



University
of Glasgow | Robert Owen Centre
for Educational Change

**FAST Forward: Families Engagement in Children's
Learning – Findings from Families and Schools
Together (FAST) programme in Scotland**

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Disclaimer

Please note that the views contained in this report are those of the authors, and do not necessarily represent the views of Save the Children.

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Executive Summary

Families and Schools Together (FAST) is an early intervention programme for primary school-age pupils which aims to bring parents, children, teachers and the wider community together, to make sure children get the support they need to fulfil their potential at school – and in life. Save the Children works in partnership with Middlesex University to deliver FAST in areas of deprivation and where high numbers of children receive free school meals. FAST works to improve family relationships, and in turn, children's ability to learn. It achieves this by strengthening their home learning environment. It encourages and enables parents, the wider family and local community to play an active role in their children's education.

This report provides the findings from the Robert Owen Centre (ROC) research of the FAST programme. The aims of the study were to undertake independent research to examine the factors that contribute to effective early intervention in relation to family engagement practice in Scotland (with a focus on education), by exploring and sharing learning from delivery of FAST in Scotland. The aim was to use the findings to influence local and national policy and practice (rather than inform FAST delivery in Scotland). Specifically the research aimed to:

1. Examine from different perspectives – those who commission, deliver and participate in FAST - the factors that contribute to successful/ unsuccessful early intervention family engagement practice in Scotland (with a focus on supporting children's education) using a case study approach of FAST delivery in five local areas.
2. Develop recommendations for effective early intervention family engagement practice.

In order to meet these research aims the report explored: what national policies FAST supported the delivery of; what impact FAST has, to date, in several case study localities in Scotland; the characteristics of FAST that are key to its success; the key elements of FAST delivery associated with success and the facilitators and barriers to this success. It also addressed the implementation of the initiative and the impact it has on different stakeholders. From this evidence, the research considered the key elements of models for family engagement in children's learning, particularly children living in poverty and the implications of this for future policy and practice to support family engagement in children's learning.

In addressing the main areas of investigation the research team adopted a mixed methods approach. The methodology involved drawing on insights from relevant international research, secondary analysis of data gathered by the Middlesex University evaluation of FAST and empirically gathered qualitative data gathered through interviews, observations, and focus groups with key stakeholders from six FAST groups across Scotland.

The National Evaluation of FAST, conducted by Middlesex University, reported a positive impact across a number of indicators reflecting FAST aims and objectives. **The qualitative evidence from the Robert Owen Centre's research also indicates that FAST and FASTworks have promoted positive and effective parental involvement in children's learning. In particular, FAST facilitated greater dialogue between teachers/partners and parents regarding their children's learning.**

There was consensus that it had promoted engagement and learning that the wider research literature suggests is indicative of positive educational outcomes.

As well as impacting on family life, **the FAST approach improved the aspirations and confidence of parents. In some cases the programme had led to them going on to participate in educational opportunities such as Further Education and University.**

The FAST approach also built parents' social capital and capacity to support each other, thus broadening the impact of FAST into the community.

In addition to impacting on families and parents, **there was consensus among all stakeholder groups that the FAST model made a valuable contribution to improved family and school relationships.**

The research identified a number of operational challenges in applying the FAST approach to different local contexts. In particular, the approach needed careful integration with school and local authority policies, planning and systems in order to ensure appropriate levels of teacher input and buy-in.

While the structured FAST approach was seen as a key factor in its success, not all parents and teachers saw the need to adhere to the exact FAST model procedures. Some believed that the approach was 'inflexible' and could have been varied to better suit the local resources, parents' initial capacities and existing commitments and the responsibilities of partners. Some participants stressed that this highlighted the importance of taking time to communicate the rationale for the structured FAST approach and to take time to ensure that the approach was embedded in local systems.

Our findings strongly indicate that, overall, the type of approach adopted by FAST and FASTworks is an effective model that can be adapted to suit local needs and context. The FAST approach has been positively evaluated internationally and in the UK. We would argue that translating the approach to local contexts while maintaining the integrity of the model is key to the success of this type of approach.

In Scotland, the role of Local Authorities in supporting the FAST approach is perhaps a unique feature. Unlike elsewhere in the UK, Scottish Local Authorities have retained a strong central planning and coordination function in social and educational service delivery. **The findings indicate that the FAST approach works best when**

stakeholders work together to ensure that the approach aligns with educational plans at school and Local Authority level and takes into account existing resources.

At a National and local policy level, there is an increasing focus on closing the attainment gap. In looking at Scotland's policy context, FAST resonates with the newly announced four-year Attainment Scotland Fund (The Attainment Challenge). The Scottish Government is *investing* £100 million through a national attainment fund over 4 years, targeting support to those local authorities with the most deprived communities. The Challenge will focus on improving literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing in primary schools in these areas, with the clear objective being to give all primary-school age pupils – regardless of background - the best start in life. Particularly important for FAST is that, as part of the Attainment Challenge, there is a focus on involving parents in their children's learning. **Scottish policy has long recognised the importance of parental involvement in children's learning. These policies and the wider research, including international studies of the FAST approach, highlights the importance of the FAST model, and similar family focused programmes, in making a difference to the learning and wellbeing of children.**

A number of recommendations emerge from the findings, highlighting the need to:

- **Ensure familiarity with the articulation between the FAST approach and the relevant Scottish policies in relation to parental engagement and education.**
- **Provide sufficient time during inception and set-up to promote the understanding of the rationale for the FAST approach**
- **Consider including sessions on group working to better equip individuals to deal with group dynamics**
- **Identify and promote key skills and attributes among FASTwork group members to help support the group's continuity. For example, fundraising, networking, and craft skills.**
- **Recognise the importance of early intervention programmes and, particularly, their articulation with the wider range of policies and measures to promote education equity and change**
- **Explore the efficacy and expansion of FAST nursery-primary and primary-secondary transitions**
- **Explore major funding sources to promote sustainability and expansion of FAST**
- **Consider researching long-term impact of FAST in the UK and Scotland in particular.**

1. Introduction

The Robert Owen Centre (ROC) at the University of Glasgow was commissioned by Save the Children to research how the FAST (Families and Schools Together) programme contributes to early intervention family engagement policy and practice in Scotland. The research took place between November 2014 and June 2015. This report provides the findings from the ROC research.

The aims of the study were to undertake independent research to examine the factors that contribute to effective early intervention family engagement practice in Scotland (with a focus on education), by exploring and sharing learning from delivery of FAST in Scotland. The aim was to use the findings to influence local and national policy and practice (rather than inform FAST delivery in Scotland). Specifically the research aims to:

1. Examine from different perspectives – those who commission, deliver and participate in FAST - the factors that contribute to successful/ unsuccessful early intervention family engagement practice in Scotland (with a focus on supporting children's education) using a case study approach of FAST delivery in five local areas.
2. Develop recommendations for effective early intervention family engagement practice.

The Robert Owen Centre research complements other research, including the on-going Middlesex University evaluation, by providing a qualitative case study approach to identify the key processes and factors influencing FAST and to offer recommendations for early intervention family engagement practice.

1.1 Background

There still exists a large gap in average educational achievement between children from economically advantaged backgrounds and those from less advantaged backgrounds. Consistently children from less advantaged backgrounds do less well in public school examinations than their better off peers (McKinney et al., 2013a, 2013b; Goodman and Gregg, 2010; DfE, 2011). Although economic difference may be associated with educational advantages and disadvantages the picture is complex. There is strong evidence that demonstrates that parental engagement in their children's learning at home and at school is perhaps the most important influence on a students' achievement, even more so than socio-economic background and parent's education level (Ferrara, 2009; Gibson & Jefferson, 2006; Mapp et al., 2008; Sammons, 2007, Gregg and Washbrook, 2009; Chowdry et al., 2010; Cummings et al., 2012; Gorard et al., 2012). This suggests that parental involvement makes perhaps the most significant contribution to closing the attainment gap.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Development Model, Putnam (2000; p. 296) suggests that child development is 'powerfully shaped by trust, networks, and norms of reciprocity within a child's family, school, peer group, and larger community' and that these 'have far reaching effects on their opportunities and choices, educational achievement, and hence on their behaviour and development'. Sampson et al. (2005) suggest that social capital can help to mitigate some of the effects of socioeconomic disadvantage and that the presence of non-profit organisations, such as Save the Children, and their involvement in intervention work can be particularly effective.

A substantial body of evidence has amassed over the last sixty years or so highlighting the role of parents as prime educators of their children (Hall, Kay and Struthers 1992; Sylva et al, 2004). Some of the first evidence emerged from longitudinal early intervention projects which had their roots in the Kennedy and Johnston US administrations' 'war on poverty' programmes of the 1960's (Lawrence et al., 2005). Despite parents from disadvantaged households being as likely to help with their children's learning as economically advantaged parents (Mongon and Chapman 2012), their efforts are less effective, especially where parental educational attainment is low. In such cases, parents require support to demonstrate how they can play a role in working with schools to promote positive outcomes for their children (Peters et al., 2008). Sosu and Ellis (2014) propose that, overall, effective parental involvement programmes that have an impact on the attainment gap are those that focus on helping parents to use appropriate strategies to support their children's learning at home. Parental involvement is strengthened when combined with approaches for raising parental expectations and positive parenting (Scott et al., 2010; Gorard et al., 2012).

Key messages arising from research in Joseph Rowntree Foundation's (JRF) Education and Poverty programme (Carter-Wall and Whitfield 2012) reveals that interventions that have improved educational outcomes are those focused on parental involvement in children's education to improve outcomes that are sustained and closely monitored. Their roundup of relevant research suggests that there is mixed evidence on the impact of interventions focused on extra-curricular activities, mentoring, children's self-belief and motivation or addressing children's general attitudes to education or the amount of paid work children do during term time.

Reviewing the literature on parent involvement in public education, Mitchell (2008) found that:

- Parental involvement in children's education from an early age has a significant effect on educational achievement, and continued to do so into adolescence and adulthood
- Family learning provides a range of benefits for parents and children including improvements in reading, writing and numeracy as well as greater parental confidence in helping their child at home
- The attitudes and aspirations of parents and of children themselves predict later educational achievement. International evidence suggests that parents with high aspirations are also more involved in their children's education.

Focusing on the features of successful interventions Grayson (2013) suggested that:

- They are based on the best available evidence
- They state explicitly what change they anticipate achieving, and define their criteria for success or failure
- The planning of activities is informed by research into local needs and circumstances
- They are properly resourced, with sufficient capacity to develop the intervention
- Senior education staff are engaged with and committed to the intervention
- Measures are taken to overcome potential participants' barriers to accessing the intervention
- A robust evaluation design is built into the programme from the outset
- They are sustainable; development should not cease when a specific piece of work concludes.

Given the wider research evidence it is arguable that we know what works regarding successful approaches to support parents to engage in their children's learning at home and at school, however, the challenge is to implement approaches that reflect these characteristics and that are sustainable.

1.2 The Scottish policy context and FAST

The issue of how to better engage with and support family engagement in learning and school features prominently in the thinking of policy-makers and school leaders. The Scottish Government has recently pulled together existing evidence into a practical guide for school leaders and staff - www.engagingwithfamilies.co.uk and there is a major impetus to address the 'Closing the Gap' in Education agenda (Sosu and Ellis, 2014; Forbes et al., 2015; Dunlop, 2015). It is interesting to note that FAST resonates with the newly announced four-year Attainment Scotland Fund (The Attainment Challenge). The Attainment Challenge will be targeted initially at schools in local authorities with the biggest concentrations of households in deprived areas. As outlined in her speech made at the University Of Glasgow on 19th May 2015, Angela Constance, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, said that the Government *"are investing £100 million through a national attainment fund over 4 years targeting support to those local authorities with the most deprived communities, providing schools with greater access to expertise and resources, through the Scottish Attainment Challenge"*. The Challenge will focus on improving literacy, numeracy, and health and wellbeing in primary schools in these areas, with the clear objective being to give all primary-school age pupils – regardless of background - the best start in life. Particularly important for FAST is that as part of the Attainment Challenge, there is a focus on involving parents in their children's learning. Scottish policy has long recognised the importance of parental involvement in children's learning (e.g. the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006 and the National Parenting Strategy (2012)) requiring

schools to work with parents to improve attainment for children. There have been national initiatives to encourage parents to read to their children by providing books through the 'Bookbug Initiative' and government funded national reading engagement projects. However, little is known about how these affect the attainment of children from the most economically deprived households. In the aforementioned 'Closing the Attainment Gap' report commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Sosu and Ellis (2014: p.25) specifically mentioned Save the Children and FAST as evidence of good practice stating that FAST '*focuses on building a stronger relationship between parents and teachers, and coaching parents on how to work effectively with their children*'.

The Scottish Government recognises that parents play an important role in their own child's learning and in the life of their school. With Parent Councils, the intention is that these structures will "help parents and carers to become more actively and effectively involved in their children's learning"¹. The Parent Councils can, ideally, inform the school about the needs of parents and issues that are important to families. This can inform school strategies regarding how to effectively involve parents in their children's learning and the life of the school. However, research indicates that Parent Councils alone do not necessarily fully support parents to engage in their children's learning both at home and at school. Wallace (2009) reports that too many parents do not receive information on the work of the Parent Council and that too many do not know how to contact the Parent Council and that 'communication with parents remains a significant gap in implementation of the legislation'.

The level and nature of parent representation on Parent Councils is one issue but so is whether the Parent Council alone is sufficient to provide a mechanism and process to facilitate active and equitable parental engagement in their children's learning at home and at school. In 2015, the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) approaches has inspired a pilot scheme in Scotland organised in partnership between the Scottish Parent Teacher Council (SPTC), and Skills Development Scotland (SDS). The project aims to be rolled out over six years to more than 600 schools. This initiative has been prompted by insights from studies in the United States, particularly those of the NNPS (e.g. Epstein 2011, Epstein *et al* 2009, Hutchins *et al* 2008). Such research suggest that effective approaches to promote parental engagement in their children's learning at home and at school require goal-oriented programmes of family involvement and community networks. Established at the Johns Hopkins University in 1996, the NNPS uses evidence-based approaches to facilitate schools, districts, states, and organisations to work together to develop and sustain programs of family and community involvement that aim to increase student success in school.

The FAST model can be seen as one such programme, in that it also adopts an evidenced-based partnership model to facilitate parents' engagement in their children's learning at home and at school. There are other examples across local authorities of systematic efforts to address meaningful parental engagement with their child's learning

¹ <http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/parentzone/gettinginvolved/parentcouncils/index.asp>

at home and school such as approaches in West Dunbartonshire and Renfrewshire with some of these adopting FAST as part of their integrated strategy.

1.3 What is the Families and Schools Together (FAST) programme FAST?

Families and Schools Together (FAST) is an early intervention programme for primary school-age pupils which aims to bring parents, children, teachers and the wider community together, to make sure children get the support they need to fulfil their potential at school – and in life. FAST works to improve family relationships and in turn, children's ability to learn. It achieves this by strengthening their home learning environment. It encourages and enables parents, the wider family and local community to play an active role in their children's education. The programme is evidence based and has been run in 18 countries around the world. Between 2009 and 2015, 11,658 families took part in the programme in the UK.

The FAST education programme was developed in 1988 by Dr. Lynn McDonald, and is endorsed by both the UN and the UK Government. Save the Children is working in partnership with Middlesex University to deliver FAST through partnerships with local authorities and schools in areas of higher deprivation and where high numbers of children receive free school meals.

FAST:

- Is a fully inclusive programme that builds on families' and communities' strengths. It takes an evidence-based approach.
- Is a universal and voluntary programme that encourages whole families to attend. This means that it is non-stigmatising and typically has a high retention rate, including among low-income and more marginalised families.
- Reaches large numbers of disadvantaged children. Each programme can benefit up to 40 families.
- Is empowering rather than prescriptive. It takes an 'asset based' approach – by involving families, teachers and members of the community it builds on the strengths and talents that already exist in a community to help children achieve. The emphasis is on supporting parents and communities to give their children the best start.
- Strengthens family relationships and breaks down barriers between home and school.

1.3.1 The FAST process

FAST supports families by:

- Encouraging good behaviour and a positive attitude to school and learning

- Helping parents get more involved in their child's education, so they can support learning and development at home
- Encouraging stronger bonds between parents and their child, their child's school, other parents and the wider community.

An important requirement of FAST is that members of the wider community work alongside parents in the school to deliver the weekly activities. Each FAST course is delivered by a group of teams made up of local parents, school staff and professionals. These FAST 'partners' take part in a two-day training event to build the skills and knowledge they need to help deliver the programme.

Each programme is held in a local primary school and delivered by up to 20 FAST team volunteers, comprising: school staff to build links between home and school; parents to provide peer support; and community members to connect to local services. The volunteers are trained by certified FAST trainers. There are a number of discrete steps that make up FAST, these are:

Step 1: Parents of children in a primary school class or year group are invited to attend FAST with their family

Step 2: Up to 40 families attend eight weekly sessions where children and parents take part in structured activities together. Evidence-based activities are fun, interactive and are geared towards helping children and parents improve their life skills and confidence. Each session lasts two and half hours and comprises eight activities that are repeated in a set order each week. An overview of these activities is available on request from Save the Children

Step 3: Weekly sessions are followed by monthly meetings, FASTworks, run by graduated FAST families to build on their experience and the work they have done through their participation. This programme consists of 22 monthly meetings which are parent led. FASTworks is purposely less structured than FAST in order to increase the capacity of the parent group, however as with FAST, FASTworks aims to strengthen positive links between schools, communities and parents in order to improve a child's school-related performance, prevent behavioural problems and reduce risk.

Between 2010 to 2014, FAST reached over 2,892 children and their families in over 49 different schools across 17 local authorities in Scotland (over 22,377 children across the UK) and has trained over 750 partners (parents, school staff and members of the community). In order to reach the most deprived families, FAST targets schools with high levels of free school meals. Free school meal entitlement (FME) is often used in Educational Research as an indicator of poverty or families living in hardship (McKinney et al., 2013a, 2013b). The evaluation findings suggests that the average FME levels in the schools in which FAST is provided is over 44% - well above the national average of 19%. In addition FAST reports that its programme has an average retention rate of almost 80%, and contrasts this with an average retention rate of 20-40% for most parental programmes.

1.4 Evidence on FAST and its outcomes

Middlesex University is conducting an on-going quantitative evaluation for each FAST group to give an indication of initial impact. This evaluation measures changes taking place among parents and children over the eight-week duration of the FAST cycle. The process involves the use of structured questionnaires completed by parents and partners before and immediately following involvement with FAST. The national evaluation measures impact on the following seven areas:

- Child academic competence
- Child behaviour at school
- Family relationships
- Child behaviour at home
- Social support
- Reciprocal parent support
- Social and general efficacy.

Each FAST programme is evaluated using a range of validated tools including Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires (Goodman, 1997) which are completed before and after the programme by parents and teaching staff. Results from these surveys are used to produce evaluation reports for individual schools which is shared with the FAST team and families who take part. This evaluation programme also asks parents about their overall satisfaction with the FAST programme and regularly results in a satisfaction score of more than 9 out of 10. Research assessing impact of FAST over the period 2013-14² has revealed that:

- children's behavioural problems decreased by 26%
- family conflicts dropped by 24%
- 74% of parents felt more able to support their child in his or her education.

The Middlesex University evaluation (McDonald et al 2010) which has conducted an aggregate analysis of results from 2009-2010 across 15 Local Education Authorities shows that FAST: improves the parent-child bond; reduces family conflict; increases parents' involvement in school; increases children's level of happiness at home and school; promotes children's engagement in learning and promotes social support networks between parents. In particular, the evaluation found that during FAST:

- 22% of parents had been more involved in parent-teacher organisations

² <http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/about-us/where-we-work/united-kingdom/fast>

- 22% of parents had been involved in community centre activities
- 26% of parent had been more involved in school or further education
- 16% of parents had been doing more volunteering and charity work
- 8% of parents had been more involved in community leadership
- 31% of parents felt they had more support from other parents at school
- 24% of parents involved in the FAST programme have since sought further education training or courses.

Comparing before and after participation results, the Middlesex University evaluation found statistically significant differences, including:

- Total family relationships improved by 15%
- Total parent involvement in education improved by 3%
- Parenting self-efficacy improved by 4%
- Total family relationships improved by 15%
- Support provided to others increased by 25%
- Support received from others increased by 33%
- Children's total difficulties in school reduced by 8% and 20% in the home

(McDonald et al 2010 pp8-9)

FAST was highlighted as a programme that 'shows promise' in supporting families to engage in their children's learning in the JRF's review of evidence on tackling the attainment gap in Scotland (Egan, 2013). It has also been included in the Scottish Government's engaging families website, a resource for teachers to help support family engagement.

Such findings demonstrate the relevance of FAST regarding efforts to promote children's attainment. Other research has shown that children achieve more at school if their parents are involved in their education (C4EO, 2011; Sosu & Ellis, 2014; Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2012). FAST is also increasing parent-to-parent support and reconnects parents to each other and their local communities, creating relationships which are vital to increasing their confidence and to give them the strength and assistance they need to support their children in school. This indicates increased social and cultural capital.

The Glasgow University Team was provided with a Scottish aggregate data report, extracted from the UK data results, for the years 2010-2014. The Scottish data indicates that in all seven areas examined the evaluation indicated that positive change had taken

place. These outcomes represent encouraging findings. However, the focus of the evaluation means there is limited indication of the longer-term impact of the FAST programme nor any indication of the impact of FASTworks. Moreover, while the programme may be able to demonstrate positive impact it is also important to review the articulation of the programme with policy developments taking place in Scotland in relation to Education generally and highlight lessons for parental engagement interventions specifically. It was to these areas that the ROC research was, in part, commissioned to address.

1.5 The ROC research

This section of the report details the research aims and research questions operationalised by the team from the Robert Owen Centre. As mentioned in the previous section, the eight-week FAST programme in the UK has been evaluated by Middlesex University since 2009 using a pre and post questionnaire survey. Findings from this research were made available to the Glasgow University team early in the ROC research and this helped firm up on the foci of the ROC research. These foci formed the basis of the following three research aims:

- Examine the impact of the FAST programme in Scotland
- Draw out the key learning from delivery of FAST in Scotland to support approaches to support family engagement in children's learning for children living in poverty
- Influence local and national policy-makers and practitioners.

Following the award of the project the ROC team met with members of Save the Children to refine and develop the research approach and research questions. The following research questions were used to shape the research enquiry and subsequent analysis:

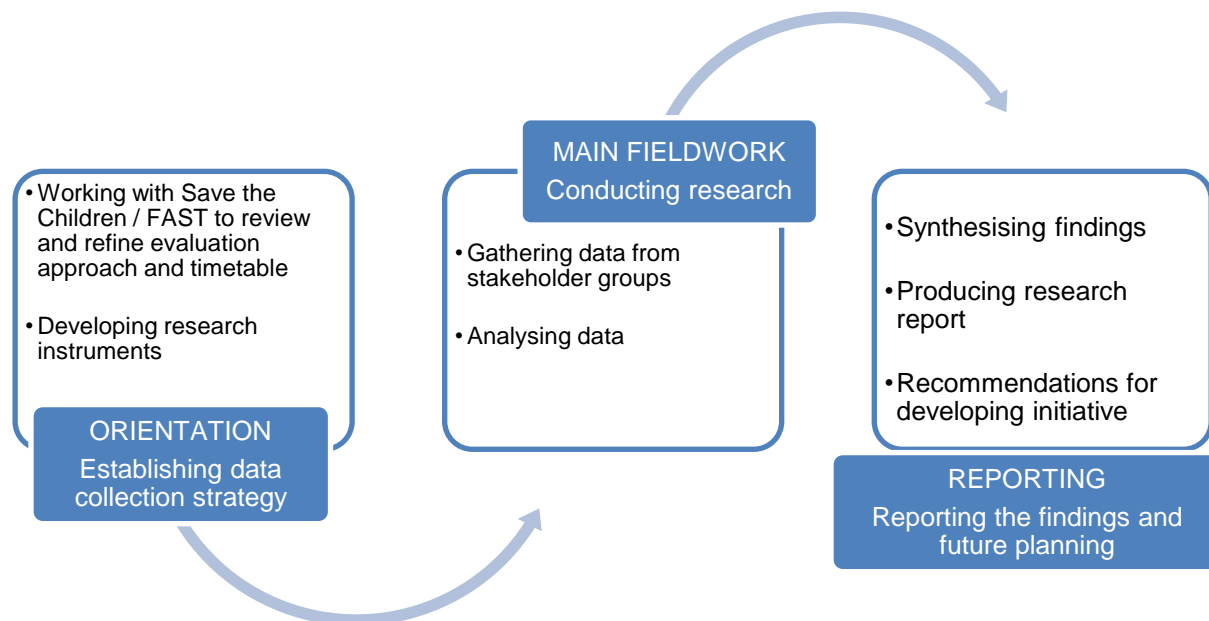
- What national outcomes/ aims does FAST support delivery of?
- What impact has FAST had to date in Scotland?
- What characteristics of FAST are key to its success?
- What are the key elements of FAST delivery associated with success?
- What are the key facilitators and barriers associated with successful/ unsuccessful implementation of the initiative?
- What impact has FAST had on different stakeholders (professionals, parents, children)?
- What key elements underpin models for family engagement in children's learning, particularly children living in poverty?
- What are the key learnings from FAST?
- What are the implications for future policy and practice to support family engagement in children's learning?

1.6 Methodology

The ROC methodology involved a combination of empirically gathered qualitative data and the inclusion of previously gathered quantitative data. The Middlesex University quantitative survey data helped to provide demographic information as well as an overview of the nature of the measured outcomes from the FAST programme. Following this exercise, four case study authorities and six FAST groups were identified (see Table 1) and qualitative data was gathered through interviews, observations, and focus groups with key stakeholders of the FAST Programme (e.g. parents, children, FAST team members, education and other sector professionals) were conducted. Both the qualitative and quantitative data was reviewed in light of evidence from the 'parental engagement' literature and associated policy developments in Scottish Education.

The research had three key stages: Orientation, Main Fieldwork, and Reporting (See figure 1). The project began in November 2014, the fieldwork was concluded in June 2015 and final report was delivered in August 2015.

Figure 1 - Overview of methodology



1.6.1 Stage 1 – Orientation

The initial stage involved two key activities:

- Discussion with Save the Children to determine the 'full scope' of the research and examine how the research would build on pre-existing data sources

- Developing research instruments for interview, observation and focus group schedules.

1.6.2 Stage 2 - Main Fieldwork

This stage of the research involved a number of key activities:

- Collaboration with Save the Children to select four cases study groups from within four local authorities. Selected Local Authorities had a longer involvement with FAST than other Authorities to maximise the opportunity for FASTworks groups to have been set up.
- Identifying informants from the stakeholder groups: families (parents/carers and children); FAST volunteers (parent/community/school partners); and educational/strategic professionals. Save the Children's FAST trainers played a significant advocacy role in recruiting participants.
- Observation of FAST groups
- Conducting group and individual interviews with informants (For interview/ focus group schedules for partners, parents/carers, children and strategic professionals see Appendices 2 to 5)
- Analysis of interview material.

1.6.3 Stage 3 – Reporting

The final stage of the research comprised a synthesis of the findings and production of a final report with executive summary (this document).

1.7 Approach to Analysis

The approach to analysis was largely iterative with the initial and overall framework for analysis framed by the research aims and research questions documented in this proposal. Qualitative evidence gathered during the individual interviews, focus groups and observations were recorded both in note-form and digital audio recording. Analysis drew on partial transcriptions for clarification and illustration.

During this process, the ROC team met to discuss emerging issues and develop more refined analytic categories. These meetings helped to identify key topics and issues emerging within and across the case studies and illuminated key factors and processes influencing the impact of the Programme in the various contexts. Participants' experiences of the FAST Programme and the different ways in which it had affected their lives and the lives of their children and its potential impact on their futures were, in a number of instances, detailed to provide concrete examples of impact.

As categories were developed through successive levels of analysis, the various data and evidence collected from different sources were be used to triangulate, check and

refine the emerging themes, culminating in a deeper understanding of the findings from the Programme.

In this report individual and group responses have been anonymised and authorities and schools have been referred to using *pseudonyms*.

Table 1: Local Authorities and FAST groups involved in this research

Local Authority	Schools (FAST groups)
Local Authority 1	Parkside Primary School
	Sunnyglade Primary School
Local Authority 2	Brightview Primary School
Local Authority 3	Hilltop Primary School
	Greenwood Primary School
Local Authority 4	Redbrick Primary School
*Local Authority 5 one interview only with Strategic Professional	

Table 2 summarises research informants while Table 3 indicates the research areas focused on with the different stakeholder groups.

Table 2: Research Informants

Participants	Individual Interviews	Focus Groups
FAST Partners (community, school, parent)	2x Community Partners 2 x Headteachers 4 x School teachers 4 x Parent partners N=12	-
Parents	N=3	1 x (8 parents) 1 x (4 parents) 1 x (6 parents) N= 18
Children	-	1 x (6 children) N=6
Educational/strategic professionals	N=4	-
Total	N=19	N=4
Total participants interviewed N= 43		

Table 3: Research stakeholders and methods

Stakeholders	Methods
Delivery partners (parents/community and school partners)	Individual interviews with FAST partners. These interviews focused on the lessons learned from the initiative and perceptions of impact on local families.
Participants in FAST (Parents/carers/children)	Individual and group interviews with parents/carers/children involved with the FAST Programme and FASTworks. This was a rolling programme of interviews over the duration of the research. Interviews focused on reported impact (both specific and wider) on the lives of parents/carers and children.
Commissioners (strategic professionals)	Individual interviews with relevant Education/Strategic professionals involved with the FAST Programme. These interviews focused on professionals' understanding of FAST and evidence of on local families and their children.

1.8 Reflecting on the fieldwork

The research fieldwork stage generally went well. However, arranging dates for interview with informants was not always straightforward and the timescale for this stage of the work had to be extended to maximise the numbers involved. Interviews with those involved in FASTworks were more problematic. Many of the FASTworks groups identified for inclusion in the research were not operating during the fieldwork period and it proved difficult to secure a good representation of those involved in FASTworks.

2. Findings

The findings of this research are based on qualitative data collected in the period January to June 2015. Direct quotes from relevant stakeholders are used to illustrate the findings as well as the inclusion of vignettes to highlight specific examples of practice in FAST and FASTworks. The original remit for the research provides the overall structure of this section. Findings in this section provide insights beyond the shorter timescale of the Middlesex University evaluation (see Introductory section).

a. Participants' views on the extent to which FAST articulates with other relevant programmes and policies

Section 1, detailed the FAST aims, focus and main types of activity. Our findings reveal that stakeholders perceived these aims and activities to be articulating well with the wider policy landscape regarding: interagency working to promote parental engagement; tackling poverty; children's learning; the attainment challenge; and closing the attainment gap³.

Across those interviewed, there was consensus that FAST articulated with and complemented such programmes and policies. Furthermore, FAST was reported to be making a positive contribution to work being done in these areas. Strategic professionals and partners reported that, because of its partnership working, focus on the community and whole family approach, FAST enabled parents to engage more fully in the learning of their child, facilitated better educational outcomes but also empowered parents in this process.

A common theme in the interviews was that FAST not only complements policies and other measures to promote family engagement in learning, but has been helpful as a vehicle to introduce families to partner programmes and vice versa. For example, in one local authority, there were clear links with another early intervention initiative which aims to provide holistic support (e.g. mental health advice, energy and financial advice, parenting strategies) for families with young children who live in challenging circumstances. The 'whole family approach' adopted by FAST paralleled the work of the core team and key workers involved in this early intervention initiative and the co-ordinator has been a FAST community partner for several years. This community partner pointed out that lessons learned from FAST had positively influenced some of the ways in which her initiative operated. For example, the community and participatory approach that characterises FAST and FASTworks (the inclusion of school, community and parent partners) meant that families had an opportunity to be introduced to other

For example: The Early Years Framework (2009); The Early Years Collaborative; The National Strategy for Play (2013); Families / Childcare First Initiative Renfrewshire; GIRFEC /L (Getting it Right for Every Child / Learner); 'Triple P' The Positive Parenting Programme; Curriculum for Excellence

support and development organisations such as, *Community Learning Development, Advice Works* financial advice. This was reported to reduce isolation of families and develop a culture of peer and community support.

One local authority interviewee, while praising FAST, noted that their council was not currently able to accommodate all available programmes. This interviewee stated that the "*Council [is] not ready to take FAST on at the moment ... it needs to fit in more with existing strategies*" (Strategic Professional, Local Authority 3). In this case, the issue was primarily finding time and a place in the strategic planning to best align FAST with existing activity.

b. Impact of FAST

One of the main objectives of this research was to elicit interviewees' reported impact of FAST and explore, in more detail, what factors and processes were important in facilitating impact. In particular, the research looked at impact in the context of the strategic objectives of FAST and the developing National policy priorities regarding parental engagement and closing the attainment gap.

Essentially, FAST aims to improve family relationships and in turn, children's ability to learn. At the core, are processes that strengthening the home learning environment and encourage and enable parents, the wider family and local community to play an active role in their children's education. In addition, FAST works in partnership with others to promote its aims. In particular, working closely with teachers to promote family engagement with the school and the formal learning of their child.

The qualitative evidence gathered for this research demonstrates that FAST is indeed making an impact regarding these aims. While there was consensus about the positive impact of FAST in terms of its objectives, there were also numerous comments on improving the day-to-day implementation and running of FAST through improved communication and co-ordination between participants and partners.

i. FAST facilitating family relationships with school to promote children's ability to learn

Across the interviews there was strong evidence of FAST promoting schools' relationship with families, including those who were traditionally difficult to engage. The FAST approach and process was an important dynamic for schools in building more meaningful links with families through promoting dialogue, creating opportunities for teachers and parents to share knowledge on children's needs and learning and collaboratively developing approaches to address these.

Creating those relationships with families and making those relationships strong where children are valued and nurtured ... [these] were evident in the FAST Programme"

Community Partner, Parkside Primary, Local Authority 1

FAST was also seen as a catalyst for parental empowerment in terms of promoting parenting self-efficacy, self-esteem and parents' ability to engage with school and the wider community. It was reported that relationships were built through FAST that would not have otherwise occurred thus making it easier for parents to communicate with school for the child's benefit.

I am convinced that being involved in FAST really helped in the transition for mum and [child's name] coming to school ready to learn. Probably I would say one of the impacts is because we have good relationships with parents, it is much easier to contact parents if a child does not come to school and ask 'what's going on, he's getting late?' and the parents trust you because you have built up relationships in that period of time and as a result, attendance does not tend to dip too much in children who would otherwise be vulnerable.

Headteacher, Hilltop Primary School, Local Authority 3

... some of the parents came as part of the families who could not normally come to school. Purely because we do not know the families before the child starts school and are maybe a bit apprehensive about what this whole school experience will be about and kind of kept themselves back a wee bit. And when the parents came, they became much more relaxed, the relationship was great because they realised we were human and had a good relationship with them, and they would ask you things that they would not normally have asked. I remember one mum saying to me 'I didn't know you knew that about me, I didn't think you saw that'.

School Partners, Hilltop Primary School, Local Authority 3

There were frequent reports of FAST facilitating improved parent-school relationships and communication. Some highlighted that this was because FAST broke down barriers that may have inhibited parents from actually coming into the school building. For example, one Headteacher clarified that having FAST in his school had allowed him to build up important relationships with the families and the wider community. FAST also acted as a vehicle to effectively communicate with parents whose life circumstances were challenging and were subsequently having a detrimental effect on the learning and well being of the children concerned. Another Headteacher noted that she felt FAST had been effective in encouraging local immigrant families to become involved in the life of the school:

Where I saw there was a difference, a good example ... is (pupil's name), she was a Polish child who had just moved over and was ready to start school and came with her mum and another child and also another Spanish boy, they were due to start school and they came to FAST. Those two mums were able to come to those initial visits and it helped and made a huge difference in the transition because they were isolated ... in terms of the impact on them and settling and being ready to learn, it was tremendous and it was really a success story and (Mum's name) is now part of our Parent Council – she runs the website, she's gone on and is now at Uni.

(Headteacher, Hilltop Primary School, Local Authority 3)

School partners reported that FAST allowed lasting relationships between school and parents which helped the school staff to appreciate a child's situation, allowing teaching and support staff to better support the child and hopefully impact on school attainment.

I think it's great when there is anything that can benefit children and relationships between families and schools together, bringing them all together can benefit the child. It is a very good programme. (School Partners, Hilltop Primary School, Local Authority 3)

There was evidence that, after their involvement with FAST, parents were more confident about getting involved in school activities, such as the School Board. Interviewees reported that parents were more confident and vocal in discussing their children's needs with the school and letting the school know if there were concerning issues:

... [it's about] confidence ... (Mum's name) is here and she has four children and she could not come through the door, and she has now completed a host of courses. She has been in continuing further education ... she is mixing with other parents and she has the confidence to do that which she did not have before. She has no issues in coming in to speak with me or see me, and before, she would not cross the door. [This was like] her mother in law, who really, really struggled to engage with chronic attendance issues and we have been able to work and resolve the differences and we have a partnership that we did not have before. And I would say that being a part of something and having a role has helped".

(Headteacher, Hilltop Primary School, Local Authority 3).

ii. FAST impact on children and their learning

Our research was also interested in exploring the importance of the impact of FAST on children and the indirect impact their wider learning. Our remit did not include assessing impact on attainment. However, in other studies evaluating FAST internationally, several large-scale randomised control trials (RCTs) have been conducted that have shown that FAST produces positive outcomes for young people and their families⁴. The complementary evaluation conducted by Middlesex University has also provided some quantitative evidence on this issue and this is highlighted in the Introduction Section.

School partners observed that children related better with their parents through practices developed with the FAST Programme, especially during special play and meal times.

When they sat to play games, the kids were getting lots out of it as much as the parents. I could see even the children learning to play better together.

(School Partners, Hilltop Primary School, Local Authority 3).

⁴ <http://www.familiesandschools.org/why-fast-works/rcts/>

This process was also highlighted in the children's focus group findings. Participating children, even after some time had elapsed, recognised the value of the time spent with parents and the activities they engaged in. Pupils spoke about the fun they experienced during FAST and the happiness they felt, one child suggested they felt "happiest when I got a chance to play with my sister and my mum because we don't get to do that often..."

The children spoke about the joy of spending one-on-one time with their parent(s) or grandparents. Pupils stated that FAST had had a positive impact on their own and family's lives.

[I] liked being able to spend time with my mum because we'd been kind of drifting apart because of arguments ...

One parent partner mentioned that their child carried on with FAST activities at home such as special play,

... I can speak on behalf of my own child who although I was being a parent partner, she used to sit inside and do the activity in the 2nd cycle and a lot of other children similar to my own daughter, they really loved doing the activities, they loved doing the special time, special play. That was something that was being taken away as being quite lasting in their minds, it was something special take away as a mentality, ... but that special time was important for children, definitely.

(Parent Partner, Parkside Primary, Local Authority 1)

Children in the focus group often reported the sense of achievement, particularly the graduation day, and the celebration of the families as important to them. In addition, special play seemed to be a prominent feature of FAST for those children involved.

There used to be a special family time when we get a bag with different materials and we build some things and we get to play with it, it was the best time to let our imagination loose" and "Special play was the best part - because we had to play, we made things...

(Pupil: focus group, Hilltop Primary School, Local Authority 3).

Communication and skill learning through play has been highlighted as crucially important for children's development by the National Strategy for Play (2013), therefore, FAST can be seen as clearly supporting and contributing to children's learning.

In looking at how FAST can contribute to young people's learning outcomes, our research explored the research literature and considered the qualitative accounts of the various stakeholders in our case studies regarding this topic. These insights also help us to understand what processes have influenced this issue. School partners and parents were particularly well placed to provide insights on how FAST was able to contribute to children's learning.

A common theme across the interviews was that FAST had a positive impact on developing parents' engagement in the learning of their children at home and in the life of the school. As the research literature indicates (Gregg and Washbrook, 2009;

Chowdry et al., 2010; Cummings et al., 2012; Gorard et al., 2012), this is a key factor in improved educational outcomes including attainment. Indeed, professional and parent interviewees stressed the impact of FAST on promoting engagement with the school and improving parent capacity and skills to engage in a meaningful way in their child's learning. This included children's confidence in their learning. For example, one teacher noted

I would say from a teacher's point of view, the children were more open. I don't know if it was because we had a relationship with the parent and they wanted their child to do better and we had more time to think about and talk about their child. But the parent had realised their child was really good and they thought that they would do that wee bit more, not all but some of them. I think the kids were more confident round about the school and coming into school because new mums were coming into the school and at some point bringing in the mums to school together, ... the success of that went up because we can see the kids bringing in their mums before they are ready, so that's around the school and even in class I have seen a difference.

(Teacher, Hilltop Primary, Local Authority 3)

Some stakeholders reported that FAST was contributing to learners' attainment. For example, one Strategic Professional stated.

I think from the feedback from the schools is that it has been really positive from different measures including educational attainment. I think where I have been involved in running FAST there has been complete agreement that it works... where it has gone into schools I think it has been successful, not without some difficulty, but it has been successful.

(Strategic Professional, Local Authority 5)

One community partner commented that her involvement with FAST, and the successes for families she had witnessed, demonstrated a positive increase in gains between the beginning of 8 weeks FAST and the end, with quantitative data indicating an increase in mean score over this 8 week time period.

iii. Wider impact of FAST on parents and their community

In addition to highlighting the impact of FAST on parent-school relationships and children's learning, the stakeholder interviews provided evidence of FAST having a wider impact on parents and families.

A common theme in the findings was that FAST had promoted parents capacity to communicate and network with other parents. This then helped them to mutually support one another. For example, the theme of increased parental confidence and efficacy and its wider impact was evident across the interviews. Stakeholders reported that FAST, in building parents' capacity, had also impacted on the wider community as

empowered parents became more willing and able to work together with others and contribute to action in their newly extended social networks. FAST was reported to have created and sustained community networks amongst the participating families.

... they are now communicating together and some of them socialise together, like one of them was a single mother with 3 kids and she is now busy and [they] are in contact 24/7 and you can see the change and that maybe due to the parents having time and being involved together ... in this setting, we saw the parents bonding.

(School Partners, Hilltop Primary School, Local Authority 3)

A Community Partner observed that she could see the positive impact on participating families when she was out and about in the community:

... when I see them, I can see parents engaging in activities where they spend more time with them like going to the park and praising their children comes more easily, because sometimes people can't see first hand the effect those things have on their children especially the reinforcement they give to the children during special play, they can see how that works well"

(Community Partner, Parkside Primary School, Local Authority 1)

The increased social networking that FAST facilitated also helped to address isolation. One school partner mentioned that she thought parents at her school were:

"isolated" and that FAST "must be meeting a need because they [parents] came and they do not come for other events... they [the parents] kept coming, so obviously it meant something for all those parents who came".

(School Partner, Parkside Primary School, Local Authority 1).

One of the Strategic Partners said,

" ... I have heard reports of parents who were socially isolated are beginning to relate with others. FAST has helped them to communicate more".

(Strategic Professional, Local Authority 3)

iv. Impact on parents' educational and employment opportunities

There was strong evidence of FAST facilitating parents' progression to educational and employment opportunities. There were examples of parents who had started going to college and university while others had been able to find work. While we must be careful in attributing such examples of progression to educational and employment opportunities solely to FAST, evidence from the interviews strongly suggests that FAST had made a substantial contribution to this process.

I would make a point of saying I can see real positive and life-long change that has taken place in the children and their parents ... the children ultimately. For example there are

several girls (parents) who went on to work and college, One of them had been thinking about college and it (involvement in FAST) encouraged them to take the next step ... you can imagine if you have been a single mother on benefits and suddenly you've been through college and now you are a nursery nurse or a teacher, image the difference it makes to your life and your children's life, and if you are a mother now in the 3rd year of your degree at university and you have your wee girls who can talk about their mum in university, that's a real issue.

(Headteacher, Hilltop Primary School, Local Authority 3)

In another setting, one of the school partners spoke about parent partners being able to develop their own capacity through involvement with FAST:

...the parent partners, those who got involved in the managing of it and of those parent partners, two set themselves up for further education for themselves and it was successful for them because it [FAST] gave them confidence and I could see that confidence rising as they would come to school.

(School Partner, Parkside Primary, Local Authority 1)

In one parental focus group, it was mentioned that FAST parent time and subsequent FASTworks sessions were "*a bit of sanity*" for parents and that there had been discussions around education and training courses. One parent said that at "*FAST I'm not just a Mum*" and that she had since "*signed up for a politics course*" (Parental Focus Group, Sunnyglade Primary School, Local Authority 1)

The impact of FAST on promoting parents' capacity to progress to educational and employment opportunities was also reflected in some of the children's accounts. For example, in the children's focus group, one child participant was keen to share that her parent (who had been involved in FAST) was now at university.

v. FAST impact on professional development and identity

A strong theme to emerge from the professional partner interviews was that their involvement in FAST had contributed to their professional development and learning as well as their perception of their role in the community. A community partner participant reported that FAST had been a “*very good learning tool*” and cited the benefits of the training on how to “*build up a good relationship with parents*”. In addition, this participant stated that being involved in FAST had “*raised the profile*” of her organisation and other professionals working in the area (Community Partner, Parkside Primary, Local Authority 1). For some their experience with FAST also allowed them to reflect and take stock of their professional role in their organisation and work within their community, recognising their role in engaging with families and the wider community in order to make a positive difference to the learning and wellbeing of young people. One Headteacher intimated that “*FAST has allowed me to be the kind of Headteacher I want to be*” (Headteacher, Local Authority 4).

vi. Impact of FASTworks

As part of the FAST process (see Introductory section), Step 3 involves the weekly FAST sessions being followed by monthly meetings. These FASTworks are run by graduated FAST families to build on their experience and the work they have done through their participation. The research included a focus on this phase, and looked at a number of case studies to elicit narratives that identified whether and how FASTworks made a difference in three different local authorities. Overall, the positive impact of FASTworks was evident and was seen to continue to empower families and allow them to develop a network for peer support. In some areas, FASTworks was working alongside other school or community based groups to strengthen ties within the community.

FASTworks case studies:

1. Focus group with newly formed FASTworks Group, Sunnyglade Primary School, Local Authority 1
2. Focus Group with newly formed FASTworks group, Redbrick Primary School, Local Authority 4
3. Focus group with established FASTworks group, Greenwood Primary School, Local Authority 3

Detailed narratives of each Case Study are provided in Appendix 1

There is evidence from other research collated by Save the Children of longer term, sustained impact on parental engagement with the school community plus the other aspects of family life that might otherwise impact negatively on children’s learning and wellbeing such as isolation and family stress. Our findings are in line with these themes.

Across the three FASTworks case studies all participants reported that they had been able to build on their FAST experience and consolidate the positive developments. Many of the reported positive impacts and developments reiterated and built on those stated for FAST. The key themes to emerge from these case studies and related evidence are reported in Table 4 below:

Table 4: Key themes emerging FASTworks

Theme	Evidence to support theme
Spending more time with children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The focus groups indicated that their involvement with the 8 week FAST Programme and now FASTworks had been useful in helping them to make time to spend with their children with no extraneous distractions.
Improving relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Between parents and children The relationships between parents and the children had improved. The time spent together meant that parents and children became "<i>interested in each other's lives</i>" and were "<i>able to discuss things</i>". This was perhaps due to the fact that The FAST and FASTworks included activities that involved families working together and were said by parents to be useful in bonding families. The one-to-one time was also valued by parents and children, with children having the opportunity to "<i>get to know their parents</i>" and also to have some "<i>mum time</i>". Between parents and schools In addition to being important for improving relationships between family members the participants said FAST and FASTworks were an opportunity to bring people together and link families with school. The informants felt that there were improved relationships between the families themselves and between teachers and families. Parents agreed that through involvement in FAST, they were able "<i>to know more about what goes on in school</i>". The parents also commented that FAST led to better relationships with teachers which they said was important for both parents and pupils. Between parents and parents Parents indicated that FAST and FASTworks was an opportunity for parents to meet with other parents and form relationships with them. These parents provided support to each other.
Impact on children's development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Confidence: The various FASTworks activities, such as participation in serving dinner and special play were seen as a good way to build children's confidence. Creativity: The parents also reported that the children enjoyed activities such as drawing (scribbles), which highlighted talent and creativity. Independence: There were indications that children learnt to take responsibilities and the "<i>roles were reversed</i>" with children directing what went on. Social Skills: The parents commented that children were able to play with a variety of different children from their normal peer group and that through this they developed their social skills. In terms of the longer-term impact on children, FASTworks was seen as supporting the development of the children's social skills which would benefit them throughout their lives. Socialising with children from other schools was an important aspect of this development.
Reducing sense of isolation for parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> During the FASTworks sessions, relationships formed amongst the group and helped to reduce the sense of isolation some parents had experienced through being "a stay-at-home mum". Their involvement in FAST and FASTworks also meant increased confidence to interact with others in the parent community. Parents spoke about how this networking in the groups allows them to call on support/help when having a hard time.
Parents advocating FAST/FASTworks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The parents stated that they would like to see the programme extended beyond P1-3. One group indicated that they are trying to recruit other parents who would particularly benefit from the experience to join FASTworks. Two parents groups were enthusiastic about the trips that had been organised and mentioned that fundraising and locating funders were very important aspects of a successful FASTworks group. As a result of this some groups had started to build relationships with a number of charities and donors. Parents sometimes felt FAST had broadened their horizons, some families could only do trips with the FASTworks group since they lacked the funds.
Issues and challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some parents were concerned that the 'one child' approach of special play "<i>excluded other children</i>". Some stakeholders saw FAST activities and process as 'repetitive' and 'inflexible'. Some parents said they were "<i>uncomfortable</i>" with some aspects of the Programme including "<i>songs and emotion cards</i>". When reflecting on their time with the 8 week FAST programme, some parents said there were times when they "<i>didn't feel able to speak up</i>" when they felt they needed to. A small number of parents reported that some leaders/partners were overly directive. Some parents in Case Study 2 were unhappy with the pre and post questionnaires used by FAST, seeing them as "<i>intrusive and patronising</i>" and thought that some questions implied that they were probing for "<i>troubled families</i>". These parents highlighted the question 'Do you argue with your neighbours?'
Suggestions for improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents suggested ways to improve FAST and FASTworks, including more opportunities for parents' input and views to be included in the design of the programme and more and clearer information on what FAST was and how it worked.

c. Factors facilitating and inhibiting the success of FAST

This section considers the main findings from the research regarding the factors that facilitated the effective working of FAST and those that could inhibit the potential of FAST.

i. Factors promoting the success of FAST

The majority of factors reported to promote the success of FAST reflected the ability to implement the FAST model, secure engagement with stakeholders and establish a shared understanding of objectives.

ii. Developing a shared understanding and vision regarding FAST

A strong theme to emerge from the interviews was the importance of establishing a shared understanding of the purposes of FAST and the rationale for the approaches used. This placed an emphasis on the role of those implementing and organising FAST and FASTworks and their ability to communicate the aims and approaches to parents, teachers and other partner stakeholders. For example, one strategic professional stated.

I think at different levels there has been a difference, I think that the strategic partnerships where they have agreed to do the work, it was understood in a shared way, but when we went to communicate that with the schools, it was not initially understood. And I think it was because we have not traditionally worked in that way ...I think also less about the aims and more about the expectations that have been hard to manage.

(Strategic Professional, Local Authority 5)

Headteachers and school partners often agreed with this perspective, stressing the value of taking time to develop dialogue and ensure that all involved shared a consensus regarding the FAST aims and approach. One school partner stated that it was important to not only raise the profile and awareness of what FAST is and does but also share with the community evidence of its impact and value.

I think in terms of what your aims are could be made a bit clearer to the wider community probably. I think maybe publishing what the results were for people to see and also give people a higher profile and promote the whole school so that everyone can know what is happening

(School Partner, Parkside Primary School, Local Authority 1)

iii. The FAST approach

Participants identified the model used by FAST as key to its success. The inclusion of community, school and parent partners appeared to be a key facilitator for successful delivery of FAST and resonates with the holistic model of child development outlined by Bronfenbrenner (1979). In particular, parent partners were seen to have a positive effect on engagement because they reflected the community/participatory approach of FAST which allowed parents to feel included and not marginalised. The inclusive approach to the delivery of FAST also enabled

parents to observe their children interacting with others (e.g. delivery partners other children). This gave parents the opportunity to observe the effect of modelling different behaviour and possibly encouraged them to take a different approach at home. One parent commented that due to time spent at FAST, her child's "*behaviour is now better*" and that she can communicate with her son because he "*listens more now*" (Parent, Brightview Primary School, Local Authority 2). Another parent mentioned that FAST "*created better networks with people*" and that "*because there are parent partners, they [parent partners] are more likely to be trusted by others and more approachable*" (Parent, Brightview Primary, Local Authority 2).

On a fundamental level, one of the key facilitators for success in FAST was seen as parents' ability to share one-on-one time with their child. A strong theme in the evidence was that parents benefitted from the structured and undisturbed interaction with the child and that they continued some of the activities at home; '*... the relationships between the child and parent, that definitely developed*' (School Partners, Hilltop Primary School, Local Authority 3).

Occasionally, some parents questioned the rationale underpinning being able to only choose one child for special play. These parents noted that their other children were asking questions about "*why one child in the family got this and others did not*" (Parental focus group, Greenwood Primary School). These parents indicated that this often presented them with a dilemma and they struggled to choose which child to focus on. The reasoning behind the one child approach is outlined by FAST as the most effective method for targeted child development and parent-child bonding. Despite this, a few parents were still adamant that it would be better if they could have one on one time with each of their children. Other parents saw a solution as parents coming to more than one cycle of FAST so that other children in their family could get the benefit.

I think that a lot of the parents benefitted in a huge way because they would bring more than one child, when they come to more than one cycle and focused on more than one child so I think the parents have benefited from the development of those relationships.
(Parent Partner, Parkside Primary School, Local Authority 1).

iv. Motivated key people

The interview and observational evidence indicated that the success and sustainability of FASTworks was also facilitated by having motivated parents who could, when appropriate, take the lead to organise activities for the group and, in some cases, develop ways to fundraise to expand the range of FASTworks activities for families. In one case study the chairperson was a driving force regarding fundraising and the group had been able to secure funding from a charity organisation which had allowed them to take fifty two people to commonwealth games events in 2014. The chairperson was also essential in working to ensure good support the Headteacher and the family support workers.

Some FASTworks groups stressed that interpersonal relationships and group dynamics between the parents involved were important factors in the effective running of the group. Some thought that there had to be someone 'in charge', however in some cases this could be a self-elected member of the group which was not always agreeable to all members.

v. Promoting effective networks

Partnerships and networks were also important for the effective working of FAST and FASTworks. The partners from original FAST groups were reported as useful support and advice sources for families involved in both FAST and FASTworks. In addition such partners would refer families to the FASTworks group. Parents also frequently reported that the networking in the groups allowed them to call on support and help when they were struggling. Headteachers reported that engaging the 'right kind' of community partners who were committed to improving educational outcomes for children, enabled FAST to be successful.

The interaction and influence of school, peers, parents and community on a child's development is outlined in the interplay between the Meso and the Micro systems as described by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Development Model.

vi. Factors inhibiting the success of FAST

The research also identified a number of factors that could inhibit the potential of FAST and FASTworks. These are discussed below but the majority of these factors represent a range of operational challenges that were typically addressed as the groups matured, relationships developed, understanding of the objectives became evident and recognition of others' commitments and roles occurred.

In terms of future development and sustainability of FAST, all of the strategic professionals agreed that if there was withdrawal of funding from Save the Children, this would most likely be detrimental to the sustainability of FAST due to the financial pressures on local authorities.

vii. Time as a resource and challenge

Some interviewees highlighted the importance of time as a resource and also the allocation of appropriate time for activities as potential challenges in promoting full engagement. Time, particularly the other commitments of professional partners, was seen as a major factor influencing the sustainability of FAST. All of the strategic professionals, who were interviewed, praised the FAST project and were convinced of its success and positive impact of the lives of the families involved. However, some of the strategic professionals and school partners voiced concerns over time commitments of their own staff. In one local authority it was the responsibility of the Quality Improvement Officer to oversee the delivery of FAST, however after this post was removed the responsibility fell to the local Educational Psychologists who were already coping with a high workload. One strategic professional mentioned that her local authority had "*struggled to get people trained to lead on FAST*" and that the London training was "*intense*" which led to "*man power issues*" and difficulties in getting staff time released from other duties to do this (Strategic Professional 1, Local Authority 3).

Another Strategic Professional commented that FAST was "*resource intensive with HR requirements*" and that the attempt to "*cover more schools was not achievable as we are not able to roll out as quickly due to resources and especially with local authority cut backs*". (Strategic Professional 2, Local Authority 3). This same Professional mentioned that he thought it would be difficult to sustain FASTworks as it took place beyond school time and therefore, became

difficult to manage. He advised that if FAST was to become sustainable, then "*partnerships need to be equal between FAST, schools and local authorities with clear agreement on how to manage resources*". (Strategic Professional 2, Local Authority 3). This stresses the importance of early and clear communication between partners when establishing FAST in local contexts.

The issue of time constraints was a key rationale for those who argued for greater flexibility in the timing and arrangement of FAST activities

I think personally that I would change the timing to develop more timing for specific activities because if a parent had 3 children and some of them were very young, you could not spend enough time doing things like scribbles and talking about what have you drawn and so forth. It was literally a situation of 'can you sit down and can you grab that paper' and so on. There was not enough time to focus on what the activity was all about, rather than just organising your children in general. So 5 or 10 minutes was not enough to do that activity

(Parent Partner, Parkside Primary School, Local Authority 1)

One Parent Partner noted that where experienced partners were put together with newer volunteers, the pressures of time could mean that the opportunities for sharing knowledge and experience could be reduced. She reported that:

When you are there directing the proceedings or trying to get things organised, you don't have time to explain to new volunteers what is happening... 'this is what we're supposed to be doing and these are the benefits'..., you just have to do it because it is quite manic, in terms of the sessions. So I thought there needed to be more training.

(Parent Partner, Parkside Primary School, Local Authority 1)

viii. The importance of developing the initial organisation of FAST groups

Establishing the composition of groups, clarifying objectives and expectations and providing appropriate training emerged as related factors that were important in promoting the success of FAST and FASTworks. One Strategic Professional, in Local Authority 5, mentioned that because in some settings there were two trainers there could often be conflicting information. In another setting, it was reported that the training of partners was not adequate in some instances, especially in the second cycle which ran in the school.

It was reported in one setting that, in the initial early stages, it was not clear what the aims were for both partners and parents:

It is always a challenge to understand what the aims are and I think that sometimes they are not well understood by the parents and the staff. I think the first cycle definitely went a bit weird and people did not understand what they were doing, so there was misunderstanding there.

(School Partner, Parkside Primary School, Local Authority 1)

The age range of children to be accommodated was recognised as a challenge for some of the partners:

The age range of children was difficult to manage because we had children from babies turning up to the primary school age, so that was difficult to manage. And I think surrounding those kinds of programmes there can be some negativity and pressure ... can be too much on staff.

(School Partner, Parkside Primary School, Local Authority 1)

ix. Aligning FAST and FASTworks with school and local authority staffing arrangements

Some senior stakeholders reported that some of the people who were selected to lead FAST (e.g. family support workers) were not all at the level or grade to drive it forward, in some cases this had led to people requesting professional re-grading to take on these responsibilities. For one local authority, while overall FAST was seen as beneficial, it was reported that it had been a struggle to co-ordinate it and align it with current staffing arrangements.

x. Recruiting partners and developing their capacity

There were a range of issues highlighted across the stakeholder groups regarding the recruitment and development of partners. One strategic professional mentioned that in their local authority they "*struggled to get community partners*" and that the "*weight of responsibility was on school staff who end up really running it*". (Strategic Professional, Local Authority 3). In light of this it was suggested that sustaining FAST was difficult and that "*empowering parent partners to take responsibility was hard ... it was still a them and us situation, not a partnership yet*". (Strategic Professional, Local Authority 3). Given the importance of ensuring the correct balance of leadership in the groups it was seen as very important for the success of FAST and its sustainability to not become reliant on teachers and school staff to take the lead.

Key to developing the capacity of partners was ensuring that there were sufficient opportunities for appropriate training. One parent partner said that there could have been more time for training for the partners so that they are clear about what needs to happen during the sessions:

... definitely training of the volunteers and something more focused talking about the benefits not just this is what you do, because there needs to be a reasoning behind the programme. There is some in the book and that's fine for me because I've read most of the book as I've done two cycles now, but it was only because I read the books, not because I was trained. I think there definitely needs to be more training for the volunteers so that they can impart that knowledge to the parents, and when going to the sessions, they can be more confident.

(Parent Partner, Parkside Primary School, Local Authority 1)

In the same setting, a school partner intimated that initial training had been quite vague.

I think possibly the initial training there could have been a video to show what it is like, obviously your first reaction when you want to find out about something is go online and see, and it is all very vague... I think [that it] did not work particularly well.

(School Partner, Parkside Primary School, Local Authority 1)

A particular challenge for FASTworks was seen as parents needing more time to develop the skills and capacity to organise and 'lead' the group after only 8 weeks experience:

... I think if you want to impact, you have to commit for a longer time. A clearer plan, structure and training should be put in place for FASTworks as this usually does not take off well because the parents are not well prepared.

(School Partner, Parkside Primary School, Local Authority 1)

The capacity of parents to lead and source funding for FASTworks was also seen as a challenge by some strategic professionals and some school management who believed that there were instances where the operation and running of FASTworks was impaired "*because parents [were] not ready*" (Strategic Professional, Local Authority 4) after 8 weeks of FAST participation. For this stakeholder, parents typically did not acquire sufficient experience and skills required to lead FASTworks before 22 weeks had elapsed.

This issue relates to fact that many (but not all) parents had initially engaged with FAST because they needed extra support to cope in their lives and, therefore, it might not be feasible to expect such parents to be in a position to lead and organise until their situations had stabilised. Again, further training and time was seen as desirable to promote the capacity of parents to develop and sustain FASTworks.

xi. Recognising the existing commitments and responsibilities of partners

Often, teachers highlighted that their range of commitments meant that it could be challenging to secure sustained buy-in from teaching staff. For example, in one setting, a school partner said that

"getting people to give of their time, and it was about 30-35 hour of your time, was a big ask. Although that would count towards your CPD time so people might be more willing to give up that time, previously, there was no recognition for that".

(School Partner, Parkside Primary School, Local Authority 1).

One strategic Professional reported that

To recruit people, if we can get them to agree to take part and to get support to put the teams together, it's that initial time that has a bit of difficulty. And also the schools that have been involved, although they say they have been successful, they have had to commit a huge amount of resources.

(Strategic Professional, Local Authority 5)

This was reiterated by another Headteacher in another setting who reported that in her opinion, the FAST Trainer responsible for her area did not appreciate how over committed teaching staff were.

I was teaching a class and I had a phone call to tell me to come along and talk to the FAST co-ordinator, who ... could not wait. That to me does not reflect the picture of understanding a school and how that should be done. FAST is expected to reflect and work alongside the school, and the understanding of what aims the school has to do and what a teacher and head teacher are doing in a day seems to be quite lost on them. And all of that is frustrating and I think just even the understanding of at the end of an evening and at the end of a session, I think it is essential to talk about the plans for the next time, but these teachers don't have that at the end of the day, they don't have the luxury of having that as time in lieu or whatever.

(Headteacher, Hilltop Primary School, Local Authority 3)

This Headteacher said that she felt that the expectation of FAST organisers was unrealistic regarding the running of the school and that they expected too high a

commitment from the school and were quite inflexible in their approach. Importantly, she did state that:

I know it takes time for these things to be ironed out and I know that issues with community partners and budgets are sorted at a different level now, and I know other headteachers don't need to do it, but for me, that was my family and I needed to do that.

(Headteacher, Hilltop Primary School, Local Authority 3)

xii. Perceptions about the format of FAST activities

A notable proportion of parents, partners and strategic professionals interviewed believed that the FAST session activities were inflexible and repetitive and thought that this was off putting, even when the underlying theory had been explained. For these individuals the perceived rigidity of the programme and not being able to "*deviate from it*" (Strategic Professional, Local Authority 4) meant they saw the control of the process as firmly in the hands of the organisers. This professional said that there "*needs to be more flexibility... people need to feel empowered*" (Strategic Professional, Local Authority 4). However, another community partner in another setting stated that the 'repetitive' elements of FAST was valued by the children who enjoyed this. This community partner said that when parents complained about the repetitiveness of the activities, she used this as a stimulus for discussion about children's need for structure in the home.

xiii. Perceived stigma associated with participating

Some parents noted that they were uncomfortable with the association of FAST and Save the Children because their perception of Save the Children was that it was an organisation that targeted families who were in 'crisis' or in poverty. For these families the organisation's title was felt to be stigmatising. This was compounded by the publicity and advertising of FAST which some thought was not always clear and several parents said that they were "*nervous*" at the beginning and "*didn't know what to expect*" (Parent Interview, Brightview Primary School, Local Authority 2). This view was shared by those in a parent focus group at another school who said that the "*original leaflet for FAST was quite misleading*" and "*not representative of what it actually was*" (Parent Focus Group, Sunnyside Primary School, Local Authority 1). A community partner reiterated this view.

... probably some of the families did not always know what the programme aimed for so they came along and it was not clear what they had signed up for

(Community Partner, Parkside Primary School, Local Authority 1)

The importance of clear communication and key individuals was highlighted in addressing the issue of projecting an accurate message about the nature and purpose of FAST. One group of parents reported that the Primary One teacher had been key to getting them engaged initially and allayed their fears that it was targeted at families who were in crisis. They explained that this teacher had pointed out that FAST was a universal programme. The parents then appeared happy that they were not being stigmatised. A community partner in another location also highlighted the importance of ensuring an accurate image of FAST was in evidence. She mentioned that the "*universal principle*" and the "*whole family approach*" of FAST allowed a range of families to engage without needing a

label such as "that's the family who are unemployed" or "that parent has mental health issues" (Community Partner, Local Authority 2)

xiv. Maintaining engagement with parents

Initially, Partners could find it challenging to maintain the focus of parents on the group activities and effectively engage with them. Engaging effectively with parents during the sessions was sometimes difficult as the parents preferred to chat, using the sessions as a social activity to catch up. Due to the structure of the sessions, it was necessary that the parents were focused:

Parents would not be totally engaging with the programme, [they were] along just for the chat and it would be kind of like they had been forced in and it would be clearly difficult to get them to engage when they were supposed to be doing things and not just sitting and chatting with the person next to them or turning to their phone ... it was really difficult trying to deal with those situations.

(Parent Partner, Parkside Primary School, Local Authority 1)

Others highlighted the challenge of ensuring regular attendance from some parents, for example, a parent partner mentioned that there were slight issues around families dropping out and others joining after the programme started.

d. Comparing the ROC findings with the Middlesex evaluation

This section of the report reflects on the ROC research qualitative findings with those from the Middlesex University evaluation of FAST presented in the Aggregate Scottish report referred to in Section 1. Table 5 summarises results from both studies.

Table 5: Comparison of Middlesex University quantitative and ROC qualitative data

Measure	Scottish aggregate data from Middlesex University	University of Glasgow qualitative research findings
Child academic competence		
Parental involvement in education	Positive change**	There was evidence of positive and effective parental involvement in children's learning. FAST allowed teachers/partners and parents to enter into conversation about children's learning.
Child behaviour at school		
Pro-social behaviours	Positive change	There was less mention of improved behaviour in the school context. This may be due to specific questions about behaviour in schools not being asked in interviews.
Emotional symptoms	Positive change	
Conduct problems	Positive change	
Hyperactivity	Positive change	
Peer problems	Positive change	
Family Relationships		
Family cohesion	Positive change	There were improvements in family relationships from parents, partners and children. FAST encouraged spending time together.
Family expressiveness	Positive change	
Family conflict	Positive change	
Parent-child relationship	Positive change	
Parenting self-efficacy	Positive change	
Child Behaviour At Home		
Pro-social behaviours	Positive change	Child's behaviour had improved and parents reported being able to communicate better with their child because their ability to listen had been improved.
Emotional symptoms	Positive change	
Conduct problems	Positive change	
Hyperactivity	Positive change	
Peer problems	Positive change	
Social Support		
Emotional support	Positive change	Parents reported that FAST and FASTworks had provided them and their children with a high level of social and emotional support.
Affectionate support	Positive change	
Tangible support	Positive change	
Reciprocal Parent Support		
Support provided to other Parents	Positive change	The benefits of receiving peer support were mentioned by many parents as FAST and FASTworks reduced isolation.
Support received from other parents	Positive change	
Social And General Efficacy		
Social efficacy	Positive change	Parents and children commented that engagement with FAST and FASTworks had been a catalyst for positive life changes e.g. parents pursuing employment and further education, children feeling enabled to participate in family life(cooking etc.).
General efficacy	Positive change	

While the Middlesex evaluation is focused on findings from parents and teachers and specifically relate to the eight week FAST programme, those of the ROC are based on interviews with parents, teachers, strategic managers and children and encompass findings from both FAST and FASTworks over a varied, generally longer, period of time.

Overall, there is strong consensus in the findings from both studies (although the differing nature of the methodologies means this is often be expressed differently). What the ROC research study brings is an indication of impact of both FAST and FASTworks in the longer term, an indication of the articulation of the programme within the Scottish policy context and comments on the effectiveness of this approach to parental engagement and early intervention.

3. Conclusion

The aims of this research were to use a case study approach of FAST delivery in five localities, to examine the factors that contribute to effective early intervention family engagement practice in Scotland (with a focus on education). The findings provide insights and recommendations regarding what can be learnt from FAST as an example of an early intervention programme to support parental engagement in children's learning.

4.2 Impact of FAST

The findings from this research reveal that FAST and FASTworks have promoted positive and effective parental involvement in children's learning. Our findings complement, and have resonance with, the National Evaluation of FAST conducted by Middlesex University that reported a positive impact across a number of indicators reflecting FAST's aims and objectives. The qualitative evidence from our research provides evidence to suggest that, as was found in the National aggregate data, FAST is having a positive impact on the development of children and their families. In particular, FAST has facilitated greater dialogue between teachers/partners and parents regarding their children's learning.

There was consensus across stakeholders that FAST was supporting parents to engage in their children's learning at home and at school, and the wider research suggests is indicative of positive educational outcomes. FAST was also reported to have had a positive impact on children's:

- Confidence
- Creativity
- Social Skills
- Personal responsibility

Our research indicates that FAST has made a positive difference to the lives of participating families. It has impacted on the lived experiences of parents and their children (e.g. strengthening of family relationships and communication, better child behaviour). The nature of the FAST model promoted improved relationships between parents and their children through structured activities and spending time together. Children's behaviour was reported to have improved, they participated more in family life and parents were able to communicate better with their child. The longer term benefits were more evident in longer running FASTworks groups and, from data which was gathered in Local Authority 3, where the success of its parents and families were traced back to involvement with FAST (e.g. engagement in further/higher education, sustained better school-parent interaction).

Parents reported improved self-confidence and aspirations that, in some cases had led to them going on to participate in educational opportunities such as Further Education and University. The FAST approach also built parents' social capital and capacity to support each other, thus broadening the impact of FAST into the community. The increased peer support experienced as a result of FAST and FASTworks reduced the social isolation experienced by some parents. Teachers reported that their involvement led to improvements in their professional development and leadership.

There was consensus across all stakeholders that the FAST model made a valuable contribution to improved family and school relationships with a range of positive outcomes for parents and children. However, there were a number of operational challenges in applying the FAST approach to different local contexts. In particular, the approach needed careful integration with school and local authority policies, planning and systems in order to ensure appropriate levels of teacher input and buy-in. Time, particularly the other commitments of professional partners was seen as a major factor influencing the sustainability of FAST. The importance of having motivated people involved, who were effective networkers and skilled in acquiring resources and funding, was also an important facilitating factor, particularly for FASTworks.

While the FAST approach was seen as a key factor in its success, not all parents and teachers saw the need to adhere to the exact FAST model procedures. Some believed that the approach was 'inflexible' and could have been varied to better suit the local resources, parents' initial capacities and existing commitments and responsibilities of partners. Some saw a particular challenge for FASTworks as parents needing more time to develop the skills and capacity to organise and 'lead' the group after eight weeks experience through FAST. Some participants stressed that this highlighted the importance of taking time to communicate the rationale for the structured FAST approach and to take time to ensure that the approach was embedded in local systems.

4.3 Wider learning for FAST for policy and practice

The research findings emphasise the need to ensure that there is a shared vision and a set of shared values between the school, the community, the partners and the strategic professionals. Securing 'buy in' from local authorities and from school management is also crucial. Indeed, our findings suggest that FAST is most effective when it articulates with existing local authorities' policies and strategies. This is vital for the success and sustainability of FAST.

Importantly, our research reveals that FAST embodies Graysons' (2013) criteria and factors (See Section 1.3) associated with successful approaches to support parents to engage in their children's learning at home and at school. These criteria largely describe the features and characteristics of FAST. For example: that the approach is informed by research evidence on what works; is tailored to local context and needs; is properly resourced and involves buy-in from school staff and partners, particular, school management.

4. Discussion

The lessons that can be drawn from our research, taking into account relevant evidence from other research and literature, mainly focus on two dimensions:

1. The FAST approach and underpinning principles as a model of early intervention programmes facilitates effective parental engagement in children's learning.
2. There are general, and arguably, Scotland-specific factors that need to be considered when translating such models into action at a local level.

Our findings strongly indicate that, overall, the type of approach adopted by FAST and FASTworks is an effective model that can be adapted locally to suit needs and context. The underpinning vision, principles and rationale for the approach appear sound but not all stakeholders grasp these initially. When they do, they are more willing to engage fully with the activities which promote positive outcomes. This suggests that the implementation phase of those types of approaches that operate according to a specific format of steps and processes needs to ensure sufficient time is devoted to communicating the rationale to stakeholders; particularly parents, teachers and education managers.

As described elsewhere in this report, the FAST approach has been positively evaluated internationally and in the UK. We would argue that translating the approach to local contexts while maintaining the integrity of the model is key to the success of this type of approach. It is, however, also a challenge that requires skill, human relationships and time to address. This has implications for timelines, and recruitment, i.e. taking into account the skills of those in key facilitating positions.

In Scotland, the role of Local Authorities in supporting the FAST approach is perhaps a unique feature. Elsewhere in the UK many Local Authorities have lost their key central role in social and educational service delivery. Our findings show that, ideally, Scottish Local Authorities are well placed to support the planning and implementation of FAST. Again, communication between stakeholders is important. The findings of this research indicate that the FAST approach works best when stakeholders work together to ensure that the approach aligns with educational plans at school and Local Authority level and takes into account existing resources. While Local Authorities can play a key role in facilitating FAST, it should be noted that, plans for FAST to become funded through local authority services will remain aspirational under the current financial restrictions.

At a National and local policy level, early intervention programmes that aim to support parental engagement in children's learning are framed by the increasing focus on closing the attainment gap. In looking at Scotland's policy context, FAST resonates with the Scottish Government's Attainment Challenge. Particularly important for FAST is that the Attainment Challenge includes a strong focus on involving parents in their children's learning. Scottish policy has long recognised the importance of parental involvement in children's learning e.g. the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006 and the National Parenting Strategy (2012) require schools to work with parents to improve attainment for children.

In the 'Closing the Attainment Gap' report commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Sosu and Ellis (2014: p.25) state that effective parental involvement

programmes that have an impact on the attainment gap are those that focus on helping parents to use appropriate strategies to support their children's learning at home. They specifically mention Save the Children and FAST as evidence of good practice and said that FAST '*focuses on building a stronger relationship between parents and teachers, and coaching parents on how to work effectively with their children.*

The findings from our study, relevant international research and the policy context highlight the importance of the FAST model and similar family focused programmes in making a difference to the learning and wellbeing of children. The findings also suggest a number of recommendations; these are set out in the Section 5.

5. Recommendations

Our research findings suggest a number of recommendations for practitioners and local and national policy representatives regarding implementing and sustaining successful family engagement approaches.

5.1 What can be learned from FAST about programme features of successful family engagement approaches:

The wider research literature and our research indicate that successful family engagement approaches are:

- Evidence based – activities are based on robust research and evaluation of child development and the most effective methods to improve child outcomes.
- The planning of activities is informed by research into local needs and circumstances.
- Universal – non-stigmatising and inclusive
- Multiagency – parents, teachers, local authority and community workers co-producing the programme, working together to improve outcomes for children, more equal relationship established between parents and teachers and can break down barriers
- Whole family can take part – older and younger children all able to attend as well or extended family, depending on circumstances. This avoids a typical issue for families that these kinds of programmes can be for young children only and cannot accommodate teenagers etc.
- Play-based, interactive – means activities are accessible and enjoyable for families who might experience literacy issues and other barriers to participation in programmes
- Parent-led – table based coaching means that parents are empowered and lead activities within own family, when working properly it is not parents being ‘taught’
- Include integral monitoring and evaluation from the outset that states explicitly what change they anticipate achieving, and define their criteria for success or failure
- They are properly resourced, with sufficient capacity to develop the intervention with planning addressing sustainability
- Senior education staff, including Local Authority personnel are engaged with and committed to the intervention
- Measures are taken to overcome potential participants’ barriers to accessing the intervention.

5.2 What learning from FAST suggests about policy and practice changes needed (local level)

Taking into consideration the criteria summarised in Section 5.1 above, the wider research literature, and our research there is indications that successful family engagement approaches can be best supported locally when the following measures are adopted:

- There is a need for alignment between family engagement programmes and interventions with education plans at school and local authority level
- Successful family engagement approaches must fit within and take account of existing resources
- Leadership from Head Teachers is essential to ensure adequate priority and resources allocated within school to make delivery of the programme and family engagement approaches core to how children are supported with their learning (e.g. freeing up staff to focus on delivering high quality family engagement work, making school facilities available to parents and partners in community and out of school hours, supporting teachers, parents and partners to work through any initial challenges)
- Successful approaches need buy-in from local authority and school staff and have the support of professionals involved, they must understand and be committed to aims and principles of family engagement approaches and value for children – including where it fits with other relevant plans and policies
- Programmes and interventions must fit within whole-school or long-term approach to family engagement. This will facilitate opportunities for continued engagement with parents and sustainable gains, commitment to building on relationships to further parent's participation in school life and in supporting children's learning (i.e. supporting parents to have space in school to meet and convene, opportunities to co-plan new and contribute to existing mechanisms for parental engagement)

5.3 What learning from FAST suggests about longer-term direction of policy and practice in Scotland

The wider research literature and our research indicate that successful family engagement approaches have implications and relevance for National policy:

- Evidence-based models such as FAST have the potential to make important contribution to meeting Scottish Government and local authority's aims of achieving objectives to close the attainment gap.
- Scottish Government and local authorities should consider how to ensure families are accessing programmes and practice approaches which have a robust research and evidence base, as does FAST, to meet their aims of increasing family engagement in children's learning.

Table 6 provides further breakdown of suggested recommendations and target audience.

Table 6: Recommendations and target audience

Recommendation	Applies to....
Ensure familiarity with the articulation between the FAST approach and the relevant Scottish policies in relation to parental engagement and education.	FAST staff, local authority partners, and staff volunteers
Provide sufficient time to promoting the understanding of the rationale for the FAST approach	Local authority partners, staff volunteers and parents
Consider running sessions on group working to better equip individuals to deal with group dynamics	FAST trainers, parent ,and staff volunteers
Identify and promote key skills and attributes among FASTworks group members to help support the group's continuity. For example, fundraising, networking, and craft skills.	FASTworks parents and volunteers
Recognising the importance of early intervention programmes and, particularly, their articulation with the wider range of policies and measures to promote education equity and change	Scottish Government and its agencies, Local Authorities
Explore the efficacy of FAST nursery-primary and primary-secondary transitions	FAST staff, local authorities and teachers
Explore major funding sources to promote sustainability and expansion of FAST	FAST staff, local authorities
Consider researching long-term impact of FAST in UK and Scotland in particular.	Save the Children

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7. Appendix 1: Detailed narratives of the three FASTworks case studies

1. Newly formed FASTworks Group, Sunnyglade Primary School. Local Authority 1

Sunnyglade is a newly formed FASTworks group which started in February 2015. This group indicated that their involvement with the 8 week FAST Programme and now FASTworks had been useful in helping them to make time to spend with their children with no TV and phone distractions. One of the participants had been involved with the Parent Teaching Association before being involved in FAST and FASTworks.

The parents reported that there were important lessons learnt during FAST such as listening to children properly and allowing them develop their independence. The various FASTworks activities, such as participation in serving dinner and special play were seen as a good way to build their children's confidence. The parents also reported that the children enjoyed activities such as drawing (scribbles), which showed hidden talent and creativity. The FAST and FASTworks included activities that involved families working together and were said to be useful in bonding families. The one-to-one time was also valued by parents and children, with children having the opportunity to "*get to know their parents*" and also to have some "*mum time*".

The parents found their involvement with FAST and FASTworks positive because they were able to take time away from other activities and focus on their children. One mum mentioned that during FAST and FASTworks, she was able to put aside the "*personal issues*" she was dealing with, particularly with "*changes happening in her relationship*". FAST and FASTworks provided support and a good distraction away from those issues.

During the FASTworks sessions, relationships formed amongst the group and helped to reduce the sense of isolation some parents had experienced through being "a stay-at-home mum". Their involvement in FAST and FASTworks also meant increased confidence to interact with others in the parent community. These relationships developed during 'parent time' and there were discussions about their children but these expanded to encompass discussions about jobs and potential opportunities to get back into education. Some parents brought leaflets in from local colleges to facilitate these discussions. It was mentioned that the parents felt encouraged and supported by these conversations and more confident as a result of this network of other parents.

The relationships between parents and the children was also said to have improved. The time spent together meant that parents and children became "*interested in each other's lives*" and were "*able to discuss things*". The parents also commented that FAST led to better relationships with teachers which they said was important for both parents and pupils.

Some parents agreed that the initial leaflets which promoted FAST had turned them off slightly because they thought Save the Children would only target "*underprivileged children*" or "*troubled families*". The group said that are trying to recruit other parents to join FASTworks. The PTA group was interested in being involved and the group hoped to continue with some FAST-like activities, especially the shared meal times. The parents stated that they would like to see the programme extended beyond P1-3 and were happy with the informal atmosphere.

2. Newly formed FASTworks group, Redbrick Primary School, Local Authority 4

The participants heard about FAST from an open day at the school as well as from a letter sent out from school (P1). This was the first series of FAST ever in the school. The parents thought it was "more structured" than they initially thought it would be.

The participants felt that there were improved relationships between the families themselves and between teachers and families. Parents agreed that through involvement in FAST, they were able "*to know more about what goes on in school*" and also meet with other parents.

In terms of activities, there were indications that children learnt to take responsibilities and the "*roles were reversed*" with children directing what went on. The shared mealtimes were said to be an enjoyable part of FAST, especially for families who were not used to eating together. Some parents voiced their opinions over the 'one child' approach of special play, mentioning that this approach "*excluded other children*". The parents also pointed out that the graduation part of FAST was really important and they felt "*a sense of achievement*".

Involvement with FAST and FASTworks was said to be useful because it provided a chance to connect beyond the role of a parent; "*not just a mum, you are a person*".

However, there was criticism of the FAST process from some parents in Case Study 2. These saw FAST activities and process as being 'repetitive' and some said this meant "*children got bored*". Some parents also said they were "*uncomfortable*" with some aspects of the Programme including "*songs and emotion cards*". Despite this, there were many positive aspects of FAST articulated in this case study. The parents commented that children were able to play with a variety of different children from their normal peer group and that through this they developed their social skills. In particular, one Mother spoke about her daughter who has severe separation anxiety benefited greatly from her participation in FAST and the partners found ways in which to help her be away from her mum.

In starting up the FASTworks group in Case Study 2, there had been some initial difficulties in finding a venue, however this has since been fixed and the group is now meeting at a Salvation Army hall. When reflecting on their time with the 8 week FAST programme, some parents said there were times when they "*didn't feel able to speak up*" when they felt they needed to, the parents said some leaders/partners were overly directive.

Some parents in Case Study 2 were unhappy with the pre and post questionnaires used by FAST, seeing them as "*intrusive and patronising*" and thought that some questions implied that they were probing for "*troubled families*". These parents highlighted the question 'Do you argue with your neighbours?'

Parents suggested ways to improve FAST and FASTworks, including greater opportunities for parents' input and views could be included in the design of the programme and more and clearer information on what FAST was and how it worked.

3. Established FASTworks group, Greenwood Primary School, Local Authority 3

Two cycles of FAST have been run in this school while FASTworks has been

running continuously for the last two years. The participants said FAST and FASTworks were an opportunity to bring people together and link families with school. The shared mealtimes were a big attraction as was the one-on-one time (special play) with children and parents.

One of the FASTworks group members said that the initial FAST group had helped her child settle into the school when they had moved into the area. It was also said that FAST and FASTworks have helped foster links between people in the area. According to the group there is nothing similar to FAST in the area. FASTworks has been so successful in this area that some families have come to FASTworks directly without going through FAST.

The FASTworks group commented on the pre-set structure of FAST, this includes family time, special play, flag making, meal time, announcements and singing. When asked why things were so regimented the group said that things had to be included in a set order, that "*there was scientific evidence to justify this*". One member commented that the special play "*had to happen*" while another said that "*buddy time had to happen*" and another spoke up for the parent sessions having to also happen. By the end of the eight-week programme the children are familiar with the process and know what is happening. It was suggested that the cycle and regime from FAST "*helps the children's brains reset*".

In terms of FAST impact on the community, the parents said that it gave them "*time out and somewhere to go*". Children were given the opportunity to let loose and parents do not have to worry about their safety. One parent suggested that this familiarity (with the process and the building in which it takes place) encouraged the children to want to return to school. The group reported that there were one or two dads involved.

When asked to describe FASTworks, many of the parents enthused about the trips they had organised. They mentioned that fundraising and locating funders were very important aspects of a successful FASTworks group. The chairperson of the FASTworks group reported that they had received £10,000 from the *National Lottery* and that they have £11,000 in the bank. The chairperson spoke about having to build relationships with a number of charities and donors and also said that the group had charitable status. It was clear that this chairperson was the driving force behind the fundraising. She also said that the group had received money from a charity organisation which had allowed them to take fifty two people to commonwealth games events in 2014. She mentioned the good support that FASTworks received from the Headteacher and the family support workers.

Some of the families involved in the commonwealth games venture were not involved in the FASTworks group but had been identified as 'in need' by the school. The FASTworks group were also involved in a food bank run through the woman's refuge. Children of the group had received a social enterprise award for recycling school uniforms from other families. They had also received 2nd prize in the Bank of Scotland Community Awards. [COMM impact]

The FASTworks committee held meetings to plan the year ahead. Trips were felt to build children's excitement and allow parents to develop relationships with each other. In the summer 2015 they aimed to conduct two trips. This was believed to help maintain the children's contact with the school and helps ease transitions.

The FASTworks group meets once a month although events can happen more frequently than this. In total they aim for four trips in a year. This is not charged to parents but is covered by the group fundraising and donations.

Parents spoke about how the networking in the groups allows them to call on support/help when having a hard time. Some parents indicated that some families have real need and FASTworks allows them a break from their routine and also helps break down the social isolation. One of the parents said that her family could

only do trips with the FASTworks group since she lacked the funds. Several of the parents indicated that the commonwealth games trip was out with their budgets and would not have happened without the FASTworks support. [broadening horizons]

The school was mentioned a number of times by the parents for being very supporting of the FASTworks group. The group had gifted a stage and piano to the school in recognition of this support. The partners from the original FAST group were highlighted as useful support and advice sources for families involved in both FAST and FASTworks. In addition they would refer families to the FASTworks group.

** In terms of the longer-term impact on children, FASTworks was seen as supporting the development of the children's social skills which would benefit them throughout their lives. It was also felt that the group had a positive role in developing children's confidence and supporting children to make friends and network with other children out with their own school. Shared mealtimes was felt to provide a situation without distraction and teaching them to eat dinner and develop their manners while parents get opportunity away from routine. At the time of the research, parents did not see a benefit in terms of more formal educational or employment outcomes.

In this setting, there are currently around 20 families involved in FASTworks. There was some suggestion that more families should be involved and the group had approached the Headteacher to see if there were other families who could be involved. Having a third cycle of FAST was felt to have a role in boosting the numbers and it was intimated that Save The Children was looking at the possibility of running a third FAST cycle in the school since it was regarded as so successful. Having one session every four weeks was felt to be adequate by the parents, it take time to organise, and costs around £150 per session to run. The group also mentioned that they were in discussion with the Robertson Trust to look at the possibility of funding a support worker who would also support other FW groups.

8. Appendix 2 - Interview questions for partners/volunteers involved in FAST

1. How did you become involved with the FAST Programme? (* Note participant details e.g. Name, position etc.)
 - a. What is your understanding of the aims of FAST? E.g. child development, education, community engagement, tackling socio-economic disadvantage.
2. What have been your main tasks to date?
 - a. Who do you work regularly with?
3. Can you tell me about the families you have been working with as part of the Programme?
 - a. Do you think FAST targets/reaches the right families? If yes, how does it do this, if no, why not?
4. Can you tell me about the successes of the Programme?
 - a. Who has benefitted the most from FAST and why? Can you give me an example?
 - b. What educational benefits has there been for the young people involved?
5. What have been the most challenging aspects of the Programme and why?
 - a. Budgeting, planning, resources etc.?
 - b. Have there been families who have dropped out? If so, why do you think this happened?
 - c.
6. Do you think there are any lessons which can be learned as a result of the Programme, for example:
 - a. Has there been enough opportunity for parents and children to interact and connect?
 - b. Do you think FAST does enough to promote the independence and self-reliability of families
 - c. Do you think there has been enough school / local authority support?
7. What long term impact has there been on the lives of the children and families who have been involved in the Programme?
 - a. Has FAST works been successful, if so why?
8. In your opinion, what could have been done differently?
9. Is there anything you would like to add which has not been covered?

9. Appendix 3 - Interview questions for parents and carers involved with FAST

1. How did you first become involved in with the FAST Programme? (*Note details of participants, children, ages etc.)
 - a. How long have you been involved?
 - b. How did you feel about it in the beginning, what were your expectations?
 - c. Have you been involved in any other groups like FAST?
2. Can you tell me what kind of things you have been doing as part of the FAST Programme?
 - a. Have you been involved in the parent-led FASTworks at all? If so, what has that experience been like?
3. To what extent do you feel being involved in the FAST Programme has given you and your family time to connect and do you feel it's made a difference to your lives?
 - a. Do you feel being involved in FAST has empowered you or helped you develop any skills?
4. Is there anything specifically that you and your family really enjoyed doing during your time with FAST?
 - a. Why this in particular?
 - b. Who was involved in organising it?
5. Do you think your involvement with FAST will help you and your child/children in the long term with:
 - a. Learning e.g. going to school, college or university
 - b. Work
 - c. Health e.g. how you are feeling physically and/or emotionally?
6. Is there anything else you would you like to say about your experience with FAST?
 - a. How important are the shared mealtimes?
 - b. How could FAST be improved? Is there anything you didn't enjoy as part of the FAST experience?

10. Appendix 4 – Children’s Focus Group Activity/Questions

What do you do at FAST?	What makes you happy when you’re at FAST?
Who do you spend time with at FAST	Which kind of things do you do at home?

Prompt Questions for Researchers –

1 – What do you do at FAST?

Do you play (*or whatever activity they are drawing*) on your own or with other children?

What are the best bits about FAST?

2 - What makes you happy when you’re at FAST?

Why does that make you happy?

3 - Who do you spend time with at FAST?

Do you prefer playing with other children, with mum/dad or with FAST helpers?

4 - Which kind of things do you do at home?

Are the things you do at home different from the things you do at FAST?

How are they different?

11. Appendix 5 - Interview questions for strategic professionals involved with or impacted by the FAST programme

1. What has been your involvement with the FAST Programme? (* Note participant details e.g. name, position etc.)
 - a. Are you involved in planning, funding or budgeting for FAST?

2. What is your understanding of the main aims of the FAST Programme?
 - a. Do you feel that there has been a shared understanding of the aims of FAST across different stakeholders?
 - b. Do you feel that there is a strong focus / impact on children's educational outcomes?

3. How has the Programme impacted on your own work and your organisation?
 - a. Do you feel FAST has been successful? If so, why?
 - b. Do you believe links can be drawn between FAST and the wider, national social policy context e.g. GIRFEC, Early intervention Strategies?

4. How do you think the Programme has impacted on the lives of the families involved?
 - a. Do you think the successes experienced by FAST and / or FAST works are due to them being community led?
 - b. Have there been any challenges in terms of engaging the 'right' families

5. In your opinion, is there any way the Programme could be improved?
 - a. Have there been any significant challenges?
 - b. How do you see FAST becoming sustainable in terms of management and funding arrangements?