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# Building Firm Foundations

A report on early language  
and communication policy

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# Foreword



## **Christian Wakeford, Labour MP for Bury South, Literacy APPG Co-Chair**

Reading helps children do well in school and in later life. It helps them to develop their understanding of the world and empathy for others. It is also intrinsically enjoyable – it feeds imagination and gives children exposure to language and stories that enrich their lives.

However, you must ‘learn to read’ before you can ‘read to learn’. And currently, far too many children are starting school without the words, oracy, and communication skills that they need to access the school curriculum and then flourish.

It is clear to me that a new approach must be considered. If we want to have a significant impact on children’s literacy outcomes, we need to provide support from birth onwards.



## **Alexander Stafford, Conservative MP for Rother Valley, Literacy APPG Co-Chair**

The importance of improving literacy cannot be overstated, given the effect it has on everything from education and career prospects to life satisfaction and even expectancy. The best time to start developing literacy skills is, of course, in our children’s early years. This is especially true for disadvantaged children who, right from the start, face bigger obstacles than their peers and so need the most support to improve their literacy at this early stage.

This government, through childcare and educational reforms, is improving prospects for all children but especially those in most need. This report will help streamline this government’s approach, and I look forward to continuing working with colleagues across Parliament to close the gap in early language and communication outcomes, and bring better literacy to all.

# Acknowledgments

This report was written by Marc Newall and Erin Hayden from the National Literacy Trust on behalf of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Literacy. We would like to express our thanks to Tracy Jackson, Jonathan Douglas, and all those who contributed to our call for evidence:

- Catch Up
- Education Endowment Foundation
- KPMG UK
- Libraries Connected
- The National Deaf Children's Society
- National Literacy Trust
- Nuffield Foundation
- The Scouts
- The Small Steps Big Changes partnership and Nottingham Trent University
- Speech and Language UK

This report has also been informed by the work of BookTrust, the Centre for Education and Youth, the Early Education and Childcare Coalition, the Early Years Alliance, the Education Policy Institute, the Early Intervention Foundation, the Fair Education Alliance, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Nesta, the Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood, the Sutton Trust, and the Speech, Language and Communication Alliance (formerly known as the Communication Consortium). Any errors are the responsibility of the report authors.

This is not an official publication of the House of Commons or the House of Lords. It has not been approved by either House or its committees. All-Party Parliamentary Groups are informal groups of Members of both Houses with a common interest in particular issues. The views expressed in this report are those of the National Literacy Trust and the group.

## Scope

This report is focussed on the early years system in England. This is because there is variation in early education and care policy and practice across devolved administrations.

This report acknowledges the relevance of child poverty and references issues related to the early years workforce. However, given this is a report on behalf of the APPG on Literacy, we have decided not to cover these topics in extensive detail. Other expert organisations and All-Party Parliamentary Groups are better placed to make considered recommendations.

To discuss the ideas that are set out in this report, please email [policy@literacytrust.org.uk](mailto:policy@literacytrust.org.uk).



# Executive summary

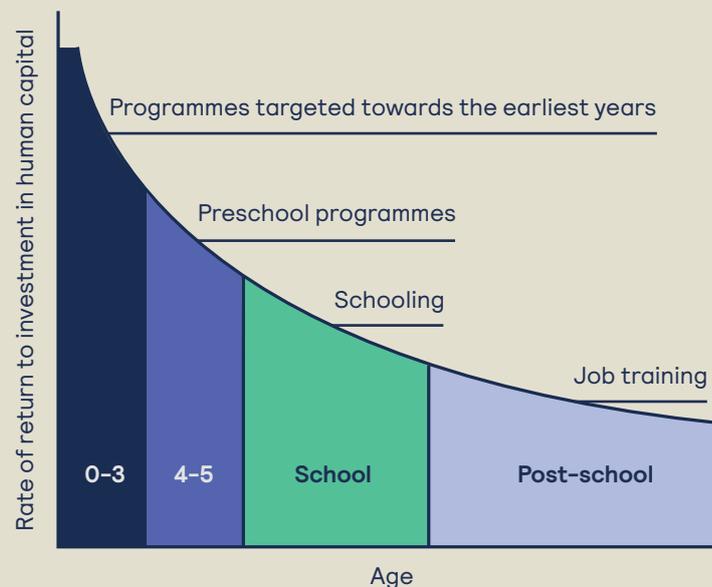


The early years system in England should support universal early developmental outcomes whilst also reducing disparities between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children<sup>1</sup>. The public, private and voluntary sectors should work in partnership to make this happen.

- **A long-term and evidence-based approach to investment needs to be established.**

The early years continues to be undervalued as a developmental stage by public policy. This is not simply a matter of social justice – it is also an important economic issue. Evidence from Heckman (2011)<sup>2</sup> and Garcia et al. (2020)<sup>3</sup> shows that sustained government investment in early education is more effective and represents a greater financial return on investment than interventions that are administered later in life.

- Political parties should establish a consensus that a core goal of the early years system should be to close the gap in early language and communication skills between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children by the age of five.
- HM Treasury should reclassify spending on early education as capital investment as it will drive our country's future prosperity. Overall funding levels for the early years should be increased and guaranteed over longer time periods.

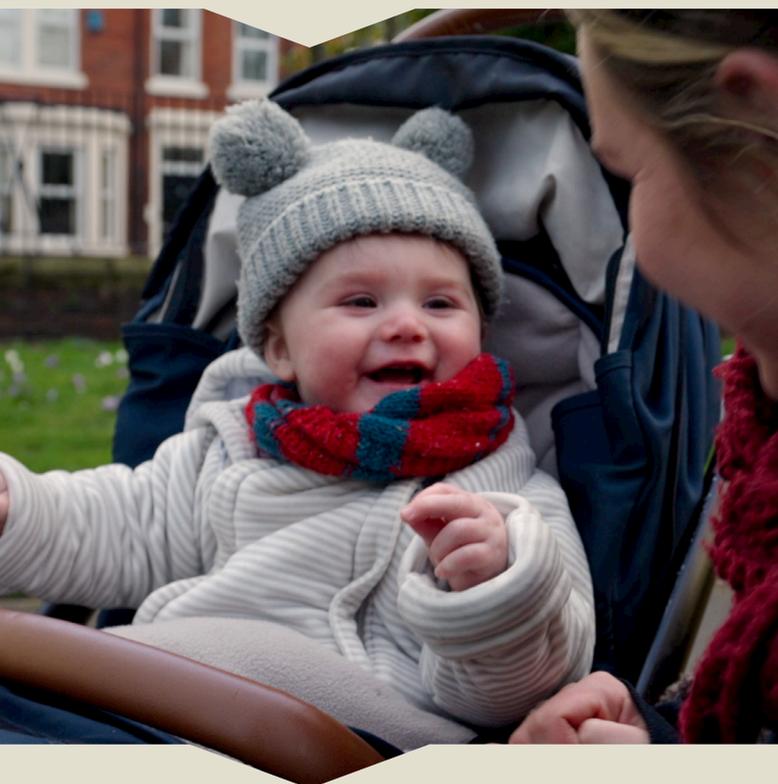


- The Department for Education should ensure that all early years practitioners – but particularly those working in the private, voluntary and independent sector – can access high-quality training to enhance their understanding of speech, language and communication development.
- The Department for Education should continue to invest in research and evaluation and foster networks that will strengthen the evidence ecosystem.

- **Government early years policy must strengthen its strategic focus on the home learning environment.**

The process through which a child learns to communicate is complex. Language and literacy development is shaped by a range of cognitive, behavioural, familial, and cultural assets. However, the evidence is clear that what matters most is the quality of parenting a child receives and the quality of the home learning environment this creates. We need to focus on early language and communication outcomes from birth.

- The government should guarantee that by 2030 all parents will be able to access a well-resourced and integrated speech, language and communication pathway for children from birth to five in their local area.
- The Department for Education should shift the early years system in this direction by expanding the Start for Life and Family Hubs programmes.
- The Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care should grow their investment in Start for Life as a data-driven behaviour change campaign that promotes the importance of the home learning environment<sup>4</sup>. This should be delivered through a multi-sector partnership aligned with the BBC's Tiny Happy People campaign.



- **Government policy must place more emphasis on children's early education outcomes and provide additional financial support for disadvantaged children and families.**

Research indicates that high-quality early childhood education and care has the potential to significantly improve life chances for children and can bridge the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their more affluent peers<sup>5</sup>.

The government's recent reforms are designed to make childcare more affordable for parents. They may lead to economic benefits by boosting parental employment rates. Whilst this is an important policy goal, there is a risk that the reforms could undermine the quality of care delivered and harm children's early education outcomes.

At the 2023 Conservative Party Conference, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children, Families and Wellbeing, David Johnston OBE MP, acknowledged this risk and stated that he is looking into what mitigation measures could be put in place.

- Existing staff-to-child ratios should be maintained to safeguard quality.
- Childcare should be expanded to all parents, including those not in employment. Promote uptake by simplifying the system and conducting targeted outreach.
- The early years pupil premium should be aligned with the primary school rate.

England's early years system is at a critical juncture. Careful policy design will be needed. However, top-down change will not be sufficient to address the complexity of the challenge. Ultimately, what the early years system needs is greater coordination of activity at the national and local level to create integrated networks of support between parents, communities and professionals. This report outlines how this could work in practice.

Section 1 provides context. We begin with an overview of the foundations of language and literacy and then explain why early language outcomes vary by socioeconomic background. Section 2 presents our vision for a better early years system that we could collectively build. Section 3 outlines how this vision could be realised through investment and reform.

# Introduction

Literacy gives you the power to shape your future. If you grow up without the tools that you need to communicate effectively, it is much harder to get where you want to go in life. As well as being the foundation of personal success, literacy is also a national imperative. It drives economic growth<sup>6</sup> and can help to promote social cohesion by reducing inequality<sup>7</sup>.

However, despite improvements in recent years, the challenge remains significant. 1 in 6 adults (16.4%) in England still lack basic literacy skills<sup>8</sup>. This can mean that they struggle to read letters from their GP or their bank and may find it difficult to secure employment.

The issue is being exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis and by rising rates of child poverty. The economic context is relevant, as the impact of poverty on early language can already be seen by the time a child is two<sup>9</sup>. An unequal start in life can lay the foundation for a lifelong pattern of literacy inequality, as the relationship between poverty and literacy is mutually reinforcing<sup>10</sup>. Low literacy limits employment opportunities and earnings and has a negative impact on health and wellbeing. Together, these factors establish the mechanism for the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

Thankfully, this vicious cycle can be broken. By providing better early language support for children from birth to five, we can mitigate the impact of poverty on literacy and help to ensure that the next generation have the skills they need to lead productive and happy lives.

Whilst there is no one-size-fits-all solution to the issue of low literacy, we know what helps. In the early years, there needs to be a strategic focus on the home learning environment, and far more emphasis given to quality and equity in early education and care provision. This will benefit all children, but particularly those living in disadvantaged communities.



# 1. Context: Where are we now?

## 1.a. The foundations of language and literacy.

What happens in the early years of a child's life has a profound and lasting impact on their ability to learn and succeed in school and life. Advances in neuroscience in recent decades have shown that the quality of a child's experiences in their first five years shapes their social, emotional, and cognitive development<sup>11</sup>. These formative experiences lay the foundation for their future health, happiness, and success<sup>12</sup>.

The process through which a child learns to communicate is complex. Language and literacy development is shaped by a range of cognitive, behavioural, familial, and cultural assets<sup>13</sup>. However, the evidence is clear that what matters most is the quality of a child's home learning environment, followed by the quality of the education and care that they receive<sup>14</sup>.

For context, the home learning environment encompasses both the physical characteristics of the home and the quality of the learning support that is provided by parents or carers<sup>15</sup>. Both elements have a strong social gradient. Children born to affluent parents grow up in more resource-rich environments. Affluent parents also often have higher levels of literacy and formal education<sup>16</sup> and are more confident in supporting their children's learning<sup>17</sup>.

In addition to the direct negative impact that results from material deprivation, poverty also has an indirect negative impact on children's language development. A lack of income can cause stress and strain parent-parent and parent-child relationships, making it much harder for families to foster a happy, healthy, and language-rich home learning environment<sup>18</sup>.

## 1.b. The language and literacy challenge starts in the early years.

England faces a stark language and literacy challenge. In the 2021/22 academic year, over 200,000 children were assessed to be below the expected level of development in communication, language, and literacy by the end of the early years foundation stage. This assessment occurs in the summer term of the academic year in which children turn five.

By then, there is already a substantial gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children. Only half of children known to be eligible for free school meals were assessed to have a good level of development in communication, language, and literacy at five. This is 20 percentage points lower than their more affluent, non-free school meal eligible peers<sup>19</sup>.

Early language difficulties affect between 8 to 10 percent of all children, and around half of all children living in areas of high social deprivation will start primary school with speech, language, and communication deficiencies<sup>20</sup>. This delay in language development can significantly hamper children's ability to learn to read and to access the school curriculum.

The single most important factor that influences a child's cognitive and social development is the quality of parenting and care that they receive and the quality of the home learning environment this creates<sup>21</sup>. There is strong evidence to suggest that the attainment gap is underpinned by income-related gaps in children's early language and communication.

Whilst this issue predated COVID-19, the pandemic exposed and amplified existing social inequalities. Many families found themselves facing serious financial challenges following job losses, sickness, or as a result of increased caring responsibilities. The impact was most pronounced among those already experiencing poverty, particularly single parents<sup>22</sup>. The temporary or permanent closure of many early education and care settings also reduced the professional support that was available to support children's development. Whilst some children were lucky enough to benefit from language-rich home learning environments during lockdown, many were not, as their parents lacked the resources, knowledge, or time. Lockdown also limited opportunities for peer-to-peer socialisation through play.

This is an urgent social mobility issue, as children who start school behind their peers often struggle to catch up. Children who do not achieve the expected standard in early language and communication skills at age five are around six times less likely to reach the expected standard in English at age 11<sup>23</sup>. In fact, language skills at age five are the single most significant predictor of literacy levels at age 11<sup>24</sup>. Research by Elliot Major et al. (2022) found that half of all pupils who failed to achieve a Grade 4 in GCSE English and Maths at age 16 were already behind their peers by age five<sup>25</sup>.

The implication is clear. To improve literacy levels across the country – and break the cycle of child poverty reinforcing educational inequality – we need to work together to build an early years system that champions the importance of parents and improves the speech, language, and communication outcomes of disadvantaged children. In doing so, we will uplift every child.

## 1.c. The early years system in England.

The early years system in England would benefit from a clearer strategic direction. It has evolved over time to meet a raft of changing political imperatives<sup>26</sup>. The consequence is that we now have early years policies, programmes and funding streams spread across three government departments, and a lack of governance to tie them together.

A core reason that the system delivers suboptimal outcomes for disadvantaged children is because it lacks clarity of purpose. Policy discourse often conflates early education and childcare. Whilst the two are inextricably linked, they are not one and the same. We need to build a consensus that the early years are the first, critical stage of a child's education. This should then be reflected in funding and policy decisions.

On funding, our current approach is to try and make our education expenditure decisions fit into three-year spending periods in order to align with democratic cycles of accountability. Whilst this may make political sense, it does not make economic sense. Short-term decision-making leads to early intervention being systematically undervalued by government<sup>27</sup>.

On policy, when making trade-offs between competing political priorities, the impact on disadvantaged children's developmental outcomes should be given precedence. We should also shift towards a coordinated place-based approach, as this is the most effective and sustainable way to improve children's early language and communication outcomes<sup>28</sup>.



# 2. Vision: Where do we want to get to?

## 2.a. A place-based approach to ensure that every child can thrive.

The APPG on Literacy's vision is for every child to achieve a good level of development in communication, language, and literacy by the age of five.

For this vision to be realised, we will need to shift to a place-based multi-agency approach. Government should recognise and prioritise the significant contribution of the family to children's communication, language, and literacy outcomes. All parents should be able to access information and guidance on how to create a quality home learning environment. All children should be supported through a locally coordinated integrated speech and language pathway<sup>29</sup>. The wider system should have sufficient funding to deliver specialist support.

We recognise that this vision will not be realised overnight. However, the National Literacy Trust has developed an approach that works that could be replicated across England.

Research has shown that the characteristics of the neighbourhoods in which children live, and the systems that they encounter, shape language and communication development outcomes more than the effects of social class and overall deprivation levels of the area<sup>30</sup>.

Informed by this research, the National Literacy Trust has, over the past decade, been exploring how place-based solutions can help to raise literacy levels. In partnership with the community and with cross-sector stakeholders such as

the Department for Education and Arts Council England, the National Literacy Trust works to better understand and then foster the conditions for sustainable change. The goal is to create an integrated system that works for all children and families by strengthening and coordinating activity at the local level.

The evidence from data and from input from families is clear that four things are needed to improve children's early communication, language, and literacy outcomes:

1. Place-based initiatives that bring together cross-sector organisations to address the underlying causes of complex social problems in a more holistic and joined-up way.
2. Better information and support for parents to build their confidence and give them the skills to make their home-learning environment language-rich.
3. Evidence-based speech and language interventions delivered by well-funded and trained early years providers, health visitors, speech and language therapists, and Teachers of the Deaf.
4. Greater awareness of existing entitlements to early education and care.

This work needs to be facilitated by a backbone organisation who is able to provide visible system leadership, coordinate the collective efforts of partners, and ensure that external messaging to the community is clear, consistent, and compelling. The private sector needs to support the effort by leveraging their channels to consumers to drive behaviour change. The government needs to strengthen its commitment to multi-agency place-based working and reflect on insights from the local level to continuously improve the national system.

The most successful place-based approaches are underpinned by the following features:

- i. A common agenda between partners, including a shared vision for change, a joint understanding of the problem and an agreed approach to solving it.
- ii. Joint use of data and a shared measurement system to understand the issue and then to track progress against a framework of shared outcomes.
- iii. A range of mutually reinforcing activities that create a comprehensive approach with clearly defined roles for each partner organisation.
- iv. Continuous communication between stakeholders and clear and consistent external messaging from the public, private and charitable sectors to drive behaviour change.
- v. A backbone organisation that provides strong and visible leadership to coordinate the collective effort and that of local partners.
- vi. A medium- to long-term commitment to the communities in need.
- vii. Cross-sector partnerships that are mutually beneficial for each partner's long-term strategy and short-term goals.
- viii. Communities that are engaged in all stages of the design and delivery of the project.



## 2.b. Case study: Middlesbrough.

In 2013, the National Literacy Trust launched their first 'Hub' in Middlesbrough with funding from the Booker Prize Foundation. The charity now has 'Hubs' in 17 places across the UK that data indicates would benefit from additional, targeted and bespoke literacy support.

Between 2013 and 2015, the Middlesbrough Hub worked with children's centres that are feeders for 11 priority primary schools in the town. These primary schools are in wards that are in the most deprived 15% nationally, with four in the most deprived 4%.

Around 200 families took part in Early Words Together, which is a six-week programme where trained volunteers from the community work one-to-one with parents and young children in an early years setting to promote good early literacy practices.

Children who went through Early Words Together showed an improvement at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage compared to other children in Middlesbrough and the national average.

Between 2013 and 2015:

- The number of children reaching the expected level in communication and language increased by 20.1 percentage points (pp), compared to an increase of 12.4pp for children in settings that did not receive Early Words Together and a national average increase of 5pp.
- The increase in children reaching the expected levels in literacy was even greater, with a 20.9pp increase, compared to a 9.1pp increase for children in settings that did not receive Early Words Together and a national average increase of 5pp.
- The percentage of children achieving an overall good level of development increased by 24.3pp, compared to a 17.8pp increase for children in settings that did not receive Early Words Together and national average increase of 8pp.

## 2.c. Case study: Gateshead.

Gateshead is another target area for delivery for the National Literacy Trust. There is strong partnership working between Family Hubs, libraries, smaller voluntary and community organisations and the National Literacy Trust's 14 Gateshead-based Literacy Champions.

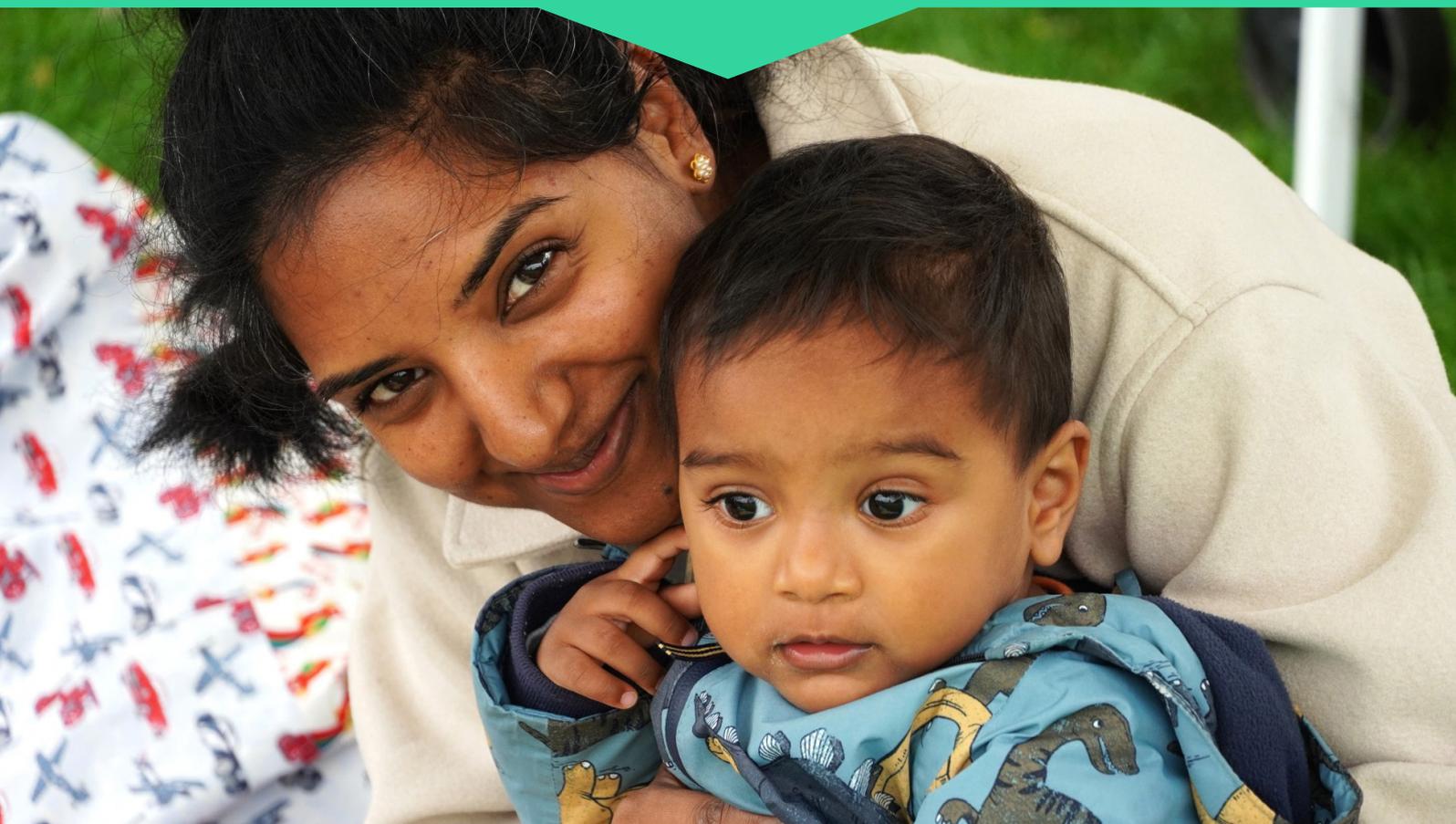
For context, Literacy Champions are local volunteers who are passionate about making a difference in their community. They are advocates, influencers and fundraisers who understand the power of literacy in changing life stories.

A strategic partnership between Gateshead Libraries and Family Hubs allows librarians, early years practitioners and family outreach workers to deliver National Literacy Trust programmes such as First Words Together (for families with children from birth to two) and Early Words Together (for families with children aged three to four). These form part of Gateshead's Better Health – Start for Life offer. Public libraries provide invaluable early years services. In particular, via rhyme times, which have been proven to positively impact early language and communication development<sup>31</sup>.

In Gateshead, local partners work together to deliver sessions in Family Hubs, libraries, and community spaces. They provide a seamless universal pathway of speech, language and communication support for children from birth to five, with a speech and language therapist partner referring into local, targeted and specialist provision where appropriate.

The approach taken directly reflects the needs and preferences of the local community. Several events have taken place in partnership with Gateshead Family Hubs and libraries. For example, a treasure hunt and book gifting tour based on the dog Spot, which signposted to further age-appropriate early language support opportunities. Literacy Champions have also run a range of other activities, such as storytelling sessions, free children's book events, book swaps, and video creation with local footballers. These activities have motivated local families to interact further with local services and early language support programmes.

A behaviour change campaign runs alongside all activity to provide local families with the skills, knowledge, and confidence that they need to support their children's early language development at home. Local social media channels are used to promote programme sessions and to disseminate key messages related to the home learning environment, as well as signposting free, accessible tips and resources on the National Literacy Trust's Words for Life website.



# 3. Recommendations: How do we get there?

## 3.a. Leadership

We need to take the bold step of embracing the extensive and robust evidence on early language development to create a society that better serves disadvantaged children. This will require strong political leadership that cuts across party and sector lines.

We should start by establishing a national consensus that a core goal of the early years system is to close the attainment gap in early language and communication skills between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children by the age of five. This consensus should shape party manifesto commitments and early years strategy, policy, and funding decisions.

Our future early years strategy should be shaped by the principle of early intervention and underpinned by clear objectives, sustained investment, and better joined-up local services<sup>32</sup>. It should acknowledge the intrinsic value of early language, commit to improving the quality of early education provision, and establish policy positions that will improve the support parents receive so that every family can foster a language-rich home learning environment.

HM Treasury should reclassify spending on early education as capital investment as it will drive our country's future economic prosperity. Overall funding levels should be increased and guaranteed over longer time periods as this will save public money in the long run.

## 3.b. Capacity

We do not need to reinvent the wheel to have a positive impact on children's outcomes. We should build existing programmes such as Family Hubs and Better Health – Start for Life.

For context, in the Autumn 2021 Budget the government announced a £302mn investment into the Family Hubs and Start for Life programmes in order to transform services and promote integration at a systems level. Family Hubs bring services together, helping parents, carers, children, and young people to access the support they need more easily. The funding was committed over three financial years, starting from 2022–23, and the most recent spending review confirmed the allocation of funding until March 2025. The funding covers 75 upper-tier local authorities across England, or approximately half of the country.

We welcome the progress that has been made because of the government's investment in these much-needed programmes. An integrated whole-family approach has clear benefits. To catalyse further progress, the Department for Education should expand Family Hubs so that they cover the whole of England. The Department should allocate sufficient resource to the delivery of early speech, language and communication interventions from birth<sup>33</sup>.

The Department for Education should also strengthen the programme's strategic function by establishing a new national network of local strategic leaders. The role of this network should be to coordinate multi-agency working and inform local early years strategies and service commissioning. Leaders should be linked into expert agencies such as the Education Endowment Foundation and help to ensure that local settings implement interventions that have been proven to work. Robust impact evaluation should be embedded from the start<sup>34</sup>.



## **i. Home learning environment**

The single most important factor that influences a child's cognitive and social development is the quality of parenting and care that they receive and the quality of the home learning environment that this creates. What parents do is more important than who parents are<sup>35</sup>.

However, the evidence suggests that "children from poorer backgrounds are much less likely to experience a rich home learning environment than children from better-off backgrounds"<sup>36</sup>. If we want to break the cycle of child poverty reinforcing educational inequality, we need to ensure that every parent has the support that they need to promote their child's development. We cannot afford to wait until children enter formal childcare. Support for speech, language and communication from birth onwards is critical<sup>37</sup>.

One step that the government could take to shift the system in a more progressive direction would be to establish a minimum service guarantee delivered through the Start for Life programme. The government should guarantee that by 2030 all parents will be able to access a well-resourced and integrated speech, language and communication pathway for children aged from 0-5 in their local area. This will require investment in the early years workforce, speech and language therapists, health visitors and Teachers of the Deaf<sup>38</sup>.

This pathway should reflect and embed the features that underpin successful place-based approaches. There should be a strategic focus on prevention via the early identification of children at risk of speech and language difficulties. Through evidence-based interventions, parents should be supported to build playful and positive interactions into daily activities to develop their confidence and ability to create a language-rich home learning environment. Co-producing these services with local parents would help ensure they meet their needs<sup>39</sup>.

## **ii. Early childhood education**

The government's recent £204 million investment will make childcare more affordable for parents. It may also drive economic growth by boosting parental employment rates. These are important policy goals. However, it is also important that the childcare system gives due consideration to quality and access.

Research indicates that high quality early childhood education and care can significantly improve life chances for children and close the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their more affluent peers. Yet, some disadvantaged two-year-olds do not access the care to which they are entitled, and many poorer families are locked out of the 30-hour childcare entitlements at ages three and four. The quality of provision on offer is also variable as the funding given to providers for the 15- and 30-hour entitlements is lower than the cost to settings to provide the hours. Staff qualification levels in the sector are also falling as pay is not competitive.

Going forward, the eligibility for 30 hours childcare should be extended to all families of three and four-year-olds. This would provide better continuity for families on lower incomes with children aged two to four and refocus early years funding on what should be its core purpose – closing the pre-school attainment gap. This reform could be funded by reducing eligibility for households with high incomes.

The government should ensure that funding is sufficient to meet the true cost of quality provision. It is estimated that funding levels per hour are 20-25% below the cost of delivery. If we do not address these issues, there is a risk that reforms will inadvertently increase the gap in early language and communication outcomes between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children.

The Department for Education should also increase the early years pupil premium so it aligns with the rate allocated to primary pupils. This would remove some of the barriers to nurseries providing places to children in areas of disadvantage or to children with SEND. Existing staff-to-child ratios should be maintained to safeguard quality.

Moreover, to remove barriers for parents, we should reduce the complexity of provision and funding by streamlining entitlements and applications. This would benefit parents living in areas of disadvantage and help those who speak English as an additional language. Targeted outreach should be used to boost uptake amongst disadvantaged families.

## 3.c. Conditions

The quality of the education system is a function of the quality of its staff. We need to commit to a long-term strategy that will support and empower our early years workforce.

Prioritising and improving staff qualification levels is essential. There should be a long-term aspiration to have a qualified teacher in every setting. For this aspiration to be realised, the Department for Education must first address the recruitment and retention of Early Years Teachers and the lack of parity with primary and secondary teachers holding QTS.

The introduction of a Leadership Quality Fund in areas with high levels of disadvantage could help to attract and retain qualified professionals in the places where they would have the greatest impact<sup>40</sup>. However, this policy would need to be part of a wider consultation on funding, pay and conditions. Ensuring equity across maintained and private, voluntary, and independent settings would help to improve the quality of the workforce across all settings.

Early years practitioners should receive ongoing continuous professional development (CPD) to enhance their understanding of speech, communication and language development<sup>41</sup>. This CPD should emphasise the importance of working in partnership with families and support practitioners to access, understand and implement the latest evidence-based interventions<sup>42</sup>. Whilst all early years practitioners should be able to access this CPD, it should be targeted at those working in private, voluntary, and independent settings<sup>43</sup>.

## 3.d. Partnerships

Children's early language and communication outcomes are influenced by family, peers and culture as much as they are by public services. We therefore need to mobilise the resources of all parts of society – including the business community – to realise progressive change.

There are many innovative ways that the business community can work in partnership with the public and voluntary and community sectors to promote social mobility. We encourage leaders to begin by reflecting on what makes their own organisation commercially successful. Leaders should then reflect on how their organisation's assets and capabilities can be leveraged to improve children's early language and communication outcomes.

To illustrate, one practical way the businesses community can make a positive social impact is by raising public awareness of issues of importance<sup>44</sup>. The Royal Foundation recently established the Business Taskforce for Early Childhood following the launch of 'Shaping Us', a long-term campaign spearheaded by The Princess of Wales. The National Literacy Trust's Literacy and Business Council is an equivalent that works to address literacy inequality.

In addition to raising public awareness, businesses can also drive positive behaviour change amongst their consumers via their products and services. Businesses have communication channels with families that the government simply does not. These channels could be used to deliver clear, consistent and relevant educational messages. For example, guidance to parents on why and how they should "Chat, Play and Read" with their children from birth<sup>45</sup>.

Businesses should also consider how they can provide direct support for their staff. In the context of charitable activity, staff are most commonly thought of as a potential resource for volunteering. Whilst this is true, they should also be seen by employers as parents, grandparents, and carers. Businesses can support their employees to create a stimulating home learning environment for their children by providing them with support and guidance and subsidising educational materials. Internal staff networks, wellbeing programmes and family-friendly employment policies can also help parents juggle their work and home life.

Lastly, businesses should consider how they can drive change in their local communities. Every business has a place that they call home. Businesses can improve outcomes by forging partnerships with government, other local companies, community groups, and third sector organisations. Place-based initiatives that bring cross-sector organisations together can help to address the underlying causes of social problems in a more holistic and joined-up way.



### **McDonald's**

The National Literacy Trust has worked in partnership with McDonald's since 2013 as part of McDonald's Happy Readers campaign, which strives to increase book ownership and make reading fun for children.

Over 61 million books have been distributed through promotions with popular authors such as Roald Dahl and Jeff Kinney. McDonald's swaps out toys in the Happy Meal for books and includes a book offer on the Happy Meal box.

### **BookTrust**

Following the 1998 National Year of Reading, the retailer Sainsbury's were looking to support a Millennium children's learning project that would leave a legacy. The charity BookTrust was chosen. Investment from Sainsbury's allowed BookTrust to scale Bookstart.

Bookstart is a reading programme for children under five. Every baby born in England and Wales is gifted a free book. Bookstart also offers packs at key developmental stages before school, with tips and guidance for parents, and support for children with additional needs.

Bookstart is now funded by Arts Council England, enabling every child in England and Wales to receive a free Bookstart pack before they are 12 months old. Bookstart also gifts additional needs packs for babies and toddlers.

### **Vision for Literacy & WHSmith**

The Vision for Literacy Business Pledge provides a framework for business action to help close the literacy gap between disadvantaged young people and their more affluent peers.

The Pledge was established by the National Literacy Forum in 2015, with the generous support of KPMG UK. In 2023, 97 businesses signed up and committed to take action.

The retailer WHSmith has since started working with the National Literacy Trust on an in-store campaign that will aim to improve children's early language and communication outcomes. The campaign will profile books for children from birth to five and raise customer's awareness about the importance of creating a language rich home learning environment. WHSmith also provides support for the National Literacy Trust's Swindon Hub.

## **3.e. Evidence**

Evidence from research is a crucial tool in addressing the long-term impact of the socioeconomic attainment gap. Using evidence to make decisions about practice allows educators to make informed decisions about what to do (and what to stop doing).

Early years practitioners should be supported to engage with evidence and implement approaches in their settings. Networks which broker evidence for practitioners are a valuable mechanism that can promote engagement with evidence and support settings to share good practice. Such a network should be integrated into the Family Hubs programme.

Alongside supporting settings to draw on high-quality evidence in their day-to-day practice, it is important to continue to generate new evidence to identify high-potential programmes through rigorous evaluation<sup>46</sup>. The APPG on Literacy would welcome further research into:

- Effective practices to support parents in their provision of a positive and language-rich home learning environment.
- The role of formal early years settings in supporting positive parenting.
- How support for parents can be better designed, to remove barriers to access.
- How support for parents can be built into mainstream services at scale.
- What is required to bring about sustainable parental behaviour change.

# 4. Conclusion

There is broad political support for acting early to tackle the root causes of social and educational disadvantage – before they have a dramatic effect on the lives of children. However, this rhetoric has not always been backed up by concrete action and investment.

To improve children's early language and communication, the APPG on Literacy is calling for:

- A long-term and evidence-based approach to investment.
- A strategic focus on the home learning environment.
- More emphasis on children's early education outcomes.
- Additional financial support for disadvantaged children and families.

To discuss the ideas that are set out in this report, please email [policy@literacytrust.org.uk](mailto:policy@literacytrust.org.uk).



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The logo for the National Literacy Trust is a teal-colored shape that resembles an open book. Inside this shape, the words "National Literacy Trust" are written in a bold, black, sans-serif font, stacked vertically.

**National  
Literacy  
Trust**

## **Change your story**

### **About the National Literacy Trust**

Literacy changes everything. It opens the door to the life you want. It's the key to knowledge, confidence and inspiration. It's better results at school, and better jobs. If you grow up without the tools to communicate, without books to read or opportunities to write, it's harder to get where you want to go.

We're a charity helping people overcome these challenges and change their life chances through the power of words – reading, writing, speaking and listening. From first words, through school days to training, jobs and beyond.

## **Together, we're helping people change their stories**

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