EEFective Kent Project

Evaluation Report

October 2024

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The project was independently evaluated by a team from the Institute for Employment Studies (IES). Rakhee Patel was the principal investigator and Ceri Williams was the project manager. Olivia Garner, Joseph Cook, Ehecatl Hunt-Duarte, Kate Alexander, Georgie Akehurst, and Jade Talbot worked across the research activities. Dr Dafni Papoutsaki was the project manager until April 2021 and Emma Pollard was an interim principal investigator between June 2021 and June 2022.

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Acknowledgements

Glossary

Abbreviation	Description
CASEL	Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning
CPD	continuing professional development
EEF	Education Endowment Foundation
EKP	EEFective Kent Project
ELEs	Evidence Leaders of Education
FSM	free school meals
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GIAS	Get Information About Schools
IDACI	Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index
IDEA	Intervention, Delivery, and Evaluation Analysis
IES	Institute for Employment Studies
IP	Internet Protocol
IPE	implementation and process evaluation
KARS	Kent Associate Research School
KCC	Kent County Council
KEE Hub	Kent Education Evidence Hub
KELSI	Kent Education, Learning and Skills Information
MAT	Multi-Academy Trust
NFER	National Foundation for Educational Research
NLEs	National Leaders of Education
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
PSHE	personal, social, health and economic
QR	quick response
RCT	randomised controlled trial
SEND	special educational needs and disabilities
SENDCO	special educational needs and disabilities coordinator
SLA	Service Level Agreement
SLEs	Specialist Leaders of Education
URN	unique reference number

Executive summary

The project

In autumn 2019, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) and Kent County Council (KCC) formed a partnership and created a new joint fund worth £600,000 to support improvements in education across Kent. The goal of the EEFective Kent Project (EKP) was to bring evidence-based programmes to Kent to support school improvement and the attainment of all pupils, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The project had three key strands of activity.

- **Strand 1 Promising Projects:** Promising Projects are programmes and interventions that have been independently evaluated by the EEF with promising results and therefore, identified as having high potential to improve attainment. Schools were able to apply for 50% matched funding from EKP in order to implement a Promising Project.

- **Strand 2 Evidence-Based Training:** This was a training offer designed to meet the needs of Kent's schools, covering topics such as 'SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) and Learning Behaviours' and 'Tackling Educational Disadvantage'. The training aimed to give schools an evidence base around their priority area, tools to understand their context, and to understand successful implementation.

- **Strand 3 Developing Research Champions:** The aim of this strand was to develop, embed, and sustain evidence-based practice and leadership at multiple levels within the Kent school system to ensure a legacy beyond the life of the project. It included activities such as developing a network of Evidence Champions and the appointment of a Kent Associate Research School (KARS).

The project was intended to run for three years from September 2019 until July 2022 but was extended to July 2023 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The mixed-methods evaluation aimed to increase understanding about knowledge mobilisation and the uptake of evidence-based practices in Kent, exploring EKP's reach, feasibility, promise, and sustainability. The evaluation used data from surveys, interviews, and management information, with participants including staff from KCC, the EEF, schools, and other relevant stakeholder organisations. The evaluation was relatively light-touch and aimed to generate a descriptive account of project activities and reflections on lessons learned to inform future projects and policy.

The evaluation faced several issues. This included poor response to the endline survey, difficulties in recruiting enough participants per school for the intended case study approach, and few interviews taking place with schools that had not participated in EKP. Delays to project delivery and the subsequent withdrawal of the post-project evaluation phase meant that the evaluation could not adequately assess sustained changes in practice within schools. The difficulties in implementing the intended design limits confidence in the evaluation's findings.

Table 1: Key conclusions

Reach	35% of Kent schools completed at least one Promising Project or Evidence-Based Training course, meaning the target of 35% of all Kent schools participating was met.
	A similar proportion of priority schools (34.2%) completed a Promising Project or Evidence-Based Training course, despite the higher target of 50%.
	Schools that took part in EKP were similar to the wider population of Kent schools in relation to the phase of education, level of disadvantage, and pupil attainment outcomes.
	The main enablers to participation were the training meeting school needs, the robust evidence base, and matched funding. Barriers to participating included resourcing and capacity issues, tight timeframes, and the courses offered.
Feasibility	There was a significant underspend against the total joint fund capacity of £600,000, with KCC and the EEF jointly contributing £348,076. The main reasons for this relate to lower-than-expected take-up of project activities for a range of reasons including the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, staffing issues and long-term illness in schools, and limited budgets to cover the matched funding requirement.

	Across all EKP strands, key informants and participants valued the skills of trainers and considered the training to be relevant to their context. There was some feedback that the Evidence Champions training could have been more tailored to take account of prior experience of evidence use. Flexibility around timings of sessions before and after core hours also enabled schools to participate.
Evidence of Promise	Overall, there is insufficient evidence to conclude whether the short-term outcomes in the Theory of Change are accurate. There was positive feedback from Evidence-Based Training participants, with them commonly reporting increased understanding, skills, knowledge, and confidence in relation to using evidence in decision-making. This improved understanding and confidence appears to have translated to perceived improvements in capability to identify and specify priority areas for change. However, the strength of the evidence in relation to these research questions is relatively weak and so the findings cannot be considered generalisable. The difficulties in recruiting interviewees and case studies, as well as small sample sizes for surveys, prevented the evaluation from creating more generalisable findings.
Sustainability	At the start of the project, Kent stakeholders envisaged that KARS would be re-appointed for a follow-on period and that KARS would play a key system-leadership role and drive the continuation of project activities after the EKP ended. As no Kent-based research school was appointed, this meant that the mechanisms for sustaining system-leadership that had been anticipated at the start were not in place. Sustainability plans had been built on this assumption and so had to change unexpectedly and relatively late on. In the absence of a Kent-based research school, there was a focus on building sustainability through local stakeholder relationships. The three main project legacies were: • The Kent Education Evidence (KEE) Hub: The KEE Hub was launched at the end of EKP as a platform to enable teachers and leaders to share, collaborate, and access evidence-informed practice. • Kent-based trainers for two of the Promising Projects. • Evidence Champions.

Additional findings

The findings of the evaluation indicate that the offer of matched funding to schools, combined with KCC and the EEF partnership to add profile to the initiative, was insufficient to drive take-up of Promising Projects at the anticipated level. Participation of Kent schools was lower than expected overall, as reflected in the significant project underspend.

There were multiple reasons for this. The COVID-19 pandemic presented significant challenges for schools that affected their ability to engage with EKP activities. Senior staff had to oversee school closures and the move to remote learning, while re-prioritising resources in response to illness and staff shortages. In some cases, this diverted focus and resources away from longer-term, strategic improvement priorities. It is impossible to isolate the influence of the pandemic from other factors that affected take-up. However, feedback about the budgetary pressures Kent schools faced at the time EKP was launched suggests that for some schools the 50% matched funding was inadequate, regardless of the context of the pandemic. Additionally, despite some evidence that the partnership between KCC and the EEF added profile to the initiative and was attractive to schools, some schools still did not perceive the EKP offer as appropriate to their needs.

The three main points of learning identified for similar future initiatives were:

• the importance of sound governance arrangements that facilitate contributions from a diverse range of stakeholders;

• the need to fully understand and analyse the complex stakeholder landscape before implementing this type of project to maximise opportunities for alignment and minimise tensions; and

• the need for a focus on sustainability from the start of the project, with contingencies in case first choice options cannot be implemented.

Introduction

In autumn 2019, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) and Kent County Council (KCC) formed a partnership and created a new joint fund worth £600,000 to support improvements in education across Kent. The goal of the EEFective Kent Project (EKP) was to bring evidence-based programmes to Kent to support school improvement and the attainment of all pupils and particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The project was intended to run for three years from September 2019 until July 2022. In 2021, the project was extended to July 2023 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.[1]

This report presents the findings from an independent project evaluation, funded by the EEF and undertaken by the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) between July 2020 and December 2023. The evaluation investigated whether the project had influenced demand for evidence-based interventions (Promising Projects) in schools within Kent and the sustainability of access to these interventions once the project came to an end. It also tested whether light-touch support and training based on the EEF guidance reports influenced schools' capability to implement evidence-based interventions. The extent to which EKP supported collaborative working across the Kent school system was also explored. The evaluation used a mixed-methods design to generate insights and understanding about these areas, focusing on the reach, feasibility, evidence of promise, and sustainability of the project. The evaluation was relatively light-touch and aimed to generate a descriptive account of project activities and reflections on lessons learned to inform future projects and policy.

The EKP

Project context and rationale

Kent is a highly selective local authority, with over 30 selective schools out of a total of 103 secondary schools. The Sutton Trust has shown that disadvantaged children are much less likely than other pupils to attend grammar schools (Cullinane, 2016). Further, research by Andrews et al. (2016, p. 8) indicates that in the most selective areas, there is a small negative effect of not attending grammar schools—an average of 0.6 grades lower per pupil across all GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) subjects. This negative effect is greater for pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) who do not attend grammar schools—they achieve 1.2 grades lower on average across all GCSE subjects.

Additionally, Kent has significant pockets of coastal deprivation that stand in contrast to more affluent areas of the county. This is reflected in patterns of educational attainment across districts, with Thanet and Ashford generally achieving below the national average in Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 attainment measures. This includes, for example:

- the percentage of pupils achieving the expected standard in reading, writing, and maths (Key Stage 2);

- the average Attainment 8 score (Key Stage 4); and

- the percentage of pupils achieving a standard pass in English and maths (Key Stage 4).

In contrast, most other districts perform above the national average on these measures, with a significant range in performance. Some districts perform only slightly above the national average (e.g. Folkestone and Hythe and Gravesham) but in other districts there is a 5–14 percentage point difference (e.g. Tunbridge Wells and Dartford) (Management Information, Children, Young People and Education, Kent County Council, 2020).[2]

Generally, average attainment in Kent is higher than the national average at all phases but the attainment gap between pupils eligible for FSM and pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), and their counterparts, is larger (Management Information, Children, Young People and Education, Kent County Council, 2020).[3]

The KCC strategy for school improvement in 2019–2020 (Kent County Council and The Education People, 2019), the year EKP was launched, tackled this issue. It included a strategic objective to provide support for schools so that

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[1] A glossary of terms can be found at the beginning of the report.
[2] Data relates to management information about the 2019–2020 academic year.
[3] See Table 3d, 3g, and 3j, for example.

achievement gaps close for pupils on FSM, children in care, young offenders, and pupils with SEND. Further, it included a specific goal to support all schools to 'use best evidential practice to narrow achievement gaps'. School-to-school support was at the heart of the school improvement strategy, reflecting national policy's drive for more autonomous schools and a school-led self-improving system.[4]

The school improvement strategy covered academies and free schools as well as local authority-maintained schools and stated that these were entitled to school improvement support. In Kent at the start of EKP, 56% (329) of schools were local authority-maintained,[5] 42% (245) were academies, and 2% (10) were free schools (Management Information, Children, Young People and Education, Kent County Council, 2020).[6] The strategy also covered all phases of education. Overall, there were 456 primary schools, 100 secondary schools, 22 special schools, and 6 Pupil Referral Units (Management Information, Children, Young People and Education, Kent County Council, 2020).[7]

From the EEF's perspective, it wished to understand how best to support local areas in their efforts to reduce the attainment gap. In 2019, it announced newly created regional leads—based across England—who would work with schools in their region who were most in need of support to improve attainment. Regional leads would help schools to use evidence-based resources and training to address the challenges they faced and to support school improvement activities. Concurrently, the EEF Research Schools Network was being expanded to extend its geographical reach.

A previous scale-up campaign funded by the EEF—the Suffolk Challenge Fund—had tested partnership working between the EEF and a local authority between 2016 and 2018, as a model for scaling up and disseminating programmes that were found to have evidence of promise (Gu *et al.,* 2019) and there was a desire to build on learning from this work. A key design principle in the Suffolk Challenge Fund was matched funding for publicly funded schools that implemented projects, which according to EEF evaluations, had a promising impact on pupil attainment. Due to the positive findings about this design aspect (Gu *et al.,* 2019), the approach was also adopted by EKP.

In this strategic context, the partnership between KCC and the EEF was forged by leaders from both organisations. The collaboration recognised that strategic objectives of both organisations were aligned in relation to reducing the attainment gap and increasing the uptake of evidence-based approaches. It was assumed that a formal collaboration between KCC and the EEF would add profile to work in this area and provide mutual benefits. The context in which the partnership was established was very different to the context in which the project started and was delivered six months later due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.[8]

Partnership arrangements

It was intended that KCC and the EEF would contribute £300,000 each to a joint-funding pot over the lifecycle of the project, which Kent schools would apply for as matched funding for Evidence-Based Training. The project was managed on a day-to-day basis by KCC, with time allocated within the budget for a senior project lead, project manager, and project officer. Staff from the EEF supported KCC and the regional lead for London and the South East managed the project for the EEF. KCC and the EEF worked closely with key stakeholders, involving them in the leadership and governance of the project.

Representatives of KCC, the EEF, The Education People (an educational services organisation providing services to Kent-maintained schools on behalf of KCC) and seven headteachers (all members of the Kent Association of

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[4] In the main, there is consensus in the literature that since 2010, the government has promoted the idea of a self-improving school-led system through flagship policies such as implementation of Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs), reduced local authority oversight of schools, and creation of more mechanisms for school-to-school support such as Teaching School Alliances (and subsequently teaching school hubs)—see Greany and Higham (2018) and Greatbatch and Tate (2019). The Department for Education White Paper published in March 2022 sets out a vision for all schools to be part of a MAT by 2030, and for the best Trusts in the system to work to transform previously underperforming schools (Department for Education, 2022).

[5] This includes community, foundation, voluntary aided, and voluntary controlled schools.

[6] Data relates to management information about the 2019–2020 academic year. See Table 1a.

[7] Ibid. See Table 1b.

[8] Also, during the Autumn of 2019, the Kent SEND system underwent its first inspection, which resulted in nine areas of weakness being identified. While this report does not consider the impact of this inspection, it resulted in the commissioning of three large-scale training programmes for schools and the co-construction of a number of policies and procedures with the education sector, both of which may have impacted on school capacity to participate in the EKP.

Headteachers, a membership organisation for all Kent headteachers[9]), sat on a project strategic steering group, established in November 2019. There were two headteachers of secondary schools, four headteachers of primary schools, and one headteacher from a special school, including a mix of local authority-maintained and MATs.[10] The strategic steering group met approximately once per half-term with 12 meetings taking place between November 2019 and May 2022. The group provided advice and guidance to KCC and the EEF to ensure EKP activities were designed to meet the needs of Kent schools. It played a particular role in advising on communications strategies for EKP, to ensure they were persuasive and would be well-received by schools. In particular, Kent Association of Headteachers and the six headteachers used their networks and influence to promote EKP within schools, particularly during the first six months of the project. The strategic steering group was disbanded in 2022 after all project activities were designed. Alongside the steering group, an operational working group was also established, which comprised of representatives from KCC, the EEF, and The Education People. This working group facilitated the implementation of the key strands of project activity and considered issues such as delivering communications, timing of activities, resourcing, quality assurance, and monitoring.

The Education People and Kent Association of Headteachers were key project stakeholders. The Education People's school improvement offer to local authority-maintained schools includes support funded by KCC, which is free of charge to schools, such as: a core offer of visits to schools; a dedicated school improvement adviser; access to senior guidance, where appropriate; support during inspection; and headteacher briefings and newsletters.[11] They also offer payable services to schools (both local authority-maintained schools and MATs) including consultancy, resources, and continuing professional development (CPD). The Education People's school improvement role meant that their improvement advisers held extensive knowledge and expertise in relation to Kent schools and key relationships with school leadership teams. In EKP, these relationships and knowledge were used to support the project in numerous ways. Senior leaders of The Education People were involved in EKP from the early stages and provided feedback on the project proposal. Improvement advisers provided insights into the needs and contexts of specific schools to inform KCC and the EEF's thinking on which schools should be prioritised; provided feedback on the appropriateness of the Promising Projects offer; used their knowledge and data to inform the Evidence-Based Training offer; promoted project activities; and supported consultation with Kent schools. The Education People charged for its services and for some of the time on the project.

While KCC and The Education People worked predominantly with local authority-maintained schools in relation to school improvement prior to the project, both organisations had some links with MATs. These tended to be smaller MATs as, typically, larger MATs comprising more than five or six schools would draw on internal school-to-school improvement practices rather than purchasing external school improvement services. There was variability in the relationships with all types of schools, with some local authority-maintained schools and MATs engaging more with KCC and The Education People than others.

The Kent Association of Headteachers had a central role in influencing strategy, policy, and planning for school improvement in Kent and aimed to develop a more effective system of school-to-school support. Kent Association of Headteachers had a key role in leading 'Strand 3 Developing Research Champions' of the EKP, working closely with KCC and The Education People.

Theory of Change

EKP is summarised in the Theory of Change diagram (Figure 1 below), which was developed at the beginning of the project in 2019 and revamped in late 2020 by the EEF, KCC, and the evaluation team. This set out how the project delivery teams at KCC and the EEF envisaged the project would work in practice to achieve its intended outcomes.

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[9] Kent Association of Headteachers changed its name to Kent Association of Leaders in Education shortly after project closure.
[10] One of the primary headteachers was unable to attend due to illness so in practice there were six headteachers involved in the steering group.
[11] From The Education People website, available at: https://www.theeducationpeople.org/offer-to-kent-schools-and-early-years-providers/ (accessed 30 November 2023).

Figure 1: Theory of Change for the EKP

Context and rationale
- Kent has a grammar school system and significant pockets of coastal deprivation that stand in contrast to more affluent areas of the county. These factors contribute to average attainment in Kent being higher than the national average at all phases but the attainment gap between pupils eligible for FSM and pupils with SEND and their counterparts being larger
- National policy advocates for more autonomous schools and a school-led self-improving system. In Kent, this is reflected in strategic objectives set out in *Inspiring Excellence*, KCC's strategy for school improvement
- The EEF wants to understand how best it can support local areas in their efforts to reduce the attainment gap
- Historically, there has been a lack of funding available to schools for school improvement activities

Long-term impacts
- Improved progress rates at Key Stage 2 and improved Progress 8 scores
- Reduction in the attainment gap between children and young people eligible for FSM and their peers at Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4
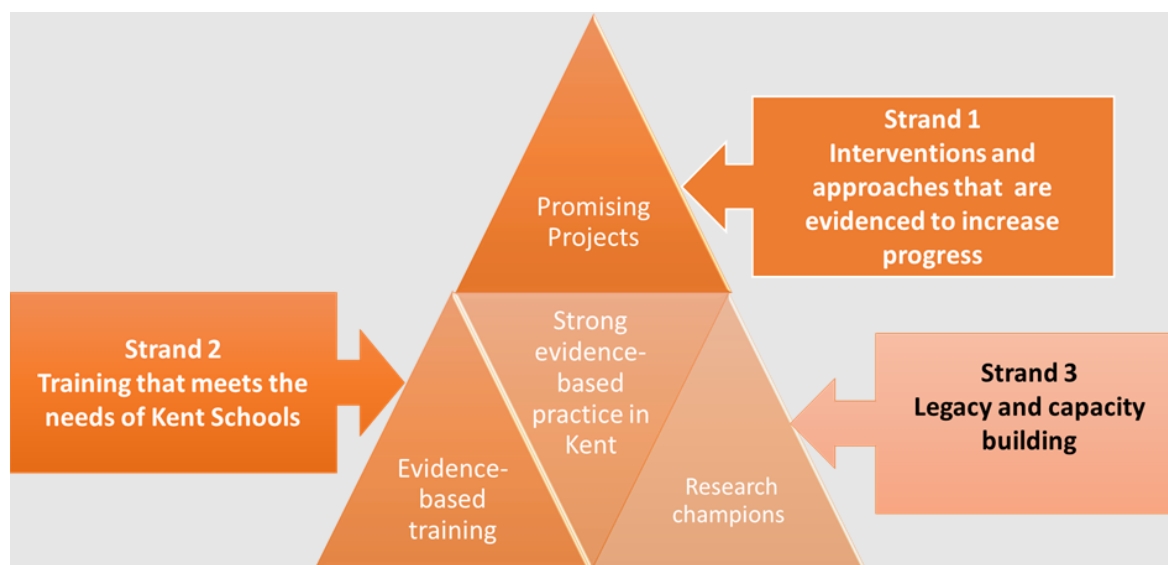- Reduction in the attainment gap between children assessed with SEND and their peers at Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4
- Improved Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) ratings among schools

Theory of Change
- Supporting leaders to change their attitudes and behaviours in order to make strategic, evidence-based decisions will result in improvements to pupil progress and attainment and school outcomes
- This will influence future decisions i.e. they will continue applying a strategic, evidence-focused approach to identifying priorities for improvement and solutions
- Consequently, they will choose to continue to spend on Promising Projects in the future
- Schools working together can develop improvement strategies that meet localised challenges through the sharing of professional expertise

Inputs
- £1.2 million funding: KCC and the EEF – £300k each; Kent schools – £600k
- Administrative support from KCC – £70k per annum
- The EEF project manager's time
- KCC project lead's time
- The Education People advisers' time to participate in Train the Trainer training
- Time of Kent Association of Headteachers members and Kent Leaders of Education

Activities
- KCC and the EEF devise list of priority schools
- Promotion via headteacher briefings, Kent Leadership of Education briefings, roadshows, website, social media, press, The Education People advisers
- Putting Evidence to Work: online implementation course for senior leaders
- **Strand 1:** Delivery of Promising Projects training by various providers, with oversight by KCC. Three application rounds
- **Strand 2:** Research schools deliver training (average three-day course) on the EEF guidance reports to clusters of schools, tailored to local needs. Wraparound support for some schools
- Targeting of priority schools for Strand 2 by The Education People advisers
- **Strand 3:** Kent Association of Headteachers lead on establishing research hubs that facilitate collaborative action research

Outputs
- Senior leaders participating in implementation training identify a realistic priority to target through new training
- 35% of all schools and 50% of priority schools send at least one representative to implementation, Promising Projects, or guidance report training and complete the training
- Those participating in implementation, Promising Projects, or guidance report training perceive it as useful
- Schools implement Promising Projects in their own contexts with fidelity

Short-term outcomes/mediators
- Senior leaders have increased evidence and research literacy
- Senior leaders have increased capability to identify and specify priority areas for change and to introduce change in a strategic, managed way
- Senior leaders apply the process described in the implementation training on a continuous basis for ongoing school improvement activities
- Increased expenditure on Promising Projects by schools in Kent
- Teachers/teaching assistants taking part in Promising Projects gain knowledge and understanding about how to implement new, evidence-based approaches in their classroom
- Staff in schools have more positive attitudes towards research use for school improvement
- Teachers in participating schools perceive an improvement in pupil performance
- Increased partnership working and collaboration between schools

Enabling factors/conditions for success
- Offer of match funding to schools
- Education professionals are committed to making changes to improve pupil outcomes
- The partnership between KCC and the EEF—adds to profile of the initiative
- The Education People, Kent Association of Headteachers, and Kent Leaders of Education support for the initiative. In the case of Kent Association of Headteachers and Kent Leaders of Education, there are existing collaborative groups to build upon
- KCC/The Education People have positive existing relationships with schools

Project activities

The project had three key strands of activity, as shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: EKP activities – three strands of work

Source: KCC.

These strands were rolled out sequentially but there was crossover between them, and the third strand of work, which aimed to provide sustainability, drew on all the project work. Schools were able to participate in one or multiple strands but were only eligible for funding for one Promising Project.

Strand 1 Promising Projects: Interventions and approaches that are evidenced to increase progress

Promising Projects are programmes and interventions that have been independently evaluated by the EEF with promising results and therefore, identified as having high potential to improve attainment. Schools were invited to bid for 50% matched funding to implement one of the projects, with schools required to fund the remaining 50% from their own budgets. In addition, if teachers needed to attend external training, schools could claim contributions towards staffing cover and travel costs.[12] All the Promising Projects offered to schools as part of EKP had been shown in trials to make at least two months', in most cases three months', additional progress for targeted pupils.

The EEF initially selected 13 different Promising Projects, ensuring a range of subjects and educational phases were covered to meet the needs of Kent schools. The subject-focused range of projects included five maths, four literacy, two science, two wider curriculum, and one assessment for learning. In terms of phases, there were eight for Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2, four for Key Stage 3, and three for Key Stage 4. Five of the projects were also appropriate for special schools. The programmes include whole-class programmes aimed at maximising the teaching and learning of all pupils in the classroom (typically focused on pedagogy), and targeted interventions, which typically provide focused, additional support, delivered by teachers or teaching assistants. The Education People school improvement advisers provided feedback on the proposed offer and the EKP team also analysed school data and carried out a survey of Kent schools to help select the most appropriate Promising Projects for Strand 1.

COVID-19 had a significant impact on delivery. Many of the projects involved face-to-face training, which required the providers to adapt their programmes for remote delivery and validate this new delivery mode with the EEF. Over the course of the first year, some of the Promising Projects on offer were withdrawn for reasons including providers ceasing to trade, experiencing internal stresses, and being unable to deliver programmes virtually. Schools who had selected one of these projects were given the option to choose another Promising Project or withdraw. In response to the issues

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[12] A flat rate of £100 per day was set as a contribution to staffing cover or £50 for a half day. Funding was not available for teaching assistant cover. For travel, schools could apply for a flat rate of £15 per training session.

faced by schools and providers, timeframes were extended to give schools greater flexibility, enable them to change their choice of project to respond to new learning gaps and priorities, and support providers to adjust their delivery model where possible.

Three rounds of Promising Projects were run. The first funding round started in 2019 and closed in January 2020, the second funding round was due to open in April 2020, however, this was moved in response to the pandemic and opened for an extended time period, from June 2020 to October 2020. The third funding round took place in April 2021 to June 2021. The offer for this final funding round was reduced to eight Promising Projects, with all but one project offering a choice of face-to-face or virtual delivery, due to the impact of COVID-19. The Promising Projects that continued during the pandemic and beyond are listed below:[13]

- 1stClass@Number (Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2);

- App-Based Maths Learning (Onebillion) (Early Years, Key Stage 1, and Key Stage 2 catch-up);

- Children's University (Key Stage 1, Key Stage 2, Key Stage 3, and Key Stage 4);

- Embedding Formative Assessment (Key Stage 1, Key Stage 2, Key Stage 3, and Key Stage 4);

- Nuffield Early Language Intervention (Early Years);

- Reciprocal Reading (Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3);

- Switch-on Reading (Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3); and

- Thinking, Doing, Talking Science (Key Stage 2).

To help schools make informed choices about which project to apply for, KCC and the EEF developed a prospectus, which included detailed information about the available programmes. Other promotional activities included headteacher briefings, briefings for Kent Leaders of Education,[14] a roadshow where schools could meet Promising Project providers, information on the KELSI (Kent Education, Learning and Skills Information) website (the KCC resource for school professionals), social media, mailing lists/bulletins/newsletters from the Director of Education via KELSI, and promotion through stakeholder organisations such as The Education People and Kent Association of Headteachers. KCC and the EEF also attended Research Ed events.

As a pre-requisite for applying for a Promising Project, schools were also expected to complete an online implementation course based on the EEF's guidance report: 'Putting Evidence to Work – A School's Guide to Implementation' (Sharples *et al.,* 2019). This was available as an online tutorial or initially as a face-to-face session led by a representative from the EEF, delivered as part of the 2019 round of headteacher briefings. The aim was that senior leaders would complete the implementation training to help identify a realistic priority to target through the Promising Projects. The EKP delivery team signposted senior leaders to the online implementation course and encouraged them to use it. Headteachers then had to complete a short online application form, which went to KCC and was then passed on to providers. This included questions about why the school had chosen the Promising Project, how it was appropriate to their needs and context, and how the school intended to ensure effective implementation of the project. Headteachers had to self-certify on their application form that they had or would complete the implementation course but this was not mandatory and completion was not monitored. Overall, the emphasis on the role of the implementation training in choosing school improvement priorities was less than originally anticipated.

Schools who submitted a successful application for a Promising Project were then expected to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with KCC, which set out the roles and responsibilities of the school, KCC, and the provider.

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[13] An overview of the funded projects taken from the project prospectus is included in Appendix A1. There were two more courses listed but which did not go ahead – 'Stop & Think: Learning Counterintuitive Concepts' and 'Working Memory Plus Arithmetic'.
[14] The Kent Network of Headteachers who provide one to one support to each other to support school improvement, through coaching, mentoring, and peer review.

Strand 2 Evidence-Based Training: Training that meets the needs of Kent's schools

Strand 2 was developed to complement 'Strand 1 Promising Projects' to provide greater school choice and respond to the identified needs within the sector. 'Strand 1 Promising Projects' was more fixed in nature and limited by the range of Promising Projects offered by the EEF. By contrast, for Strand 2, KCC and the EEF felt that there needed to be school choice in what the offer consisted of and high levels of collaboration between schools, KCC, and the EEF. They also wanted a broader menu of training options to be available to meet school needs, with a focus on school leaders to maximise impact and the potential for improvements across a school. Evidence Leaders of Education (ELEs) were recruited to support staff and schools to embed and sustain the learnings post-training. More details about ELEs are provided in the description of 'Strand 3 Developing Research Champions'.

The EKP team worked in consultation with Kent-maintained schools and academies to build content responsive to the specific needs of Kent and rooted in evidence. Via analysis of attainment and progress data and a wide consultation process (using The Education People advisers, the EKP steering group, and Kent Association of Headteachers), which included in-depth conversations, surveys, taster sessions, and focus groups with schools, four training topics were identified that responded to the needs and concerns of Kent schools. The four topics chosen to be delivered were:

- Training and Retaining Great Teachers;

- SEND and Learning Behaviours;[15]

- Delivery of Remote Learning; and

- Characteristics of Deprivation.

Following the consultation, Evidence-Based Training courses on these topics were developed based on the EEF guidance reports, which are user-friendly summaries of academic research and best practice for schools. They aimed to give schools an evidence base around their priority area, tools to understand their delivery context, and to understand successful implementation using the EEF guidance. These aims were embedded into each programme offered, and the courses were designed to maximise flexibility, collaboration, and interaction between schools. The approach to promotion of the Evidence-Based Training was similar to that of the Promising Projects. An information guide was created and the courses were promoted in headteacher briefings, the KELSI website, social media, mailing lists/bulletins from KELSI, and promotion through stakeholder organisations, including The Education People, Charles Dickens and Durrington Research Schools, the EEF, and Kent Association of Headteachers.

Development of the Evidence-Based Training was led by the EEF. It was delivered through the EEF's Research Schools Network.[16] Two research schools from the EEF's network in the London and the South East region were selected for delivery of this strand: Charles Dickens Research School (based in Southwark) and Durrington Research School (based in West Sussex). These schools were selected due to their proximity to Kent. As part of the EKP, KARS was appointed to work alongside the research schools to lead on implementation of the Evidence-Based Training.

The research schools were tasked with delivering the training on a tailored basis, to support groups of schools to progress towards existing goals or enhance partnership work. A senior school leader was required to attend with another member of staff, with exceptions made for very small schools. Schools were 50% match-funded to access up to two of the courses, and could also apply for a contribution to staffing cover. An exception was the training on SEND and Learning Behaviours, which was part-funded by KCC's special educational needs inclusion fund, because SEND is a county-wide priority, and by EKP (50% each).[17]

Initially, these training courses ran virtually (due to COVID-19) over a six- to ten-week period and were equivalent to three days of training. The virtual delivery model combined use of live training sessions with interactive elements such

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[15] This was adapted from the EEF 'learning behaviours' guidance to add the topic of SEND and have a greater focus on metacognition, designed with Charles Dickens Research School.

[16] A network of 28 research schools and 10 associate research schools across England, which support other schools in their area to use evidence to improve teaching practice e.g. through offering training (this was the scale of the Research Schools Network at the time that the Kent Associate Research School [KARS] was appointed).

[17] This meant it was fully funded for schools.

as visual 'jamboards' (digital whiteboards), pre-recorded material, and gap tasks.[18] For later courses, schools were offered hybrid courses.

Round one of the Evidence-Based Training started at the end of January 2021 and included courses on the four topics identified through the initial consultation. An additional 'SEND and Learning Behaviours' course was repeated over the Summer Term of 2021. A second round of Evidence-Based Training ran through the academic year 2021 to 2022 with the following courses offered as they were most appropriate for the schools at the time:

- SEND and Learning Behaviours;

- Tackling Educational Disadvantage;

- Evidence-Informed Curriculum Development; and

- Improving Memory and Metacognition.

The third round of Evidence-Based Training courses was run by Durrington Research School and included different courses:

- Effective Learning Behaviours;

- Designing Effective Professional Development; and

- From Mitigation to Success (a programme focused on implementing strategies to tackle disadvantages).

The courses were generally adapted versions of existing the EEF or research school training, tailored and developed to fit the Kent context.

Identifying priority schools

KCC and the EEF developed separate lists of priority schools to be targeted for EKP project activities. The KCC list was developed using a range of information including attainment and progress data and knowledge and insights from The Education People school improvement advisers about schools and their leadership. The EEF priority schools were schools with higher than average numbers of disadvantaged pupils where attainment for those pupils was below average, identified as part of the EEF's regional strategy nationally. Schools on either list were the priority schools for EKP. EKP originally had targets for 35% of all schools and 50% of priority schools to send at least one representative to complete the implementation training, Promising Projects (Strand 1) or Evidence-Based Training (Strand 2). In practice, with the lesser focus on the implementation training, the targets were monitored for schools to send representatives to complete Promising Projects or Evidence-Based Training.

Strand 3 Developing Research Champions

The aim of Strand 3 was to develop, embed, and sustain evidence-based practice and leadership at multiple levels within the Kent school system to ensure a legacy beyond the life of the project. The EKP team worked closely with Kent Association of Headteachers and The Education People as system leaders to develop and implement this strand of work. The key activities within Strand 3 were:

- **Establishing ELEs:** Following a competitive application process, six ELEs were appointed for 12 months to work with Durrington and Charles Dickens Research Schools. Each ELE committed to delivering approximately ten days of wraparound support for each round of Evidence-Based Training, to be arranged directly between school staff and their appointed ELE. This typically consisted of between two and seven hours per school. The ELE worked on a one-to-one basis with schools. The ELE time could be used to support improved understanding of areas for improvement within the school, to develop and specify an implementation plan for achieving school improvements, or to start putting the plan into action. ELEs were seconded from a range of system-leadership roles in the sector including: one primary

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[18] Gap tasks are classroom-based activities designed to be implemented and developed in the 'gap' between group sessions. Participants then have the opportunity to discuss outcomes, successes, challenges, and ideas at the next group session.

headteacher; two Trust leaders; one independent education consultant; and two senior The Education People advisers. ELE fees for this work were covered by EKP funds.[19]

- **Appointment of a KARS:** Following an open application process, Kingsnorth Primary School was assigned as the KARS in November 2021, announced in January 2022 and officially launched in early March 2022 for a fixed period until summer 2023. Its role, as with all research schools and associate research schools, was to support local schools to apply research and evidence to improve pupil outcomes and close the disadvantage gap. Additionally, it was expected that KARS would become a 'visible system-leader' in Kent, leading on the development, design, and delivery of school-to-school improvement activities. The designation of Kingsnorth Primary School as an associate research school ended in 2023 as planned. At this time, the EEF's regional strategy shifted and the associate research school's role/designation was no longer part of the Research Schools Network model. Associate research schools were able to apply to become a research school for the 2023–2026 period.[20]

- **Establishing the Kent Education Evidence (KEE) Hub:** This hub aims to support Kent schools to develop evidence-engaged cultures and practices. It focuses on building capacity by developing people (including Evidence Champions) to play specific evidence-focused roles in their schools and more widely. The hub was developed as part of EKP by KCC, the EEF, Kent Association of Headteachers, and KARS.

- **Developing a network of Evidence Champions**: EKP developed a role for school-based Evidence Champions. School practitioners applied to be their school's evidence lead so they could support, encourage, and engage colleagues with how to source, access, and understand high-quality research evidence, as well as how to apply this to teaching and learning, CPD, or school improvement planning. Their work is intended to support school leadership to ensure that planned school improvement activity is shaped by research evidence. KCC ran three cohorts of fully funded Evidence Champion training (the first took place in the academic year 2021/2022 and the second and third cohorts were in 2022/2023), with opportunities to work with other schools through this training.

- **Delivering 'Train the Trainer' programmes for selected Promising Projects**: The Train the Trainer programmes aimed to ensure ongoing access to the Promising Projects from Strand 1 within Kent, beyond the duration of EKP. EKP funding was used to train local professionals to be trainers for Embedding Formative Assessment (two new trainers) and 1stClass@Number (one new trainer).[21] To become accredited trainers, practitioners needed to have implemented these Promising Projects in their schools. To enable this, EKP also offered matched funding for additional schools starting these Promising Projects in 2022/2023. One of the trainers was tasked to set-up and facilitate a network for the schools involved in their training, to share best practice, and troubleshoot issues.

Background evidence

Use of research evidence in schools

National educational policy highlights the importance of the use of research and evidence to strengthen leadership and teaching practices in schools, especially as part of the self-improving school system (Department for Education, 2010; Greany, 2015; McAleavy *et al.,* 2021). Robust research evidence is increasingly available for schools to use. Connolly, Keen and Urbanska's (2018) systematic review of randomised controlled trials (RCTs) in education between 1980 and 2016 found that just over three-quarters of these were produced over the last ten years, reflecting the significant increase in the use of RCTs in recent years. The RCTs covered a wide range of educational settings, interventions, and impacts, demonstrating wide potential applications for evidence-based education research. Educational research is increasingly available in accessible forms such as the EEF's Teaching and Learning Toolkit (Education Endowment Foundation, no date) and guidance reports. These are designed to support teachers and leaders to make decisions about how to improve learning outcomes by synthesising the available research evidence.

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[19] The EKP delivery team considered the designation of ELEs to be an activity within Strand 3 of EKP for monitoring and reporting purposes (e.g. this is how it was described in a report to the Children, Young People and Education Cabinet committee in March 2021) In reality, because a key function of the ELEs was to provide school-to-school support as part of the Evidence-Based Training, ELEs were part of Strands 2 and 3. Later in this report, we discuss ELEs primarily in relation to Strand 2.

[20] Kingsnorth Primary School was not appointed as a research school.

[21] The intention had been that 'Train the Trainers' would be established in five of the Promising Projects (so including 'Reciprocal Reading', 'Switch-on Reading', and 'Thinking, Doing, Talking Science'). However, mainly due to workload pressures among teaching staff, that had not been possible before the end of the EKP although KCC hoped that this might be achievable in the future.

Despite a well-developed infrastructure and wealth of resources, Coldwell (2022) found that research use remains relatively low, which he attributes to institutional factors including a lack of time and resource within schools and among senior leaders. Nonetheless, some research shows that teachers' use of evidence-based resources to inform their practice has been increasing. In a survey by the Sutton Trust (2023),[22] 77% of senior leaders reported considering research evidence in their decision-making. This has dropped slightly from the decade high of 79% in 2021 (Sutton Trust, 2021),[23] but was significantly higher than the 52% of leaders in 2012. However, a 2017 survey (Walker *et al.,* 2019) indicates that the prominence of research evidence in decision-making may still be small. Further, there is limited evidence on the effectiveness or impact of any increased research use in schools (Langer *et al.,* 2016; Coldwell *et al.,* 2017; Flynn, 2019).

Encouragingly, studies show that teachers value and have positive attitudes towards using research, although Diery and colleagues (2020) found this to be more the case at senior levels and for those with more experience with research (Ovenden-Hope and la Velle, 2015; Diery *et al.,* 2020). Furthermore, the 2017 survey uncovered a willingness among teachers to engage with research evidence and also that many schools have climates, which are supportive of evidence use, suggesting a promising base to build upon (Walker *et al.,* 2019).

Research about the necessary conditions for facilitating evidence use emphasises the interaction between individual factors, such as knowledge, skills, positive attitudes, and a willingness to engage with research, with contextual factors such as the requirements of educational inspectorates and the capabilities of school leaders. For example, Schildkamp (2019) argues that evidence and data use is influenced by system, organisation, and team/individual level factors. Similarly, Langer, Tripp and Gough (2016) found evidence that interventions seeking to increase evidence use must develop the opportunity, capability, and motivation to make use of research evidence, alongside improved access. Research suggests there are benefits in giving teachers and senior leaders the knowledge and skills to exercise professional judgement for their context, and to refine and adapt interventions where needed to better meet the needs of their contexts (Sharples, 2013; Diery *et al.,* 2020).

Evidence underpinning the Promising Projects, Evidence-Based Training, and Developing Research Champions strands

Strand 1 Promising Projects

Promising Projects are projects, which have demonstrated the potential to improve attainment for children cost-effectively when independently and robustly evaluated through a RCT (Yeomans, 2019). This includes securing at least one month's additional progress for participating pupils compared to the control group (i.e. an effect size greater than 0.05 standard deviations); costs less than £80 per pupil for each additional month's progress and is rated by the EEF as having at least moderate security. For EKP, projects were chosen, which had been shown in trials to make at least two months', in most cases three months', additional progress for targeted pupils.

Strand 2 Evidence-Based Training

The Evidence-Based Training courses were based on the EEF guidance reports, which summarise a wide range of available recent research evidence in a particular area. The guidance reports are drawn from sources including systematic reviews and meta-analyses, qualitative and quantitative research including EEF-funded evaluations, and expert advisory panels of researchers and practitioners. Evidence is often drawn from the EEF's Teaching and Learning Toolkit (Education Endowment Foundation, no date), a synthesis of international research evidence developed by Professor Steve Higgins and colleagues at the University of Durham with the support of the Sutton Trust and the EEF.

Strand 3 Developing Research Champions

In the literature, there is an increasing recognition of the need to establish place-based school improvement networks to counter the variation in provision and improve social mobility in disadvantaged areas (Greatbatch and Tate, 2019). Evidence also points to an emergence of shared leadership models to accommodate inter-school collaborative

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[22] See: https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/school-funding-and-pupil-premium-2023/
[23] See: https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/pupil-premium-2021/

arrangements (Sandals and Bryant, 2014; Armstrong, 2015; Greatbatch and Tate, 2019). Armstrong's (2015) review of evidence for the Department for Education found that impacts of school-to-school collaboration include improved staff professional development and career opportunities, sharing good practice and organisational efficiency, and school culture shifts towards collaboration, enquiry-based approaches, and knowledge mobilisation. The evidence for direct impact of school-to-school collaboration on student outcomes is more limited.

In relation to the role of Evidence Champions, research by Dimmock (2019) identifies the establishment of 'formal roles that recognise the importance of a research-informed approach, such as a research coordinator' (p. 60) as a feature of strong school leadership for research engagement. Similarly, Coldwell et al. (2017) identify through case study research that in schools that are more engaged in evidence-informed teaching, senior leaders often work with other leaders and staff as Evidence Champions across the school. These are individuals who are key sources of evidence-engaged knowledge and expertise. Other studies emphasise that in a research-engaged school, staff must be members of a research community (Handscomb and MacBeath, 2003 cited in Sharp et al., 2006) that is collegiate and collaborative (Hargreaves, 2003). Evidence Champions play a role in creating and leading this community.

Evidence on similar previous initiatives

The EEF launched a similar intervention in 2016, partnering with Suffolk County Council to set-up the Suffolk Challenge Fund. This was a bid to improve educational attainment, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, in a county with a wide attainment gap, through supporting schools to use research and evidence to inform decisions about teaching and learning. Publicly funded schools in Suffolk were offered matched funding for one of nine Promising Projects, which predominantly focused on improving teaching practices in primary schools. An independent mixed-methods evaluation was carried out from 2016 to 2018, which aimed to test whether incentivising schools to adopt EEF programmes is a viable way of scaling up an evidence-based approach to improving teaching and learning in schools.

The evaluation (Gu *et al.,* 2019) found there was a clear demand among schools in Suffolk to learn how to use research and evidence to inform practice. Schools were drawn to the Promising Projects as a means to meet schools' improvement priorities (often related to a specific cohort of pupils), the availability of matched funding, and the association with the EEF. The joint matched funding model was perceived by many schools to be a viable way of scaling up interventions. However, schools that were shown to be already evidence-engaged were comparatively over-represented in the programme and encouraging schools in coastal areas and those in need of support to participate in the Suffolk Challenge Fund was a consistent challenge. The evaluators suggested that based on the findings of the evaluation, using incentives to encourage schools to take-up evidence-based interventions has promise and 'there would be merit in trialling and evaluating similar approaches in the future to investigate the impact on attainment, on school engagement with research, and how the level of incentives affects take-up' (Gu *et al.,* 2019, p. 56).

In summary, the evidence base related to the use of research-based approaches to teaching is relatively limited. Nonetheless, it does suggest that features of EKP may be promising in encouraging take-up of evidence-based approaches to teaching. These include, for example: being a system-wide, collaborative approach that provides access to evidence-based interventions; offer of a financial incentive; access to professional development and training; and support and guidance to leaders about how to adapt and implement interventions in light of their individual contexts. The emphasis in Strand 3 on building system-leadership and opportunities for school-to-school collaboration on school improvement priorities is aligned to wider policy shifts and is promising in terms of bringing benefits to participating schools and teachers.

Research questions

Table 2: Research questions on the implementation and process evaluation (IPE) domains

IPE domain[24]	Research question

Reach	1. What proportion of publicly funded schools overall and 'priority' schools in Kent:
	   a. Send at least one representative to complete the implementation, Promising Projects, or guidance report training
	   b. Take up a Promising Project during the project lifetime
	
	2. What are participation rates for each project strand?
	
	3. What are the reasons for schools' participation/non-participation?

Feasibility	4. Was the project delivered as intended? Why/why not?
	5. Were Promising Projects delivered by schools with fidelity?
	6. What are the barriers and facilitators for this type of project? How do these vary for different types of schools?

Evidence of promise	7. Does the project result in schools…
	   a. …using evidence confidently in decision-making?
	   b. …increasing capability to identify realistic priorities to target with new training approaches?
	   c. …increasing capability to implement evidence-based interventions with high fidelity and to a high standard?

	8. What are the main perceived benefits of the project?
	9. Are there unintended consequences?
	10. Has the project overall and its individual components influenced the spending of schools and partners towards evidence-based interventions? Why/why not? If yes, what role did the project play?
	11. What proportion of publicly funded schools (overall and priority) plan to continue with evidence-based interventions after the project?
Sustainability	12. Is the work of expert school-based groups (research champions) sustained? Why/why not?
	13 What learning can inform future similar projects?
	14. What proportion of publicly funded schools (overall and priority) continue to deliver evidence-based interventions after the project? What enables/hinders this?

Ethical review

The potential for harm in this research was judged by the IES ethics committee to be low as no data was being collected from children or young people, the main research participants were professionals involved in EKP, and limited personal data was collected. Consequently, the project was not presented for review at a full IES ethics committee but instead was subject to scrutiny by two internal senior colleagues. Ethical issues with regard to consent, privacy, and confidentiality of data were considered carefully in each strand of the research, in line with the recommendations of the Social Research Association and the Government Social Research Unit.

Data protection

The evaluation involved collecting personal data (name, role, organisation, email address, and telephone number) of key informants and participating school staff so they could be contacted to take part in interviews and surveys. In addition, KCC and the EEF shared monitoring data with the evaluation team, which included information about the school. Much of this was publicly available information about schools such as school name, phase of education, school

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[24] Domains of IPE from the EEF's IPE handbook (Humphrey *et al.,* 2016).

type, and locality but the monitoring information also included data about, which project activities the school had signed up for and the amount spent on these. The project teams at KCC and the EEF sought consent from stakeholders for their contact details and data to be shared with the evaluation team. For schools taking part in any of the training, consent was obtained via a Memorandum of Understanding signed between KCC and schools. IES was a data controller, and KCC and the EEF were data processors. IES's legal basis for processing personal data was 'legitimate interests'. The evaluation of the EKP fulfilled one of IES's core business purposes (undertaking research, evaluation, and information activities) and therefore, processing personal information for the conduct of the evaluation was in IES's legitimate interests. The EEF's lawful basis for processing data was legitimate interests and for KCC, processing was necessary to carry out tasks in the public interest. IES will securely delete all personal data within six months of the project finishing, that is, once the final draft of the evaluation report has been submitted. KCC will delete all personal data six months after the completion of the project with the exception of data related to schools receiving funding from EKP, which will be deleted 12 years from the date of project closure in line with the KCC's retention schedule. The EEF will delete personal data after 24 months but will retain information on the name of the school attending the training, the training attended and, where provided, job title.

All interviewees were provided with an information sheet about the aims, purpose, approach, and timings of the evaluation (see Appendix A2) in advance of interviews. Then, at the start of interviews, interviewees verbally consented to indicate that they understood the research aims, agreed to the interview being recorded, and were given assurance of anonymity. A privacy notice for research participants (included in Appendix A3) explained how information collected was used and stored and communicated to participants their right to withdraw from data processing. This was available online, with the link provided in email briefings to take part in the surveys and interviews. We also developed a data sharing agreement between IES, KCC, and the EEF stating data to be shared by whom, how, and why to ensure full data security.

Project team

The evaluation team at IES comprised:

- Rakhee Patel, Project Director: responsible for leading the evaluation.

- Ceri Williams, Project Manager (from June 2021): responsible for managing all research activity, liaising with the EEF and KCC, drafting research tools, and coordinating members of the research team.

- Joseph Cook, Research Fellow: supported the quantitative and qualitative research and analysis.

- Olivia Garner, Research Fellow: supported the qualitative research and analysis.

- Dr Dafni Papoutsaki, Project Manager (until June 2021).

- Emma Pollard, Interim Project Director: responsible for oversight of the evaluation between June 2021 and June 2022.

The KCC team responsible for implementing EKP were:

- Michelle Stanley, Project Lead, Education Lead Adviser (2019–2023).

- Wendy Dunmill, Business Support Officer to the education lead adviser (2019–2023).

- Sian Dellaway, Project Officer, Manager – Transformation (2019–2022).

- Virginie Clarke, Project Officer, Manager – Transformation (2020–2021).

- Brian Pottinger, Project support (2023).

The EEF team working with KCC were:

- Igraine Rhodes, Regional Lead London and the South East (2019–2021).

- Maria Cunningham, Regional Lead London and the South East (2022).

- Victoria Cockram, Regional Lead London and the South East (2023).

- Lizzie Swaffield, National Delivery Manager (Partnerships) (September 2020 onwards).

- Beth Adams, Regional Delivery Officer (2020–2021).

- Kara Taylor, Regional Delivery Officer (2022–2023).

Methods

The aim of the project was to increase understanding about knowledge mobilisation and the uptake of evidence-based practices in Kent. This evaluation used a mixed-methods approach (both sequential and longitudinal) to explore and assess the EEF's success criteria of reach, feasibility, evidence of promise, and sustainability with regards to EKP and answer the research questions outlined in the previous section under 'Research questions'.

Overview of research design

The mixed-methods research was designed to run over three phases, involving the three strands of the EKP:

- **Scoping and familiarisation (2020–2021)**: The aim of this phase was for the evaluation team to develop a sound understanding of EKP, the range of stakeholders involved and their roles, and the management information data being collected by KCC, the EEF, and delivery partners. It included a number of scoping interviews with key stakeholders. The information and knowledge gained was used to work with the EEF and KCC to develop a Theory of Change for EKP through an Intervention, Delivery, and Evaluation Analysis (IDEA) workshop (drawing on the EEF IPE guidance in Humphrey *et al.,* 2016). During the workshop key stakeholders within the EEF and KCC came together with the evaluation team to define the inputs, activities, intended outcomes, and impacts of the project. There was also consideration of the expected mechanisms for change and contextual factors that might affect implementation of the project. The 'Scoping and Familiarisation' phase was also used to finalise the proposed research methodology.

- **Phase 1 (2021–2022):** This phase involved the collection of quantitative data through a baseline survey on research and evidence use in Kent schools and qualitative data through key informant telephone interviews, school-based telephone interviews with senior leaders and teachers who participated in an EKP activity, and staff in non-participating schools. Key informant interviews focused on understanding progress with delivery of EKP, and views on barriers to, and conditions for, effective take-up and delivery of projects. Interviews with school staff sought to understand motivations for taking part and experiences of EKP activities.

- **Phase 2 (2022–2024):** This phase focused on repeating the research tasks from Phase 1 to track experiences and attitudes over time. The survey on research and evidence use was re-administered to understand changes over time. Additionally, a further round of key informant telephone interviews was carried out, with a focus on views of sustainability of project activities and learning. Further school-based interviews with schools participating in EKP activities were carried out, with a focus on covering experiences of later EKP activities. This phase also involved a full analysis of the management information data provided by KCC.

In addition, online surveys of Promising Projects and Evidence-Based Training participants were carried out on a rolling basis, and administered as courses came to an end to seek feedback on experiences and perceived outcomes.

The original study plan had an additional, post-project evaluation phase of data collection and analysis. It had been intended that this would include telephone interviews with senior leaders in schools and key informants to explore the extent to which evidence-based practices and peer-to-peer school improvement activities had been sustained and perceptions of longer-term outcomes. In addition, some descriptive analysis of attainment data, comparing participating and non-participating schools before and after the project had been planned. However, due to disruption to assessments at Key Stage 2 and at Key Stage 4 and the wider impact of COVID-19 on the collection of attainment data, it was agreed (in negotiation with the EEF) that this was no longer feasible. The qualitative research was also cancelled because of challenges in engaging schools in the research and the fact that delays to project delivery likely meant insufficient time had lapsed to explore longer-term outcomes.

Table 3 below provides an overview of the evaluation methods against the IPE dimension and research questions.

Table 3: Evaluation methods overview

IPE dimension	Research question addressed	Research methods	Data collection methods	Sample size and sampling criteria	Data analysis methods
Reach	1a, 1b, 2, 3	KCC management information data	Successful Schools' Tracker spreadsheet	Records for 571 schools in Kent	Descriptive statistics
			Stakeholder data spreadsheet	Records for 209 Evidence-Based Training course registrations	
		Online survey	Evidenced-Based Training survey	69 Evidence-Based Training participants (33% response rate)	Descriptive statistics
			Promising Projects survey	15 Promising Projects participants (15% response rate)	Thematic analysis
			Baseline and endline survey of all Kent schools	153 Baseline survey respondents (25% response rate)[25]	
				5 responses received to Endline survey[26]	
		School-based interviews	Phone/online interviews	13 Evidence-Based Training participants across 9 schools	Thematic analysis
				15 Promising Projects participants across 9 schools	
				5 Evidence Champion schools (interviews with 5 Evidence Champions and 3 colleagues)	
		Stakeholder interviews	Phone/online interviews	8 senior leaders in non-participating schools	Thematic analysis
				22 key informants:	
				KCC (2); Kent Association of Headteachers (2); The Education People (3); ELEs (5); Promising Projects providers (5); research school (1); KARS (1); Train the Trainer trainees (3)	
				(Some key informants took part in two or three interviews)	
Feasibility	4, 5, 6	Document review	KCC final milestone report	Details on final project spend	Descriptive statistics
				KCC case study material	Thematic analysis
		Management information data	Successful Schools' Tracker spreadsheet	Records for 571 schools in Kent	Descriptive statistics
				Analysis of spend by project strand	
		Online survey	Evidenced-Based Training survey	69 Evidenced-Based Training participants (33% response rate)	

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[25]Response rate calculated against number of schools.
[26] No change over time analysis possible at endpoint due to low response rate to endline survey.

			Promising Projects survey	15 Promising Projects participants (15% response rate)	Thematic analysis
		School-based interviews	Phone/online interviews	13 Evidenced-Based Training participants across 9 schools (Phase 1)	
				15 Promising Projects participants across 9 schools (Phase 2)	
				5 Evidence Champion schools (interviews with 5 Evidence Champions and 3 colleagues)	
		Stakeholder Interviews	Phone/Online interviews	22 key informants:	Thematic analysis
				KCC (2); Kent Association of Headteaachers (2); The Education People (3); ELEs (5); Promising Projects providers (5); research school (1); KARS (1); Train the Trainer trainees (3)	
				(Some key informants took part in two or three interviews)	
Evidence of promise	7a, 7b, 7c, 8, 9, 10, 11	Online survey	Evidenced-Based Training survey	69 Evidence-Based Training participants (33% response rate)	Descriptive statistics
			Promising Projects survey	15 Promising Projects participants (15% response rate)	Thematic analysis
		School-based interviews	Interviews with schools participating in Evidenced-Based Training or Promising Projects courses	13 Evidenced-Based Training participant interviews across 9 schools	Thematic analysis
				15 Promising Projects participant interviews across 9 schools	
				5 Evidence Champion schools (interviews with 5 Evidence Champions and 3 colleagues)	
		Stakeholder interviews	Phone/online interviews	22 key informants:	Thematic analysis
				KCC (2); Kent Association of Headteachers (2); The Education People (3); ELEs (5); Promising Projects providers (5); research school (1); KARS (1); Train the Trainer trainees (3)	
				(Some key informants took part in two or three interviews)	
Sustainability	12, 13, 14	Stakeholder interviews	Phone/online interviews	22 key informants:	Thematic analysis
				KCC (2); Kent Association of Headteachers (2); The Education People (3); ELEs (5); Promising Projects providers (5); research school (1); KARS (1); Train the Trainer trainees (3)	
				(Some key informants took part in two or three interviews)	
		School-based interviews	Interviews with schools participating in Evidenced-Based Training (Evidence Champion) courses	5 Evidence Champion schools (interviews with 5 Evidence Champions and 3 colleagues)	Thematic analysis

Timetable

The evaluation had intended to run from June 2020 through to July 2022, with post-project activity in the 2022–2023 academic year. Following delays caused by COVID-19, the EKP evaluation was redesigned to allow more time for the completion of activities, and in particular, the Strand 3 work in the academic year 2022–2023. Consequently, the timetable for the evaluation was also extended and the date for completion of the evaluation was moved to late 2023 to enable the evaluation team to collect feedback on later EKP project activities.

The dates below follow the academic year (September to August):

2020–2021: Scoping and familiarisation and Phase 1

- Set-up meetings (2) and IDEA workshop (1);

- desk-based research;

- mapping available management information through stakeholder interviews;

- Theory of Change and indicator framework developed and finalised;

- data sharing agreement in place;

- Research Use survey (baseline) developed;

- Research Use survey administered;

- key informant interviews; and

- Evidence-Based Training feedback survey.

2021–2022: Phase 1

- School-based interviews for Strands 1 and 2;

- interviews with non-participating schools;

- qualitative data analysis (interviews);

- emerging findings presentation to the EEF and KCC;

- Evidence-Based Training feedback survey (continued); and

- Promising Projects feedback survey (from September 2021).

2022–2023: Phase 2

- Evidence-Based Training and Promising Projects surveys (continued);

- school-based interviews for Strands 1 and 2 (new cohort);

- qualitative research (interviews) with Strand 3 key informants;

- Research Use survey (endline) developed; and

- Research Use survey (endline) administered.

2023–2024 (Autumn Term): Phase 2 extended

- Qualitative research (interviews) with Strand 3 key stakeholders (continued);

- school-based interviews with Evidence Champion schools;

- school survey administered (endline continued);

- qualitative data analysis (Strand 3 stakeholders and Evidence Champion school-based interviews);

- survey analysis (Research Use, Promising Projects, and Evidence-Based Training); and

- management information analysis.

Data collection

Scoping and familiarisation

The evaluation team carried out a review of the existing project documentation such as the online training sessions, existing management information templates, project website, Promising Projects prospectus, and internal planning documents about resourcing, activities, and intended outcomes. We also carried out a review of the wider information on school improvement activities in Kent such as information on The Education People's school improvement offer and Kent Association of Headteachers activities. This desk research helped the evaluation team to build a Theory of Change for the project and to begin mapping out key indicators to evidence the Theory of Change.

The scoping phase was also designed to identify gaps in management information that could be filled through the evaluation activities. The evaluation team carried out telephone interviews with seven key informants from a range of organisations including the EEF, KCC, The Education People (three key informants), and two Promising Projects providers to attempt to map-out all available management information. The interviews covered:

- their role in the project;

- relevant components of the Theory of Change;

- early views on progress, challenges, and enablers to effective implementation; and

- management information data currently or planned to be collected.

Interviewees were also asked to send the evaluation team any additional project documentation they held and fully anonymised management information templates for review. Following this, the evaluation team, the EEF and KCC agreed an updated Theory of Change, an indicator framework showing evidence sources for each Theory of Change component, and a revised evaluation plan.

Management information

The rationale for using management information data in the evaluation was to use as much existing data as possible and then conduct primary research to fill gaps, to reduce the burden on the project team at KCC. In practice, this ended up being an ongoing process and as EKP evolved, the management information process developed alongside it. The evaluation team conducted additional interviews with EKP staff so that they could stay informed of these processes. However, there were challenges to the planned approach, primarily related to low completion and response rates among schools and providers.

Sources

The final list of agreed data sources that were planned for use in the analysis was:

- **Successful Schools' Tracker (extracted September 23):** This recorded Kent schools that were actively engaged in EKP. It included project, start date, estimated end date (based on start date and duration), actual end date, financial contribution from the school, whether the school withdrew prior to starting, and the strands of activity schools participated in. These records were complete.

- **Stakeholder data (extracted August 23):** This spreadsheet logged all Kent schools and specified if they were an EKP or the EEF priority school. Schools on either list were the priority schools for EKP. The spreadsheet identified those that signed up or attended an event but who had not taken up or had withdrawn from training, as well as those who engaged with any of the training, apart from the online implementation training, which was not monitored. For engaged schools, the spreadsheet indicated

depth of engagement in terms of number of strands (1, 2, and/or 3, and conference participation). These records were complete.[27]

- **Quality assurance process data: School Engagement Review form:** Promising Projects providers were all asked by KCC to complete one questionnaire per school that took part in the training when they had finished working with the school. The questionnaire included questions about the school's attendance and engagement, and whether the school decided to continue with the Promising Projects beyond the period of matched funding. Only 16 forms were submitted by providers and some providers filled in one form to give feedback on multiple schools, meaning it was not possible to identify how many schools were in scope of the feedback.

- **School feedback:** KCC emailed schools participating in Promising Projects requesting any feedback at two check-in points (after the first training session and a few weeks after the confirmed end date). The feedback was voluntary and there was no standardised format for providing it—schools were able to simply email back with any comments if they wished. The log of these emails was shared with the evaluation team. It includes feedback from 11 schools, eight of which provided feedback after their first training session and three after the final session.

- **Quality assurance feedback and visit log:** This was a log of four quality assurance meetings between KCC and three Promising Projects providers, which took place between January 2021 and November 2022. It recorded short notes on feedback from providers about working with schools and working with the EKP delivery team.

- **ELE meetings feedback (provided in May 2022, the EEF):** These summary notes of an internal meeting between the EEF, ELEs, and KCC provided qualitative feedback about what went well, barriers, and what could be improved in relation to the ELE network, as well as on priorities for Kent schools.

- **Research Schools Network central data:** It was planned that the Evidence-Based Training participant data uploaded termly by research schools, which provides basic information about the total number of modules engaged with by schools over the programme duration, would be included in the evaluation.[28]

- **Web analytics data** (**the EEF and KCC):** These are page views and link clicks from Internet Protocol (IP) addresses in Kent of the EEF website/online resources for the year preceding the project and over the duration of the project (from Google Analytics data), and KELSI page views and link clicks by month. Data was provided by the EEF but similar data was not available from KCC and so data was missing on KELSI page views and clicks.

Other files made available to the research team by KCC for the final report included:

- data on the numbers of schools attending Promising Projects Roadshows (including online) and attending Implementation Training (for an early period in the project); and

- three school case study reports developed by KCC for its own monitoring and promotional purposes (two Embedding Formative Assessment and one 1stClass@Number).

Baseline and endline surveys of all schools in Kent

Purpose

Surveys were carried out at two timepoints with all schools in Kent (regardless of whether they were participating in EKP or not) to gather self-reported perception data on schools' confidence in using evidence, actual evidence use, and collaboration between schools and school improvement partners. The survey was flexibly designed to allow completion by headteachers, senior leaders, middle leaders, classroom teachers, and included routing for those who had participated in Promising Projects/training sessions. Surveys at baseline and endpoint were sent to all schools in Kent so that indicative differences between participating and non-participating schools and changes over time could be explored.

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[27] An updated version was provided to the evaluation team in September 2023, which also included school unique reference numbers (URNs), to aid analysis.
[28] This data was not available for analysis to the evaluation team.

Design

Design of the baseline survey was based on previous questionnaires run by the EEF and the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) (with slight adaptations) and also a questionnaire used in the evaluation of the Suffolk Challenge Fund.[29] Working in close collaboration with KCC and the EEF, the tool was developed and refined at both timepoints to capture the relevant data (see Appendix A4). This involved adding questions to the endline survey to collect views on participation in the project and perceived impacts of participation (see Appendix A9).

Topics covered included:

- characteristics of the school and respondent;

- approaches and methods used to identify and address school issues;

- factors that influence how a school decides to address issues;

- use of research information in their work;

- approaches to improving teaching and learning that the school has taken over the last two years;

- what helped identify the need for those measures;

- participation in Promising Projects in the last two years;

- supporting professional learning; and

- working with other schools.

Delivery

For the baseline survey, a sample was compiled using a database provided by the EEF,[30] and publicly available school contact data (from Get Information About Schools [GIAS]). Where their name was available, the headteacher was emailed directly. Otherwise, a general school email address was used. A closed link was sent to 542 schools. The baseline survey was also added to the KELSI website as an open link and schools were encouraged to engage on various occasions by the Director of Education in their weekly KELSI briefing. Instructions were to share the survey with whoever it was relevant to so as many people as possible had the chance to share their views and experiences. Headteachers were asked to forward the email and the survey link to three other members of staff (in primary schools) or five other members of staff (in secondary schools) and encourage them to respond as well. They were asked to aim for a mix of: other members of the senior leadership team; middle managers with responsibility for changes to teaching and learning; governors; research leads; or teachers.

Three reminder emails were sent. Staff who completed the survey were also entered into a prize draw to receive a cash incentive of £200 for the school. The winning school was randomly selected from those who submitted the completed survey, at both timepoints (baseline and endline).

For the endline survey, a closed link was sent to the same 542 schools and, again, the instructions were to share the survey with whoever it was relevant too. A number of reminders were also sent by email. To try and improve the response rate, several additional methods were agreed including the EEF sending out an email with survey links (and reminder) to a subsample of schools (N=157) in the autumn of 2023. KCC also added the survey link and explanatory text to communications sent out by the four regional teams in November 2023. A link was also included in the communications shared at the EKP conference in June 2023. The prize draw cash incentive was offered again for the endline survey.

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[29] Nelson *et al.* (2019) and Gu *et al.* (2019).
[30] The database came from SPIRIT, the marketing platform used by the EEF, which is provided by The Education Company.

Achieved sample

At baseline, the closed link survey was completed by 133 staff in total from 113 schools (a response rate of 21%, as a percentage of all Kent schools). The open link added to the KELSI website produced 21 responses, from 20 schools. In total, surveys were submitted by 153 staff from a total of 133 schools, equalling 25% of all schools in Kent. A total of 40 respondents (26%) said that they had applied for Promising Projects by December 2020.

Using nationally available data on all schools in Kent, the achieved sample was analysed to examine how representative it was, across a number of key indicators. The results (outlined below) show that overall, the achieved sample at baseline was fairly representative of schools in Kent:

- low attainment at Key Stage 2—all Kent schools 11% and baseline survey 8%;

- school phase—all Kent schools 77% primary, 17% secondary, and baseline survey 80% primary, 20% secondary;

- low progress,[31] low attainment at Key Stage 4—all Kent schools 41% and baseline survey 45% (combined measures);

- most deprived (Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index [IDACI] deciles)—all Kent schools 6% and baseline survey 3%; and

- the EEF or KCC priority school 22% and baseline survey 19%.

For the endline survey, unfortunately the achieved sample across all these delivery methods was extremely low (N=5).

Promising Projects and Evidence-Based Training feedback surveys

These were an additional aspect to the research, agreed during 2021, to capture immediate feedback on the training and wider views on the use of research. One of the focuses of the Promising Projects survey was to capture feedback on fidelity to the training programme (see survey in Appendix A5). In partnership with KCC and the EEF, a fidelity matrix was developed to capture the key aspects of each project. Using the project prospectuses, key elements of the training were identified and included in a series of statements to measure fidelity to the courses including: time spent on the training; how many sessions were delivered in schools; engagement of pupils; and monitoring processes.

These online surveys were programmed by the evaluation team in Snap software and administered by KCC (on behalf of the evaluation team) as part of their normal end-of-training processes. Due to the varying end dates of the courses, hyperlinks and quick response (QR) codes for these post surveys were sent out on a rolling basis, at the end of the training period and again three weeks later as a follow-up reminder, to gather early feedback and insights from participants.

The first surveys were completed by participants on courses finishing in December 2021. The achieved number of responses for the Promising Projects feedback survey was very low—14 responses (across six of the projects and received between January 2022 and July 2023) compared to the total successful applicant figure for Promising Projects courses of 95. This means the overall response rate for the Promising Projects survey was 15%.

For the Evidenced-Based Training surveys, KCC also asked trainers delivering the final sessions of courses to display the survey link and QR code and encourage attendees to complete the survey (for Evidence-Based Training Rounds 1, 2, and 3 courses) (see Appendix A6). KCC also re-sent a survey invite (plus link and QR code) to those who had recently finished Evidence-Based Training courses in Round 2. The total number of responses was 69 (between July 2021 and August 2023), across eight Evidence-Based Training courses. The total successful applicant figure for Evidence-Based Training courses overall was 209, giving a survey response rate of 33% (N=69). A high number of responses were from

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[31] Low progress refers to the Progress 8 score for the relevant schools. This measure aims to capture progress from the end of primary school until the end of secondary school. Pupil results are compared to the achievements of other pupils with similar prior attainment. The value of the variable is ranked between -1 to +1. A score of +1 indicates that pupils in the school achieve one grade higher in each qualification than similar pupils. A score of –1 indicates pupils achieve one grade lower than similar pupils.

participants of the 'SEND and Learning Behaviours' course (N=29, out of 82 total participants), representing a response rate of 33% for this particular course. In comparison, excluding 'SEND and Learning Behaviours' survey respondents, the overall response rate was 31% indicating that there was a slight overrepresentation in the survey findings for participant perceptions of this course.

Key informant interviews

A list of key informants to be interviewed was agreed between the evaluation team, KCC, and the EEF. The evaluation team selected key informants who had been involved in the design and delivery of EKP activities, ensuring coverage across all activities, and representatives from all relevant stakeholder organisations. Contact details of key informants were mainly provided by the EEF and KCC, with a small amount of 'snowballing' if the initial contacts then identified other relevant stakeholders in the project. Key informants were interviewed in two phases, with interviews via telephone or Teams/Zoom taking approximately one hour each time.

Phase 1 interviews took place from March 2021 to May 2021 (and one follow up in November 2021), with stakeholders involved in the first two strands of the project. Phase 1 included 12 interviews with representatives from KCC (1), the EEF (1), Kent Association of Headteachers (1), The Education People (4), Promising Projects providers (4), and a research school (1).

Phase 2 interviews further included strand 3 stakeholders and took place from January 2023 to October 2023. Phase 2 included 22 interviews with representatives from KCC (2), Kent Association of Headteachers (2), The Education People (3), ELEs (5), Promising Projects providers (5, including ones who trained the Train the Trainer trainees), a research school (1), KARS (1), and Train the Trainer trainees (3). Two further interviews with KCC and the EEF were conducted to gather final reflections on the project.

The interviews allowed key informants to share their views on the progress of the project at each point, including views on the context of Kent and the project, partnership working, governance and management, delivery, sustainability, and outcomes.

Planned case study research with schools

School case studies were planned and designed to complement the surveys and provide a richer understanding of how and why schools signed up to the project, their experience of taking part and implementing the project in their school, what the enablers and barriers were to participation, and the perceived outcomes (see Appendix A7 for the topic guides used for this component of the research).

However, the exceptional difficulties schools faced due to the COVID-19 pandemic meant that it was very difficult to recruit schools to participate in research during this time. In schools that did agree to participate, it was then difficult to secure interviews with the full range of members of staff necessary to achieve a case study. Despite moving the fieldwork back (to autumn 2021) and multiple approaches by email and telephone to a large sample of schools, the total achieved sample varied from the intended sample profile, with seven rather than eight schools participating overall and fewer priority schools.

Phase 1

Table 4 below compares the original plan for the Phase 1 case study work with schools with the final achieved sample. For each strand, it had been intended that four case studies would be carried out, three in priority schools and one in a non-priority school, across a range of schools in terms of phase (primary/secondary) and type (maintained/academy/trust). Four to five relevant staff would be interviewed in each school including the headteacher or another member of the leadership team, middle leaders, teachers or teaching assistants involved in the evidence-based intervention and, if applicable, a governor.

Table 4: Phase 1 planned case studies

	Strand 1 Promising Projects		Strand 2 Evidence-Based Training	
	Target	Achieved	Target	Achieved
Priority	3	1	3	2
Non-priority	1	3	1	1

Source: IES.

The achieved EKP school interviews are summarised in Table 5 below. These schools (and the large number of schools contacted who said they could not participate in the research) reported to the evaluation team that they faced a range of challenges with engaging with the evaluation. These related primarily to lack of staff caused by increased absence, staff turnover, and increased demands on schools in the pandemic and subsequently the post-pandemic context. Additionally, when trying to undertake interviews, group discussions were less common due to classroom 'bubbles' being in place to protect staff and pupils from illness. The use of Microsoft Teams and other remote interviewing platforms helped alleviate some of these challenges but time constraints on staff further created barriers to engaging with these aspects of the evaluation.

In most instances, we were only able to interview one member of staff, normally the headteacher. In some cases, the headteacher explained that due to a variety of reasons including staff illness and staff being too busy, we would not be able to interview any other members of staff. Typical responses were:

> *Please contact us again after Christmas for an interview. The assistant head who led the programme currently has COVID-19. With regard to other teaching staff, they will not be confident taking part in an interview and won't have capacity.* (Headteacher)

> *The assistant head has been off school since Nov 2020 and isn't fully updated on the programme.* (Headteacher)

In other potential case study schools, the primary contact (usually the headteacher) passed on the contact details of other staff but, in most cases and despite a number of attempts including email and phone calls to the named member of staff and to a general school phone number, no other staff agreed to be interviewed. Due to the difficulties in securing the planned number of staff in each school, these interviews could not ultimately be considered case studies, as the intention to triangulate a range of perspectives was not possible. Consequently, the planned case studies became a group of school-based interviews.

Table 5: EKP achieved school interviews, Strands 1 and 2 – Phase 1

School interview type	Promising Projects/training course	No. of staff interviewed	Role of staff and school phase[32]	Priority / non-priority
Promising Projects	Philosophy for Children	5	Headteacher, Key Stage 1 lead, Key Stage 2 lead, Maths lead, inclusion manager (group interview) (primary)	Non-priority
Promising Projects	Embedding Formative Assessment	1	Headteacher (secondary)	Priority
Promising Projects	1stClass@Number	1	Headteacher (primary)	Non-priority
Promising Projects	Reciprocal Reading	1	Headteacher (primary)	Non-priority
Evidence-Based Training	Delivery of Remote Learning	1	Assistant head (primary)	Non-Priority
Evidence-Based Training	Training and Retaining Great Teachers	2	Headteacher and chief executive officer (joint interview) (secondary)	Priority
Evidence-Based Training	SEND and Learning Behaviours	1	Headteacher (primary)	Priority

Source: IES analysis of KCC stakeholder information.

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[32] These were a range of types of schools including maintained and academy primaries and the two secondary schools not part of a Trust or Federation.

Phase 2

Strands 1 and 2

The amended plan for the case studies (due to the disruption caused by COVID-19) was to secure the participation of four of the schools that took part in Phase 1, to form longitudinal case studies, together with four new case study schools. However, key contacts in the original schools continued to cite issues with staff absence and changes in key staff, which meant that it was not possible for them to participate a second time. In discussion with the EEF and KCC, it was agreed that a sample of new schools would be developed from later cohorts (Promising Projects Round 3 and Evidence-Based Training Rounds 2 and 3). The achieved sample of schools for Phase 2 is outlined below in Table 6.

Table 6: EKP achieved school interviews, Strands 1 and 2 – Phase 2

School interview type	Promising Projects/training course	No. of staff interviewed	Role of staff (school phase)[33]	Priority/ non-priority
Promising Projects	Children's University	1	Assistant principal (secondary)	Non-priority
Promising Projects	Thinking, Talking, Doing Science	1	Class teacher (Year 1) (primary)	Non-priority
Promising Projects	Switch-on Reading	2	Vice principal and subject lead/project lead (secondary)	Non-priority
Promising Projects	1stClass@Number	2	Deputy head and project lead (joint interview) (primary)	Non-priority
Promising Projects	Reciprocal Reading	1	English lead (senior leadership team) (primary)	Non-priority
Evidence-Based Training	SEND and Learning Behaviours	1	Deputy head (secondary)	Non-priority
Evidence-Based Training	SEND and Learning Behaviours	1	Assistant head (alternative provision)	Non-priority
Evidence-Based Training	SEND and Learning Behaviours	4	Headteacher, special educational needs and disabilities coordinator (SENDCO), deputy head, personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) lead (group interview) (primary)	Priority
Evidence-Based Training	SEND and Learning Behaviours	1	SENDCO (primary)	Non-priority
Evidence-Based Training	Effective Learning Behaviours	1	Assistant head (primary)	Non-priority
Evidence-Based Training	Evidence-Informed Curriculum Development	1	Assistant head (curriculum) (primary)	Non-priority

Source: IES analysis of KCC stakeholder information.

As in Phase 1, the evaluation team encountered difficulties obtaining agreement from schools to take part in a case study, but schools were more willing to take part in an interview. Therefore, although the plan had been to secure eight full case studies, the evaluation team was able to interview staff in 11 schools, across a range of courses in Strands 1 and 2. Despite the efforts of the evaluation team to focus on EKP priority schools, the final sample included only one priority school due the recruitment challenges faced.

Strand 3

Research around most activities in Strand 3—ELEs, Train the Trainer, associate research school, and the research hub (the KEE Hub) centred on the key informant interviews. Additionally, interviews were undertaken with Evidence Champions.

Evidence Champions school-based interviews

The Evidence Champions research was designed to understand how the Evidence Champions training was received by participants, perceived outcomes, and to identify any early, emerging practice of embedding of research and evidence use in the school. The original intention had been to take a case study approach and conduct interviews with Evidence

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[33] As in Phase 1, these were a range of types of schools including maintained and academy primaries, one secondary was part of an academy, while the other two were not. One school was an Alternative Provision Centre.

Champions, a member of the senior leadership team, and other colleagues who had worked with the Evidence Champion. However, this full range of interviews did not take place in all cases for the same reasons as described for the Promising Projects and Evidence-Based Training case studies. Table 7 below summarises the key characteristics of the achieved sample. In total, eight members of staff were interviewed across five schools that had Evidence Champions. All five Evidence Champions were interviewed. In School 1, the safeguarding lead was also interviewed and in School 3, the head of PSHE and an early career teacher were also interviewed. In all cases, the Evidence Champion also had other senior responsibilities within the school—one was an assistant head and SENDCO, another was the SEND lead, the third was a deputy head, the fourth was the CPD lead, and the fifth was an assistant head.

Table 7: Evidence Champions, achieved school sample

School identification	School phase	Ofsted rating	Pupil size	Priority status	Kent location
School 1 (two staff interviews)	Alternative provision setting (Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4)	Good	50	Non-priority	North
School 2	All-through school	Outstanding	400	Non-priority	South (coastal)
School 3	Primary	Good	400	Priority	East
School 4 (three staff interviews)	Special school	Good	75	Non-priority	East (coastal)
School 5	Primary	Requires Improvement	150	Non-priority	North

Source: IES analysis using KCC stakeholder information.

Interviews with non-participating schools

To explore perceptions of the EKP, reasons for schools not participating and views on what might enable them to participate, short telephone interviews were carried out with senior leaders in eight schools. The sample was chosen using KCC management information where schools had been identified as having shown some interest in EKP, for example, had attended one of the roadshows or requested information, but did not then proceed to register on the project.

Data analysis

Management information

- **Successful Schools' Tracker:** We analysed EKP spend by strand of activity. As this data was also reported in KCC milestone reports, we compared the figures in both data sources and highlighted any discrepancies.

- **Stakeholder data:** We carried out a descriptive analysis of the profiles of schools that took part in the EKP and those that did not. The characteristics we focused on were school priority status, level of disadvantage, pupil attainment outcomes, phase of education, and geographical area. In order to carry out this analysis, we matched the stakeholder data to secondary data sources using the school's URN identifier. These sources included the Department for Education's GIAS data on attainment at Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 and IDACI data. Through the analysis, we compared and contrasted participating and non-participating schools and explored the reach and engagement of the project.

- **Quality assurance process data:** We had intended to analyse data on school attendance, engagement, and intention to continue with a Promising Project to contribute to an assessment of fidelity of Promising Projects and sustained engagement. Due to poor data quality, the data was not analysed.

- **School feedback, quality assurance feedback and visit log, ELE meetings feedback, and KCC case studies**: No formal analysis was conducted of these emails and internal meeting notes. The evaluation team read the documents to check whether any additional themes were raised to those identified through the qualitative analysis of interview data and, if so, these were included in the report.

- **Web analytics data:** We looked at Google traffic on the EEF website from Kent-based IP addresses during the project period (January 2019-October 2023) and compared this to a similar period before the project (March 2014–December 2018), for a high-level view of whether there was an increase in new

users, which could be potentially be indicative of more Kent schools accessing the EEF resources. The data is contextual only and any changes in website traffic cannot be attributed to the EKP.[34]

Survey analysis

Survey analysis was carried out using SPSS. For the baseline survey, frequencies were run on all questions. In addition, cross-tabulations were analysed using chi-square tests to test for statistical significance on the following variables (against all questions):

- deprivation (IDACI);

- type of school;

- phase of school;

- attainment;

- priority/non-priority status; and

- Promising Projects application.

It had been planned that data from the endline survey would be used to measure change over time in attitudes, awareness, and behaviour. However, due to the poor response the data could not be analysed. As the baseline data alone does not contribute to an understanding of any of the key research questions, we have included the analysis in Appendix A10 only.

For the Evidenced-Based Training feedback survey, descriptive statistics only were run, due to the small sample size.

The Promising Projects feedback survey could not be analysed quantitatively due to the low response rate. We have treated the responses as qualitative data and have used them to contribute to the thematic analysis of interview data where possible.

Qualitative school-based interviews

All interviews were digitally recorded and notes written up following the interview. We analysed this data using the Framework method, drawing themes and messages from an analysis of the notes, as a pragmatic and cost-effective approach for this amount of qualitative data. Framework is a qualitative analysis approach that ensures the analytical process and interpretations are grounded in the data and tailored to the research questions. Relevant information from notes and transcripts are extracted and summarised (coded) against key themes with key quotes noted. The project framework was designed in Excel for primarily deductive analysis, with columns for predetermined themes and sub-themes taken from the interview guide and related to the research questions (which were aligned to different components of the Theory of Change). With one line for each participant, the Framework approach meant the data could be coded and analysed consistently across the project team. The framework was refined and modified in the early stages of its use to also allow for emerging themes in the interviews to be incorporated. For school interviews, analysis focused on exploring the influence of school context and leadership on experiences of taking part and differences across setting types. For key informants, the focus was on understanding differences in perspective on enablers and barriers to delivery of EKP and perceived outcomes by stakeholder type.

Synthesis of data analyses

The evaluation took an integrated approach to analysis. The aim was to consider all relevant quantitative and qualitative data available for each research question (as specified in the indicator framework and evaluation plan). Within the Framework used for thematic analysis of qualitative interviews, the evaluation team added quantitative or other

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[34] These data (included in Appendix 3.1) were provided by the EEF for the following locations: Maidstone; Dartford; Ashford; Canterbury; Gravesend; and Farnborough.

documentary evidence to the relative theme or subtheme. Taking into account the strength of the available evidence across data sources, the evaluation team then formulated responses to the research questions.

Key informant and school-based interviews from Phase 1 were analysed before fieldwork for Phase 2 and insights were used to shape the research tools and approach for Phase 2. For the final report, analysis of the management information data was carried out in parallel with analysis of the Evidenced-Based Training survey data and the qualitative data collected in interviews. In relation to the Evidence-Based Training, findings from the qualitative analysis were used to add insight and depth to the quantitative findings so that a greater understanding of use of research and evidence and experiences of the Evidence-Based Training could be generated.

The school-based interviews took place at two different timepoints in the project. The interviews included exploration of contextual factors affecting experiences and views of EKP. We interrogated the data to understand if there were differences based on context and/or timing of the interview. Where any differences were discernible, these have been drawn out in the report.

However, a number of limitations to the data need to be noted. There were, for example, significant challenges around measuring whether Promising Projects were delivered with fidelity. The Promising Projects feedback survey was put in place to try and address methodological challenges identified during the scoping phase. The main challenge was that the Promising Projects providers collected some information on fidelity, but this information was collected in different ways and formats, making it of limited use to the evaluation. It was agreed that to overcome this challenge, two steps would be taken. First, data from Promising Projects providers on school attendance, engagement, and participation in Promising Projects (submitted to KCC as part of the quality assurance process) would be analysed by the evaluation team. Second, this would be combined with data from the Promising Projects feedback survey, which included tailored fidelity measures for each project. This would be used to make a high level, general assessment of fidelity. However, the poor response rate to both these tools from Promising Projects providers and schools, means that the evaluation could not make a judgement about fidelity and overall effectiveness of the Promising Projects.

The quality assurance process data was also an important source of data for answering questions around schools' ongoing intentions in relation to spend on Promising Projects. Without the quality assurance process data and combined with the removal of the post-project evaluation phase, the evaluation also has limited evidence to answer research questions related to sustainability and ongoing spend on evidence-based approaches.

Additionally, the low response to the endline survey on research and evidence used, affected the evaluation's ability to analyse progress with confidence in using evidence, actual evidence use, and collaboration between schools and school improvement partners in Kent.

Finally, the small number of interviews with non-participating schools means that the factors influencing decisions not to take part have only partially been explored.

Key findings 1: Project reach and take-up

This section presents findings about the project's reach and take-up that contribute to addressing the following research questions:

- 1. a. What proportion of publicly funded schools overall and 'priority' schools in Kent send at least one representative to complete the implementation, Promising Projects, or guidance report training? b. Take up a Promising Project during the project lifetime?

- 2. What are participation rates for each project strand?

- 3. What are the reasons for schools' participation and non-participation?

It also then considers the extent to which EKP schools were representative of all schools in Kent in relation to levels of disadvantage (as measured using IDACI 2019 data based on the schools' postcodes as a proxy), pupil attainment, phase of education, and geographic location.

Key findings 1: Project reach and take-up
1. a. What proportion of publicly funded schools overall and 'priority' schools in Kent send at least one representative to complete implementation, Promising Projects, or guidance report training? b. Take up a Promising Project during the project lifetime?
35% of Kent schools completed at least one Promising Project or Evidence-Based Training course, meaning the target of 35% of all Kent schools participating was met. Data was not recorded about whether schools completed the implementation training as this component of EKP was deprioritised relatively early on in the project.
A similar proportion of priority schools (34.2%) completed a Promising Project or Evidence-Based Training course, despite the higher target of 50%.
16.1% of all schools in Kent, and a very similar proportion of priority schools (16.7%) took up at least one Promising Project during the lifetime of EKP.
Schools that took part in EKP were similar to the wider population of Kent schools in relation to phase of education, level of disadvantage, and pupil attainment outcomes.
2. What are participation rates for each project strand?
The strand of activity in which schools most frequently participated was Evidence-Based Training—a quarter of all Kent schools and of EKP priority schools (24.7% and 25%) took part.
8.1% of all Kent schools and 16.7% of EKP priority schools took part in Strand 3, Developing Research Champions.
Nearly 30% of schools in Kent participated in one strand of activity (29.1%) while a minority participated in two (7%) or three strands (1.9%).
3. What are the reasons for schools' participation and non-participation?
The main enablers to participation were the training offer meeting school needs, the robust evidence base, and matched funding.
Barriers to participating included resourcing and capacity issues (which appear to have affected smaller schools more), tight timeframes (in Round 1) and the courses offered.

Project reach

Participation by strand

EKP had a target of 35% of all Kent schools to send at least one representative to complete the implementation, Promising Projects or Evidence-Based Training. It should be noted that data was not recorded about whether schools completed the implementation training as this component of EKP was deprioritised relatively early on in the project. This target was met and 34.5% of schools completed **at least one** Promising Project **or** Evidence-Based Training course (see Table 8 below).

Out of the 571 schools in Kent, 120 were identified as an EKP priority school (21%).[35] The EKP target that at least 50% of priority schools complete the implementation, Promising Projects, or guidance report training was not met with 34.2% of these schools completing **at least one** Promising Project **or** Evidence-Based Training course (11 schools in Strand 1 only, 21 in Strand 2 only, and 9 in both strands—41 schools in total) (see Table 8 below).

Table 8: Participation in at least one Promising Project or Evidence-Based Training course, % of all schools in Kent and of priority schools

Participation across Strand 1 and 2 and % against EKP target	Schools in Kent (571 in total) N (%)	Priority schools (120 in total) N (%)
Promising Projects only (Strand 1)	56 (9.8)	11 (9.2)
Evidence-Based Training only (Strand 2)	105 (18.4)	21 (17.5)
Both Promising Projects and Evidence-Based Training (Strands 1 and 2)	36 (6.3)	9 (7.5)
Total	197 (34.5)	41 (34.2)

Sources: IES analysis of KCC stakeholder data and Successful Schools' Tracker data.

Overall, as Table 9 shows, 16.1% of schools completed Promising Projects training (92 schools) and 24.7% of schools completed Evidence-Based Training (141 schools).[36] In addition, 8.1% (46 schools) took part in the Evidence Champions training, under Strand 3 Developing Research Champions. Participation rates were similar among priority schools (in Table 9 below).

Table 9: Participation by project strand, % of all schools in Kent and of priority schools

	Schools in Kent (571 in total) N (%)	Priority schools (120 in total) N (%)
Promising Projects (Strand 1)	92 (16.1)	20 (16.7)
Evidence-Based Training (Strand 2)	141 (24.7)	30 (25)
Developing Research Champions – Evidence Champions training (Strand 3)	46 (8.1)	20 (16.7)

Sources: IES analysis of KCC stakeholder data and Successful Schools' Tracker data. [37]

Overall, the strand most frequently participated in was Strand 2 (24.7% of all Kent schools), while Strand 3 was the least (8.1% of Kent schools) (see Table 9 above).

The data were also analysed to see the extent to which schools took part in multiple strands of EKP project activities (see Table 10 below). The majority participated in **one** strand of activity (29.1%, 166 schools) while a minority participated in two strands (7%, 40 schools), or three strands (1.9%, 11 schools).

Table 10: Participation in the EKP, by the number of strands participated in

	N	%
Participated in one strand	166	29.1
Participated in two strands	40	7.0
Participated in all three strands	11	1.9
Did not participate	354	62.3
Total	**571**	**100**

Sources: IES analysis of KCC stakeholder data and Successful Schools' Tracker data.

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[35] For our analysis, we have included as a priority school all schools that are on either the KCC or the EEF list or both.
[36] N.B. Schools can be in multiple strands.
[37] Please note that our analysis is based on management information provided by KCC in August 2023. Specifically, the Stakeholder Analysis file, which includes information on all schools in Kent (571 listed once duplicates removed). The final KCC milestone report on EKP in October 2023 lists 93 (rather than 92 schools) taking part in a Promising Project. The reason for the slight discrepancy is not clear but we assume it is to do with the timing of the data cut. Additionally, 145 schools participated in an Evidenced-Based Training project during EKP's lifetime but only 141 of these could be matched to the 571 in the stakeholder analysis enabling priority school percentage to be identified.

Table 11 below shows the rates of participation in at least one project strand by priority school status. Priority schools participated in at least one strand of project activity at a similar rate to all schools in Kent.

Table 11: Participation by strands of activity and priority status of school

	Schools in Kent N (%)	Priority school N (%)
Participated in one strand	166 (29.1)	37 (29.2)
Participated in two strands	40 (7.0)	12 (10.8)
Participated in all three strands	11 (1.9)	3 (1.7)
Did not participate	354 (62.3)	68 (56.7)
Total	**571 (100)**	**120 (100)**

Sources: IES analysis of KCC stakeholder data and Successful Schools' Tracker data.

Participation by level of disadvantage

As shown in Table 12 below, within schools taking part in EKP, the distribution of schools by level of disadvantage is similar when compared to the wider population of all Kent schools.[38]

Table 12: Distribution of schools in Kent and schools participating in EKP by IDACI decile

IDACI decile	All Kent schools N (%)	Schools that participated in at least one strand of EKP N (%)
1 (Most deprived)	39 (6.8)	17 (7.9)
2	48 (8.4)	20 (9.3)
3	44 (7.7)	11 (5.1)
4	61 (10.7)	23 (10.6)
5	50 (8.8)	24 (11.1)
6	74 (13.0)	21 (9.7)
7	91 (15.9)	38 (17.6)
8	58 (10.2)	22 (10.2)
9	64 (11.2)	26 (12.0)
10 (Least deprived)	41 (7.2)	14 (6.5)
Total N	**570 (100)**	**216 (100)**

Sources: IES analysis of KCC stakeholder data, Successful Schools' Tracker data, and IDACI 2019 data.

Participation by pupil attainment outcomes

Comparisons between schools were also made based on attainment, by utilising published data from the GIAS service. Information from the 2022–2023 academic year for Kent local authority Key Stage 2 (Key Stage 2 revised results) and Key Stage 4 (Key Stage 4 final results) were used for this analysis and compared to the mean national average.

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[38] More detailed tables showing the breakdown of schools by IDACI decile across all three strands are shown in Appendix A11. Stakeholder analysis data was matched to IDACI 2019 data using postcodes, with only one school from the 571 not having information available for download.

For Key Stage 2, the attainment variable for comparison was the mean average value[39] of all Key Stage 2 settings in England. Schools that fell above or met the mean national average (of 60%) were classified as high attainment, and those that fell below the mean were classified as low attainment settings.

The proportion of high- and low-attaining schools that participated in the EKP was almost identical to that of Kent as a whole (See Table 13 below), although with a slightly higher proportion of high attainment schools than low attainment schools (52.8% and 52.0%, respectively).

Table 13: Key Stage 2 attainment of schools in Kent compared to EKP schools

Key stage 2 attainment	All Kent schools N (%)	Participated in EKP N (%)
Low attainment	204 (47.2)	73 (48.0)
High attainment	228 (52.8)	79 (52.0)
Total	**432 (100.0)**	**152 (100.0)**

Sources: IES analysis of KCC stakeholder data and GIAS data.

A similar process to that for Key Stage 2 results was followed for Key Stage 4, using the mean national average[40] score as the comparison variable. Schools that fell above or met the mean average (of 46.3%) for all schools in Kent were classified as high attainment, and those that fell below the mean were classified as low attainment settings.

Table 14 shows that when considering Key Stage 4 settings, high-attaining schools were slightly over-represented among EKP participants when compared to the population of Kent schools (75.0% vs 65.7%).

Table 14: Key Stage 4 attainment of schools in Kent compared to EKP schools

Key stage 4 attainment	All schools in Kent N (%)	Participated in EKP N (%)
Low attainment	37 (34.3)	12 (25.0)
High attainment	71 (65.7)	36 (75.0)
Total	**108 (100.0)**	**48 (100.0)**

Sources: IES analysis of KCC stakeholder data and GIAS data.

Participation by phase of education

Analysing participation by phase of education, EKP appears to have attracted a slightly higher proportion of secondary schools compared to the total school population in the county.[41] While secondary schools account for 17.2% of all Kent schools, 20.5% of participating schools were secondary schools (Table 15 below). This is despite a greater emphasis on primary education in Strand 1 activities.

Table 15: Phase of education of all Kent schools compared to EKP schools

Education phase	All schools in Kent N (%)	Participated in EKP N (%)
Primary	447 (79.1)	164 (76.3)
Secondary	97 (17.2)	44 (20.5)
Special	21 (3.7)	7 (3.3)
Total	**565 (100)**	**215 (100)**

Sources: IES analysis of KCC stakeholder data and Successful Schools' Tracker data.[42]

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[39] PTRWM_EXP is the percentage of pupils achieving the expected standard in the combined reading, writing, and maths measure. Some data is unavailable for public release so the average may differ slightly from the Department for Education figures. Data is not publicly available for all Kent schools.

[40] ATT8SCR is the Average Attainment 8 score per pupil. Some data is unavailable for public release so the average may differ slightly from the Department for Education figures.

[41] Of the 571 schools in the sample, information on school phase was available for 565 cases (98.9%). Information on school phase was taken from stakeholder information provided by KCC.

[42] Data was only valid for 565 schools with school phase information missing for six cases.

Considering the extent of participation in multiple strands, secondary schools were more likely to take part in just one strand of EKP rather than multiple strands (37.1%, 36 schools) compared to primary schools (27.3%, 122 schools). Just seven secondary schools (7.2%) took part in two strands, and one took part in all three strands (1.0%). (Table 16 below).

Table 16: Phase of education by stand of EKP activity

Education phase	Participated in one strand N (%)	Participated in two strands N (%)	Participated in all three strands N (%)	Did not participate N (%)	Total N (%)
Primary	122 (27.3)	33 (7.4)	9 (2.0)	283 (63.3)	447 (100)
Secondary	36 (37.1)	7 (7.2)	1 (1.0)	55 (54.6)	97 (100)
Special	6 (28.6)	0 (0)	1 (4.8)	16 (66.7)	21 (100)
Total	**164**	**40**	**11**	**350**	**565**

Sources: IES analysis of KCC stakeholder information and Successful Schools' Tracker data.

Participation by geographical area

Table 17 below shows the geographic locations (by sub-regions North, South, East, West) of all schools in Kent and schools taking part in EKP.[43] Overall, EKP schools were geographically well-balanced, with good representation of schools from all sub-regions. Schools in the South of Kent had the highest rate of participation in EKP while participation in the North of Kent was comparatively slightly low. The South of Kent (comprising the districts of Sevenoaks, Dartford, and Gravesham) has higher levels of deprivation and educational challenges than the North (Ashford, Folkestone and Hythe, and Dover).[44]

Table 17: Distribution of schools in Kent and schools participating in EKP by sub-region

Kent sub-region	All schools in Kent N (%)	Participated in EKP N (%)
North	121 (21.2)	43 (19.8)
East	143 (25.0)	52 (24.0)
South	143 (25.0)	62 (28.6)
West	164 (28.7)	60 (27.6)
Total	**571 (100)**	**217 (100)**

Source: IES analysis of KCC stakeholder data.

Enablers and barriers to taking part in EKP

Enablers: Meeting schools' priorities

The most commonly cited reason for taking part in EKP by survey respondents was that the training was appropriate to their school's needs. This was the case for almost all respondents who had applied to take part in the first round of Promising Projects before December 2020 (n=38, 95%)[45] and around three-quarters of Evidenced-Based Training survey respondents (n=47, 76%) (see Appendix 1.2). School-based interviews provided additional evidence, suggesting that when Promising Projects or Evidence-Based Training were used by schools to meet identified needs, schools had

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[43] Participating in at least one strand of EKP.

[44] For example, analysis of the October 2021 School Census and Indices of Deprivation Analysis shows that districts in the South of Kent have a higher percentage of pupils eligible for FSM (26.4% vs the Kent average of 22.5%), higher rates of exclusion at secondary schools as a percentage of the roll (4.4% vs the Kent average of 3.5%) and a higher average Index of Multiple Deprivation score (22.78 vs 20.74 for all Kent schools). See: https://www.kelsi.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/136482/Facts-and-Figures-2022.pdf (accessed 3 April 2024).

[45] This data is from the baseline survey about evidence and research use, distributed to all schools in Kent in November 2019 and December 2019. Those respondents who indicated they had applied to take part in a Promising Project (the only EKP activity on offer at that early stage), were then asked about their reasons for doing so.

considered the characteristics of the pupil intake, the appropriateness of the teaching approach, fit with school ethos, and used data to inform decisions.

In some cases, schools were focused on improving outcomes for a subgroup of learners within a cohort while in others, schools had identified a need for a whole class or year group and felt that one of the EKP courses was well-placed to meet that need and fitted with the school context. Learners with SEND were a key subgroup of young people that school-based interviewees had identified as a priority. Interviewees who participated in Evidence-Based Training on 'SEND and Learning Behaviours', commonly recognised an existing lack of consistent, high-quality support for pupils and welcomed training focused on improving teaching and learning for this group.

Another common theme was that extended periods of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic had resulted in learning losses among pupils and that the EKP training offer was an opportunity to meet these emerging needs. There were also examples of schools who used EKP training as an opportunity to continue evidence-based approaches that they had established but which had to be paused during the pandemic.

Enablers: Role of the EEF and the offer of evidence-based interventions

Around three-quarters of schools in the baseline survey (n=30, 75%) who had applied for a Promising Project and over half of Evidenced-Based Training survey respondents (n=34, 55%) indicated that one of the reasons influencing their decision was the robust evidence base underpinning the interventions on offer (Appendix 1.2).

Several key informants reported that the EEF's involvement in EKP brought credibility and traction among schools, as a charitable and evidence-based research organisation (particularly to the Promising Projects). This was seen as especially helpful in the context of schools operating in challenging circumstances.

A number of school-based interviewees discussed the role of the EEF and, in particular, the offer under EKP of evidence-based interventions that had been used in other schools in similar contexts. School staff valued not having to spend time themselves researching the evidence base and that this had already been undertaken by a credible organisation.

Enablers: Matched funding

The matched funding offered was also an important incentive for taking part in EKP. Over two-thirds of respondents who had applied to take part in the first round of Promising Projects before December 2020 (n=27, 68%) felt it was a **strong incentive**, and around a third of respondents to the Evidenced-Based Training survey (n=21 cases, 34%) (Appendix 1.2).

School-based interviews suggest careful decision-making processes among leadership teams, weighing up a range of considerations, including the matched funding. In some schools, staff discussed the financial pressures facing schools and noted that in this context, the financial contribution was very welcome, and sometimes vital.

There were some examples where the availability of matched funding was the deciding factor in a headteacher's decision to take part. In one school, a headteacher had selected 1stClass@Number as an intervention meeting the school's priorities and needs but the matched funding was what convinced them to sign-up. They were attracted to being able to 'trial' the programme at a reduced cost. In another case, a school was already aware of Children's University and intended to sign-up, regardless of the presence of matched funding. However, the matched funding enabled them to have more staff take part in the training, resulting in potentially greater benefits for children in their school.

Other interviewees discussed the current strain that schools are facing with budgets, and how the availability of funding freed up training budgets to be spent on additional activities.

Although the financial support provided by EKP was important, this was not the only factor in Strand 1 school-based interviewees' decision to participate. Schools also discussed considering whether they had the required staff in place before signing up and, as previously noted, the extent to which the selected intervention was likely to bring about the desired changes to teaching practice and learner outcomes. In some contexts, the funding was a lesser factor, and the focus was on benefits for pupils.

Barriers: Resourcing and capacity

The baseline survey also provided insights into the main reasons that schools did not apply to take part in Promising Projects. Of the participants who had not applied (N=80), the most commonly given reason was that they lacked time and the capacity to apply (n=25, 31%) (Appendix 13). Several key informants discussed that the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic affected schools' ability to take up training offered under EKP. They reported that in the earlier stages of the pandemic, schools were in 'crisis management' mode as they had to cope with a move to remote learning. In this context, planning and applying for school improvement activities was not considered to be a priority and time and resources were diverted away to more immediate day-to-day tasks necessary to keep schools running safely. A non-participant interview with a SENDCO of a small, special school highlighted the added pressures on senior leadership teams to ensure COVID safety and compliance, which affected the school's ability to engage with EKP.

Financial constraints and staff absences and shortages were ongoing factors that affected take-up. Among baseline survey respondents who had not applied to take part in Promising Projects, just over a quarter felt that the school's financial contribution to the training was too high (n=23, 28%) and similarly a quarter felt that the matched funding was not sufficient to enable participation (n=20, 25%) (Appendix 13). Key informants, reflecting on their interactions with schools, also emphasised that budgetary pressures on schools were severe and that, even with the matched funding, EKP activities were unaffordable to many schools. This view was supported by non-participants who highlighted the issue of inadequate funding and felt they would struggle to meet the costs for staff cover without higher levels of funding. Some key informants compared the lower take-up of EKP activities that provided 50% matched funding to the higher take-up of Department for Education Accelerator Fund projects, which was available from February 2022 and provided 75% matched funding. Others noted the increase in uptake of Promising Projects when the prices were reduced as part of the move to remote learning and attributed this to the influence of cost on decision.

Key informants and non-participants reported that as the pandemic progressed and with the continued requirement for remote learning, staff absence due to sickness became an increasing barrier. Although during periods of school closure, costs for overheads were lower, the costs for staff cover increased due to higher rates of staff absence. Schools struggled to both find and pay for cover staff. According to key informants and non-participants, this exacerbated ongoing and long-term issues related to the recruitment and retention of staff in the education sector and limited the budgets that could be allocated to training and other school improvement activities. Several of the Promising Projects are interventions designed to be delivered by teaching assistants and key informants noted that this is a staff group with particular challenges around recruitment and retention. This wider sectoral challenge was considered to have affected take-up of Promising Projects.

Non-participant and key informant interviews suggested that resourcing and capacity issues were keenly felt by smaller schools. Further, staff in smaller schools often had a wide remit, which could make decision-making about school improvement, and any subsequent applications, slower.

Barriers: Shortened timeframes for promoting Promising Projects

The timeframe for promoting the first round of Promising Projects was comparatively short due to the compressed timetable for launching the projects (this issue is discussed in greater detail in the 'Feasibility – Barriers and Enablers' section). This meant the window for sign-up was shorter than for later rounds and, in the view of some key informants, affected take-up. Although the EKP delivery team had planned to gain ground in recruitment in later rounds (with longer timeframes for sign-up) and hoped to see an increase in uptake, the onset of the pandemic affected their plans.

Barrier: Perceptions of the EKP offer

Some key informants discussed the wider landscape of training provision in Kent. They considered there to be a rich and varied offer available to schools, with some training offered free of charge. Some stakeholders felt this is likely to have affected schools' perceptions of the EKP offer. Some key informants who worked regularly with schools shared feedback from schools that they disliked that the Promising Projects meant working with a certain training provider and would have preferred greater choice. Other feedback from key informants was that schools felt the training was not quite right for their needs or perceived to be 'pitched too low'.

However, although none of the interviews with non-participants indicated the quality or range of the offer to be a barrier, one interviewee felt they would have valued more information about the offer. They recognised that not having sufficient information available may have been due to a lack of communication from the EEF and KCC or an issue of lack of communication within their school.

Key findings 2: Feasibility – barriers and enablers

This section presents findings about the project's feasibility, addressing the following research questions:

- 4. Was the project delivered as intended? Why/why not?

- 5. Were Promising Projects delivered by schools with fidelity?

- 6. What are the barriers and facilitators for this type of project? How do these vary for different types of schools?

It primarily discusses the inputs and activities in the Theory of Change, considering whether project inputs were as intended and describing how activities were delivered and stakeholder views and experiences of these. The section takes the three main strands of EKP activity in turn, Promising Projects, Evidence-Based Training, and Developing Research Champions. It draws out enablers and barriers specific to each of these strands, and those which were cross-cutting.

The data sources that have been used for this section include KCC milestone reports submitted to the EEF to monitor funding and activity, the Evidenced-Based Training survey data, the KCC engagement data, qualitative analysis of the Promising Projects survey responses, interviews with key informants and school staff, and case studies compiled by KCC as part of their own review processes. There are limitations to these data sources, which need to be considered in relation to findings about feasibility. Primarily, the sample of schools participating in the Evidenced-Based Training and Promising Projects surveys, which provided views on the quality and usefulness of training, was small (33% and 15%, respectively). It is unlikely to be representative of all EKP schools—there may have been selection bias whereby those who had positive experiences of the training were more likely to take part in the survey. Similarly, the small qualitative sample (13 Evidence-Based Training participants across 9 schools, 15 Promising Projects participants across 9 schools, and 5 Evidence Champions and 3 of their colleagues) is unlikely to capture the full breadth of perceptions and experiences.

Key findings 2: Feasibility

4. Was the project delivered as intended? Why/why not?

Inputs: The project inputs were not as planned. There was a significant underspend against the total joint fund capacity of £600,000, with KCC and the EEF jointly contributing £348,076. Together with school contributions and contributions from the KCC Inclusion Fund, which supported training to improve outcomes for children and young people with SEND, the total project spend was £494,626. The main reasons for this relate to lower-than-expected take-up of project activities among schools for a range of reasons including the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, staffing issues and long-term illness in schools, and limited budgets to cover the matched funding requirement.

Additionally, the spend on staff time within KCC to run the project was less than the £70,000 per annum estimated in the original Theory of Change. However, some informants from the EEF and KCC had not been expecting that staff would spend as much time on management, administration and processes supporting the project.

Activities: Key informants and schools generally reported they found the communications and promotion of EKP effective although their comments must be seen in the context of uptake of EKP activities being lower than expected, despite being match-funded. A range of channels were used for promoting EKP to schools. One to one discussions between The Education People advisers and school leaders was considered a particularly effective means of encouraging take-up. The fact that this did not routinely happen until late 2021 (when EKP funds were used to commission and fund The Education People advisers to have signposting conversations with schools) likely contributed to engagement of priority schools not being as expected.

Putting Evidence to Work, the EEF's online implementation course for senior leaders, featured in EKP's original Theory of Change. It had been intended that senior leaders would complete the implementation training to help identify a realistic priority to target through the Promising Projects. The emphasis on the role of the implementation training in choosing school improvement priorities was less than originally anticipated. An estimated 300–400 headteachers accessed a light-touch (one hour) face-to-face version of the training at headteacher briefings before the pandemic. Subsequently, senior leaders were signposted to the online version and encouraged to complete it. They had to state on their application form that they had or would complete the course, but this was not monitored or followed up. Some senior leaders who did access the training were positive about its usefulness while others considered it to be a 'tickbox' exercise that did not affect their decision-making.

Delivery of Promising Projects was significantly different to plans. There were delays to this strand of work due primarily to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and also due to the need to establish new Service Level Agreements (SLAs) between KCC and multiple Promising Projects providers. The COVID-19 pandemic affected provider resources and courses had to be adapted for remote delivery. Generally, this process of adapting Promising Projects for remote delivery was considered to have been

effective. Strong partnership working between KCC, the EEF, and Promising Projects providers helped to navigate highly challenging circumstances.

Evidence-Based Training: The process for developing the Evidence-Based Training included extensive stakeholder consultation and was generally considered to have fulfilled the ambition to develop a high-quality training offer that was relevant to Kent schools. Delivery of the Evidence-Based Training was affected by resourcing and capacity constraints within stakeholder organisations including the EEF, KCC, research schools, and KARS.

ELEs were intended to provide 44ocused4444zed support to schools taking part in the Evidence-Based Training. Around half of schools took up ELE support, and stakeholder feedback indicated that more could have been done to increase awareness of the support and build trust in its value among schools. The potential for ELEs to work as a collaborative network was not 44ocused44, with limited joint working between ELEs. Feedback from a small qualitative sample indicated that schools that did take up the ELE support tended to value it.

Targeting of priority schools did not take place as intended. At the start of the project, there were no specific activities to target priority schools for Promising Projects due to the pace at which they were launched. When the EKP delivery team 44ocused44 that priority schools were not engaging with EKP activities at the rate anticipated, measures for improved targeting were put in place. This included targeted communications and doubling the offer of funding for priority schools for the Evidence Champions training and associated ELE support. Additionally, there was a focus on using the established relationship between The Education People advisers and schools. EKP commissioned The Education People to undertake a desktop exercise, matching priority schools to Evidence-Based Training and Promising Projects courses based on advisers' knowledge of the schools' needs, and then having a conversation with the school. This worked better but there were insufficient resources for The Education People advisers to have targeted conversations with all priority schools and in some cases, there was limited leadership capacity in priority schools to engage with the training.

The scale of the Promising Projects Train the Trainer work was smaller than expected. Capacity and resourcing pressures within schools affected interest and demand among teachers to become trainers. Stakeholders were nonetheless positive about EKP having established Kent-based trainers for two Promising Projects and saw this as an important development to ensure ongoing benefits.

In relation to the appointment of KARS, the programme team at KCC and the EEF had planned for KARS to be a 'visible system-leader' 44ocused on supporting schools to use research and evidence to improve school outcomes. This role was not entirely fulfilled as intended for multiple reasons. A key challenge was staff absence within KARS soon after its appointment. The timings of the appointment of KARS partway through EKP also did not allow sufficient time for the role to develop. Further, the designation of Kingsnorth Primary School as an associate research school ended in 2023 as planned. At this time, the EEF's regional strategy shifted and the associate research school's role/designation was no longer part of the Research Schools Network model. Associate research schools, along with others, were able to apply to become a research school for the 2023–2026 period but this process did not lead to the appointment of a research school in Kent. This meant that the mechanisms for sustaining system-leadership were not as strong as had been anticipated at the start of the project.

5. Were Promising Projects delivered by schools with fidelity?

There were practical challenges in the data collection of fidelity, which means the evaluation cannot make a judgement about implementation quality and fidelity. Qualitative feedback indicates that in schools where there was not a stable leadership team committed to the Promising Projects, fidelity could sometimes be undermined.

6. What are the barriers and facilitators for this type of project? How do these vary for different types of schools?

The complexity of the stakeholder landscape in Kent affected project delivery. Specifically, KCC's contract for school improvement provision with The Education People created barriers. The Education People advisers were key stakeholders who had relationships with school leaders and knowledge about schools' training needs. However, The Education People's existing contract did not cover EKP project activities. Further, The Education People had its own commercial training offer and it was not initially made clear how EKP activities differed from this. It took time to establish arrangements between The Education People and the EKP delivery team, with The Education People's involvement in the project increasing slowly over time. There were also mixed views about the extent to which strong partnership working had been established between Kent Association of Headteachers and KCC.

Several stakeholder organisations were involved in delivery of EKP and there were capacity constraints in many of these organisations due to staff turnover and absence. This made consistency difficult and likely contributed to a perception among some key informants that there was a lack of clearly assigned roles and responsibilities between stakeholder organisations. Some key informants discussed poor handovers between staff, which created barriers such as delays, missed opportunities to engage schools, and lack of or delayed information particularly related to the running of Evidence-Based Training courses (such as details of key contacts, session plans, and information about attendees).

The high quality of the training offered through EKP appears to have been an enabler. Across all EKP strands, key informants and a relatively small sample of participants generally valued the skills of trainers and considered the training to be relevant to their context. There was some feedback that the Evidence Champions training could have been more tailored to take more account of prior experience of evidence use. Flexibility around timings of sessions before and after core hours also enabled schools to participate.

Remote learning facilitated participation of a wider range of schools from varied geographic locations, reduced school costs for staff cover time, and made it easier for participants to catch-up on missed sessions. There were, however, barriers related to poorer engagement online and reduced opportunities for networking with peers.

Resourcing and capacity within schools was a barrier to taking part in EKP. Existing resourcing and capacity issues in schools were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. National lockdowns meant schools had to prioritise the implementation of remote learning and resources were diverted away, temporarily or on a long-term basis, from school improvement activities. Issues of staff turnover and absence were commonly mentioned and in some cases school leaders related turnover to wider problems of staff recruitment and retention in the teaching profession.

Support and commitment of senior leaders enabled effective delivery of Promising Projects within schools and was the key to overcoming barriers linked to lack of time and resource.

Project inputs

Overall spend

The key financial inputs to the project were the EEF and KCC equal contributions to the joint fund, school contributions for the Promising Projects and Evidence-Based Training, and KCC Inclusion Fund contributions, which supported training around improving outcomes for children and young people with SEND.

In total £471,073 was spent on delivery of the EKP project, with an additional £23,553 contribution to KCC office costs, bringing the total expenditure on the project to £494,626 (Table 18).

Table 18: EKP expenditure

Source of funding	Expenditure (£)
EEF and KCC equal contributions to the joint fund to date	348,076
School contributions	124,463
KCC Inclusion Fund contributions	22,087
Total	**494,626**

Source: KCC milestone report, October 2023.

There was a significant underspend against the total possible joint fund capacity of £600,000 (with equal contributions from KCC and the EEF), with KCC and the EEF jointly contributing £348,076.[46] Linked to this, school contributions were also lower than anticipated at the outset of the project (£124,463 vs an anticipated level of school spend of £600,000). The main reasons for this relate to lower-than-expected take-up of project activities among schools for a range of reasons. These are discussed in the previous section 'Key findings 1: Project reach and take-up' and include the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected: take-up of Promising Projects and Evidence-Based Training; staffing issues and long-term illness in schools; limited school budgets affecting capacity to match-fund; and low take-up of the Evidence Champions grant and the ELE support offered as part of Evidence-Based Training. Further, KCC noted that only small numbers of schools claimed the travel and staff cover expenses that were available.

Spend by activity

Table 19: EKP Expenditure by project strand

Activity	Expenditure (£)	Total expenditure (%)
Strand 1 Promising Projects	207,045	42
Strand 2 Evidence-Based Training	153,623	31
Strand 3 Sustainability	110,755	22
Office costs	23,553	5
Total	**494,976**[47]	**100**

Source: IES analysis of Successful Schools' Tracker data.

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[46] KCC milestone report, October 2023.
[47] There is a slight discrepancy of around £350 between the headline figure of expenditure reported in the KCC milestone reports and the breakdown figures presented in the Successful Schools' Tracker.

There were no targets within the budget for overall spend on each strand of activity, perhaps reflecting that the plans for each strand of activity evolved as the project developed. Table 19 above shows the allocation of spend across the three main project strands, and indicates that the greatest share of the budget was allocated to the Promising Projects strand (around two-fifths).

Staff time

As well as financial inputs, the contributions of KCC and the EEF staff time for the management and administration of EKP were key resources that enabled the delivery of the project.

Within KCC, there were three team members: a strategic and project lead (who spent 40% of their time per week on the project); a project officer/manager (45% of their time per week); and a business support officer (40% of their time per week). These staff inputs were broadly as expected throughout the delivery of the project. However, for the first six months of the project, stakeholders within KCC and the EEF reported there to be limited administrative support for the project within KCC. Over time, this appeared to be resolved with administrative duties absorbed within the team and also additional support sourced from other staff within KCC. It should also be noted that the original Theory of Change for EKP estimated a spend of £70,000 per annum to cover KCC staff costs to run the project. In practice, the overall spend on staff was less than this suggesting spend was overestimated at the start.

Within the EEF, time was allocated to the regional lead for London and the South East role to manage the EEF's inputs and contributions to the project and the relationship with KCC. The regional lead spent approximately 20% of their time per week on the project. In addition, a regional delivery officer spent around 10% of their time per week working on EKP and there was leadership support from the national delivery manager. These time inputs varied significantly during the project and were likely to have been greater at the earlier stages of the project.

Within both KCC and the EEF, key informants had not been expecting that staff would spend as much time on management, administration and processes supporting the project.

The Education People advisers' contribution

Key informant interviews suggested that overall The Education People advisers' contributions and inputs to the project were less than originally anticipated and that there could have been more opportunities for partnership working between KCC and The Education People, across all elements of EKP.

It was a commonly held view that it took some time to fully establish the working relationship between the two organisations. Senior leaders within The Education People were aware of the project from the start and involved in providing feedback on the original project proposal. The Education People representatives sat on the project steering and working group. Through this, they played a role in identifying priority schools, providing feedback on the appropriateness of the Promising Projects offer and developing the Evidence-Based Training offer using their knowledge and data about the needs of Kent schools. However, The Education People representatives played a more limited role in direct engagement of schools in the earlier stages of the project and this developed slowly over time.

A particular issue was that it was not clear, which project activities were included within The Education People's current contract with KCC and, which were additional and therefore, required an additional commission. Key informants from both organisations reflected that there needed to have been more thought at the start of the project about the role of The Education People and the parameters for partnership working. As The Education People is a commercial organisation, it would have been beneficial to specify earlier on how the EKP offer was different to the organisation's standard offer to limit overlap and any perceptions of competition. They felt this would have helped to secure commitment and resources for EKP from its partner from the start.

It was noted by the EEF key informants that they had not understood initially that the outsourcing of school improvement services meant that KCC had limited direct contact and relationships with Kent schools, which meant greater emphasis on the role of The Education People.

These challenges were identified and worked on over time, and to a degree overcome. The sections below on 'Promoting EKP' and 'Targeting of priority schools' describe how The Education People advisers' roles in these activities developed over the course of the project.

Time of Kent Association of Headteachers members

The time of Kent Association of Headteachers members to contribute to the strategic direction of the project was also a key planned input. There were mixed views among key informants about the extent to which strong partnership working had been established between Kent Association of Headteachers and KCC, and whether Kent Association of Headteachers inputs had been as planned. Some key informants highlighted that shared strategic priorities had been identified (e.g. around developing a research hub for Kent schools) and felt that KCC, the EEF, and Kent Association of Headteachers had successfully collaborated on activities to deliver these priorities. Others felt that Kent Association of Headteachers should have had greater involvement in the shaping and direction of the project from earlier on and that KCC could have done more to facilitate this. Again, the complex structure and landscape of education in Kent was discussed by several key informants. They noted that Kent Association of Headteachers was a strong group of headteachers driving a system-led approach to education as per the government vision of academisation and a school-led system. In this context, some stakeholders considered there were tensions between the EEF and KCC's objectives and approaches and those of Kent Association of Headteachers and that even though there were mechanisms (such as the strategic steering group) to ensure alignment and collaboration, this was not fully achieved.

Promoting EKP

Key informants and school staff generally considered that the promotion of EKP and the related communications had been effective. However, it should be noted that this feedback came from schools who had signed up for at least one strand of EKP activity and the evaluation did not gather comparable feedback from schools who did not participate in EKP. Further, views on the effectiveness of communications must be seen in the context of uptake of EKP activities being lower than expected, despite being match-funded.

Survey evidence indicates that the clear information about courses in promotional materials was valued by schools who signed up and influenced their decision to take part: 45% of Evidenced-Based Training survey respondents and 60% of those responding to the baseline survey who had applied for a Promising Project indicated that the course being clearly described was a reason for participating. In some school-based interviews, staff commented that the initial promotional email they received from the EEF and KCC, detailing the aims of EKP, the matched funding and the range of projects being offered, was a hook and captured their interest. From the key informant perspective, it was noted that there were in some instances challenges in identifying the right person in the school to contact to promote the training.

Additionally, the range of channels for communicating information about EKP appears to have worked well in stimulating interest in the project. The Evidenced-Based Training survey and baseline survey asked respondents how they had heard about the training offer and multiple routes were mentioned. In both surveys, headteacher briefings were the most mentioned (in the Evidenced-Based Training survey: n=28, 50% of respondents; and baseline survey: n=33, 83%) but many other routes were also cited, from across the range of stakeholder organisations (see Appendix A14).

Key informants felt that having a range of stakeholder organisations involved in promoting EKP was useful and necessary but there was nonetheless a view that even more could have been done to increase the involvement of stakeholders and to give them a bigger role in promoting EKP. It was felt this might have increased uptake of EKP activities.

Key informants reported that promotion was more successful (as evidenced by increased applications and sign-up), where The Education People advisers were active and engaged in promoting EKP to their schools. They attributed this to the one to one relationship advisers have with school leaders and their knowledge of schools' circumstances. The involvement of The Education People in promotion increased over time and by Round 3 of the Promising Projects and Evidence-Based Training, its advisers were more routinely discussing EKP in one to one meetings with schools. Some key informants considered that if The Education People advisers had been involved earlier on in engaging schools through targeted one to one conversations, uptake of training would have been higher. In the small number of school-based interviews, school staff did not mention The Education People advisers influencing their awareness of the project or decision to participate.

Similarly, while Promising Projects providers were generally positive about how Promising Projects had been promoted, there was a view that providers should have been more involved. However, it was recognised that COVID-19 was a significant barrier to this as there were limited opportunities for face-to-face events such as 'roadshows' to supplement the written information in the Promising Projects prospectus.

Providers generally considered that the virtual promotional events such as online roadshows and the series of webinar-style Team events worked well. Provider interviews indicated the virtual roadshow was well-organised and noted that it was a practical option for providers based outside of Kent, as well as to meet social distancing requirements. One provider felt that they had professionalised their own approach to marketing, including introducing introductory webinars, as a result of learning from the EKP marketing approach.

In addition, two in-person roadshows (a morning and afternoon) were organised in January 2020 to help promote Promising Projects and share information. A total of 51 schools attended these events.[48] Similar events had been scheduled for April 2020 but had to be cancelled due to the pandemic.

Feedback from providers was that at busier sessions, there was not enough time to talk to schools and that it would have been easier if schools had received more advance information about the Promising Projects and if providers had received a list of schools that were potentially interested. This would have facilitated more focused conversations. Unsurprisingly, providers felt that poorly attended sessions were not a worthwhile use of time. Providers felt that more in-person roadshows, with the right number of schools, would have helped to build greater understanding of the commitment needed when signing up to a Promising Project, which might have prevented some schools from withdrawing later on.

The methods for promoting EKP changed slightly over time. As more schools took part in EKP, word of mouth became increasingly important. One Promising Projects provider reported that its post-COVID marketing approach was more targeted, with most schools hearing of them through the Looked After Children team or The Education People, alongside social media. Some providers also noted that when the Department for Education Accelerator Fund came into effect (from February 2022), their marketing efforts were less focused on EKP although KCC and other stakeholders continued with promotion.

Putting Evidence to Work: Online implementation course for senior leaders

Key informants from KCC and the EEF reported that the prominence of the online implementation course as part of EKP receded, indicating an adjustment to the original Theory of Change and planned delivery. Although schools were signposted to the online resources and expected to state on their application form that they had or would complete the implementation course, there was little additional activity around the course. Given the seniority of applicants, the EKP delivery team felt that it was most appropriate to signpost school leaders to the resource and encourage them to use it rather than make it mandatory or monitor completion. Additionally, before the pandemic, light-touch (one hour) face-to-face sessions had been provided with the delivery team estimating attendance of between 300 and 400 headteachers.

Evidence-Based Training survey respondents (N=69) were asked a series of questions about their experiences of the Putting Evidence to Work implementation training, including how useful it was, whether they would recommend it to others and to what extent it helped them to choose their selected projects. Half of respondents (n=31, 50%) indicated that they had accessed the training, while a fifth did not know if they had (n=13, 21%), and the remainder reported that they had not accessed it (n=18, 29%).

The small number of responses to questions about views and experiences of the training mean that evidence on this is relatively limited. However, out of 30 respondents, all or nearly all, agreed with the following statements:

- 'I would recommend the Putting Evidence to Work implementation training to other school leaders' (strongly agreed: n=19, 63%; agreed: n=10, 33%).

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[48] KCC EKP engagement data.

- 'The Putting Evidence to Work implementation training was relevant to the issues and context of my organisation' (strongly agreed: n=18, 60%; agreed: n=12, 40%).

- 'Putting Evidence to Work implementation training helped me to target a realistic priority through new training' (strongly agreed: n=19, 63%; agreed: n=10, 33%).

- 'The implementation training helped me to identify which Evidence-Based Training courses to apply for' (strongly agreed: n=18; 60%; agreed: n=12, 40%).

Additionally, 12 respondents answered the question about how useful the training was and of these, most (n=11) agreed that they found the training useful.

Most school-based interviewees recalled doing the online implementation course but did not remember the content in detail, mainly due to the passage of time between the course and the interview. Echoing the survey responses, interviewees generally felt that the implementation training was useful, and that the trainers delivering the sessions were engaging, allowing them to understand how their projects could be best implemented. Interviewees also noted that being able to contact the tutor via email outside of the sessions with any additional questions was useful.

> *The lady that ran it was very personable, relaxed, in a fast-paced environment. I think the training definitely set you up to understand what you were doing and why you were doing it. It was as informative as it needed it to be and you had the lady's details, so at least you felt that you had a contact if you needed one.* (Trust lead, Promising Projects participant)

Generally, school-based interviewees reported that the implementation training did not have any influence on their choice of project as most already knew what their goals were and chose their Promising Projects or Evidence-Based Training accordingly. One interviewee thought that it was a *'tickbox exercise'* (Deputy headteacher, Evidence-Based Training participant), necessary for them to take part in the project.

Suggested improvements from school-based interviewees and Evidence-Based Training survey respondents were limited but included:

- the initial 30 minutes of the training needed to be more engaging;

- the training needed to challenge experienced school leaders more, particularly around how they implement change; and

- knowing the date more in advance (from one Promising Projects school that did not attend the training).

The evaluation did not identify any differences in experience or views of the online implementation course between priority and non-priority schools.

Strand 1 Promising Projects

Participation in Promising Projects

As described previously in the section on 'Key findings 1: Project reach and take-up', 92 schools took part in Promising Projects. In most cases, schools completed just one Promising Project, but two schools participated in a project in more than one round. Table 20 below shows the Promising Projects selected in the 95 successful applications (made by 92 schools).[49] Overall, the most popular project was 1stClass@Number with close to a quarter of successful applications being for this project (N=22, 23%). This was followed by Embedding Formative Assessment (N=18, 19%) and Reciprocal Reading (N=10, 11%). The least popular project was Children's University with just four successful applications for this project (N=4, 4%).[50]

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[49] Participation in Promising Projects was made possible in three separate rounds. Schools were able to participate in multiple rounds. For example, one school participated in a single project in all three Promising Projects rounds accounting for three of the cases in Table 20. However, schools could only access funding for one Promising Projects—additional projects had to be self-funded.
[50] Although part of EKP initially, Nuffield Early Language Intervention was made available to all schools during the COVID-19 pandemic so no longer part of EKP.

Table 20: Successful applications for Promising Projects, by school type

Promising Projects	Primary	Secondary	Special	Successful applications for Promising Projects N (%)
1stClass@Number	22	0	0	22 (23)
Embedding Formative Assessment	13	5	0	18 (19)
Reciprocal Reading	7	3	0	10 (11)
Thinking, Doing, Talking Science	9	0	0	9 (9)
Philosophy For Children	7	1	1	9 (9)
Switch-On Reading	6	2	1	9 (9)
App-Based Maths Learning (One Billion)	8	0	0	8 (8)
Nuffield Early Language Intervention	6	0	0	6 (6)
Children's University	2	1	1	4 (4)
Total successful applications	**80**	**12**	**3**	**100**

Source: KCC EKP engagement data.[51]

Challenges in establishing SLAs between providers and KCC

The KCC team reported that the key challenge affecting delivery initially was that they did not have the SLAs with the 13 Promising Projects providers in place before recruitment to the first round of Promising Projects began. Ideally, SLAs would have been established before school recruitment began so that the delivery team's work could be staggered. However, the two work streams needed to run concurrently in order to allow a sufficient lead in time to raise school awareness and engagement. This put the KCC delivery team under significant pressure.

As KCC had not previously worked with the Promising Projects providers, establishing SLAs required engaging with multiple legal teams about the details of the terms and conditions, which was a long and complex process. As delivery of Promising Projects could not begin until a final SLA was countersigned by KCC and providers, the start date of some Promising Projects was affected, although the key reason for delays was the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (see subsection 'Delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic' below). In the case of two Promising Projects providers, it was not possible to define terms and conditions acceptable to both parties and the providers did not proceed with EKP.

Promising Projects providers noted the back and forth to agree the detail of the SLA. A few commented that the process was more laborious than they had previously encountered and was a source of frustration. One provider found the process difficult because they did not have access to a legal team and found the specialist vocabulary used in the SLA hard to understand.

A strong partnership between Promising Projects providers and KCC and the EEF

Despite challenges in establishing SLAs, all the Promising Projects providers reported positive relationships and communication with KCC and the EEF. This included having regular catchups and email contact with KCC during the period when contracts were being established, at the initial stages of set-up and delivery, and afterwards support with *ad hoc* issues.

KCC were described as efficient and supportive in their regular and prompt communications. One provider appreciated being given a dedicated contact from KCC to support them through the process, which helped make the partnership working straightforward, while another appreciated that KCC adapted well to COVID-19. Promising Projects providers commented on the passion for EKP demonstrated by both KCC and the EEF.

> *Their [KCC's] administrative arrangements were really good. I had a lot of contact with admin people who very efficient and capable…the nursing and preparation work that the EEF had done was important and successful and pretty well key in making the whole thing happen.* (Promising Projects provider)

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[51] Data provided to IES by KCC in August 2023—figures may slightly differ from KCC figures published in their milestone reports.

KCC agreed that Promising Projects providers worked effectively in partnership with KCC and the EEF. KCC stakeholders noted, however, that it was difficult to obtain the follow-up case studies that providers had committed to provide after delivery.

Delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic

Key informants reported that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected this strand of work and resulted in activities not being delivered as and when intended.

In the final stages of SLAs being agreed, the first national lockdown was announced. Providers' resources were affected, with some staff on furlough and in a few cases, providers ceasing to trade. Furthermore, providers needed to re-work their offer to deliver remotely and the EEF needed to check their offer remained efficacious i.e. the quality was not affected, and that the adapted Promising Projects did not undermine the results of the previous trials. KCC also had to make many changes, including amending the prospectus and marketing materials as well as reducing the costs of the projects in light of the remote rather than face-to-face offer. All of this additional work further contributed to delays in finalising the SLAs, which meant that schools who had signed up for the first round of Promising Projects were unable to begin on time.

All Promising Projects providers interviewed adapted at least some of the delivery to be remote when the pandemic started (with some later switching back to face-to-face when feasible) and key informants considered that this was generally successful.

It was easier for some projects than others to adapt to remote teaching and learning, for example, the App-Based Maths Learning (Onebillion) and Embedding Formative Assessment (based on one to one support), were able to proceed more quickly after the initial disruption of the pandemic had passed. However, most schools were not able to begin engaging in the new remote training until May/June 2020, and for others it was later than this.

Low uptake in the first round also meant that some of the Promising Projects did not have enough applicants to be able to run the project. The intention was that a second round of recruitment to boost numbers would be run from April 2020. Due to the onset of the pandemic, this could not happen, and so there were further delays.

For the second round of the Promising Projects, in the context of uncertainty around COVID-19 and school closures, KCC and the EEF decided that rather than having a two-week recruitment window as planned, a longer window for rolling applications (from April 2021 to June 2021) would offer schools greater flexibility. KCC hoped that they could start running cohorts earlier if schools applied early, however, most schools still applied towards the end of the application window. Key informants reported that recruitment to the second round of Promising Projects was affected by the high levels of school and pupil absence caused in the longer-term by the pandemic.

Extent to which Promising Projects were delivered with fidelity

As discussed earlier in the 'Methods' section, the evaluation experienced significant challenges in capturing evidence on the fidelity of Promising Projects delivered by Kent schools during EKP and it has not been possible to measure fidelity to answer this research question.

Key informants noted that the challenging context in which schools were trained in and then delivered Promising Projects, in some instances led to changes to the project that likely undermined fidelity. They attributed this mostly to external pressures (e.g. Ofsted, course content delivery changing to online during COVID), resourcing pressures, and changes in leadership, where the staff member who did the initial training left and the new lead did not have the same level of understanding and/or had different priorities. New leads also did not have a relationship with the trainer, so it was difficult to build engagement.

In interview, schools were asked if they had made any changes to the implementation of their selected projects. One school had to train a new member of staff who had not attended the original training and found that initially their students' post-assessment scores were lower than those who did attend the original training. A school delivering a literacy intervention changed some of the texts they were using to better engage their students but ensured that they followed the training otherwise.

Strand 2 Evidence-Based Training

Development of the Evidence-Based Training

Key informants generally considered that the process for developing the Evidence-Based Training was effective and resulted in a relevant training offer for Kent schools. KCC and the EEF reported that the development process went well and that they valued the partnership working established with a range of stakeholders to formulate the offer. Members of the steering group and other key informants also generally agreed that the process for stakeholder engagement and consultation had been effective in eliciting feedback and views on what schools' training needs were and how the offer should meet these. It was though acknowledged by some key informants that the context of the COVID-19 pandemic meant it was harder to directly engage schools in the consultation process and one key informant felt The Education People should have had greater involvement.

Key informants discussed that there was tailoring of existing EEF training programmes to ensure relevance to the Kent context, particularly in terms of ensuring sufficient focus on children and young people with SEND (see subsection 'Project context and rationale' in the 'Introduction' section above). For example, existing training on 'learning behaviours' was adapted to be 'SEND and Learning Behaviours' and had a greater focus on metacognition. New courses were carefully monitored and evaluated by the EEF and research schools and refinements made after the first course, based on reflection and feedback.

Participation in Evidence-Based Training courses

Overall, there were ten Evidence-Based Training courses for schools to take part in. There were a total of 209 school registrations across these courses[52] (Table 21). The most frequently selected course was the 'SEND and Learning Behaviours' training. It should be noted that this course was fully funded as opposed to match-funded and also extra courses were run to meet demand.[53] 'Delivery of Remote Learning' was the second most popular course overall, selected by 25 schools.[54]

Table 21: Evidence-Based Training course, by school type

Evidence-Based Training course	Primary	Secondary	Special	Pupil Referral Unit	Total
SEND and Learning Behaviours	64	16	1	1	82
Delivery of Remote Learning	20	5	0	0	25
Characteristics of Deprivation	9	8	0	0	17
From Mitigation to Success	11	2	0	1	14
Tackling Educational Disadvantage	10	4	0	1	15
Designing Effective Professional Development	7	2	3	2	14
Effective Learning Behaviours	8	3	1	0	12
Evidence-Informed Curriculum Development	7	4	1	0	12
Improving Memory and Metacognition	11	1	0	0	12
Training and Retaining Great Teachers	3	3	0	0	6
Total	**150**	**48**	**6**	**5**	**209**

Source: KCC EKP engagement data.[55]

ELE support

As only a low proportion of Evidence-Based Training survey respondents had accessed ELE support (n=18, 27%), there is limited quantitative feedback on views and experience of this component of the Evidence-Based Training. Most of these survey respondents indicated they found the support useful and valued the experience and knowledge of the ELEs

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[52] Figure taken from KCC engagement data provided to IES in August 2023. Final figures may differ slightly to reported statistics by KCC in published milestone reports.
[53] There were five cohorts for the 'SEND and Learning Behaviours' training and additional funding was provided through the Kent Inclusion Fund meaning some schools became eligible for free funding (see: https://www.kelsi.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/154198/Christine-McInnes.pdf).
[54] Due to schools applying for multiple projects the number of courses selected and unique schools selecting them differs. In total, 138 individual schools applied for 209 projects.
[55] These are the final figures for Evidence-Based Training course take-up by Kent schools, provided by KCC in August 2023. Schools were able to participate in more than one project during the EKP duration.

and this was supported by the qualitative research with schools, key informants, as well as qualitative feedback provided by survey respondents (in optional, open-text questions about how the support worked in their contexts).

Interviewees emphasised the flexible and tailored nature of the support provided by ELEs. It was commonly reported that ELEs considered the needs of individual schools and their contexts when designing support, working collaboratively with schools to focus on areas of need and value. Examples included the deployment and support of teaching assistants, identifying priorities for Pupil Premium spend, and designing a remote learning curriculum for the Gypsy and Roma communities.

The ELEs' role involved coaching schools and helping them put in place implementation plans to tackle areas of school improvement identified as a priority through the schools' training. Several mentioned that their support was key to ensuring implementation plans had a realistic timeline and feasible steps, to avoid trying to '*do too much at once'* (ELE). Reflecting on this aspect of the support, one ELE felt that the training could have emphasised more that the implementation plans could be delivered over a long-term period and often required multiple stages.

ELEs also helped schools to identify and engage with the evidence bases for existing and future interventions and strategies. A school-based interviewee described their experience of this:

> *She gave us a direction, different research papers that would be of use to us, her experience and projects where she'd seen similar to what we've done before, talked about how we collect quantitative data… just really good.* (Deputy headteacher, Evidence-Based Training participant)

One ELE said that in some schools, where the Evidence-Based Training participant was not a member of the school's senior leadership team, they focused on the development of leadership capabilities through their coaching.

ELEs described providing the allocation of one day's support over two or three meetings, typically with at least one of these held face to face. Some suggested that having three touchpoints with schools worked particularly well—during the course before writing the plan, during the planning for implementation and then at the end of the first term to support monitoring and review after the plan had been implemented initially.

The role of ELEs in helping schools to foster connections with other schools grappling with similar challenges was also cited as a key benefit. One school indicated that through their ELE they had forged a new collaboration that generated learning for them around reducing the attainment gap in reading for pupils eligible for Pupil Premium and their counterparts. From the ELE perspective, linking schools up with other schools that had the same priorities was an important part of the support. In practice, this involved signposting to other school leaders and arranging for schools to meet.

ELE collaboration

All the ELEs felt it would have been useful to have more contact with other ELEs. They felt an ELE network would have been useful to share knowledge and facilitate a joined-up approach. A couple of ELEs reported that they had met with other ELEs during the first year through facilitated meetings, which had been useful, but these opportunities had since stopped. Other key informants confirmed that this had not been a focus.

ELE barriers to take-up of the ELE offer

According to KCC records, just over half of schools participating in the Evidence-Based Training took up the offer of support from an ELE (n=110, 53%), with an average (mean) of 3.7 hours of support provided per school. The two Evidence-Based Training sessions with the highest take-up of the ELE support were 'From Mitigation to Success' (n=12, 100%) and 'Characteristics of Deprivation' (n=17, 94%) (see Appendix A15).

ELEs reported that a lack of knowledge among schools of ELE support was a barrier to uptake. They felt that schools were often unclear about their role and the type of support they could offer. This was attributed by one ELE to the personalised, wraparound support being a new way of working in Kent, and another suggested that the confusion was because the role was so bespoke. Some key informants reported that in recognition of the issue, KCC and the EEF made efforts to communicate the role with greater clarity as the training progressed. There was generally consensus that improved communication was needed and greater effort to increase visibility of the ELEs.

Another barrier to uptake mentioned by ELEs included schools being apprehensive about an external person coming in, with ELEs working to provide reassurances that their role was to provide support rather than judgement.

> *Some of the schools the directors of the trust were a bit nervous about me coming in. In one school they treated me like an Ofsted inspector and got the children out to talk to me. I said no, that's not me.* (ELE)

For other ELEs, the timing of when the ELE support was offered to schools was more of an issue. There was a view that there was less uptake from schools when the ELE support was offered after the training modules were completed (as opposed to during the training) but with recognition that there is unlikely to be a set formula that works.

Strand 3 Developing Research Champions

Evidence Champions

The first step in establishing a network of school-based Evidence Champions in Kent was designing and delivering training for Evidence Champions. According to the final KCC milestone report in October 2023, a total of 63 Evidence Champions were trained.[56] However, the barriers to delivering this training were very similar to those that affected delivery of the range of Evidence-Based Training courses more widely and are discussed below in the section 'Enablers and barriers cross-cutting the three strands of EKP activities'.

Promising Projects Train the Trainer work

Key informants were generally positive about the Promising Projects Train the Trainer work and felt it was a useful model for ensuring ongoing benefits for Kent schools. Some noted that the scale of the work was not as great as originally anticipated—with trainers established for two Promising Projects. The main barrier to establishing trainers for a wider range of Promising Projects was a lack of sign-up among potential trainers in response to the advertised opportunity and, in some cases, direct approaches to EKP participants by the delivery team. Reflecting on reasons for this, key informants commented that: '*we were asking too much of schools*' (Key Informant)), noting that individuals were expected to train as trainers, be responsible for advertising the training and recruiting schools, and finding venues. Although EKP funding was provided to trainers to cover costs for undertaking these tasks, it appears to have been an insufficient incentive.[57] For one of the science-based projects, three school science leads had initially expressed an interest in being trained as a trainer but ultimately had not proceeded. This was attributed by key informants involved in the process to the resourcing pressures in schools meaning when they understood the role, it was not feasible for them to take it on.

Interviews with trainers indicated satisfaction with the training they had received, a sound understanding of their role, and positive feedback about ongoing support for trainers from the Promising Projects providers.

Appointment of KARS

Overall, KARS did not entirely fulfil the role intended in EKP. The programme team at KCC and the EEF had planned for KARS to be a 'visible system-leader' focused on supporting schools to use research and evidence to improve school outcomes. It was also intended that KARS would build a network of Evidence Champions and support the ongoing work of the ELEs.

Key informants noted that the schedule for the appointment of the associate research school in Kent was not aligned to the EKP delivery timeline, which affected capacity for delivery. KARS was appointed around half-way through delivery of the Evidence-Based Training. Key informants explained that although the pandemic affected timelines, it was always the intention to appoint KARS at a later stage of the project. The rationale was that this would help build engagement and capacity among local schools who had the potential to take on the role. Additionally, this approach allowed the EKP

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[56] The KCC Engagement data, August 2023, lists 42 individuals taking part in Evidence Champion training. We have assumed the figure in the milestone report is accurate as this was produced in October 2023.
[57] According to the KCC milestone report in October 2023, funding of £6,035 was awarded to two individuals who trained to be Embedding Formative Assessment trainers and £4,750 to an individual who trained to be a 1stClass@Number trainer.

delivery team to focus on delivering Strands 1 and 2 of the project, which required significant resource from the team earlier on. Some key informants reflected that, in practice, the later appointment resulted in insufficient time for KARS to establish itself, build relationships, and take the lead on the Evidence-Based Training, as had been expected. Further, soon after KARS was appointed, staff absence created capacity issues and less time to focus on EKP. This was very soon after the appointment and had a significant impact on the school's capacity. For example, it was unable to support on the majority of the Evidence-Based Training courses.

Key informants from a range of organisations commented on a positive working relationship between KARS and KCC. Similarly, there was a good partnership between KARS and the research schools. However, some key informants noted that staff absence meant that KARS was not able to fully engage in the support from research schools and the EEF to build capacity and experience.

Key informants also noted that KARS was not fully integrated into the EKP management and delivery team that spanned KCC and the EEF, and there was a view that communications and team working could have been improved. Several key informants emphasised that staff absence within KARS contributed to this. When KARS designation ended as planned in summer 2023 and there were subsequently no successful applicants for a Kent-based research school, the EKP ambition of KARS being a system-leader over time could not be realised.

Enablers and barriers cross-cutting the three strands of EKP activities

Targeting of priority schools

As the Promising Projects were launched at pace and subsequently affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, there were no specific activities early on to target priority schools and encourage them to take part in a project. When the EKP delivery team realised that priority schools were not engaging with EKP activities at the rate anticipated, measures for improved targeting were put in place. It was decided that using the established relationships between The Education People advisers and school leaders would be the most effective mechanism for targeting schools. Consequently, The Education People were contracted to undertake a desktop exercise, matching priority schools (all local authority-maintained) to Evidence-Based Training and Promising Projects courses based on advisers' knowledge of the schools' needs, and then having a conversation with the school. If an adviser was working with an academy or had good contacts there, they were also encouraged to speak to them about the EKP offer. Additionally, there were targeted communications to priority schools, twice as much funding offered to priority schools to take part in the Evidence Champions training, and twice as much ELE support when doing the training.

Interviews with key informants highlighted the following barriers to effectively targeting priority schools:

- *Lack of time and capacity among The Education People advisers:* Given the recruitment timetable and the number of schools in scope, key informants noted there was insufficient time for The Education People advisers to have an individual conversation with each priority school about which training session they should engage in.

- *Lack of up-to-date information about priority schools:* Although The Education People advisers had initially provided information to help identify priority schools, by the time the matching exercise took place, they felt the data was no longer current and needed to be updated. The EEF decision was not to update the priority schools list so they remained the same schools as identified in 2019, despite changes in data. Some advisers would have liked to have added priority schools to the list and were disappointed this was not possible midway through the project.

- *Limited leadership capacity in priority schools to engage in Evidence-Based Training:* Although The Education People advisers were able to focus their efforts on schools they knew had the required leadership capacity to take part, The Education People advisers reported that in some instances schools were accepted onto the project regardless of their leadership capacity, which led to a small number of schools not attending or engaging later on.

There were some reflections among key informants of alternative approaches that might have helped to overcome some of these barriers. For example, one key informant considered that a more focused approach on schools with strong capacity and wide need, with increased funding, would have been more effective in targeting and engaging priority schools. They commented:

If we stuck to that group, made it fully funded so we picked up the smaller ones that couldn't afford it, and maybe set non-negotiables around attendance at the outset [then we could have increased take-up among priority schools]. If you had the main school adviser, even just for that district, engaged to a greater extent, that's the person who is regularly in contact with those schools, to facilitate engagement and follow up where there is not enough engagement, and attendance issues.
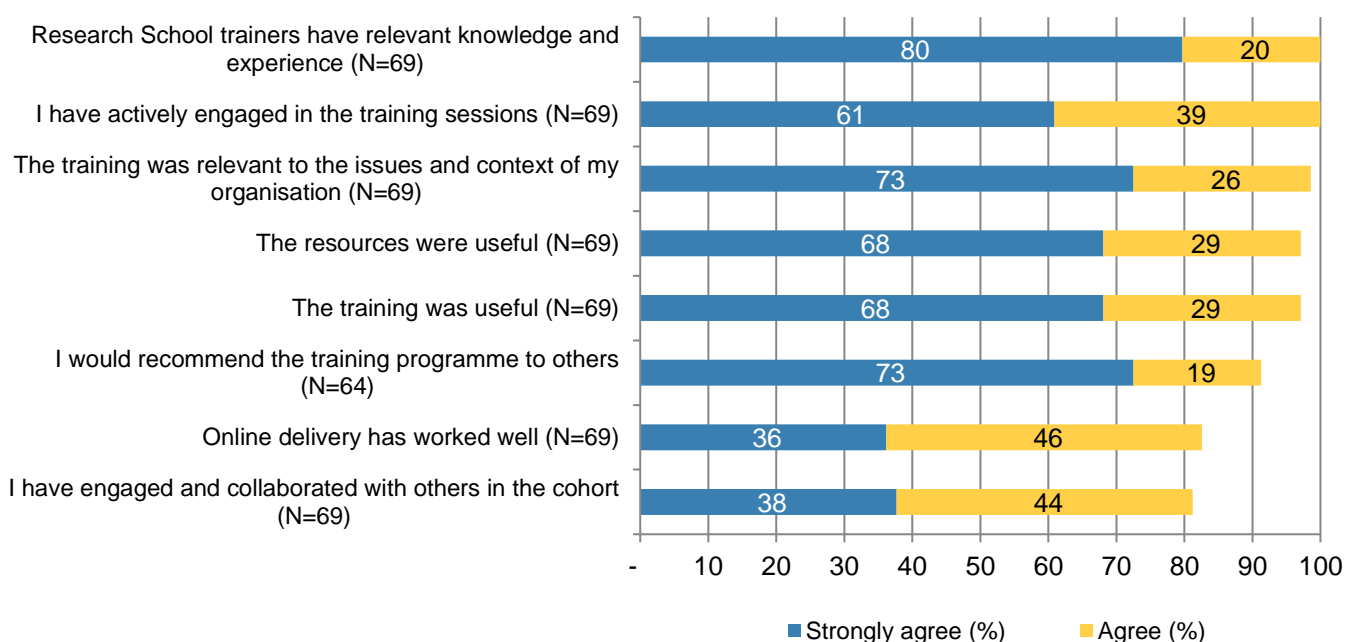(Key informant)

Despite the barriers encountered in engaging priority schools, key informants recognised that the more targeted approach of working through The Education People advisers worked better and being able to operate over a longer period and with greater adviser capacity, could have helped to engage more priority schools.

Quality of training and support offered to schools

The quality of the training and support offered as part of EKP was valued by those who participated.

As Figure 3 below shows, respondents to the Evidence-Based Training survey were highly positive about the training, although they comprised just 33% of all Evidence-Based Training participants and may not be a representative group. Respondents were asked to state the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements about the usefulness and relevance of the training. Between 81% and 100% of all respondents either strongly agreed or agreed with each statement. Two statements in the Evidenced-Based Training survey received 100% agreement (with participants strongly agreeing or agreeing), one relating to the research school trainers having relevant knowledge and experience) and the other about them actively engaged in the course. The two statements receiving the least positive feedback were: 'I have engaged and collaborated with others in the cohort'; and 'Online delivery has worked well' (although 82% of respondents still either strongly agreed or agreed to both and most of the remaining respondents provided neutral feedback).

Figure 3: Views of the training from the Evidenced-Based Training survey

Source: IES Evidenced-Based Training survey.

N.B. Percentages have been rounded so may not sum to 100.

Key informant and school-based interviews across the three strands of EKP activities provided further insights about participants' experiences, with the following discussed as valuable features of Promising Projects and Evidence-Based Training (including the Evidence Champions training):

- *Skills of the trainers:* Participants frequently commented on the knowledge, skills, and enthusiasm of trainers. They highlighted that the mix of different training activities (e.g. practical examples, videos, activities to take part in, and individual and group work) were engaging and varied.

- *Relevance to the contexts of schools:* Generally, participants felt that the training was appropriate and relevant to the context and needs of their school. Among Evidence-Based Training participants, there was an appreciation that the training was delivered in a way that encouraged reflection about how different approaches might work in different settings rather than offering a rigid solution. In a few instances, participants felt a more tailored approach was required. For example, one headteacher felt that the training did not take sufficient account of the context of schools in relation to low attendance.

- *Opportunities for networking:* Participants reported that they enjoyed and benefited from the opportunity to share experiences and ideas with peers. However, some participants felt overall the quality of the training would have been enhanced with more opportunities for face-to-face interaction and networking.

- *Quality of resources:* Participants found the training materials and resources to be useful and relevant. They particularly valued physical resources that could be taken back into school and shared with other staff and pupils. Related to this, some participants from larger schools felt that additional copies of materials that could be shared with colleagues would have been useful. A couple of schools provided feedback on books provided for pupils as part of literacy interventions and called for greater representation of children from different ethnic groups and disabled children.

- *Follow-up support:* Interviewees noted that trainers were available to be contacted in-between sessions and valued this option. A few Promising Projects participants indicated that some light-touch proactive contact from trainers to inquire about how delivery and implementation was progressing would have been useful.

In relation to the Evidence-Based Training and Evidence Champions training, a common theme was the flexibility around timings. There were examples of training taking place before or after school so that cover for teaching staff was not required. Schools felt this enabled participation and reduced barriers to taking part.

Regarding the Evidence Champions training, there were mixed views about the development of an implementation plan that set out how the school would effectively mobilise research evidence to support school improvement activities and evaluate its impact. Some participants indicated that this was largely a theoretical exercise that took place during the training, which was not applied in their school contexts or re-visited. Others were able to amend and improve existing school implementation plans to integrate the underpinning research evidence and found this useful.

Remote learning

The context of the COVID-19 pandemic meant that all strands of EKP relied on remote learning, with some hybrid opportunities later in the project. Generally, there were mixed views on online learning. Key informants and school-based interviewees acknowledged the many advantages, which included: greater ease of participation for rural and remote schools; schools needing to source less staff cover time; and being able to catch-up on missed sessions by watching recordings. From the point of view of Promising Projects providers, the move to remote working '*opened up a whole new way of working'* (Promising Project provider)*.* However, the challenges of building strong engagement via remote learning were also commonly discussed. Some key informants were concerned that schools were less engaged and motivated and felt it was difficult to build a strong relationship between trainers and participants. It was also felt to be harder to provide networking opportunities in the online learning mode. Key informants and school-based interviewees felt peer relationships were central to achieving learning outcomes and that the online mode made it much harder to facilitate the building of new networks. Some suggested that to overcome this issue, school partnerships or pairs should be built more structurally into online learning.

Resourcing and capacity within schools

Key informants and school-based interviewees reported that financial constraints, additional resourcing requirements, and increased workloads were a barrier to taking part in EKP activities.

Existing resourcing issues in schools were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. National lockdowns meant schools had to prioritise the implementation of remote learning for the majority of pupils and resources were diverted away, either temporarily or on a more long-term basis, from school improvement activities.

School-based interviewees mentioned lack of cover staff to enable teachers and teaching assistants to attend all training as a challenge. In some schools, multiple staff members were delivering the Promising Projects but as cover was not available for them all to attend, only a subgroup of relevant staff attended.

Issues of staff turnover and absence were also commonly mentioned, and in some cases school leaders related turnover to wider problems of staff recruitment and retention in the teaching profession. New staff in affected schools had to be trained in new approaches introduced through EKP. When combined with the issue of widespread experiences of staff illness and absence due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this meant interventions were often temporarily halted or not continually delivered.

The issue of capacity was felt particularly acutely where one to one interventions, that required staff to take individual students out of the classroom, were being implemented. One vice principal who had selected such a Promising Project described how they needed a dedicated staff member working with the targeted children. They ultimately halted delivery because they felt that the cost-to-impact ratio of the project was not benefiting their school.

It was widely recognised by key informants that the commitment of senior leaders to EKP training was closely linked to issues of resourcing. They noted that where senior leaders were fully supportive of EKP activities and considered them to be a strategic priority for the school, time was adequately ring-fenced for their staff members to take part. Additionally, Promising Projects providers note that changes in school leadership teams could de-stabilise arrangements even if previous leaders had been engaged and supportive.

As well as resourcing, leadership approaches sometimes affected the confidence of teachers and teaching assistants to adopt the new approaches being introduced via EKP activities. For example, one school taking part in a Promising Project experienced challenges in their staff's confidence to deliver more practical science lessons, in part due to the emphasis placed by school leaders on the need for written evidence to assess progress across subjects. The Promising Project focused on greater verbal engagement of pupils and practical activities rather than on written work. A participating teacher reported that the requirement for written evidence to assess progress prevented some of their colleagues from fully adopting the new approach.

These barriers did not appear common to any particular type of school, although the lack of survey data and the small scale of qualitative feedback from schools means it is not possible to draw out definitive learning about whether particular contexts were more or less affected by these issues.

Capacity and resourcing within the EEF, KCC, and research schools

Delivery of the Evidence-Based Training and the Evidence Champions training was affected by capacity constraints among stakeholder organisations. Charles Dickens Research School withdrew from the Evidence-Based Training due to a lack of capacity (resulting from the pressures of the pandemic), which meant Durrington was the only research school involved. In response to staff absence within KARS, Durrington was able to take on some of the tasks initially allocated to KARS despite the pressures on its own capacity and the EEF also took a more hands-on role than initially anticipated. This included, for example, the EEF taking responsibility for some of the communications with participants, including sending out pre- and post-training materials.

In addition, key informants reported that changes of staff within the EEF delivery team led to some disruption and inevitably meant periods of time when new team members were still becoming familiar with EKP. It also meant relationships between individuals from the various stakeholder organisations working on the Evidence-Based Training had to be re-established. Turnover within a key role in the KCC delivery team had similar repercussions:

> *We've suffered a bit from some fairly frequent changes in personnel, from [the] EEF in particular over the last year and some change in capacity at KCC administratively[…]So it's been a constant effort of joining things together and there have been some missed opportunities along the way.* (Key informant)

Lack of clearly defined roles and responsibilities for managing and delivering Strands 2 and 3

These resourcing challenges likely contributed to perceptions among key informants about a lack of clarity of roles and responsibilities for managing and delivering the Evidence-Based Training, and in particular the ELE network, and the Evidence Champions work.

From the ELE perspective, the early stages of their role were better, and they reported good initial communication and support from KCC, the EEF, and the research schools. Some ELEs initially felt they understood their role and remit but over time this became less clear. They commented they did not always know who their key contacts for the Evidence-Based Training were and that they received information at short notice, which made it difficult to plan. In some instances, this led to ELEs not having the required capacity to support Evidence Champions because in the absence of communication, their time had been allocated to non-EKP commitments.

They considered that clarity of the role was affected by differences in how the range of Evidence-Based Training courses were run, which they attributed to staff changes within the EEF, research schools, and KARS. Some examples provided were different approaches to allocating ELEs to schools (e.g. in relation to when ELEs received the list of schools they would be working with) and to how much information they received about the training (such as session plans and the upcoming Evidence-Based Training schedule).

Some non-ELE key informants agreed that there could have been greater clarity around roles and responsibilities and stronger management of these strands of work. The division of responsibilities was acknowledged as operationally challenging and sometimes confusing. It was noted, for example, that the EEF managing the funding and relationships with research schools and KCC being responsible for allocating funding to schools, on the EEF's approval, was a cumbersome process that was difficult to manage. There were also some reported difficulties with the contractual arrangements for ELEs, which in some instances had not been completed before the courses began. This was attributed to responsibility for line management passing from the EEF to the research school, and then staff changes within the research school and the EEF, meaning contract renewal did not happen on time. Others did not consider that there was an issue with clarity of roles and responsibilities but felt changes in staffing within the EEF and research schools explained perceptions of a lack of clarity among wider stakeholders.

Similarly, in relation to the Evidence Champions training, key informants noted that lack of clearly defined roles affected information sharing and communications. Trainers/facilitators lacked full information about attendees such as details about the phase of education and setting in which they worked and their prior knowledge and experience of evidence use. This was reflected in feedback from participants also, with a common theme that the training could be improved by tailoring content to take account of previous experience in using research and evidence by gathering more information pre-training.

Key findings 3: Evidence of promise – contribution to an increase in evidence-based practice

This section presents findings about the project's evidence of promise, considering the extent to which there is evidence of the key short-term outcomes listed in the EKP Theory of Change. It addresses the following research questions:

- 7. a. Does the project result in schools using evidence confidently in decision-making?

- 7. b. Does the project result in schools increasing capability to identify realistic priorities to target with new training approaches?

- 7. c. Does the project result in schools increasing capability to implement evidence-based interventions with high fidelity and to a high standard?

- 8. What are the main perceived benefits of the project?

- 9. Are there unintended consequences?

- 10. Has the project overall and its individual components influenced the spending of schools and partners towards evidence-based interventions? Why/why not? If yes, what role did the project play?

This section also discusses whether schools plan to continue with evidence-based interventions after the project (research question 11. What proportion of publicly funded schools (overall and priority) plan to continue with evidenced-based interventions after the project?). The very limited evidence available to answer questions on spend and future intention is summarised and the challenges with data collection are detailed in the earlier section on 'Methods'.

The data sources for this section include: the Evidenced-Based Training survey, qualitative analysis of the Promising Projects feedback survey, key informant interviews, and a small number of school-based interviews. This section relies heavily on survey data about perceived increases to understanding, confidence, and capability. These are relatively weak measures of effectiveness as they rely on self-report. There are particular risks around social-desirability bias, where respondents may have 'over-reported' perceived outcomes. Further, the sample of survey respondents is small (33% response rate) and likely to be subject to selection bias—it comprises those who completed the training and who were potentially more likely to have positive views about the training. As noted earlier in the section on 'Methods', feedback via survey data was only available for the Evidence-Based Training and for the other two strands of EKP activity, the evaluation drew only on small-scale qualitative evidence.

Key findings 3: Evidence of promise

Overall, there is insufficient evidence to conclude whether the short-term outcomes in the Theory of Change are accurate. There was positive feedback from Evidence-Based Training participants about perceived short-term outcomes listed in the Theory of Change (research question 8) in the survey. However, this needs to be interpreted with caution because of risks around social-desirability bias (i.e. respondents providing the feedback they believe evaluators and delivery teams want to receive) and a comparatively small and unrepresentative sample of schools who potentially chose to complete the survey because they had more positive experiences of the training. Further, the Promising Projects survey had a low response rate and could not be analysed quantitatively, meaning that evidence about the short-term outcomes resulting from the Promising Projects is limited and based only on a small sample of school-based interviews.

7. a. Does the project result in schools using evidence confidently in decision-making?

Participants of the Evidence-Based Training commonly reported increased understanding, skills, knowledge, and confidence in relation to using evidence in decision-making. The vast majority of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the training had: improved their understanding of the evidence base (99%); the EEF Toolkit (92%); evidence-based strategies to reduce the attainment gap (94%); and skills in making evidence-informed decisions (97%). There were a range of qualitative examples from schools and key informants of Evidence-Based Training participants appraising evidence more critically, being more aware of relevant research and disseminating research and evidence to colleagues more frequently and effectively.

7. b. Does the project result in schools increasing capability to identify realistic priorities to target with new training approaches?

This improved understanding and confidence appears to have also translated to perceived improvements in capability to identify and specify priority areas for change. Nearly all Evidenced-Based Training survey respondents (97%) strongly agreed or agreed that their skills in exploring problems in their schools had improved and their ability to tightly define areas for improvement in their school (95%) also. School-based interviewees gave a mix of examples related to

improved exploration of issues around numeracy, behaviour management and literacy, often with a focus on children eligible for Pupil Premium or with SEND.

7. c. Does the project result in schools increasing capability to implement evidence-based interventions with high fidelity and to a high standard?

The Evidence-Based Training led to perceptions of improved understanding and confidence in implementing and managing change, creating a leadership environment for implementing evidence-based practice, evaluating the impact of changes, and sustaining and scaling up innovations. Again, over nine in ten survey respondents reported improvements in these areas. There were overall fewer concrete examples of practice in these areas from schools and key informants, potentially reflecting the timepoint at which fieldwork was carried out, shortly after the training.

It is not possible to state the extent to which perceived improvements to confidence, knowledge, and skills translated to behavioural change in schools—the timing of the evaluation did not allow this to be examined. Additionally, findings related to the barriers and enablers to EKP activities (see section 'Key findings 2: Feasibility – barriers and enablers') such as capacity and resourcing constraints and varied levels of commitment from senior leaders, suggest that there may have been highly variable levels of opportunity provided in school contexts for individual capability and motivation to lead to shifts in behaviour.

8. What are the main perceived benefits of the project?

Other perceived outcomes of EKP related to increased confidence and engagement among pupils, improvements in pupil attainment and, in some cases, improved professional networks.

9. Are there unintended consequences?

The evaluation did not identify any unintended consequences of EKP.

10. Has the project overall and its individual components influenced the spending of schools and partners towards evidence-based interventions? Why/why not? If yes, what role did the project play?

The lower-than-expected take-up of EKP activities suggests limited influence on school spend. However, it should be noted that most of the Promising Projects were not previously available, and the Evidence-Based Training offer was new. This combined with evidence that for some schools the matched funding was a pivotal factor in decisions to spend on school improvement activities, does indicate some additional influence on participating schools.

11. What proportion of publicly funded schools (overall and priority) plan to continue with evidence-based interventions after the project?

Limited available evidence means it is not possible to state what proportion of schools planned to continue with the same or another Promising Project after the end of EKP. There is encouraging survey evidence from Evidence-Based Training participants of positive intentions to implement new evidence-based practice and to devise an evidence-informed strategy (96% and 92% of survey respondents strongly agreed or agreed they intended to do this).

Perceived increases in evidence and research literacy

Evidence and research literacy

There were positive indications that the Evidence-Based Training and Evidence Champions activities contributed to perceived increases in evidence and research literacy among senior leaders.

Figure 4: Impacts of training on evidence use from the Evidenced-Based Training survey
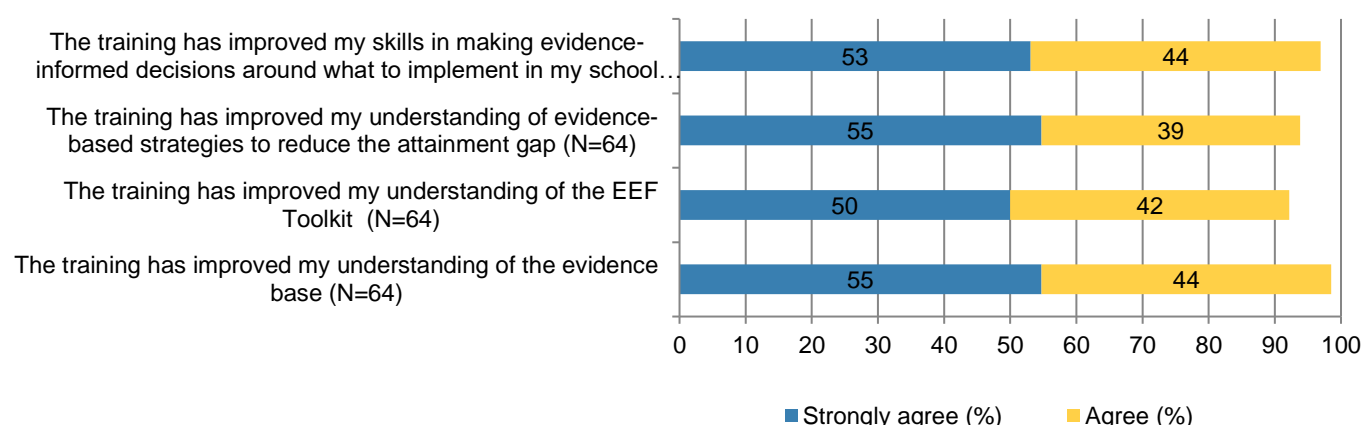
Source: IES Evidenced-Based Training survey.

N.B. Percentages have been rounded so may not sum to 100.

The Evidenced-Based Training survey, sent to all course participants at the end of training (N=209 contacts, with 69 responses), asked respondents how the training had impacted their understanding of evidence and research, evidence-based strategies, and how to make evidence-informed decisions. Responses to all statements in the survey related to these areas were positive, with over 90% of respondents agreeing (as seen in Figure 4 above).

While the low response rate to the Promising Projects survey means quantitative analysis was not possible, respondents tended to also report perceived benefits around an improved understanding of the evidence base, the EEF toolkit, and evidence-based strategies.

For some school-based interviewees, a key immediate outcome of the training was an increased focus on the importance of research and evidence and motivation to consult research more frequently. Several described having an existing interest and skills in this area, which the training helped to further. Others reflected on their improved skills to critically evaluate different sources:

> *I think it's throughout the course, you look at different sources of evidence, but it also highlights the need to look at evidence critically and look at the context behind it, look at how much evidence there is collected on a particular subject? Who's carrying out the evidence? Do they have a vested interest in something because there's money involved? It's looking at that evidence in a really critical way and in the best way. So, it's not just 'well it says it here, so that must be true', it's looking a bit deeper into it.* (Assistant headteacher, Evidence-Based Training participant)

Others emphasised using evidence and research before making decisions or creating plans for how to use research and evidence to ensure a deeper understanding of school improvement priorities. Key informants involved in the delivery of Evidence-Based Training confirmed that many schools appeared to be referring to a wider range of evidence sources than previously, with increased confidence.

School-based interviewees highlighted particular topic areas in which they gained greater awareness of relevant research evidence, which improved their knowledge and influenced their decision-making. Those who participated in the 'SEND and Learning Behaviours' course commented on their knowledge of research on social and emotional learning, based on the CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) model—a framework for applying evidence-based social and emotional learning strategies.[58] There was one example of this model being used to inform the development of a five-year social and emotional literacy curriculum for students with autism.

Key informants also shared that middle and senior leaders in schools were increasingly using different research methods for their own school-based inquiry projects focused on reducing the attainment gap. There were examples too from the Evidenced-Based Training survey, which asked respondents how they had used research and evidence more effectively in decision-making through an open-text question. Multiple respondents described how they were now approaching their Pupil Premium strategies differently, with greater consideration of the evidence base.

Some key informants commented on the extent of change in research literacy. For one, it was perceived to be a '*sea change'* (Key Informant)*.* Many commented on how there was increased exposure among schools to the EEF materials and resources, when previously many schools were not aware of the EEF. This was reported to be partly through the Promising Projects and Evidence-Based Training but even schools who did not participate in training were more likely to be introduced to these through their school improvement adviser. One key informant reflected that they were noticing greater research and evidence literacy among school governors also.

There was discussion among key informants of wider sectoral developments, which likely also contributed to outcomes related to increased research and evidence literacy. In particular, changes to the Ofsted framework had brought evidence-informed practice to the fore. Additionally, the high proportion of schools that were previously deemed to be 'outstanding' by Ofsted that had been downgraded to 'good', was considered to be a driver for schools to focus on school improvement.

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[58] See: https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/what-is-the-casel-framework/ (accessed 3 April 2024).

Dissemination of research and evidence

As well as accounts from participating individuals about how their own research and evidence literacy had increased, there were examples of EKP participants sharing research and evidence with colleagues in their school. As might be expected, these often came from those who had taken part in the Evidence Champions training. At the time of the interview fieldwork, Evidence Champions had only recently completed their training but there were nonetheless interesting emerging examples of participants working to build research and evidence capability more widely across their schools. These included examples of more developed practice as well as more early-stage shifts in practice:

- One interviewee in a special school described a whole-school approach to embedding research and evidence about risky play, which including sharing relevant research with teachers, lunchtime supervisors, teaching and learning support, and caretakers as part of training.

- Another Evidence Champion discussed how their knowledge and skills had been refined as a result of the training and they felt more equipped to identify relevant research and share it with colleagues. They viewed their approach as: '*less random than what it was to start with*' (Evidence Champion training participant).

For some, even though they were early on in their Evidence Champion roles, the increased dissemination of research and evidence, was perceived to be benefiting colleagues. They commented, for example, on greater interest and conversation around research evidence.

The evaluation was overall limited in its ability to triangulate these views with those of peers and colleagues of Evidence Champions. There were some indications in the small number of interviews with colleagues who had worked with the Evidence Champion in their school, that they valued the opportunity to work with a wider group of staff on understanding and integrating research and evidence into practice.

Website traffic

Data provided by the EEF analytics department are encouraging from a 'positive indicator' perspective. The data show evidence of a substantial increase in traffic from Kent-based IP addresses across any of the EEF webpages, during the period of the EKP (1 January 2019 to 20 October 2023). In total, users during the project period, compared to a similar duration prior to project start (14 March 2014 to 31 December 2018), increased by 173.4%, up from 29,491 users to 80,640. The proportion of new users when comparing the two periods, saw an increase of 157.3%, up from 27,942 users to 71,900. (Results and highlighted sections are shown in Appendix 16).

However, it is not possible to state from these results whether the increases in website traffic were attributable to EKP being in operation and the data also cover the COVID-19 pandemic period when schools may have been looking at sites, such as the EEF's, to gather information and guidance around adapting to remote learning, etc. Further, the EEF website traffic has increased across the board, so caution is required in interpreting this data.

Perceived improvements in capability to identify and specify priority areas for change and to introduce change in a strategic, managed way

Exploring and defining areas for improvement

Nearly all Evidenced-Based Training survey respondents strongly agreed (n=36, 56%) or agreed (n=26, 41%) that the Evidence-Based Training had improved their skills in exploring problems in their school. Similar proportions reported that the training had improved their ability to tightly define areas for improvement in their school (strongly agreed: n=38, 59%; agreed: n=38, 36%) (see Appendix A17). Among school-based interviewees, views and experiences were mixed. Some discussed an increased ability to explore problems and identify areas for improvement, including understanding the underpinning research base. However, their process around exploring problems remained relatively unchanged:

> *I think it's made us more focussed, giving us more of a research base, but I don't think we're identifying priorities any differently than we would have done.*' (Deputy headteacher, Evidence-Based Training participant)

Planning and preparing to introduce change

Again, the vast majority of Evidenced-Based Training survey respondents indicated that the training had:

- improved their skills in developing an evidence-informed implementation plan for change (strongly agreed: n=34, 53%; agreed: n=28, 44%); and

- improved their knowledge about how to practically prepare for introducing change (strongly agreed: n=32, 50%; agreed: n=29, 45%) (Appendix 17).

Planning and preparing to introduce change was not commonly raised by school-based interviewees. One school-based interviewee articulated how the Evidence-Based Training had supported their strategic thinking about how they planned for and tackled school improvement priorities:

> *I think the need for linking our priorities together has come across really strongly, looking at talking about the golden threads, that has been quite eye-opening for me, the golden threads between the guidance reports from whatever you know, I'm looking at the maths lead, or the English lead, what are the threads throughout that are going to make our school effective? There's common things amongst each of the guidance reports. These commonalities helped us to tighten up our ship a little bit and make it a bit more coherent.* (Assistant headteacher, Evidence-Based Training participant)

Implementing, managing, and evaluating change

Nearly all Evidenced-Based Training survey respondents reported that the training had:

- improved their understanding of how to implement and manage change in schools (strongly agreed: n=32, 50%; agreed: n=30, 47%);

- improved their confidence in being able to create a leadership environment that is conducive to implementing evidence-based practice (strongly agreed: n=32, 50%; agreed: n=29, 45%);

- improved their skills in evaluating the impact of changes that have or will be introduced (strongly agreed: n=30, 47%; agreed: n=32, 50%); and

- improved their understanding of how to sustain and scale-up innovations that have proved successful (strongly agreed: n=30, 47%; agreed: n=31, 48%) (see Appendix 17).

Likely reflecting that the Evidenced-Based Training survey was administered shortly after participants completed the training, the proportion of respondents reporting that they had moved beyond improved understanding and skills, and used research and evidence more effectively in their decision-making was slightly lower. Slightly under nine in ten agreed with this statement (strongly agreed: n=32, 51%; agreed: n=24, 38%). Similarly, the proportion of those stating they had actually implemented evidence-based changes in their school, as distinct to exploring issues or planning changes, was slightly lower again, at just under eight in ten participants (strongly agreed: n=26, 41%; agreed: n=24, 38%) (see Appendix A17). Those who had implemented changes were asked to detail what these were, and responses included interventions focused on social and emotional learning, literacy and oracy, as well as changes to professional development for staff to include a greater focus on evidence-based practices.

Some school-based interviewees discussed that the training had highlighted to them the importance of allowing a longer time period to implement and evaluate change and helped to create an environment where teachers and teaching assistants were less afraid to try new approaches. Others discussed that following the training, they had reflected on the need for a narrower focus in order to effectively manage and monitor changes.

Perceived differences in outcomes for different participant groups

The qualitative research indicated that perceived gains in understanding and knowledge may have varied, with some groups potentially experiencing greater benefits. Factors that appeared to affect perceptions of outcomes were experience and setting type. There were no apparent difference between priority and non-priority schools.

For example, there were mixed views among school-based interviewees about the extent to which learning and development in relation to implementing, managing, and evaluating change resulted for more experienced leaders. One experienced senior leader reported that the training enabled new thinking and approaches while another thought their experience meant they were already knowledgeable about some of the key principles shared in the training.

In relation to previous experience of using research evidence, some participants reported that they were generally quite confident in their understanding and skills already but that the training had helped to consolidate and further this. For example, one participant had recently completed a master's degree and felt the training complemented knowledge from their degree. Another participant indicated that they had used the EEF training and guidance in the past and that attending another training course by the EEF had cemented their previous experiences.

Regarding setting type, those more likely to have a higher proportion of staff who are not qualified teachers were perceived by some to experience more benefits. One participant, working in an alternative provision setting, found that the training was extremely useful for their colleagues who were often not qualified teachers. The opportunity to see how research and evidence could be useful and how it could be taken forward was invaluable. They also noted that the training had given them confidence ahead of their upcoming Ofsted inspection.

Perceptions of other outcomes as a result of taking part in EKP

Increased confidence and engagement among pupils

Many school-based interviewees noticed increased engagement and enthusiasm among pupils. They felt this was an important foundation for improved participation and attainment. A teacher who took part in a Promising Project commented, for example:

> *[There has been] more engagement, when I put the visual science logo on the board the students are happy, they're enthused, engaged and wanting to be a part of it.* (Classroom teacher, Promising Projects participant)

For some, increased engagement was linked to pupils' confidence to admit they did not understand and their willingness to speak to a teacher about this. For example, a senior leader in a school delivering a Promising Project focused on reading commented on how children who were initially reluctant to take part over time became more vocal about areas they were struggling in. They viewed this as beneficial in creating a positive learning environment. For senior leaders reflecting on the benefits for children and young people with SEND, increased confidence among pupils due to a greater awareness of their strengths was an emerging theme.

Perceived impact on pupil progress

There were examples across Promising Projects and Evidence-Based Training interviews of perceived improvements in pupil attainment in a range of subjects. These included perceived improvements in early numeracy as part of a targeted intervention for children who had been struggling, in reading across a whole-year group, and in another school for children with SEND. Respondents to the Promising Projects survey were also positive and tended to state they would recommend the project to improve attainment although it should be noted that the survey did not gather concrete examples of improved attainment so this was primarily a positive perception.

Perceived impact on partnership working

Participating in EKP activities improved professional networks and partnership working for some schools.

Around three-quarters of Evidenced-Based Training survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had improved their professional networks since participating in the training (n=48, 76%) (See Appendix 17). This is lower than the proportions that agreed there were improvements in their knowledge, skills, and capabilities in the other areas of evidence-based practice and leadership asked about in the survey (average of 94%). It also chimes with qualitative feedback from EKP participants that they would have liked more opportunities to build professional networks, and that the online mode of delivery offered fewer opportunities for interaction and networking (see section above on 'Key Findings 2: Feasibility – barriers and enablers').

School-based interviewees who participated in Evidenced-Base Training courses also highlighted instances of partnership working between schools. One school who participated in the 'SEND and Learning Behaviours' training had developed a relationship with other local primary schools through attending the course sessions, and delivered a series of autism awareness training classes to them. A school in an alternative provision setting had begun contacting all alternative provision and special educational settings in the Kent area and now shared information between them to address gaps in knowledge in their curriculums. This approach had begun to expand to areas across the UK.

Some ELEs involved in providing wraparound support on the Evidence-Based Training courses, supported the view that the courses had facilitated improved professional networks among schools. They gave examples of schools that stayed in contact upon completion of the training to continue to share professional knowledge and experiences, and also reflected on how they were able to link up more isolated schools.

Among Promising Projects participants, the benefits of improved networks appeared less pronounced and depended on the specific format and nature of the project. Some participants who attended group-based training reported new connections with other schools. For example, a school who took part in a science-based Promising Project gave an example of peers from another school visiting their school to see how they were delivering.

Influence on spend on evidence-based interventions

As we outlined in the 'Methods' section earlier, there were practical and methodological challenges to collecting data from Promising Projects providers about whether schools intended to continue with the Promising Projects. Further, the post-project evaluation phase did not go ahead and so the evaluation has not been able to explore actual ongoing evidence-based practice and ongoing spend on evidence-based interventions.

Nonetheless, it is encouraging that out of 16 review forms submitted by Promising Projects providers, 11 indicated that schools had decided to continue with the Promising Projects in some way (although it is not possible to quantify how many schools this relates to).

When considering more generally whether the project overall and its components influenced spend towards evidence-based interventions, the lower-than-expected take-up of EKP activities suggests limited influence on school spend. However, it should be noted that most of the Promising Projects were not previously available and the Evidence-Based Training offer was new. This combined with evidence that for some schools the matched funding was a pivotal factor in decisions to spend on school improvement activities, does indicate some additional influence on participating schools.

Taking forward strategies following the Evidence-Based Training

Although the evaluation was not able to capture mid- to long-term outcomes and explore the extent to which evidence-based interventions were continued following training, the Evidenced-Based Training survey indicated positive intentions among training participants. Nearly all respondents said shortly after completing the course that they intended to implement new evidence-based practices in their school (strongly agreed: n=45, 71%; agreed: n=16; 25%) and that they intended to devise an evidence-informed strategy for an aspect of school improvement (strongly agreed: n=44, 70%; agreed: n=14; 22%) (see Appendix A17).

Key findings 4: Sustainability

This section presents findings about the sustainability of the EKP after the end of the project, that contribute to addressing the following research questions:

- 12. Is the work of expert school-based groups (research champions) sustained? Why/why not?

- 13. What learning can inform future similar projects?

It summarises progress with activities related to sustainability, and then goes on to discuss key informant views on the extent to which EKP activities were likely to be sustained after the end of the project and the potential enablers and barriers to this. Finally, this section summarises key informant views on the main learning for similar future initiatives.

As discussed in the 'Methods' section earlier, the post-project evaluation phase did not take place and so the evaluation could not answer the research question:

- 14. What proportion of publicly funded schools (overall and priority) continue to deliver evidence-based interventions after the project? What enables/hinders this?

Key findings 4: Sustainability

12. Is the work of expert school-based groups (research champions) sustained? Why/why not?

KARS was appointed for a fixed period until summer 2023. At the start of the project, Kent stakeholders envisaged that the associate research school would be re-appointed for a follow-on period and that KARS would play a key system-leadership role and drive the continuation of project activities after the EKP ended. The designation of Kingsnorth Primary School as an associate research school ended in 2023. At this time, the EEF's regional strategy shifted and the associate research school's role / designation was no longer part of the Research Schools Network model. Associate research schools, along with other schools, were able to apply to become a research school for the 2023–2026 period but this process did not lead to the appointment of a research school in Kent.

This meant that the mechanisms for sustaining system-leadership that had been anticipated at the start were not in place. Sustainability plans had been built on the assumption that there would be an associate research school in Kent. There had been limited contingency planning for an alternative scenario and plans had to change unexpectedly and relatively late on, meaning sustainability plans were not as well developed at the end of the project as they had hoped for. Instead, there was a focus on building sustainability through local stakeholder organisations, which had been key to EKP from the start. Some key informants felt that without a Kent-based research school or associate research school, Kent schools would feel distant from the work of the EEF and would be less likely to engage with the EEF resources and guidance.

The three main project legacies were:

- The KEE Hub: The KEE Hub was established by Kent Association of Headteachers, KCC, KARS, and the EEF. The KEE Hub was developed by these key partners on an ongoing basis from 2020 onwards. It was launched at the end of the EKP as a platform to enable teachers and leaders to share, collaborate, and access evidence-informed practice, and was the main mechanism for sustaining EKP activities after the project ended. While some EKP funds had been allocated to raise awareness of the KEE Hub, coordinate training, and networking and for headteacher capacity to chair the implementation group, some key informants expressed concerns about the lack of ongoing committed funds, particularly for administration and project management. They considered this to be a potential barrier to the effective functioning of the KEE Hub and therefore, the sustainability of EKP activities. Some key informants felt that launching the KEE Hub earlier in the project may have helped with sustainability.

- Kent-based trainers for two of the Promising Projects.

- Evidence Champions: Evidence Champion training had only recently completed at the time of the final round of fieldwork. Encouragingly, several Evidence Champions described their intention to continue to embed research and evidence use within their school. Further, the KEE Hub intended to coordinate Evidence Champion networks to enable sharing of good practice, which would enable further progress.

At the time of the final phase of research for the evaluation, it was not known if ELEs in Kent would be sustained beyond the end of the EKP.

13. What learning can inform future similar projects?

The three main points of learning identified by key informants for similar future initiatives were: the importance of sound governance arrangements that facilitate contributions from a diverse range of stakeholders; the need to fully understand and analyse the complex stakeholder landscape before implementing this type of project to maximise opportunities for alignment and minimise tensions; and the importance of a focus on sustainability from the start of the project, with contingencies in case first choice options cannot be implemented. Additionally, in relation to offering a wide range of Promising Projects to schools across Kent, there was learning about the time required to establish SLAs with multiple providers.

Future plans

The following sections consider stakeholder views on sustainability drawing on qualitative interview data.

Sustaining Promising Projects

Key informants reported that prior to the launch of EKP only three Promising Projects were available in Kent: Switch-on Reading; the Nuffield Early Language Intervention; and Embedding Formative Assessment. EKP introduced a wider range of Promising Projects to Kent schools and key informants considered the training of Kent-based trainers for two additional Promising Projects to be an important legacy of the EKP, which would support evidence-based practice to be sustained after the end of the project.

Nonetheless, several key informants including ELEs, Promising Projects providers, and The Education People staff also identified barriers that might impede the sustainability of Promising Projects over time. They discussed support and structures that were not in place, but which they felt would have been beneficial in relation to sustainability of the projects. For example, providers felt resource being allocated to more follow-up contacts with schools, potentially every six months, would have been useful to support ongoing implementation of Promising Projects. They suggested that such follow-up sessions would be most useful if they included senior leaders, Promising Projects participants, and the trainer. They suggested that the sessions could be used to share updated project resources and materials where these were available.

Others felt networks with other schools doing the same project would have been helpful while on the programme, and afterwards, to maximise peer-to-peer support and promote sustainability. This was in place for one of the Promising Projects that had a longer duration, with a trainer facilitating a network for the schools to share best practice and problems. It was considered by key informants to work well. A The Education People adviser suggested that the training or projects should include monitoring and evaluation activities to assist schools with their understanding of whether or not the desired outcomes are being achieved.

Sustaining Evidence Champions

Delays to delivery of EKP mean that the Evidence Champions training took place close to the end of the evaluation fieldwork period. This meant that the research activity necessarily focused on gathering experiences of the training, perceived increases in understanding, knowledge and skills, and emerging examples of changes in practice to better embed evidence and research use more widely in schools (as described in the earlier section on 'Evidence of promise – contribution to an increase in evidence-based practice'). Research questions focused on medium- to longer-term outcomes, for example, about whether the work of school-based Evidence Champions was sustained, could not be answered by the evaluation.

However, Evidence Champion interviewees were very positive about their plans, with many describing how they intended to continue with their work to integrate research and evidence use**.** For example, one Evidence Champion commented:

> *Although the project on paper is finished, we're not ending it. We see it as a never-ending project.*
> (Evidence Champion school, School-based interviewee)

They went on to describe how they intended to involve a new staff member in the Evidence Champions work to help to further it.

An Evidence Champion in another school described how they had established staff focus groups on research and explained that they wanted to consider behaviour in the coming year, combining learning from the evidence base with their own school-based inquiry, and work with research partners.

Key informants reported that there were plans for Evidence Champion networks to be established to support Evidence Champions through regular network meetings to enable them to share effective approaches to the role, with coordination of these through the KEE Hub (see below section on 'The KEE Hub'). Key informants (from Kent Association of Headteachers and KCC) were also keen that further rounds of Evidence Champion training were run to train additional cohorts of Evidence Champions.

Sustaining ELEs

It was unclear at the time of the final round of fieldwork for the evaluation if ELEs in Kent would be sustained beyond the end of the EKP. KCC key informants discussed how they hoped that ELE support could be maintained via the KEE Hub, and potentially be available to support schools who had used an audit tool for self-assessment to implement improvement activities.

The KEE Hub

From the early stages of the EKP, it had been planned by the EEF, KCC, and Kent Association of Headteachers that a research hub would be developed, with Kent Association of Headteachers leading the coordination of the work. Initial planning meetings for the research hub took place in 2020 and 2021 and the hub was developed on an ongoing basis throughout the project. It was planned that the research hub would be central to the sustainability plan for the project. According to KCC internal documents, the research hub, which came to be known as the KEE Hub, was intended to:

- create peer networks, so Kent teachers and leaders can share practice and provide peer support;

- coordinate training, so that teachers and leaders have access to relevant training and support to implement practice and can take part in that training together with colleagues from other Kent schools; and

- build local capacity, by training and developing Kent teachers and leaders as Evidence Champions and as facilitators of training and networks.

The KEE Hub would sustain strategic relationships with the EEF research schools and also help to engage schools in ongoing training that was aligned to local priorities, building greater collaboration across schools in Kent.

A KEE Hub implementation group, comprising representatives of Kent Association of Headteachers, KCC, KARS, the EEF, and a wider group of headteachers developed the KEE Hub. Ongoing work to develop the hub throughout the course of EKP culminated in the launch of the KEE Hub in June 2023, at the end-of-project conference. The KEE Hub was, according to its website: 'a platform to enable teachers and education leaders to share, collaborate, access and engage in growing a culture of evidence-informed practice' (KEEHub, 2023). The website itself included information about upcoming networking events and training opportunities and over time it was planned that a repository of resources created by Kent schools to share insights into how they have used evidence to affect change would be added. The KEE Hub—as the platform where future training and networking opportunities would be shared—was the intended mechanism for sustaining the development of Evidence Champions.

During development and planning work, it was assumed that KARS would play an important role in the coordinating and leadership work of the KEE Hub. With the designation of KARS coming to an end and no alternative Kent-based research school in place, many key informants were concerned that it would be harder to sustain the work of the EKP beyond the end of the project. Their concerns were primarily around capacity for project management and also the lack of 'the EEF badge' for ongoing activities. In particular, there was uncertainty among Kent-based stakeholders such as KCC, Kent Association of Headteachers, and The Education People about which 'the EEF-owned' training and resources would be available after the project. At the outset, Kent stakeholders had envisaged KARS as the EEF-designated associate research school, and Charles Dickens and Durrington Research Schools would be the route for Kent schools to access the EEF training and resources. Uncertainty about future access to the EEF training and resources arose with the end of KARS's designation and limited capacity within research schools, as well as the wider shift in the EEF's research school's strategy, which aimed for research schools to have fewer but deeper partnerships with schools. Several key informants perceived this to be a sudden and significant change. One key informant, for example, commented that:

> *The landscape changed so quickly.[…]It was like the rug being pulled out from under us.* (Key Informant)

Other key informants emphasised that, although the new research schools strategy was not in place when KARS was appointed, there was a 12- to 18-month lead-in period with wide stakeholder engagement, during which the change in strategy was developed and communicated.

Key informants reported that although KARS was only appointed for a fixed period until summer 2023, at the start of the project Kent stakeholders envisaged that the associate research school would be re-appointed for a follow-on period and that KARS would play a key role in driving the continuation of project activities after EKP ended. The designation of Kingsnorth Primary School as an associate research school ended in 2023 as planned. At this time, the EEF's regional strategy shifted and the associate research school's role/designation was no longer part of the Research Schools Network model. Associate research schools, along with other schools, were able to apply to become a research school for the 2023–2026 period but this process did not lead to the appointment of a research school in Kent.

This meant that the mechanisms for sustaining system-leadership that had been anticipated at the start were not in place. Key informants reported that sustainability plans had been built on the assumption that there would be an associate research school designation in Kent. There had been limited contingency planning for an alternative scenario and plans had to change unexpectedly and relatively late on. Instead, there was a focus on building sustainability through local stakeholder relationships, which had been key to EKP from the start.

To help overcome potential capacity and resource issues, towards the end of the EKP Kent Association of Headteachers on behalf of the KEE Hub implementation group, requested funds from the EKP to support implementation activities related to awareness raising, coordination of training, and networks and headteacher capacity to chair the KEE Hub implementation group. The funding was awarded, which key informants considered was useful for ensuring a sustained offer. Some key informants also reported that there may be future options for funding administration and project management costs through other local budgets.

Key informants were positive about the establishment of the KEE Hub and its ability to support continuation of elements of EKP activities over time. Key informants, in particular, highlighted its role in helping to better coordinate information for Kent schools, for example, about training available from a range of providers. They were hopeful that this would help to reduce duplication of provision and information sources, creating a single gateway for schools.

Potential barriers to sustaining evidence-based activities through the KEE Hub

While recognising it was too early to draw any conclusions about how effectively EKP activities would be continued, key informants identified potential barriers to sustaining evidence-based activities established through the EKP:

- Despite the additional funding awarded through the EKP, some key informants expressed concern about the lack of committed funds for administration and project management and considered this might be a barrier to sustainability.

- Others noted that if the KEE Hub had been launched earlier in the EKP, schools would have likely had greater awareness of it and this may have helped to maintain momentum and engagement established during the project, after its end.

- Some key informants considered that without a Kent-based research school or associate research school, Kent schools would feel distant from the work of the EEF and would be less likely to engage with EEF resources and guidance.

- Another view was that dynamics between different types of schools in the Kent education system might impede equal engagement of all schools in the KEE Hub. It was, for example, noted that local authority-maintained schools tend to be more open to working with each other than with academies.

Stakeholder views on key learning for future initiatives

Key informants were asked if there was any key learning from the EKP that should inform any similar future initiatives. Many of the responses to this question have been explored and discussed earlier in this report but we summarise the main views shared below.

Having a diverse range of members on the project steering group and implementation groups was an important success factor. This, combined with a thorough consultation process, was considered by key informants to result in an offer that appealed to different types of schools.

In relation to offering a wide range of Promising Projects to schools across Kent, there was learning about the time required to establish SLAs with multiple providers (see the earlier section on ' Feasibility – barriers and enablers'.

It would have been beneficial to spend more time before the project began understanding and analysing the stakeholder roles in the Kent education system to inform their role in the EKP. Specifically, key informants commented on the need to better understand, which stakeholders and organisations most influenced the decisions of senior leaders in schools and to ensure they were engaged and motivated to support EKP from the beginning. Key informants within the EEF commented that they had not at the start fully appreciated that due to the outsourcing of school improvement services, KCC did not hold direct relationships with Kent schools. Key informants from within KCC and The Education People recognised the challenges of distinguishing between The Education People's main contract for school improvement services, The Education People's commercial offer and additional EKP activities, and that this should have been a focus earlier in the project.

Additionally, KCC reflected that some stakeholders such as the National Leaders of Education (NLEs) and Specialist Leaders of Education (SLEs) had not been involved in the EKP and similar future initiatives should consider how their roles aligned to project activities.

Spending more time to understand the stakeholder landscape would have helped to identify tensions and alignments between EKP strategic objectives and those of stakeholder organisations. For example, some key informants felt that the EEF's approach was too rigid and meant the needs of Kent schools were not met. A commonly cited instance of this was that Kent headteachers felt attendance was a major challenge schools were grappling with but because the EEF did not have an evidence-based guidance report on this topic, the EKP could not be used to provide training or establish a project on attendance. There was also a view that local headteachers wanted to shift away from centralised delivery of training towards the creation of an environment in which schools could work together on issues/themes relevant to their practice and taking into account their specific geographic contexts. Key informants recommended a better understanding of these types of issues at the start of similar future projects.

The need to consider sustainability from the start of the project was raised by many key informants. There were sustainability plans for EKP from early on and work was ongoing throughout the project to develop these, with greater time and resource invested in the later stages. The KEE Hub, the main mechanism for sustainability, was implemented at the end of the project and some key informants felt it should have been launched earlier. These key informants considered that building awareness during EKP of the KEE Hub may have better supported ongoing engagement from schools after the end of the project. Several key informants recommended that for future initiatives, there should be a clearer allocation of funds to more specified plans, with contingencies in case first choice options cannot be implemented.

Conclusion

Key findings 1: Project reach and take-up

1a. What proportion of publicly funded schools overall and 'priority' schools in Kent send at least one representative to complete the implementation, Promising Projects, or guidance report training?

35% of Kent schools completed at least one Promising Project or Evidence-Based Training course, meaning the target for 35% of all Kent schools participating was met. A similar proportion of priority schools (34.2%) completed a Promising Project or Evidence-Based Training course, despite the higher target of 50%. The project did not collect data on participation in implementation training.

1b. What proportion of publicly funded schools overall and 'priority' schools in Kent take up a Promising Project during the project lifetime?

16.1% of all schools in Kent, and a very similar proportion of priority schools (16.7%) took up at least one Promising Project during the lifetime of EKP.

2. What are participation rates for each strand?

The strand schools most frequently participated in was Strand 2, Evidence-Based Training, with over a quarter (24.7%) of all Kent schools taking part. Around 8% of all Kent schools took part in 'Strand 3 Developing Research Champions' Evidence Champion training.

3. What are the reasons for schools' participation/non-participation?

The main enablers to participation were the training offer meeting school needs, the robust evidence base, and matched funding. Barriers to participating included resourcing and capacity issues (which appear to have affected smaller schools more), tight timeframes for applying (in Round 1) and the courses offered.

Key findings 2: Feasibility

4. Was the project delivered as intended? Why/why not?

Inputs: The project inputs were not as planned. There was a significant underspend against the total joint fund capacity of £600,000, with KCC and the EEF jointly contributing £348,076. Together with school contributions and contributions from the KCC Inclusion Fund, which supported training to improve outcomes for children and young people with SEND, the total project spend was £494,626. The main reasons for this relate to lower-than-expected take-up of project activities among schools for a range of reasons including the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, staffing issues and long-term illness in schools, and limited school budgets to cover the matched funding requirement. Additionally, time inputs from staff at KCC, the EEF, and The Education People were also not as expected. Both KCC and the EEF considered administration and project management inputs had been underestimated.

Activities: There were a number of ways in which the planned activities did not take place as intended:

- Putting Evidence to Work, the EEF's implementation training, was a less formal requirement for applying for a Promising Project than originally anticipated. This was a decision on the part of the project delivery team and instead, senior leaders were signposted to the available resource. Before the pandemic, they were also provided with a light-touch (one hour) session at headteacher briefings. Headteachers had to self-certify on their application form that they had or would complete the implementation course but this was not mandatory and completion was not monitored.

- Although there was positive feedback from key informants and a small sample of schools about the promotion of the EKP project, overall take-up was lower than expected despite the matched funding.

- There was less targeting of priority schools than anticipated. As the Promising Projects were launched at pace and subsequently affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, there were no specific activities to target priority schools in the first round of Promising Projects for the Evidence-Based Training and subsequent

rounds of Promising Projects The Education People advisers were commissioned to target priority schools through a desktop analysis and focused conversations with school leaders, but the work did not include all priority schools and began relatively late on in the delivery phase (began towards the end of 2021). There were also targeted communications to priority schools, twice as much funding offered to priority schools to take part in the Evidence Champions training, and twice as much ELE support for those who took part in the training.

- Delivery of Promising Projects was delayed primarily due to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and also due to the need to establish new SLAs between KCC and multiple Promising Projects providers. The COVID-19 pandemic affected provider resources and courses had to be adapted for remote delivery. Generally, this process of adapting Promising Projects for remote delivery was considered to have worked well. Strong partnership working between KCC, the EEF, and Promising Projects providers helped to navigate highly challenging circumstances.

- The process for developing the Evidence-Based Training included extensive stakeholder consultation and was generally considered to have fulfilled the ambition to develop a high-quality training offer that was relevant to Kent schools. Delivery of the Evidence-Based Training was affected by capacity constraints within stakeholder organisations including the EEF, KCC, research schools, and KARS. Only around half of schools took up the personalised support provided by ELEs, and overall more could have been done to increase awareness and build trust in its value. Feedback from a small qualitative sample, indicated that schools that did take up the ELE support tended to value it.

- The scale of the Promising Projects Train the Trainer work was smaller than expected. Capacity and resourcing pressures within schools affected interest and demand among teachers to become trainers, with trainers established for two projects. Nonetheless, stakeholders were positive about the establishment of these Kent-based trainers and the ongoing access to evidence-based interventions.

- The programme team at KCC and the EEF had planned for KARS to be a 'visible system-leader' focused on supporting schools to use research and evidence to improve school outcomes. This role was not entirely fulfilled as intended due to the timings of the appointment of KARS partway through EKP and the end of the associate research school designation in 2023.

5. Were Promising Projects delivered by schools with fidelity?

The evaluation experienced significant challenges in capturing evidence on the fidelity of Promising Projects delivered by Kent schools during EKP and it has not been possible to measure fidelity to answer this research question.

6. What are the barriers and facilitators for this type of project? How do these vary for different types of schools?

The complexity of the stakeholder landscape in Kent affected project delivery. Specifically, KCC's contract for school improvement provision with The Education People created barriers. The Education People advisers were key stakeholders who had relationships with school leaders and knowledge about schools' training needs. However, The Education People's existing contract did not cover EKP project activities. Further The Education People had its own commercial training offer for Kent schools, and it was not initially made clear how EKP activities differed from this. It took time to establish arrangements and build the working relationship between The Education People and the EKP delivery team. The Education People were involved in EKP from the early stages and provided feedback on the project proposal, and the organisation helped to shape and promote the project. However, this did not lead to engagement with schools until later in the project, with The Education People advisers' involvement in the project increasing slowly over time. There were also mixed views about the extent to which strong partnership working had been established between Kent Association of Headteachers and KCC.

Several stakeholder organisations were involved in delivery of EKP and there were capacity constraints in many of these organisations due to staff turnover and absence. This made consistency difficult and likely contributed to a perception among some key informants that there was a lack of clearly assigned roles and responsibilities between stakeholder organisations. Some key informants discussed poor handovers between staff and reported that this created barriers such as delays, missed opportunities to engage schools, and lack of or delayed information, particularly in relation to the Evidence-Based Training (such as details of key contacts, session plans and the overall schedule for the Evidence-Based Training courses, and information about attendees).

The quality of the training offered through EKP appears to have been an enabler. Across all strands, participants generally valued the skills of trainers and considered the training to be relevant to school context and needs. Although encouraging, the sample providing feedback was relatively small and unlikely to be representative of all participants. There was some feedback that the Evidence Champions training could have been more tailored to take more account of prior experience of evidence use. Flexibility around timings of sessions before and after core hours also enabled schools to participate.

Remote learning was considered to facilitate participation of a wider range of schools from varied geographic locations, to reduce school costs for staff cover time, and to make it easier for participants to catch-up on missed sessions. There were also, however, barriers related to poorer engagement in the online mode and reduced opportunities for networking with peers.

Resourcing and capacity within schools was a barrier to taking part effectively in EKP. Existing resourcing and capacity issues in schools were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. National lockdowns meant schools had to prioritise the implementation of remote learning and resources were diverted away, either temporarily or on a more long-term basis, from school improvement activities. Issues of staff turnover and absence were commonly mentioned and in some cases school leaders related turnover to wider problems of staff recruitment and retention in the teaching profession.

Support and commitment of senior leaders enabled effective delivery of Promising Projects within schools and was the key to overcoming barriers linked to lack of time and resource.

Key findings 3: Evidence of promise

7. a. Does the project result in schools using evidence confidently in decision-making?

7. b. Does the project result in schools with increased capability to identify realistic priorities to target with new training approaches?

7. c. Does the project result in schools with increased capability to implement evidence-based interventions with high fidelity and to a high standard?

Overall, there is insufficient evidence to conclude whether the short-term outcomes in the Theory of Change are accurate. There was positive feedback from Evidence-Based Training participants about these short-term outcomes in the survey. Over nine in ten survey respondents reported improvements in these areas. There were also qualitative examples from school-based interviewees. However, the strength of the evidence in relation to these research questions is relatively weak and so the findings cannot be considered generalisable.

*8. What are the main perceived benefits of the project***?**

The main benefits were perceived improvements in use of evidence in decision-making, capability to identify realistic priorities, and to implement evidence-based interventions.

9. Are there unintended consequences?

The evaluation did not identify any unintended consequences.

10. Has the project overall and its individual components influenced the spending of schools and partners towards evidence-based interventions? Why/why not? If yes, what role did the project play?

The lower-than-expected take-up of EKP activities suggests limited influence on school spend. However, it should be noted that most of the Promising Projects were not previously available, and the Evidence-Based Training offer was new. This combined with evidence that for some schools the matched funding was a pivotal factor in decisions to spend on school improvement activities, does indicate some additionality and influence on participating schools.

11. What proportion of publicly funded schools (overall and priority) plan to continue with evidence-based interventions after the project?

Limited available evidence means it is not possible to state what proportion of schools planned to continue with the same or another Promising Project after the end of EKP. Evidence-Based Training participants reported positive intentions to implement new evidence-based practice and to devise an evidence-informed strategy (96% and 92% of survey respondents strongly agreed or agreed they intended to do this), and there was motivation among Evidence Champions to continue to embed research and evidence use in their contexts. It is not possible to measure the extent to which these intentions translated to behaviour change. It is also important to note findings about contextual barriers (such as capacity constraints in schools and varied levels of commitment from school leaders), which could potentially hinder longer-term behavioural change.

Key findings 4: Sustainability

12. Is the work of expert school-based groups (research champions) sustained? Why/why not?

KARS was appointed for a fixed period until summer 2023. At the start of the project, Kent stakeholders envisaged that the associate research school would be re-appointed for a follow-on period and that KARS would play a key system-leadership role and drive the continuation of project activities after the EKP ended. The designation of Kingsnorth Primary School as an associate research school ended in 2023 as planned. At this time, the EEF's regional strategy shifted and the associate research school's role/designation was no longer part of the Research Schools Network model. Associate research schools, along with other schools, were able to apply to become a research school for the 2023–2026 period but this process did not lead to the appointment of a research school in Kent. This meant that the mechanisms for sustaining system-leadership that had been anticipated at the start were not in place. Sustainability plans had been built on the assumption that there would be an associate research school in Kent and so had to change unexpectedly and relatively late on. Instead, there was a focus on building sustainability through local stakeholder relationships, which had been key to EKP from the start. Some key informants felt that without a Kent-based research school or associate research school, Kent schools would feel distant from the work of the EEF and would be less likely to engage with the EEF resources and guidance after the end of EKP.

The three main project legacies were:

- The KEE Hub: The KEE Hub was established by Kent Association of Headteachers, KCC, KARS, and the EEF. The KEE Hub was developed by these key partners on an ongoing basis from 2020 onwards. It was launched at the end of the EKP as a platform to enable teachers and leaders to share, collaborate, and access evidence-informed practice, and was the main mechanism for sustaining EKP activities after the project ended. While some EKP funds had been allocated to raise awareness of the KEE Hub, coordinate training and networking, and for headteacher capacity to chair the implementation group, some key informants expressed concerns about the lack of ongoing committed funds, particularly for administration and project management. They considered this to be a potential barrier to the effective functioning of the KEE Hub and therefore, the sustainability of EKP activities. Some key informants also felt that if the KEE Hub had been launched earlier in the project, schools would have likely had greater awareness of it and this may have helped to maintain momentum and engagement established during the project, after its end.

- Kent-based trainers for two of the Promising Projects.

- Evidence Champions: Evidence Champion training had only recently completed at the time of the final round of fieldwork so the evaluation cannot report on the embedding of practice. The KEE Hub intended to coordinate Evidence Champion networks to enable sharing of good practice, which would support progress if it took place.

At the time of the final phase of research for the evaluation, it was not known if ELEs in Kent would be sustained beyond the end of the EKP.

13. What learning can inform future similar projects?

The three main points of learning identified by key informants for similar future initiatives were: the importance of sound governance arrangements that facilitate contributions from a diverse range of stakeholders; the need to fully understand and analyse the complex stakeholder landscape before implementing this type of project to maximise opportunities for alignment and minimise tensions; and the importance of a focus on sustainability from the start of the project, with contingencies in case first choice options cannot be implemented. Additionally, in relation to offering a wide range of Promising Projects to schools across Kent, there was learning about the time required to establish SLAs with multiple providers.

14. What proportion of publicly funded schools (overall and priority) continue to deliver evidence-based interventions after the project? What enables/hinders this?

The withdrawal of the post-project evaluation phase meant data on this research question was not collected.

Interpretation

The Theory of Change for EKP assumed that the offer of matched funding, coupled with a partnership between KCC and the EEF, would create demand for Promising Projects, and that access to these interventions could be sustained once the project came to an end. It also tested whether light-touch support and training based on the EEF guidance reports—also match-funded—influenced schools' capability to implement evidence-based interventions. The Theory of Change identified enabling factors including support from key stakeholders such as The Education People, Kent Association of Headteachers, and Kent Leaders of Education, the positive relationships that KCC and The Education People had with Kent schools and the commitment of education professionals to making changes to improve pupil outcomes.

The underlying theory was that supporting senior leaders to change their behaviours to make more strategic, evidence-based decisions would result in improvements to pupil progress and attainment. This would be a sustained change, and they would continue applying a strategic evidence-based approach to identify priorities for improvement and solutions. Consequently, they would choose to continue to spend on Promising Projects in the future.

There was also an assumption that EKP activities would bring Kent schools together and increase collaboration, which would allow schools to develop improvement strategies that met localised challenges through the sharing of professional knowledge and expertise.

In this section, we consider the extent to which there is evidence to support the Theory of Change for EKP.

Factors mediating successful scale-up of evidence use and evidence-informed practice in schools

The findings of the evaluation indicate that the offer of matched funding to schools, combined with KCC and the EEF partnership to add profile to the initiative, was insufficient to drive take-up of Promising Projects at the anticipated level. Participation of Kent schools was lower than expected overall, as reflected in the significant project underspend.

There were multiple reasons for this. The COVID-19 pandemic presented significant challenges for schools that affected their ability to engage with EKP activities. Senior staff had to oversee school closures and the move to remote learning, while re-prioritising resources in response to illness and staff shortages. In some cases, this diverted focus and resources away from longer-term, strategic improvement priorities. It is impossible to isolate the influence of the pandemic from other factors that affected take-up. However, feedback about the budgetary pressures Kent schools faced at the time EKP was launched suggests that for some schools the 50% matched funding was inadequate, regardless of the context of the pandemic. Additionally, despite some evidence that the partnership between KCC and the EEF added profile to the initiative and was attractive to schools, some schools still did not perceive the EKP offer as appropriate to their needs.

Despite the pandemic context, the receptiveness of schools to the EKP offer and potentially the capacity of schools and leaders to engage with the project could have been addressed and overcome to a degree, with a greater focus on contextual factors that are known to influence evidence-based practice in schools. As discussed in the 'Introduction' section earlier, previous evaluations of the EEF pilots of the scale-up of evidence use and the wider literature (e.g. Maxwell *et al.,* 2019a, 2019b, 2019c; Nelson *et al.,* 2019; Schildkamp, 2019) show that providing guidance and training inputs to schools on its own is insufficient to lead to evidence use and evidence-informed practice. Contextual factors at the system, school, and team/individual level mediate progress with evidence use. Sharples (2019) summarises that evidence-informed practice in schools relies on the interaction of four factors:

- the alignment with the wider school system;

- the quality and usefulness of evidence;

- the presence of skilled research intermediaries; and

- the receptiveness and capacity of schools as evidence users.

Considering the first factor—the alignment with the wider school system—the existing Theory of Change for EKP specifies support from The Education People, Kent Association of Headteachers, and Kent Leaders of Education as well as positive relationships between KCC and The Education People with Kent schools as mediating factors. While these factors acknowledge to an extent that the wider education system must support the desired changes, they are too narrowly conceptualised. A broader conceptualisation of a system-wide partnership leading the project, with all influencers involved, would better reflect evidence from the literature about what is needed for successful roll-out of evidence-informed practice.

The evaluation found that there were efforts to build a strategic partnership with other system leaders such as The Education People, Kent Association of Headteachers, and research schools but this happened by and large after the joint funding between KCC and the EEF was agreed, when some aspects of the project had already been designed. The situation was different for Strand 3, with greater evidence of a strategic partnership overseeing activities, including a wider range of system leaders (Kent Association of Headteachers, KCC, KARS, the EEF, and a group of headteachers). In terms of relationships with Kent schools, the relatively limited influence of KCC in a complex school improvement system should have been better understood at the start of the project so that appropriate strategies were in place for school engagement, prior to the launch of the project. The pace at which the project was initiated was unhelpful for the nature of strategic engagement and relationship building that was required. A better approach would have been to have an extended scoping phase to build stronger relationships with influencers in Kent. This is a critical factor that has been identified in other evaluations of the scale-up of evidence use (e.g. Willis *et al.,* 2023). This would have allowed detailed examination of how the EKP offer fitted in a fragmented landscape within which there were various other providers of school improvement services. The project would likely have been more successful at tapping into existing school improvement relationships where schools already trusted in individuals, processes, and the quality of the school improvement offer. This would have potentially improved take-up and increased the likelihood of sustaining new school improvement activities beyond the duration of a time-limited project.

The second factor—the quality and usefulness of evidence—is addressed by key activities in the Theory of Change, namely, developing and delivering training and resources to support the use of the EEF guidance (Evidence-Based Training) and the offer of Promising Projects. The evaluation found most participants were positive about the clarity and usefulness of the training and thought it helped to make the evidence base accessible, with the caveat that this feedback came from a small and potentially unrepresentative sample. However, some schools felt the training and resources did not sufficiently take into account the context and challenges in their school related to, for example, low attendance and high levels of ethnic diversity. The evaluation could not measure how widespread this view was but there may be merit in future initiatives considering how training and resources can be adapted so there is a better fit between the evidence presented in training and school contexts.

In relation to the third factor—the presence of skilled research intermediaries—the Theory of Change addressed this critical success factor to an extent, through the inclusion of wraparound support as part of the Evidence-Based Training. The evaluation found that ELEs were appointed from a range of system-leader roles and one aspect of their role was providing this wraparound support. However, in practice, there was relatively low take-up of the wraparound support and limited quality assurance processes established in relation to the ELE network. This suggests that a skilled research intermediary role was only partly achieved for Evidence-Based Training participants. Further, the equivalent support was not in place for schools taking part in Promising Projects. Even though the literature indicates that one of the characteristics of schools that embed research evidence effectively is that they focus on *how* to implement approaches as well as *what* approaches to adopt (Sharples *et al.,* 2019), this was not built into the Promising Projects. The Theory of Change included Putting Evidence to Work, the EEF's online implementation training, but this was ultimately a very minor component of EKP with the emphasis in the Theory of Change and performance targets not carried through into delivery. Maintaining the requirement for senior leaders to engage with the online implementation course would have strengthened the Promising Projects strand of activity. It would have been likely to: help to build support and commitment more consistently from senior leaders; ensure schools selected Promising Projects that fully met their needs and could be resourced; and support embedding of Promising Projects over the long-term.

In relation to the final fourth factor—the receptiveness and capacity of schools as evidence users—the Theory of Change for EKP partially acknowledged this as a critical factor: it specified the commitment of education professionals to improving pupil outcomes as a mediating factor. The evaluation findings suggest that this should be expanded to

encompass school leadership capability and receptiveness to different approaches to using evidence. Previous studies (Maxwell *et al.,* 2019a, 2019b, 2019c; Nelson *et al.,* 2019; Godfrey, 2016)) have found that a lack of skills in schools to make evidence-informed decisions can be a barrier to successful implementation of evidence. These studies have all highlighted that commitment from senior leaders to evidence-informed change is key—and without it, initiatives are unlikely to succeed. The findings of this evaluation were similar. In some instances, the progress that schools could make in implementing Promising Projects or evidence-based approaches was hampered by senior leaders. Most commonly, a lack of commitment was evident through a failure to ensure adequate resourcing. For the Promising Projects, more structured and formal engagement with senior leaders may have helped. This could have been through the implementation training, or potentially through greater engagement with senior leaders to monitor whether the roles and responsibilities set out in the Memorandum of Understanding were being fulfilled. For the Evidence-Based Training, the focus on senior leaders was appropriate and in line with research evidence on the need to focus on the skills of leaders to implement evidence-informed change. The ELE wraparound support had the potential to address variable levels of skills and commitment if the ELE network had been implemented more consistently and at a greater scale. Its scope could also have been extended to include the Promising Projects to support greater consistency in levels of commitment from senior leaders in schools implementing Promising Projects. As discussed, the receptiveness and capacity of schools was also significantly affected by the particular context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Also, regarding receptiveness and capacity of schools, the evaluation found that EKP experienced difficulties in engaging priority schools. Evaluations of other scale-up initiatives have reported similar problems (Gu *et al.,* 2019; Willis *et al.,* 2023). The lower than anticipated engagement of priority schools suggests the need for a more targeted approach to school recruitment, alongside more universal measures. Efforts were made to take a more targeted approach to engaging priority schools, working through The Education People school improvement advisers, but these measures were implemented too late in the project. Other evaluations of scale-up initiatives (Willis *et al.,* 2023) have identified that schools in particularly challenging circumstances may require a period of preparation support before engaging with training for evidence-informed practices. This recommendation is pertinent to EKP also. Any similar future initiatives could take a more targeted approach by assessing and building receptiveness and capacity among priority schools, potentially with a period of support prior to taking up a Promising Project or Evidence-Based Training course.

The evaluation also found that in some instances schools applied for an EKP activity and were offered a place even though it later emerged they did not have the leadership or capacity required for successful participation. This raises the question of the most appropriate way to select schools to take part in initiatives like EKP that offer access to evidence-based interventions. The application process for EKP tried to ascertain whether school conditions were favourable for participation by, for example, asking about why the school had selected the Promising Project or Evidence-Based Training course, how it met school needs and priorities and how it would be resourced. A strengthened approach to this that included a conversation with a senior leader at the school, while more resource-intensive, would offer a more thorough screening and potentially contribute to more positive engagement with EKP activities. This could be another potential dimension for the ELE role.

School collaboration

The Theory of Change's assumption that schools working together can share professional expertise and better develop improvement strategies that meet localised challenges was not fully tested through EKP or the evaluation. The Evidence-Based Training was designed as group training, with opportunities built in for networking and interactions between schools. With research schools and KARS leading delivery for other schools in Kent, the offer had school collaboration at the core of its design. However, the evaluation found some evidence that the online/hybrid modes of delivery affected peer-to-peer networking opportunities and generally feedback around increased partnership working was less positive than for other aspects of the training. For some schools that took up the ELE support, their ELE was able to help forge connections with other schools, but this did not take place consistently. More formal and structured opportunities for partnership working during the project would have been beneficial. Nonetheless, it is encouraging that there are potentially opportunities post-project through the KEE Hub, which has been established as a platform to create peer networks so leaders and teachers can share practice and provide peer support.

Outcomes

Overall, the evaluation was inconclusive about whether the intended outcomes in the Theory of Change were achieved by EKP.

In relation to senior leaders' and schools' capability to implement evidence-based interventions, the strength of evidence on the gains in understanding, knowledge, and skills among senior leaders was relatively weak and so conclusions cannot be drawn. Additionally, the evaluation was unable to robustly evidence that increased knowledge and understanding translated to changes in behaviour and practice within schools. Overall, low rates of participation in the evaluation led to poor achieved samples, which could not be used to make generalisable and reliable findings. Further, the timing of the evaluation activities meant that many EKP schools took part in the evaluation only a short while after taking part in a project activity, when there may have been insufficient time lapsed for behavioural changes to be identified.

Regarding the sustainment of evidence-based approaches and ongoing spend on Promising Projects, this element of the Theory of Change has not been tested. The changes to the timing and design of the evaluation, which resulted from delays in delivery of EKP due to the pandemic, meant the evaluation could not gather evidence on this. However, the discussion above highlights that EKP could have had a greater emphasis on factors that are known to mediate schools' progress with evidence use, and this may have affected the sustainability of outcomes.

Further, progress in the use of evidence and research cannot be evidenced due to the challenges the evaluation experienced in collecting survey data, and as noted above, there is only some limited evidence that EKP increased partnership working and collaboration between schools.

Limitations of the evaluation

- The poor response to the endline survey on research and evidence use affected our ability to analyse progress with confidence in using evidence, actual evidence use, and collaboration between schools and school improvement partners in Kent, overall and among EKP participating schools.

- We would have liked to conduct more interviews with schools who did not participate in EKP to develop a deeper understanding about factors that influence the decision not to take part. This would have been particularly beneficial among priority schools.

- The lack of fidelity data means the evaluation has not been able to make judgements about the effectiveness of the implementation of schools' chosen Promising Projects.

- It is not possible to separate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on schools from underlying capacity constraints (which would still have been in place irrespective of the pandemic), which makes interpretation of some data difficult and limits the conclusions that can be drawn.

- The delays to EKP project delivery and the evaluation and the withdrawal of the post-project evaluation phase meant that the longitudinal research design was not implemented and the evaluation could not adequately assess sustained changes in practice within schools.

- The Evidenced-Based Training survey may be subject to non-response bias whereby the 67% of participating schools that did not respond to the survey had systematically different (i.e. poorer) experiences in comparison to respondents.

- We would have liked to have developed case studies of schools, which drew on a wider range of perspectives within the school, to understand in more detail how the school context enables or hampers the implementation of evidence-based interventions. Additionally, we would have liked to carry out interviews or case studies with a higher number of participating schools to understand a wider range of settings and experiences.

- It has not been possible to evaluate any differences between priority and non-priority schools other than for participation rates.

- It would have been useful to have a broader picture of 'business as usual' to ascertain whether EKP activities displaced existing school improvement provision.

Future research and publications

Given the importance of a strategic system-wide partnership as the foundation for initiatives focused on the scale-up of evidence use and evidence-informed practice, further research to understand and specify different ways to achieve such a partnership in different contexts, and the barriers and enablers, would be useful.

Finally, further research into effective methods for engaging disadvantaged or priority schools in similar initiatives is required.

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Appendices

Appendices can be found in a separate document on the EEF's website.

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