

Public Libraries and Literacy Recovery



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Foreword

Public libraries are a national service, supporting reading and literacy throughout life. I am proud to be the Minister with responsibility for championing public library services across England. This report illustrates how vital both reading and public libraries are, particularly as we recover from the pandemic and work to level up the country.

Through their day-to-day work, libraries support early-years development, giving children a fun and welcoming introduction to language skills. They complement the critical literacy work done in the classroom by providing children with free, universal access to the rich world of opportunity that can be unlocked by reading for pleasure. From comics to classics and reference books to bestsellers, public libraries empower independent reading and learning, unconstrained by cost.

Working in partnership with schools, libraries can reach out especially to the most disadvantaged children and those who do not have books readily available at home, to boost their access and help them realise their full future potential. As plans are put in place nationally and locally to support post-pandemic educational recovery, this report clearly demonstrates why libraries need to be integral to them.

I am pleased to be providing this foreword alongside my colleague Robin Walker, Minister of State for School Standards, as a demonstration how important we think this collaboration is across Government.

Lord Parkinson,

Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Minister for Arts)

The Department for Education believes that all pupils deserve to be taught a curriculum that promotes and provides opportunities for extensive reading, both in and out of school. Our focus is on ensuring teachers and school leaders are equipped with the tools and knowledge they need to decide how best to provide and maintain access to books for their pupils. Last year, the Department published non-statutory guidance (The reading framework: teaching the foundations of literacy) which explores how to create a school environment where every child is not only able to read proficiently, but also develops a genuine love of reading.

I welcome this report, which identifies the important role of libraries in fostering a love of reading and helping children who have suffered educational disruption as a result of the pandemic. By ensuring all young people - particularly those from disadvantaged communities - have access to a range of literature, and by complementing the work of schools in supporting early language and literacy, libraries can help achieve the government's Levelling Up agenda.

As the work of the Primary School Library Alliance demonstrates, children's reading benefits from the partnerships between teachers and librarians and between public libraries and school libraries. I am therefore pleased to be providing a foreword alongside Lord Parkinson, Minister for Arts at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to show the cross-governmental commitment to libraries and the benefits they bring.

The Government is committed to continuing to raise literacy standards, including those of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. I am pleased to champion the importance of reading widely and often, and the important role public libraries play in ensuring all children are able to do so.

Robin Walker MP

Minister of State for School Standards

1. Executive Summary

Public libraries are a national reading service, supporting reading and literacy throughout life. As a free local resource, they are particularly powerful in supporting the development of literacy and reading skills in disadvantaged communities. Libraries have a unique and powerful role to play in raising literacy skills, vital for individuals and communities to fulfil their social and economic potential.

In England there is a strong, reinforcing link between social disadvantage and low literacy. For this reason, the Government has announced a target to increase the number of children attaining expected levels in maths and literacy to 90% by 2030 as central to the Levelling Up agenda.

The pandemic has exacerbated the literacy challenge. Despite the huge achievements of the education and library sectors in supporting children's reading throughout periods of school closures, it is now apparent that the disruption caused by the pandemic has influenced children's literacy in a number of ways:

- Children from disadvantaged communities have fallen furthest behind;
- School readiness has suffered and more children are starting school with speech and language delay;
- The early language development of babies and toddlers from disadvantaged communities has been particularly impacted by temporary library closures.

Data is suggesting that many children have returned to school with a strong appetite for learning and that progress is being made with students catching up. However, children from disadvantaged backgrounds are not making the rapid gains seen by other children and the impact on early language will mean that the education system will be dealing with the impact of the pandemic for the next two decades, possibly longer, as literacy patterns are strongly intergenerational.



In this context, public libraries have a key role to play:

- As a free universal service, giving access to books to children from the poorest backgrounds, whose literacy has been impacted most in the pandemic, 1 in 11 of whom don't have a book of their own;
- Supporting early language development: Libraries have been shown to be a vital component of a strong home learning environment and have a positive effect on reading skills in the first years of school;
- In re-engaging and inspiring young people to be readers. Libraries are successful in engaging and motivating young people to be readers: twice as many young public library users enjoy reading and read daily.

Libraries have a specific and unique contribution to make in post-pandemic literacy recovery, which is of central importance to the Levelling Up agenda. They need to be working in partnership with children and young people's services on local educational recovery strategies, working with MATs and local clusters of early years providers. The activities they already offer will help many of the children and families who most need support. There is also the opportunity for libraries to participate in local partnership activities that have been developed to address literacy challenges. This holistic approach to reading addresses social, cultural and educational needs and can also be sustained.

2. Libraries – a national reading service

Libraries have a unique and powerful role in promoting reading and literacy in our society and are the foundation of the national reading culture. They are a universal service, where everybody can discover her or his reading identity, and where there is no financial penalty involved in the free choice of reading materials. Use of libraries is linked to the growth and strengthening of literacy skills. Their books, advice, spaces and rhyme times are a vital and integral part of early language development. National reading campaigns, such as The Reading Agency's Summer Reading Challenge, build on this foundation and help to form the reading habit and appetite throughout childhood. **Children and young people reading above the expected level for their age are twice as likely to be public library users** (Clark and Hawkins, 2011).

Public libraries challenge one of the key causes of the literacy gap related to social disadvantage: in a society where book ownership, reading and literacy is strongly related to socio economic status, they offer free access to books to everyone. But their services and support for reading and literacy go well beyond this, and as such will ensure that they have a central role in increasing skills in disadvantaged communities to support levelling up and in addressing the impact of the pandemic on literacy.

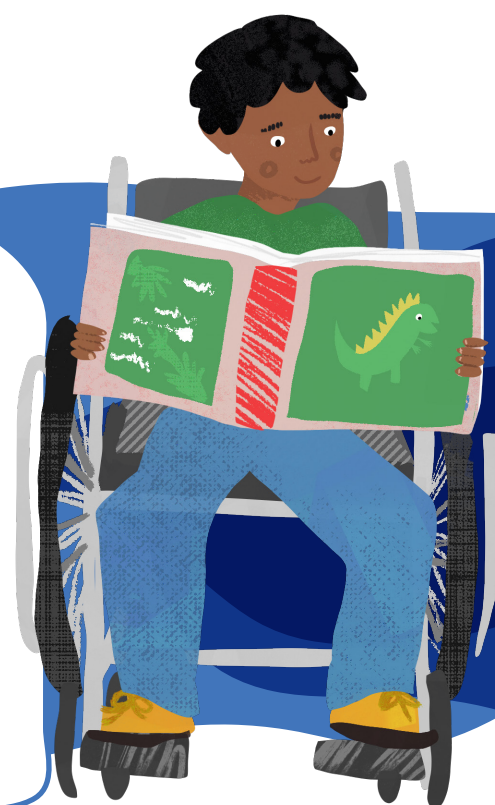
Case Study

Sandwell Libraries are delivering two under-fives projects that started in early 2022. The Sandy Bear Challenge is delivered in partnership with Council partners, Children's Centres and Sandwell Council's Public Health team. The aim of the challenge is to encourage membership of the library and attendance at children's centres to improve early literacy. The aim of the project is to improve early literacy as well as supporting parents'/carers' mental health post-Covid by providing a range of free activities. Play Talk Read are sessions aimed to reduce social isolation following Covid as well as engaging families with book-based activities to support literacy and early language development. The programmes are funded by the library budget, Quality Early Years team and Public Health.

2.1 Support for early language and literacy development

A child's early language experiences are the foundation of life-long literacy. The language of stories, the rhythms of nursery rhymes and the familiarity with books build on strong and positive experience of early communication to create the early literacy skills that will eventually enable a child to learn to read and write. As the importance of parenting and the home learning has grown, so has the appreciation of the vital role of libraries in supporting the early language development.

When the UK's largest longitudinal study of early development (EPPE) examined the importance of the home learning environment, the activities that libraries promote were demonstrated to be of central importance. In fact subsequent regression studies ([Melhuish et al, 2008](#)) demonstrated that **visiting the library was in itself a vital component of a strong home learning environment and at the age of 3 could be seen to impact positively on reading skills in the first years of school.**



2.2 Engaging and inspiring young readers

For many children the library is the place where they discover their reading identities, freely choosing the books that interest them and experiencing the fun and excitement of being part of a reading community. In 2011, 8 in 10 (84.3%) children and young people who used the public library considered themselves to be a good reader compared with only 5 in 10 (54.9%) who didn't ([Clark & Hawkins, 2011](#)).

Libraries provide children with the opportunity to experiment as readers, providing access to new genres, titles and authors. With greater choice often comes greater enjoyment, encouraging children to read more because they enjoy it. A vital ingredient of this is social reading experiences. Reading challenges and reading groups add a new dimension to the reading experience and research has shown how they enable children to read more, read more widely and have a more enjoyable and satisfying reading experience ([The Reading Agency, 2004](#)). No moment is more powerful in demonstrating this effect than the Summer Reading Challenge, the UK's largest annual reading campaign for children and young people ([The Reading Agency, 2022](#)).

These strategies work – **twice as many young public library users enjoyed reading (68.0% vs. 35.0%) and read daily (46.5% vs. 22.2%),** ([Clark & Hawkins, 2011](#)).

Case Study

Libraries Unlimited launched their [Secret Book Quest](#) reading challenge in November 2021. It is designed for 5- to 12-year-olds to promote a love of reading. It's free to take part – each child is given a fully illustrated booklet (with 10 fun zones to 'travel' through), and stickers along the way, which each feature a piece of the code. Once they've read the 50 books and collected all the stickers, they'll be able to solve the puzzle, collect their certificate and a finisher's prize. Since it launched in November 2021, there have been close to 1,500 sign-ups. Libraries Unlimited received funding from Unwin Charitable trust and Tesco, support from Exeter City Football Club and worked alongside Extra Strong Design and illustrator Emily Fox. See the [promotional video](#), with endorsements from authors Andy Stanton, Sue Hendra and Paul Linnet, and Chris Callaghan. This is an ongoing challenge, and the service hope to extend the offer in the future (potentially for newborns to five-year-olds).

2.3 Closing the gap linked to socioeconomic background

As a free universal reading service, public libraries directly address the gap linked to socioeconomic background, which shapes the literacy challenge in England. As a community service with outreach, responding to the needs and profile of the community, libraries have a reach and relationship with young people, families and adults who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, where literacy challenges are intergenerational.

The most fundamental way in which libraries democratise the reading experience is by providing reading resources for free. For the 1 in 11 disadvantaged children who don't have a book at home, public libraries are a reading lifeline.

The value that children from disadvantaged communities place on library provision is shown by higher patterns of usage of school libraries by those who receive free school meals ([Clark and Hawkins, 2011](#)). As the pandemic has exacerbated educational gaps linked to social background, the ability of libraries to engage and support the reading of children and young people in disadvantaged communities has never been as important an asset in the national literacy campaign as it is today.

Case Study

The National Literacy Trust Hubs operate in the most deprived areas to find solutions to the barriers and challenges faced for championing literacy. The Hubs harness community assets to address literacy through campaigning, influencing and supporting attitudes and behaviours around literacy ([National Literacy Trust](#)). One example of this work was the collaboration with Peterborough Central Library, where we distributed 3,000 copies of a walk and talk trail quiz to schools and children's centres in the local area. The trail finished at the library in a bid to encourage library membership. This provided a clear opportunity for children to enter a library, many for the first time, and spark conversation about public libraries and what children could access there, opening the doors to public libraries for children in disadvantaged areas.

The place-based focus on literacy with libraries as a key partner has had a significant impact. In Peterborough the number of 8- to 11-year-olds who enjoy reading increased by 23.4% between 2014 and 2015. A focus on early years in Middlesbrough increased the number of children obtaining Good Levels of Development at the top of Foundation Stage, closing the gap with the national average from 22.6 percentage points to 6.27 percentage points in three years.

Case Study

Percy Main Primary School is in Chirton Ward, North Tyneside, and has a Lower Super Output Area that is in the 1% most deprived in Britain. A school in this area was chosen to benefit from a longer-term activity rather than a one-off event to enable a bigger school buy in and also involve parents and carers. North Tyneside Libraries worked with Bigfoot Arts North East to deliver a programme of after-school drama sessions with children from Percy Main Primary School in North Shields. The programme used the novel *Robinson Crusoe* as a stimulus and workshops delved into characterisation, locations and plot of the novel in an accessible and engaging way. Through drama, creative writing, music production and film, the young people explored the novel. An abridged version of the novel was gifted to each child, which they read at home in advance of each workshop to encourage reading in the home.

2.4 Supporting adult literacy

Whilst the focus of levelling up and post-pandemic literacy recovery is on children and young people's literacy, adult literacy skills are also a significant challenge in many disadvantaged communities. Nine million adults in the UK have literacy issues, with up to 40% of the adult population in the most disadvantaged wards facing literacy challenges. This undermines local economic and community development. Low parental literacy is also a limiting factor in raising pupil attainment.

Public libraries play a key role in promoting adult literacy. Research has shown how they operate as a vital point for re-engaging adult learners: libraries can support referrals and also help identify adults who need literacy support. Libraries promote collections and reading activities for adults looking to improve their literacy skills and work in partnership with colleges, frequently hosting adult literacy classes.



3. Literacy, reading and a fairer society

Literacy and libraries are inextricably linked to opportunity and empowerment. Increasing levels of literacy increases life opportunities, earnings and health outcomes. Raising literacy levels across a community will have collective economic and social benefits.

For this reason literacy is a priority in the Levelling Up agenda and libraries, as a universal agent of reading, have a key role to play. The Government has announced a 2030 target for 90% of children to be reading at the expected level. Increasing literacy is recognised as a cornerstone of the Levelling Up White Paper, a vital ingredient in improving opportunities in disadvantaged communities and enabling every young person to fulfil their potential.

However the challenge is considerable – in 2019 only 65% of children left primary school with expected levels of literacy and the OECD has identified that 1 in 6 adults in England face literacy challenges. In the UK the phenomenon is profoundly linked to socioeconomic background: England has one of the strongest links between low literacy and socioeconomic status of any country in the developed world (OECD, 2013). Struggling to read in England is more closely linked to low pay and the risk of being unemployed than in any other developed country, and children with poor vocabulary at age five are more than twice as likely to be unemployed when they are aged 34 (Law, 2019).

As well as creating poverty, low literacy is also led by poverty: at just five years old children from the most disadvantaged communities can start primary school up to 19 months behind their better-off peers in terms of vocabulary (Sutton Trust, 2012). This is a deficit most will never recover from – at GCSE, almost 3 in 5 (58.6%) disadvantaged students fail to achieve a good grade in English and maths compared with 1 in 3 (35.4%) students overall (Department for Education, 2020).

This mutually reinforcing pattern of inequality and low literacy affects outcomes beyond economic impact: low literacy is linked to poor health, with 43% of working-age adults in England lacking the literacy skills they need to understand and make use of everyday health information (known as 'health literacy') (Rowlands et al., 2016).



In detail, people with low literacy are up to 18 times more likely to take their prescriptions incorrectly, three times more likely to rate their health as “very poor” (34% vs 11%) and significantly less likely to understand symptoms of a medical condition such as diabetes or asthma (Morrisroe, 2014).

Ultimately, poor literacy skills can even be linked with lower life expectancy, with children born into communities with the most serious literacy challenges having some of the lowest life expectancies in England. A boy born in Stockton town centre (which has some of the most serious literacy challenges in the country) has a life expectancy **26.1 years shorter** than a boy born in North Oxford (which has some of the least). Similarly, a girl born in Queensgate, Burnley, has a life expectancy **20.9 years shorter** than a girl born in Mayfield, Wealdon (Gilbert et al, 2018).

There is also a heightened risk of poor mental health and wellbeing for those with lower levels of literacy: children and young people who are the most engaged with literacy have better mental wellbeing than their peers who are the least engaged (Clark and Teravainen-Goff, 2018).

At a societal level the World Literacy Foundation estimated that a failure to master basic literacy skills costs the UK economy £80 billion every year ([World Literacy Foundation, 2018](#)). If every 11-year-old was able to read well by the time they left primary school, the economy would be £32.1 billion bigger by 2025 ([Read On.Get On., 2014](#)).

Poorer families are less likely to read to their children and this pattern perpetuates into adulthood. Nearly 1 in 3 (27%) of those in the lowest socioeconomic group (DE) said that they never read books, compared with just under 1 in 6 (13%) in the highest group (AB) ([BookTrust, 2013](#)). Approaches to raising literacy in the UK are increasingly taking these challenges on board, as can be seen in the DfE's Literacy Hubs initiative, focused on the poorest communities, starting with early years support and embedding approaches to reading for pleasure alongside decoding and comprehension skills.

Importantly, the benefits of literacy are most powerfully realised when reading for pleasure is appreciated as a vital ingredient of literacy. Reading for pleasure supports increased literacy skills by vocabulary growth and increasing reading fluency to such an extent that recent

research has shown that if all school-aged children in the UK read for pleasure every day, the number getting five good GCSEs by the age of 16 could increase by 1.1 million within 30 years ([British Land, 2021](#)).

As reading for pleasure is an activity undertaken because the individual wants to do it, rather than is instructed to do it, reading for pleasure creates, exercises, and develops an individual's intrinsic motivation to learn and develop. This is incredibly powerful and makes reading for pleasure an important approach for promoting social mobility. Libraries fundamentally democratise reading for pleasure – removing financial barriers and promoting it to all communities. As such, they are powerful resources for promoting social mobility.

By placing reading at the heart of the Levelling Up agenda, the Government is recognising these relationships and the vital role of literacy in creating opportunities and building successful communities. This agenda challenges not just schools but all who have a role in supporting literacy and reading to take urgent action to build a literate nation. Public libraries have a powerful and unique role in this campaign and must be vital partners in the mission to breaking the link between social background and literacy.

Case Study

Staffordshire Libraries are offering read-for-pleasure class visits with Year 5 children focusing on the wellbeing aspects of reading. Library staff had powerful discussions with children about how reading can help them, particularly how it increases vocabulary, concentration, creativity and increased empathy with the wider world (people and places). This will help to develop stronger links between the library and the children/local schools, and the support the library can provide in promoting reading for pleasure. In return, they described how they have benefited from books and reading, particularly during the lockdown. 'My book became my best friend as I couldn't see my real friends' was how one young lady described it. 'I read loads more books during lockdown because it took my mind off things' is how another girl described it. The librarian was blown away by their contributions to the discussion.



4. The impact of the pandemic on reading and literacy

The challenge to equip a new generation with the literacy skills they need to fulfil their own potential and the potential of their communities sits at the heart of the Government's Levelling Up agenda. But this challenge has intensified and has become more pressing in the context of the pandemic, especially for those children who because of their social background were already at a disadvantage.

In March 2020 the first national lockdown meant that most elements of the national reading infrastructure immediately ceased to function. Over 2020 and 2021, most children were estimated to have lost half a year of face-to-face schooling ([Sibieta, 2021](#)). Extraordinary efforts were made by teachers, librarians and families to support children's learning remotely under very difficult circumstances. However, the pandemic seriously impacted on literacy skills, particularly among children living in disadvantaged areas.

Children in the early years were particularly affected. Many settings were closed during lockdown periods, and even when restrictions were lifted, some parents chose to keep their children at home. [Education Endowment Foundation research](#) found that 76% of schools reported that children starting Reception in autumn 2020 needed more support than children in previous cohorts: 96% of schools were concerned about children's communication and language; 91% were concerned about personal, social and emotional development; and 89% were concerned about literacy.

For school-aged children, standard tests and exams such as Year 6 SATs and GCSEs were suspended. However, commercial reading assessments enabled schools to measure pupils' reading skills and researchers to estimate overall levels of learning loss. In autumn 2020, research by Renaissance Learning and the Education Policy Institute based on more than 400,000 tests found a learning loss of up to two months in reading in both primary and secondary school-aged pupils ([DfE, 2021](#)), with primary-aged pupils showing between 1.7 and 2 months' mean learning loss in reading.

The pattern of the impact began to emerge: a review of 10 studies of commercial reading assessments published in summer 2021 concluded that younger primary-aged pupils were further behind expectations than older ones ([Newton, 2021](#)).

As well as impacting on literacy skills, the pandemic has also affected children's reading for pleasure: just prior to the first lockdown, overall reading enjoyment levels were at a 15-year low, with under half (48%) of children and young people saying they enjoyed reading in early 2020 ([Clark & Picton, 2020](#)). Positively, this increased to 56% in June 2020 but this was driven mainly by girls. Indeed, the gender gap in reading enjoyment increased five-fold, from 2.3 to 11.5 percentage points between early 2020 and summer 2020 ([Clark & Picton, 2020](#)).

This research also highlighted barriers to reading identified in children's comments about reading during lockdown, including library closures. One in 11 (9.3%) children eligible for free school meals do not have a single book of their own at home ([Clark et al., 2021](#)); these children, many of whom are reliant on libraries, would not have had the opportunity to re-read a favourite book during lockdown. Children also shared that a lack of a quiet space at home and the absence of teacher and peer support at school affected their motivation to read. The free access to books and quiet(er) spaces offered by libraries may be particularly relevant to the literacy recovery of these groups of children.

The closure of libraries and the cessation of rhyme times and library services to under-fives was recognised by [research from Oxford Brookes University](#) as having a significant impact on the early language development of the poorest babies and toddlers.

At a national level, literacy is recognised as crucial both to the future prosperity of the nation and as a vital component of sustainable approaches to levelling up. The COVID-19 pandemic and associated disruption to schools and libraries has exacerbated patterns of inequality linked to literacy. [Reading assessments](#) indicate that, despite the heroic efforts of schools, libraries, charities and families to support children and young people's learning, many still showed significant levels of learning loss in reading at the end of summer term 2021. It is likely to present as a characteristic in the education system affecting children and young people's learning for decades to come, and possibly beyond, as poor literacy has an intergenerational element.

5. The impact of the pandemic on the reading and literacy of children from disadvantaged communities

The pandemic both exposed and exacerbated pre-existing inequalities in literacy, intensifying the urgency of the Levelling Up agenda. The attainment gap linked to disadvantage has been a key challenge for the education system and has sat at the heart of England's education policy, research and practice for decades. The pandemic has increased the urgency of addressing this attainment gap.

School plays an important "protective and equalising role" for children from disadvantaged communities ([Andrew et al., 2020](#)), a role shared by public libraries. Educational organisations were therefore quick to predict that school closures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic were likely to widen the gap in performance between children from lower- and higher-income homes (see e.g. [Education Policy Institute, Sutton Trust](#)). One rapid evidence review predicted that school closures were likely to reverse the progress made to close the attainment gap over the preceding decade ([EEF, 2020](#)). Studies to date have indicated that these early concerns have been borne out (see e.g. [DfE, 2021](#); [Scottish Government, 2021](#)) both in the UK and internationally ([Hammerstein et al., 2021](#)).

Over the past two years the impact of the pandemic on the attainment gap has shifted and changed: in late 2020, a report based on the standardised test scores of more than 250,000 primary school pupils confirmed the widening of the attainment gap ([Blainey et al., 2020](#)); and secondary schools with a high proportion of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds were found to have learning losses 50% higher than those schools serving fewer pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds (2.2 months vs 1.5 months, [DfE, 2021](#)). But by July 2021, it was clear that many children were catching up and the average learning loss in reading had decreased between spring and summer as children returned to school. However, for disadvantaged secondary school pupils the gap actually increased over the time: the learning loss for reading was calculated to be 1.9 months

for disadvantaged pupils in autumn 2020, but by summer 2021 this had increased to 2.4 months ([DfE, 2021](#)). The pandemic has laid the foundation for a widening of the gap that teachers had worked so hard to close.

Unsurprisingly, areas with high concentrations of disadvantaged pupils have suffered disproportionately, with pupils in the Midlands and parts of the north of England experiencing greater learning loss in reading than their peers in London and parts of the east of England. In autumn 2020 primary-aged pupils nationally had between 1.7 and 2 months' learning loss in reading, but pupils in the North East and Yorkshire and the Humber had lost 2.4 months and 2.2 months respectively ([DfE, 2021](#)). And whilst secondary-aged pupils in the North East and Yorkshire and the Humber had experienced on average 2.3 and 2.4 months learning loss, learning loss was only 1.2 months in the South East and 1.3 months in the east of England ([DfE, 2021](#)). November 2020 research found that schools in urban areas and in the North or the Midlands showed greater-than-average declines ([Blainey et al., 2021](#)). Since autumn 2020, secondary pupils in most areas have shown signs of recovery with the highest recovery in London, but no recovery was seen in the North East. Pupils in Yorkshire and the Humber actually showed greater learning losses in the summer term than in the autumn term (increasing from -2.5 to -2.9 months).

The root cause of the differentiated impact of the pandemic on children from different socioeconomic backgrounds is strongly related to the different resources and support that they could access during lockdown, including their school's ability to support remote teaching; their access to resources (digital or otherwise); their parents' time, confidence and ability to support their learning; and their own mental wellbeing and motivation to learn. From the start, the move to remote teaching highlighted existing and ongoing inequalities in access to the resources needed to learn effectively outside school.

Schools in the most deprived areas were **least well equipped to support pupils' learning** at the start of the pandemic.

Fewer than 1 in 4 (23%) of these schools had an **online learning platform** in place, compared with 37% of state schools in affluent areas and 60% of private schools.

Cullinane and Montacute, 2020

Just **2%** of teachers in the most **disadvantaged communities** believed all of their pupils would have **adequate access to devices for home learning**, compared with a national average of **7%**.

Teach First, 2020

27% of children in households classed as "**most financially vulnerable**" could **not** consistently **access online home learning**.

Ofcom, 2021

Schemes were established to **increase access to devices** and connectivity for the **most vulnerable and disadvantaged pupils*** and increased access to technology and a much more sophisticated learning offer were in place by the January 2021 lockdown. However, access to a **stable broadband connection** continued to be a **challenge**.

*DFE, 2020; Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2021

The different levels of advice, resources and learning support available to families from lower and higher income homes was soon apparent.

Children in the **highest-income families** were spending **5.8 hours** a day on **educational activities** compared with **4.5 hours** in the **lowest-income families**.

This is equivalent to a **15-day deficit in home learning** by September 2020.

Andrew et al., 2020

Access to books in the home also **varies by household income**.

1 in 11 (9.2%) children receiving FSMs have **no books of their own**, compared with 5.3% of children who don't receive FSMs.

Clark et al., 2021

The differences in the resources children could access in the home meant that the pandemic also widened the disadvantage gap in early language and literacy. Children growing up in low-income households are significantly less likely to have a rich home learning environment, so libraries, early years settings, social and familial networks all have an important role in supporting these families. With these resources temporarily withdrawn, the most disadvantaged suffered most. The negative effect on the early language development of disadvantaged babies and toddlers was documented in an [Oxford Brookes study](#), which found that disadvantaged parents were less likely to engage in enriching activities, while research by [Bottle UK](#) with disadvantaged families found that only 3% identified positive things to have come from the pandemic.

By September 2021 more than three-quarters of schools felt children starting Reception in the last year needed more support than those in previous cohorts ([Bowyer-Crane et al., 2021](#)).

It is important to note that parents, teachers and librarians have been tireless and committed to supporting the most vulnerable children's reading and literacy throughout the pandemic. Although research has found a disproportionate impact on children from more disadvantaged backgrounds, it is clear that without the immense efforts of parents and professionals the impact would have been even more devastating.



6. The role of libraries in literacy recovery

As local authorities, schools and multi-academy trusts continue to develop plans for supporting children and young people whose literacy has been impacted by the pandemic, many are developing approaches in partnership with public libraries. Increasingly, libraries' ability to engage and inspire young readers, support families in developing the language and communication skills during the early years, and reach children from disadvantaged backgrounds with free access to books, means that they are key players in local literacy campaigns.

Four themes characterise libraries' responses to the literacy challenge:

- **Targeted** – Libraries are expert at delivering approaches that focus on disadvantaged communities, where literacy is lowest, book ownership and reading habits are weakest, and where the educational impact of the pandemic is strongest. Libraries have a specific role to play in supporting reading in these communities and they have an excellent track record of working in multi-agency partnerships in these areas.
- **Holistic** – The impact of the pandemic on children's literacy has been prompted by the interruption of schooling but also by its social effects and the disruption of play, families and cultural activities. Through reading clubs, holiday activities and early years rhyme times, public libraries can support not just literacy skills but the social, emotional and cultural elements of literacy. Vitality, their expertise in supporting reading for pleasure means that they can help develop and strengthen the intrinsic motivation to read and learn, which is so vital to a child's future life chances.
- **Sustained** – Research has already demonstrated the impact of the pandemic on the language development of disadvantaged babies and toddlers under the age of two. It is clear that for the next two decades the shape of the literacy challenge will be profoundly influenced by the pandemic. Reading is at the heart of the mission of public libraries. They are in a position to be long-term partners to schools, colleges and settings, shaping the literacy skills and reading behaviours of a generation.
- **Local** – The effects of the pandemic are unique to every community. Libraries are uniquely positioned to craft local strategic responses working with schools, settings and colleges which meet those needs, based on their insight and knowledge of the community.

Case Study

Reading Riot was a county-wide celebration for young people in Cumbria, offering holistic support in response to what they had experienced under lockdown, demonstrating that reading for pleasure can be an escape, a release from reality and a journey into other people's lives and cultures. Teenagers have been adversely affected by the global pandemic with disruption to education, family health and security as well as their social development at an age when this is hugely important. Under this umbrella theme, Cumbria Library Service have highlighted the best young adult fiction with the themes of Gender and Identity, Dreams and Aspirations, Love and Relationships, My World Your World and Unique Minds. The service created digital content for the YouTube channel and social media platforms. Young people were encouraged to participate by completing the Reading Riot challenge, a pick-and-mix activity where young people could select from a series of tasks such as read an author you haven't before, read a graphic novel, listen to an audio book or try a new genre.

Case Study

Staffordshire Libraries found an innovative way of engaging pupils aged 11-14 during the lockdown from Feb to July 2021. Each month, they sent out a Young Teen Fiction engagement pack to school librarians and English leads, including exclusive interviews with authors with questions sent in from Staffordshire teens, Staffordshire libraries-recommended reads, and online activities so teens could engage at home during lockdown or if they were still at school. We finished with a big celebration day including a popular online escape room that featured authors Catherine Doyle and Lesley Parr.

About the National Literacy Trust

The National Literacy Trust is a charity that transforms lives through literacy. We are dedicated to improving the reading, writing, speaking and listening skills of children who need it most, giving them the best possible chance of success in school, work and life.

We run Literacy Hubs and campaigns in communities where low levels of literacy and social mobility are seriously impacting people's lives. We support schools and early years settings to deliver outstanding literacy provision and we campaign to make literacy a priority for politicians, businesses and parents. Our research and analysis make us the leading authority on literacy and drive our interventions. Last year we directly supported the literacy of 144,579 children through our programmes and activities, in schools and in early years settings; released a series of research reports from our Annual Literacy Survey of 60,654 children and young people from across the UK; and created 337 million opportunities for the public to read, see and hear about our work in the media, generating an advertising value equivalent of £8.1m.

Find out more at literacytrust.org.uk

About Libraries Connected

Libraries Connected is the membership organisation for heads of library services in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We take a leading role in the development of public libraries through advocating for the power of libraries, sharing best practice and helping to shape the public library service now and in the future.

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