, supported by stronger observations and clearer examples of children's progress.

Collection times were reported to feel less rushed with parents having more time to talk with staff, making it easier for some families to share concerns or discuss progress observed both at home and in the nursery.

These changes helped to build stronger relationships with parents, some of whom became more open and trusting.

#### **For example:**

*"A very young mum [of a BRIDGE child] in the beginning, she was a bit defensive and not very engaged, but then ... we saw a difference in her. She would share things with us."*

#### **Deeper relationships with Teachers also helped some BRIDGE parents to accept emerging needs:**

*"...some parents don't accept, that the child has something ... they have that hope, oh, maybe my child is just like young, maybe there are other children that are the same level ... So we try to give extra time and space to allow parents to accept that and lots of feedback on what we can do so they can help them at home."*

Finally, Teachers reported that when parents attributed children's progress including, in some cases, progress in the context of significant developmental challenges to nursery support, this enhanced Teachers' professional status. This, in turn, strengthened families' trust in the nursery.

#### **As this Teacher explained:**

*"...what I'm hearing is that also being there for longer hours, they [parents] start to really see you more as professionals because they see more progress in the child, so that something maybe clicks in them about, like, they actually see the impact on the child."*

## 3.3 How Teachers benefited from the BRIDGE Project

### 3.3 Reduced stress and increased job satisfaction

The additional staffing resource significantly reduced stress levels and increased job satisfaction as Teachers felt better able to do their job.

With an extra person in the room, Teachers felt more in control and less overwhelmed by competing demands. For example, they could regularly deliver all the activities set out in a child's personal plan and take BRIDGE children to the sensory room or the garden when they became dysregulated. The quotes below illustrate how additional staffing reduced stress levels:

**The quotes below illustrate how additional staffing reduced stress levels:**

*"I think having extra staff there helps the day run smoothly as well. So it's less stress for us. We're not stressed out. We can give more to the children if we're in a better position ourselves."*

*"Being able to sit down with the children and not having to worry about, oh, is somebody watching this child over there while I'm working over here with these children ... [I don't have to] stop what I'm doing, look around, check on the room..."*

*"Some strategies ... are every single day. So you feel like, oh my god, I haven't done it today, I'll do it tomorrow. Having an extra staff member allows [me] not [to] feel overwhelmed and stressed because you don't feel like, oh, I haven't done the PP for them this week, I can't have a catch-up with mum."*

Teachers reported greater satisfaction from being able to do their job properly. As discussed above, the extra staff and additional hours for children meant staff could dedicate more time to refining observations, investigating suitable interventions and having pedagogical discussions with parents. Combined with work to strengthen SEND support, this motivated staff to focus on their learning and development, leading to increased confidence in their skills and greater job satisfaction.

*"...well there are lots more opportunities to take the [BRIDGE] children out for longer and really ensure that they're getting the best out of the whole experience in the nursery. So I really am very grateful [for the expanded offer] ... it has had such a really good impact so far ... And that's obviously what we want for the children."*

*"And that's what I like, being able to see the children change ... how [BRIDGE child's name] has calmed down ... can sit there, ... can listen to you ... gives you more eye contact and he lets you know, he's listening..."*

*"...you know that child who started speaking in sentences, that gives you that buzz. And actually, you know that child that has tried sweet potato, it's like, yes ... amazing moments. And they're amazing moments for the children and the parents, but they're also amazing moments for us."*

## 4. How children benefited from the BRIDGE Project

Discussions with parents and Teachers show that the benefits for **BRIDGE** children were significant and aligned closely with the project's Theory of Change — both in terms of the areas of development in which children made progress and how that progress was achieved.

### The project supported improvements in:

- early education participation, experiences and attendance;
- language and communication;
- confidence and independence;
- stability of relationships;
- health and wellbeing.

### These improvements were achieved through a combination of:

- **BRIDGE** children spending more time at nursery, attending every day, for a full day, and having a hot lunch in a communal environment
- the availability of additional staff to provide one-to-one, tailored support based on careful observation and regular assessment.

Staff emphasised that both elements were essential. In the previous year, when only additional hours were provided, staff felt they lacked the capacity to offer the level of personalised support **BRIDGE** children required.

### 4.1 Improved participation and experiences

Alongside providing 30 hours of ECEC per week during term time, the project supported children's participation in two ways.

First, parents reported that the 9am–3pm session fitted better with their caring and domestic responsibilities than the previous 15-hour offer, improving attendance for some families.

Second, the timing of the original 15-hour offer in some nurseries (e.g. 8am–1pm or 1pm–6pm) meant some children could not attend the whole session — for example, because it clashed with the school run or finished too late for family routines. The **BRIDGE Project** offer meant these children could now stay for the full session.

Parents and staff reported that an expanded offer improved experiences in several ways.

#### 4.1.1 Sense of belonging and relationships

Daily attendance and increased support helped children feel safe and develop a sense of belonging. A parent described how the 30 hours helped their child settle, and even after illness:

*"...he was begging me to go to the nursery and I was saying, not yet."*

#### Another parent shared:

*"And his emotional coping is getting a bit better ... now he's used to the noises [in the nursery]."*

Attending every day also helped children develop strong relationships with staff and peers, which underpinned positive nursery experiences, as well as supporting learning and development. For example, one parent believed their child's progress was due to daily attendance, strong teaching, friendships and a close relationship with their key person.

*"Having [a key person], you know, it really has made a world of difference."*

## 4. How children benefited from the BRIDGE Project

### 4.1.2 Inclusive practice

Children's experiences improved because practice became more inclusive. The expanded offer meant that **BRIDGE** children were less likely to become isolated during play or disruptive, and more able to take part in a wider range of activities, including community outings that would not have been possible without extra staff.

#### **The importance of individual, tailored support for children with complex needs is illustrated in the quote below:**

*"...when sometimes he doesn't get that attention he'll just go around, pulling everything out and throwing everything on the floor. Whereas when you sit with him and he's happy, ... he'll start touching my face and he'll laugh."*

Improved SEND expertise helped other children become more aware of, and sensitive to, the needs of their peers. Teachers reported that they became less wary of **BRIDGE** children, more likely to play with them, recognise their emotions and offer help:

*"If [BRIDGE child] starts crying, some children will now ask why is he crying and will come and give him a hug."*

*"...you see them playing alongside him. They show an interest in him. You even have, some children saying, oh, why is [BRIDGE child] not talking? So you've actually got those conversations."*

Additional staffing also meant that a nursery was able to offer a place to a child with very complex needs who would not have been able to attend without additional staffing for health and safety reasons.

Last but not least, children benefited because it became possible for the child's needs-led practice to increase. Teachers said a 30-hour place meant a better balance between structured activities and free-flow play. Often, much of the time spent with children with additional needs is focused on interventions or routines, therefore the 30-hour places and the support of an extra Teacher allowed more time for exploration and free-flow play.

Furthermore, activities could be delivered at a pace suited to each child's needs.

#### **As one Teacher explained:**

*"...not trying to cram absolutely everything into a three-hour slot ... it's crazy. You know, you're trying to do a circle time, ... give them snack, ... change nappies... You're trying to give them the opportunities for independent play. You're going in the garden and trying to fit all of that."*

## 4. How children benefited from the BRIDGE Project

### 4.2 Improved language and communication skills



Teachers echoed this progress, with targeted interventions and one-to-one work, children were better supported to overcome communication challenges, as the quotes below illustrate about children who were non-verbal when they started:

*"Her language is coming along. She's singing, she's humming. She will play alongside other children."*

*"...we've seen some beautiful, intense interactions ... he's definitely a lot more communicative with some more sounds, lots more eye contact. So to be able to communicate by looking at the Teachers."*

Children with EAL also made strong progress with additional support, as these Teachers explained:

*"He didn't really talk. He was ... reserved and he'd be by himself rather than going off and playing with other children... but now he definitely has much more confidence and [... he wants] to do things independently, join activities, ask questions. He would go and ask the children 'Can I play with you?' Which is a big, big jump from when he first started."*

Significant progress in language and communication was observed among BRIDGE children, including those with autism, EAL and developmental delays. In some cases, improvements were strong enough for additional language support to be removed from their SEND plans.

Parents who had been very concerned about their child's language described rapid progress once their child spent more time at the setting:

*"[She is] ... talking, talking, talking, talking ... her speech and language has come along majorly."*

*"He went from hardly speaking to not shutting up."*

A parent also explained that specialist training for them (and the key person) arranged by the nursery had made a remarkable difference:

*"...he makes so many more attempts to communicate ... [child] said hello the other day ... I had never heard his voice before."*

*"Her language improvement has been massive ... now she can chat away in English without any problems."*

Another Teacher described a child who initially could not be understood and received a lot of help to support his communication:

*"...I was sitting in here doing something and I heard this sentence ... He was making a statement and it was something to do with supporting another child and ... I understood every single sound, every single word that came out of his mouth..."*

As discussed later, lunchtimes also played an important role in developing communication. Talking about a child who was very shy when she arrived, a Teacher explained:

*"...mealtimes is where a lot of the conversations happen and she may sit with children that she doesn't know well and has definitely become more verbal with non-familiar children."*

## 4. How children benefited from the BRIDGE Project

### 4.3 Improved confidence and independence

#### One parent described their child who was shy and had separation anxiety became far more confident with full-day attendance:

*"She's confident, she's happy. She's smiling. She's engaging with the other children. So initially when she first started... she did not even acknowledge the other children. She just pretended they weren't there, they were just invisible to her. They were coming to her, she just didn't engage with them."*

A Teacher also explained how daily one-to-one time with a quiet child who appeared to have language and communication challenges helped them quickly understand the child's ability and what support was required:

*"It was a confidence thing rather than that it actually being a speech and language thing ... his confidence is growing, he's now feeling more comfortable to be able to come and ask those questions. Why is that happening? What's going on? Can I have a turn?"*

Attendance for 30 hours a week also promoted independence and autonomy. Children felt secure enough to explore, try things for themselves and make choices.

**As Teachers explained**, about children who had been shy and tended to play alone:

*"...definitely has much more confidence and ... she wants to do things independently, joins activities, asks questions. She asks other children if they want to play with her."*

*"...he's developed relationships with the other children. He's really confident. I think confidence has really grown for [child]. So he was one of our shyest children. Now he's just full of confidence."*

As the quote above highlights, a child's ability to communicate underpins their personal development and confidence. Parents and Teachers observed that 30 hours a week helped children settle, develop a stronger sense of belonging and engage more deeply in nursery life.

#### Parents also noticed increased independence at home:

*"He tidies up his mess. He is really good at home, you know, he is just brilliant ... if it wasn't for this nursery [child] would not be how he is today."*

*"So last night [3-year-old] went to the toilet by herself. She didn't ask me to help her or anything, she literally just got up and went ... that's the first time she's ever done it..."*

For some children with more complex needs, small breakthroughs were hugely significant. The parent of a severely autistic child said their favourite moment that month was when their child responded to an instruction, something the nursery had been working on:

*"Before, he'd never respond if I said [child] put your shoes on or wear this ... he didn't respond while I now see him responding back ... it makes me feel so happy because oh my god, you understand what I'm saying to you."*



## 4. How children benefited from the BRIDGE Project

### 4.4 Increased stability of relationships

Spending more time in nursery helped children build stronger relationships with both Teachers and peers — especially those who had previously found social interaction difficult (e.g. due to autism).

#### **A parent described how their child, who has complex needs, formed friendships after starting the 30 hours:**

*“Every time I walk in, there’s a few kids ... they’re like ‘Your mum is here.’ So even though he doesn’t talk, he’s got friends. There’s three boys in there who always play with him.”*

#### **Another parent of a severely autistic child noted:**

*“He used to feel very overwhelmed if he was around a certain amount of people, ... but now he’s fine. I take him to soft play, it’s very busy, he used to feel really stressed out before but now because he’s at nursery and used to be around people and children ... he’s completely fine. He also now makes eye contact.”*

#### **Lunchtime was also an important social space. One Teacher explained how a small lunch group supported positive relationships:**

*“...having that intimate group has actually enabled them to build those relationships, build their language development and actually form those close relationships with their peers and the Teachers. And eating, I think that’s been a massive thing for our children.”*

### 4.5 Improved health and wellbeing

The most noticeable health improvements related to eating. With the expanded **BRIDGE Project** offer, all children had a cooked lunch daily and for some this made a significant difference.

Some children had major challenges around food, including extremely restricted diets or difficulty tolerating certain textures. Staff worked patiently and consistently to introduce new foods and eating experiences, and even very small steps touching new foods, sitting at the table, or tasting something unfamiliar were celebrated as big milestones.

One parent described how the nursery created a targeted plan to help their child engage with different textures through activities like messy play. This helped the child begin touching ingredients such as flour and eggs during baking activities.

#### **As a Teacher explained:**

*“He was a bit apprehensive [about doing baking]. He looked back and forth. He’s like, oh what is this? But then she [Teacher] was able to do one-to-one with him, get him to use the whisk. He was touching it with his finger, licked it a little bit. So that was a different taste to him.”*

## 4. How children benefited from the BRIDGE Project

### 4.5 Improved health and wellbeing

#### A Teacher described progress for a child with very restricted eating:

*"For such a long time, the only thing that he would have is crackers and butter ... when he decided to eat rice out of a bowl—it was like a massive Hallelujah moment. ... he's got the spoon. He's feeding himself, and, you know, that's massive."*

Even for children without major challenges, daily lunch helped broaden their diet, **as this parent said:**

*"...their eating has improved ... here [at the nursery] they are eating things that they refuse to eat at home normally."*

One mother described how her 'picky eater', who was underweight, started trying new foods at nursery and then Teachers supported her to use the same approach at home. The child's eating improved considerably, and the child gained weight.

Parents also valued that eating a proper hot meal would help support a smoother transition to school, where children are expected to manage their own food more independently:

*"Also for me that shows you that when they go to primary school ... you know that they're not going to go from crackers to ... a full meal."*

Children's overall wellbeing also improved. Children were happier in an environment better able to meet their needs, and the reduction in parents' stress (discussed in Chapter 5) also benefited children. **One parent said:**

*"It's been the perfect, perfect timing. And I think because it has such a hugely positive effect on me, [the child]'s picking up on that and that's having a second-hand ripple effect. So, [the child]'s like, that's obviously making them feel good as well."*

### 4.6 Sense of community and sharing

By the end of the project, as children got closer to school transition, it was clear they had formed strong connections within the setting and contributed to nursery life in their own ways. Even children who had struggled to settle initially now felt safe and had a strong sense of belonging – their peers, the Teachers, the nursery environment, the routines and activities had all become comfortably familiar. Parents and staff consistently linked this to the expanded **BRIDGE** offer.

A sense of belonging was also supported by the nurseries' inclusive ethos. Staff made efforts to learn key words in children's home languages, celebrated a range of cultural festivals and staff diversity reflected the communities they served.

**BRIDGE** children learned to take part in shared activities – from circle time and collaborative play to eating together and tidying up. The extra Teacher was vital in ensuring children did not become isolated and could fully engage in these activities.

## 4. How children benefited from the BRIDGE Project

### 4.6 Sense of community and sharing

Children formed close friendships and parents shared examples of children not wanting to miss nursery, resisting naps so they could keep playing with friends, or meeting nursery friends outside the setting. Parents also noted that their children were becoming more confident at making friends in other environments, such as playgrounds and soft play.

**As one parent said:**

*"He's got a good group of friends in nursery, but also outside ... Teachers in the nursery, he's quite attached to them..."*

Children also learned to be with others, recognising others' feelings, taking turns and helping peers. For some children, this represented considerable progress from the start of the year when they barely acknowledged others.

**One Teacher explained the support needed to help a BRIDGE child understand conversational turn-taking:**

*"[what] we're working on with him at the moment is actually understanding when it is his turn to talk..."*

And finally, lunchtime not only supported social development as discussed earlier, but also allowed a BRIDGE child who was a confident eater to become a role model for peers with food challenges.



## 5. How families benefited from the BRIDGE Project

Discussions with parents and Teachers indicate that the **BRIDGE Project** made a tangible difference to families, reflecting the outcomes outlined in the Theory of Change, such as in terms of:

- their ability to support children's learning and development at home;
- their understanding of their child's health and nutrition;
- parental wellbeing;
- parental employability and financial situation.

From the parents' perspective, these benefits stemmed largely from children attending for 30 hours a week during term time. Teachers' accounts also highlighted the additional value of having extra staff resources to help parents support children's learning, development and nutrition at home.

### 5.1 Ability to support children's learning and development at home

Supporting learning at home is a central pillar of the **BRIDGE Project** and a key part of the LEYF Pedagogy, which promotes strong, ongoing communication between nursery staff and families through regular pedagogical conversations, a nursery app, and a range of parent activities.

#### 5.1.1 How parents and Teachers communicate

Teachers reported that additional staff resources meant they were better able to help parents as they had the time to gain an in-depth understanding of children's needs and develop strategies to support them not only in the setting, but also at home. They could also devote more time to pedagogical conversations. Parents found it harder to articulate how the expanded offer helped to build stronger relationships with staff compared with the 15-hour offer, though some felt that attending daily created more opportunities to catch up with Teachers and seek advice.

Feeling informed about children's progress at nursery was key for **BRIDGE** parents. Many valued the App for its detailed updates on meals, naps and activities:

*"It's brilliant. It tells you what they had. What if they had a snack, if they ate all her food, if they went to the toilet, if they've had a sleep."*

Parents typically saw the app as complementing rather than replacing daily face-to-face conversations, which some preferred:

*"I'm talking to them [Teachers] all the time. They're amazing. They give you time in the morning, and when I pick up [child] they give you a download of the day."*

*"They're very like communicative with the parents ... I get five to ten minutes every day with either their key person or whoever's around telling you how their day's been, how they've got on, what they've done today."*

## 5. How families benefited from the BRIDGE Project

### 5.1.1 How parents and Teachers communicate

LEYF nurseries also offer a range of opportunities for parents to participate in their child's learning and nursery life, including stay-and-play sessions, workshops, parent evenings and cultural events. Engagement with these activities among **BRIDGE** parents varied. Some embraced these opportunities enthusiastically, as this parent shared:

*"They even did a spa day where the children did our nails – it was lovely!"*

However, other parents were less aware of these activities or faced barriers, such as anxiety or social discomfort:

*"I know about the coffee mornings, but I don't mix easily with people. I have anxiety, so I don't go."*

#### **Some parents expressed interest in more structured ways to connect with other families:**

*"It's nice to bond with the other parents because then if we have concerns or issues, we can [share them] ... it helps the kids [to make] friends as well. And if you've that engagement in the nursery, you can then do things outside together as well, because otherwise you're just isolated to your own families."*

Of the 12 children supported by the project, there was one case where communication between the parent and nursery had broken down due to differing expectations of the support needed. The other 11 parents were very happy with regular updates, encouragement to share what their children did at home, and opportunities to ask questions or seek advice including on issues beyond their child's learning and development, such as parental mental health or financial support.

The extent to which parents were empowered to support learning varied. Family circumstances influenced engagement. Where fathers handled drop-off and pick-up, they were sometimes reluctant to engage in pedagogical conversations. Language barriers and parental mental health difficulties also limited participation, although parents emphasised that staff were patient and supportive.

Staff also observed that some parents did not initially recognise the depth of Teachers' expertise or understand that advising on home routines was part of the nursery role. Discussions with parents at the start of the year also showed that some were unsure whether they should be asking for advice. However, this uncertainty tended to decrease as relationships developed across the year and the establishment of a trusted relationship meant parents did not feel alone in navigating the challenges of raising a child with additional needs.

## 5. How families benefited from the BRIDGE Project

### 5.1.2 How engagement with the nursery empowered parents

Parents described a range of practical changes at home that had been supported by the nursery especially around speech development, toilet training and behaviour management. Importantly, they felt supported and not judged, even when suggested strategies did not work immediately.

Several of the BRIDGE children had communication and language difficulties and parents really valued support in this area. For example, a parent explained that the nursery arranged for specialist external trainers to support them (as well as the key worker) with the child's communication and language, which resulted in considerable improvements:

*"...he makes so many more attempts to communicate ... we've been getting training on specialist methods to draw the speech out. So he's highly motivated by certain games. He loves being tickled. He loves bubbles. He loves games that go like fly up in the air ... So we do things like play tickling with him, tickle him a couple of times to get him excited ... He requests a tickle and then, so he doesn't say the word tickle, but for example he knows it's two syllables. He'll go [sound]"*

Parents also valued guidance on children's behaviour, particularly advice that helped them understand possible triggers and use consistent approaches across home and nursery. One parent, who was highly engaged in her child's learning but lacked confidence as a first-time parent, described difficulties with setting boundaries for positive behaviour at home. In contrast, her child's behaviour at the nursery was consistently more settled. Teachers shared strategies used in the nursery to provide structure and support positive behaviour, and reinforced these expectations both in the setting and at home, helping to create greater consistency for the child.

Toilet training was another area where close collaboration helped families adopt shared strategies.

#### **As this parent explained:**

*"We're constantly talking about ideas we can do to help regarding his sensory and even potty training. I'm trying to get him out the nappies and obviously it's difficult because he's non-verbal!"*

Parents frequently spoke with Teachers about supporting early literacy and maths through everyday activities.

#### **As this parent explained:**

*"She didn't want a story time at home, so I copied how they encouraged her at nursery – it worked!"*

## 5. How families benefited from the BRIDGE Project

### 5.2 Increased understanding of health and nutrition

As noted earlier, several **BRIDGE** children had significant challenges around food and eating, and some parents and staff worked closely to address these.

One parent was advised to reduce bottle feeding and introduce the lunchtime routines used in nursery. With support, the child began sitting with the family at mealtimes and exploring food, which the parent felt was very helpful.

Another parent, concerned about their child's low weight due to being "a very fussy eater", sought advice because the child ate well in nursery. Staff encouraged them to replicate the food and routines used in the setting at home, including allowing the child to serve themselves. A sticker chart at the nursery helped track eating at home and was used by the Teacher to have conversations with the child about eating at home. This approach helped as the parent reported that the child was eating better and had put on some weight.

Another parent also sought help from the nursery, as the child ate very little at home while her eating was fine at the nursery. As with the examples above, the parent reported that when they began adopting the practices used in nursery at home, the child's eating improved.

### 5.3 Improved parental wellbeing

The phrase 'put your own oxygen mask on first' feels particularly relevant for **BRIDGE** families, who were invited into the project because they faced multiple adversities. Having time and space to focus on their own wellbeing was essential to being better parents, to be present for their children and support them in these crucial Early Years.

Some **BRIDGE** parents had experienced significant bereavements, and the extra hours gave them personal time to process grief, attend therapy, or engage in self-care activities, as this parent explained:

*"It has really benefited [child] in so many ways ... Like I think as well for us as a family, it's benefited us because, you know, ... I am in a grieving process. So to be able to have that 4 hours, 5 hours a day where I can sit there and grieve and I can get in the car and go to my mum's cemetery without having the hassle of having to look after [child]. It's me getting my mind space as well, you know."*

There were significant improvements in wellbeing for some parents, particularly those experiencing stress, anxiety, or complex life situations, who immediately felt a huge relief from having more nursery hours. This, in turn, translated into being more present and engaged with their children:

*"One of the first immediate effects for me of full-time nursery is my stress levels at a time when your life is just stressful almost immediately, just dropped ... I'm not shouting at [child]. I'm not losing my patience with [child]. Now I really cherish the time we have after nursery and make the most of it."*

## 5. How families benefited from the BRIDGE Project

### 5.3 Improved parental wellbeing

*"It [nursery] gave me confidence to leave my [child]. Gave me confidence to go outside. It gave me confidence to, like, I would comb my hair and I'll be like, oh, you look good today."*

All parents found the 30 hours (daily from 9am-3pm) easier to combine with other family responsibilities, and to co-ordinate with the school run, this meant less juggling throughout the day, which helped reduce daily stress:

*"It's nice to be able to go home, catch my breath, do things during the day without rushing."*

*"I feel I can go out and have a life. Like my mum goes to bingo. So she said to me, come to bingo for a couple hours, to have some fun. I can go to bingo. I could put my phone on silent and I feel secure that even though if, let's say if I miss a call, I know he [child] will be all right. I know he will be safe."*

*"Definitely helped mentally, physically, you get time off. I get to spend time with my other [younger] son as well ... I'm less stressed ... [when child comes home from nursery] he's more content and happier, that makes my life easier particularly with my younger child."*

Other parents took the opportunity to embark on a journey of personal growth. For example, one parent has developed such an interest in how to support their child that they started to attend training courses and can now see themselves having a career working with children with additional needs. They are very motivated and enthusiastic about the prospect, which is really providing them personal fulfilment, but also possibly an improved financial situation in the future.

*"I've finally found something that makes me happy."*

#### Another parent commented:

*"It's really good because for me it's made me have time for myself, whereas before as a mum, I would feel like, oh, I can't do anything. I'm stuck with my child."*

### 5.4 Improved employability and financial situation

BRIDGE families are on low incomes, and many are single-parent households. For these parents, the additional nursery hours made a real difference, enabling them to search for jobs, return to work, increase their working hours or attend training courses.

Several mothers acknowledged that these kinds of changes would not have been possible without the project, as these mothers explained:

*"30 hours helped because now I'm working. I wouldn't have considered going back if my child wasn't settled and happy.<sup>4</sup>"*

*"I wouldn't be able to do it [training] if [child] was doing like just three hours."*

<sup>4</sup>The parent did not qualify for the working families entitlement of 30 hours.

## 5. How families benefited from the BRIDGE Project

### 5.4 Improved employability and financial situation

Another mother described the offer of 30 hours as “godsend” as it enabled her to work two long days instead of two short days, which increased the family income<sup>5</sup>. She was also motivated to start looking for a more interesting and challenging job than the one she was doing.

Other parents, while not training, taking up work or increasing working hours immediately, with more free time and less juggling were able to start considering future work plans.

Finally, some families reported early signs of greater financial stability thanks to the additional income from employment, including the ability to purchase books and educational materials for their children:

*“Now we can buy more books and things for [the child].”*



<sup>5</sup>The parent did not qualify for the working families entitlement of 30 hours.

## 6. Conclusions and recommendations

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At the time of writing, England has just completed the rollout of a programme that provides 30 hours per week (during term time) of early education to children from working families, while failing to adequately invest in support of quality and equity in ECEC services. The **BRIDGE Project**, a small initiative in the City of Westminster (London), offers important lessons for national policy, alongside considerable benefits for the children, families and Teachers involved.

By offering 30 hours of provision to children with additional needs who do not meet the working families' entitlement criteria, alongside additional staffing, the **BRIDGE Project** has supported parents to be stronger and more confident and enabled Teachers to operate pedagogically at a higher level. Both benefits ensure the children enjoy, and fully benefit from, their early learning experiences.

The project has also supported Teachers to improve child observations and assessment of need, and enhanced their skills, knowledge and confidence in working with children with SEND. As the proportion of school-age children with SEND continues to rise and the SEND funding crisis deepens, the **BRIDGE Project** demonstrates how investing in high quality ECEC can support early identification and early intervention, potentially reducing the costs associated with late identification and intervention.

The project has also shown how partnerships with families can be strengthened. Additional hours with a child and their family, and additional staff capacity and support have enabled LEYF Teachers to build stronger bonds with families. This translates into increased understanding of how best to support families and how to bridge learning from nursery to home and vice versa. Empowering parents to support their child's learning at home is important for all children, but is vital for children with additional needs and for families facing multiple disadvantages. Strong, trusted relationships between nurseries and families can help break cycles of disadvantage. Yet it remains unclear how national policy is investing in bridging learning between the nursery and the home.

The project has further highlighted the important role that a cooked nursery lunch can play in supporting children with additional needs. Through the **BRIDGE Project**, lunch became an opportunity for socialisation and for overcoming

significant food-related challenges, an area where collaboration between Teachers and parents was particularly strong. Parents felt confident sharing practical tips and advice with nursery staff in this familiar territory. Considering this evidence, it is particularly concerning that Government funding for the entitlements does not cover the cost of a nursery lunch, which is not considered part of 'early education' but an optional extra. This can result in children being excluded if families cannot afford to pay, or relying on packed lunches — an approach that is impractical and unfair in a nursery context.

Finally, while the working families' entitlements are intended to support mothers to enter employment, the evidence suggests that, in their current form, they largely benefit mothers who would have entered employment without this additional support. The programme does not sufficiently address the barriers faced by mothers who are further from the labour market. The **BRIDGE Project** illustrates how this gap can be addressed by providing 30 hours to families facing challenging circumstances. From supporting mothers dealing with mental health issues, bereavement and the aftermath of domestic violence, to giving them time to undertake training, apply for jobs or engage in voluntary work, the project shows how access to 30 hours can help build confidence, skills and pathways into employment, contributing to longer-term efforts to break cycles of disadvantage.

Overall, the **BRIDGE Project** demonstrates the transformative impact that targeted investment in ECEC can have for children with additional needs, their families and the workforce that supports them. By combining extended hours with additional staffing, the project has strengthened early identification and intervention, improved practice and confidence among early educators, and deepened partnerships with families. It has shown how an expanded SEND offer can support children's development while enabling parents, particularly mothers facing multiple disadvantages, to build stability, skills and pathways into employment. As national policy continues to prioritise expanded entitlements for working families, the evidence from the **BRIDGE Project** highlights the urgent need to rebalance investment for quality, equity and inclusion, ensuring that ECEC fulfils its potential to reduce, rather than reinforce, disadvantage.

## Our policy recommendations are summarised as follows

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<p>01</p> <p><b>Rebalance ECEC funding towards equity and quality</b></p>	<p>National ECEC policy should rebalance investment away from a narrow focus on entitlement expansion for working families and towards quality, equity and inclusion. Funding mechanisms should recognise that children with additional needs and families facing disadvantage require enhanced provision, staffing and support in order to benefit fully from early education.</p>
<p>02</p> <p><b>Extend 30-hour entitlements to children with additional needs</b></p>	<p>Eligibility for the 30-hour entitlement should be expanded to include children with SEND and additional needs, regardless of parental employment status. Evidence from the <b>BRIDGE Project</b> demonstrates that extended hours, when combined with additional staffing, improve children's experiences, strengthen parental confidence, and enable higher quality pedagogical practice.</p>
<p>03</p> <p><b>Invest in additional staffing to support early identification and intervention</b></p>	<p>Policy should fund additional staff capacity within Early Years settings to support observation, assessment and early intervention for children with SEND. Investment at this stage has the potential to reduce long-term costs associated with late identification and crisis-led interventions later in the education system.</p>
<p>04</p> <p><b>Strengthen workforce development for SEND and inclusive practice</b></p>	<p>National policy should prioritise sustained professional development for Early Years teachers/educators working with children with SEND. This includes funding for training, coaching, co-researching and reflective practice that enables teachers/educators to operate pedagogically at a higher level and build confidence in inclusive, needs-led provision.</p>
<p>05</p> <p><b>Recognise family partnership as core ECEC practice</b></p>	<p>ECEC policy should explicitly recognise and fund the time and staffing required to build strong partnerships with families. Bridging learning between nursery and home should be treated as a core element of quality provision, particularly for children with additional needs and families facing multiple disadvantages.</p>
<p>06</p> <p><b>Include nutritious meals as part of funded ECEC</b></p>	<p>Government funding for ECEC entitlements should include the cost of a cooked nursery lunch. Evidence from the <b>BRIDGE Project</b> shows that mealtimes support social development, address food-related challenges and strengthen collaboration between families and teachers/educators. Excluding meals from funding risks inequity and exclusion for low-income families.</p>

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## Our policy recommendations are summarised as follows

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07

### Align ECEC policy with pathways into employment

ECEC entitlements should be designed not only to support parents already close to the labour market, but also to help parents facing complex barriers move towards employment over time. Flexible access to 30 hours can enable parents to address mental health needs, recover from trauma, engage in training, and build confidence and skills.

08

### Use targeted ECEC as a tool to break cycles of disadvantage

Policy should recognise ECEC as a preventative social investment. The **BRIDGE Project** demonstrates that targeted, well-resourced Early Years provision can support children's development, strengthen families and contribute to longer-term reductions in inequality. National policy should embed this preventative approach rather than relying on later, more costly interventions.

09

### Pilot and scale targeted SEND-focused models

Government should support the piloting and scaling of targeted ECEC models similar to the **BRIDGE Project**. These pilots should be evaluated longitudinally to capture impacts on children's outcomes, family wellbeing, workforce development and public spending across education, health and social care.

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# About the London Institute of Early Years

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The London Institute of Early Years (LIEY) exists to scale what works. Rooted in LEYF's proven model, it translates social justice pedagogy into action through leadership pathways, high quality CPD, and practice-led research. At its core is a clear "how to" replication model, enabling organisations to embed approaches that are not only effective, but equitable and sustainable.

Grounded in the belief that social justice in ECEC is fairness by design, LIEY supports leaders and educators to build this into systems, relationships, and everyday practice. It champions leadership that is values-driven, decisions that are intentional, and pedagogy that ensures every child and family is welcomed, heard, and able to flourish.

Through its strategy, LIEY positions itself as a catalyst for sector-wide transformation—developing confident leaders, generating evidence from practice, and supporting the replication of inclusive, community-focused early years provision. Its ultimate measure of success is simple yet profound: expanding each child's life chances.

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Thanks for reading.

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