

TransformED NI

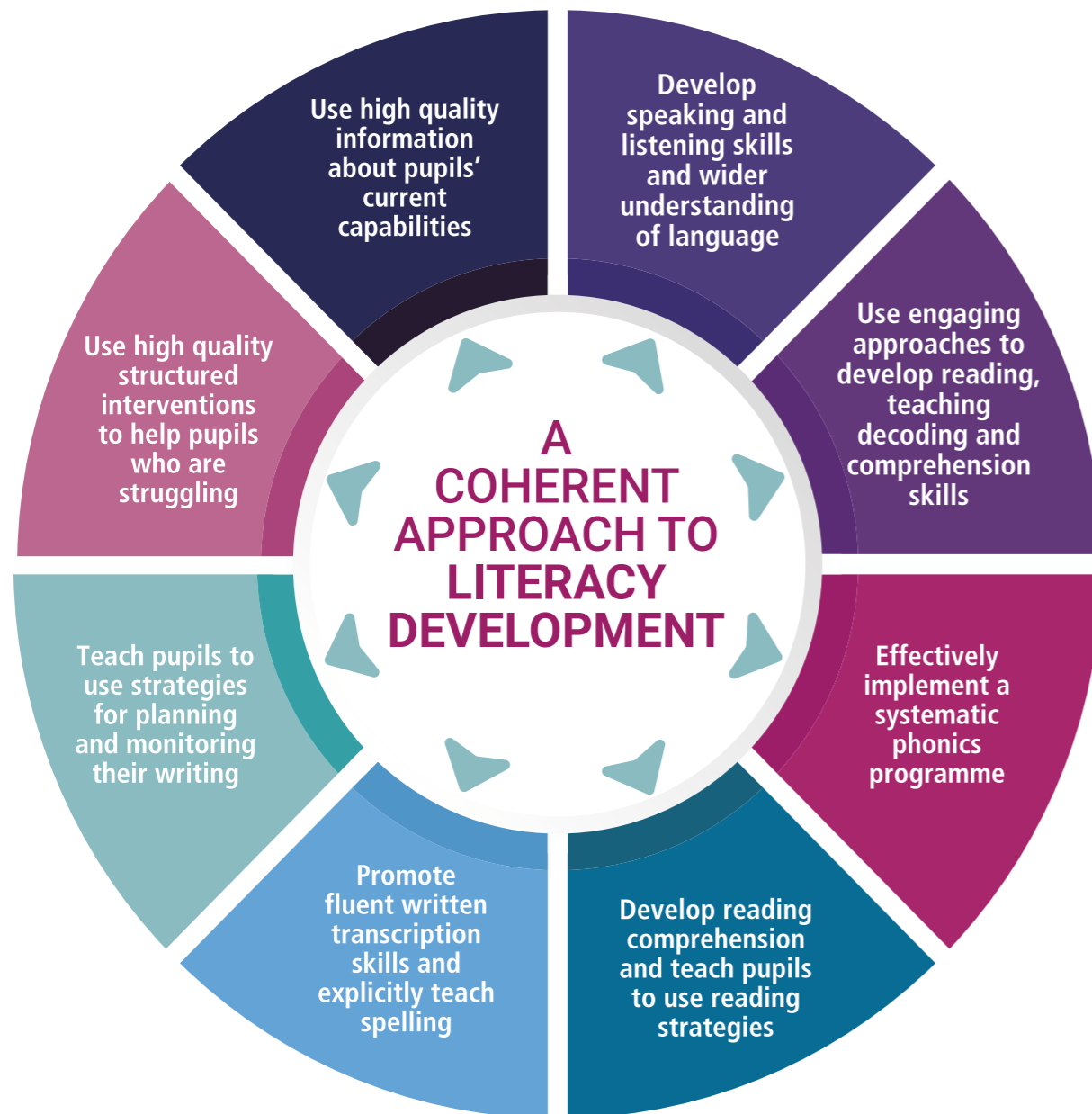
Guidelines to support a coherent approach to literacy development



To help every learner succeed, schools need a clear and consistent approach to literacy that works at every level across the whole school and within each key stage, year group and individual class.

This document supports *Strong Foundations: A Literacy Framework for Primary Schools* and sets out eight guidelines designed to underpin high-quality literacy provision. These are not prescriptive but rather offer a model that schools can use to develop, review, and plan their whole school approach to literacy.¹

Eight Steps to Literacy Success: evidence informed guidelines to shape, review and strengthen practice.



¹ This document has been extended and adapted for Northern Ireland from the Education Endowment Foundation guidance reports on the theme of language and literacy.

1. Develop pupils' speaking and listening skills and wider understanding of language.

- Language provides the foundation of thinking and learning and its development should be prioritised throughout primary school.
- Evidence indicates that success in literacy relies on the secure development of language and these language skills are amongst the best predictors of educational success.
- Speaking and listening skills are critical foundations for reading and writing and are also essential skills for thinking and communication. There is, for example, promising evidence that reading comprehension can be improved with targeted teaching that improves pupils' speaking and listening skills.
- Pupils use spoken language to ask questions, explain their thinking and collaborate with others. These skills are vital across all subjects, from explaining a maths solution to discussing historical events or scientific processes.
- Effective communication helps pupils build relationships, resolve conflicts and express emotions. Listening attentively and speaking respectfully are key components of social interaction and emotional intelligence.
- While a child's innate ability may influence certain aspects of their language development, high-quality early education can significantly improve outcomes, where initial skills are low.
- A focus on developing oral language skills is critically important for all pupils in the Foundation Stage.
- Adults play a vital role in modelling effective language and communication.
- High-quality dialogue is central to effective learning. Conversations provide the ideal context for developing children's language and thinking, and both the quantity and quality of these interactions in a language-rich environment is crucial.
- Schools should use a wide range of explicit and implicit approaches to oral language development, including planned vocabulary teaching, modelling and extending children's language during interactions and activities such as shared reading.
- Approaches to develop vocabulary should combine explicit teaching of new vocabulary and exposure to a rich language environment with opportunities to hear and confidently experiment with new words.
- High quality classroom discussion can support pupils to articulate key ideas, consolidate understanding and extend their vocabulary.

2. Use engaging approaches to develop reading, teaching both decoding and knowledge that enables comprehension.

- Reading requires two broad skills: word recognition and language comprehension. Neither is sufficient on its own.
- Motivation and engagement arise out feeling successful in literacy, rather than being drivers of progress themselves. Evidence informed practice that leads to success is the best way of developing persistence and enjoyment.
- Children need a wide range of wider language and literacy experiences to develop their understanding of written texts in all their forms. This should include active engagement with different media, genres of texts and content topics.
- Pupils should read both narrative texts (for example, fictional stories and poetry) and informational texts (for example, news articles and speeches).
- Introducing children to varied texts and reading experiences can support the development of their reading comprehension by extending both their knowledge (for example, facts, vocabulary, print concepts, narrative conventions, how authors withhold information to sustain interest) and their skills (for example, phonemic awareness, fluency, monitoring reading for sense).

3. Effectively implement a systematic phonics programme.

- Systematic phonics approaches explicitly teach pupils a comprehensive set of letter-sound relationships for reading and sound-letter relationships for spelling.
- The purpose of phonics is to help pupils quickly develop word recognition and spelling skills. This involves building their phonemic awareness - the ability to hear, identify, and manipulate phonemes (the smallest units of spoken language) - and teaching them the relationship between these phonemes and the graphemes (letters or letter combinations) that represent them.
- Systematic phonics approaches explicitly teach pupils a comprehensive set of letter-sound relationships through an organised sequence.
- Extensive evidence supports the use of a systematic phonics programme with pupils in Foundation Stage. Research suggests that phonics is particularly beneficial for younger learners (age 4 to 7) as they begin to read.
- The Education Endowment Foundation highlights that the average impact of the adoption of phonics approaches is about an additional five months' progress over the course of a year.² The EEF categorises the robustness of the evidence around phonics as very high.

- Phonics has a positive impact and is an important component in the development of early reading skills, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- **The Department recommends that all schools adopt a systematic phonics programme in the Foundation Stage, though it does not prescribe a specific programme. Schools should also note the strong evidence for synthetic phonics as a highly effective approach.**
- Schools will wish to consider the following when teaching a phonics programme:
 - Training: ensuring all staff have the necessary pedagogical skills and content knowledge.
 - Responsiveness: check if learning can be accelerated or extra support is needed and identify specific capabilities and difficulties to focus teaching.
 - Engagement: lessons engage pupils and are enjoyable to teach.
 - Focus: a responsive approach to grouping pupils is likely to help focus effort and improve teaching efficiency.
- Effective phonics techniques are embedded in a rich literacy environment for early readers and are only one part of a successful literacy strategy.

4. Develop knowledge that enables reading comprehension and teach pupils to use strategies for developing and monitoring.

- Reading comprehension is the ability to make sense of the ideas expressed in a text. It goes beyond simply answering questions; it requires understanding, interpreting and actively engaging with the meaning of the text.
- A broad vocabulary and wide background knowledge have profound effects on reading comprehension. Developing both should be a priority across the wider primary school curriculum within all Areas of Learning and subjects.
- Three further factors play a supportive role in reading comprehension: monitoring understanding, relating sentences to one another and connecting sentences to things you already know.
- Most pupils benefit from an emphasis on reading fluency in Key Stage 2 but some may continue to need support with foundational reading capabilities such as decoding.
- Once decoding is secure, reading comprehension can also be improved by teaching pupils' specific strategies for self-monitoring and for overcoming barriers to their understanding.
- These strategies require yet another kind of knowledge. They involve teaching pupils what it means to be a reader, how texts work and how to use this knowledge strategically to make sense of what is being read. Pupils need to know that readers notice when what they are reading does not yet make sense and what action they can take, such as re-reading a sentence or paying attention to pronouns and who or what they are referring to. They also need to know that authors sometimes deliberately withhold information and that they do so for a variety of reasons.

² Phonics | EEF

- Schools should note that explicit reading strategies can give developing readers a boost, but acquiring a broad vocabulary and a rich base of background knowledge will yield more substantial and longer-term benefits. This knowledge is the product of years of systematic teaching, as well as exposure to high quality books, films, conversations, and so on, which provide pupils with incidental exposure to a great deal of new vocabulary and knowledge.
- A range of reading strategies exist and some overlap. They support children to interact in the moment with a text, identify key points and make inferences from what they are reading.
- Teachers should introduce these strategies using modelling and structured support, which should be reduced as pupils progress until they can complete the activity independently.
- Key strategies include:
 - Prediction: pupils predict what might happen as a text is read. This causes them to pay close attention to the text, which means they can closely monitor their own comprehension.
 - Questioning: pupils generate their own questions about a text to check understanding.
 - Clarifying: pupils identify areas of uncertainty, which may be individual words or phrases, and seek information to clarify meaning.
 - Summarising: pupils succinctly describe the meaning of sections of the text. This causes pupils to focus on the key content, which in turn supports comprehension monitoring.
 - Activating prior knowledge: pupils connect what they already know about a topic, from reading or other experiences and try to make links. This helps pupils to infer and elaborate, ask questions to fill in missing or incomplete information and use existing mental structures to support recall.
- Strategies should be modelled and some practice is necessary to ensure that they become embedded and fluent. Evidence shows, however, that such strategies are learned quickly and continued instruction does not yield further benefits. The aim is for pupils themselves to take responsibility for automatically using these strategies to monitor and improve their reading comprehension.
- The teaching of reading strategies is more effective in later year groups when children have well-established decoding.³ The evidence for the effectiveness of such reading strategies is limited for pupils in lower year groups in primary.
- Reading strategies require attention and space in working memory. Pupils who are still learning to decode fluently do not have enough working memory space available to implement strategies.

³ *Comprehension Instruction A Meta Review | Pedagogy Non Grata*

5. Promote fluent written transcription skills by encouraging extensive and purposeful practice and explicitly teaching spelling.

- Writing is both a physical and intellectual task.
- Transcription refers to handwriting and the ability to spell words correctly. Children must develop fluency in these skills until they are automated.
- Strong transcription skills are not an end in themselves rather they are a gateway to effective composition. If children have to concentrate to ensure their transcription is accurate, they will be less able to think about the content of their writing.
- Handwriting should be taught and practised regularly before introducing typing. Typing is important but it should complement handwriting rather than replace it.
- Fluency requires substantial, purposeful practice supported by effective feedback.
- Accurate letter formation is an essential early skill that forms the basis of a fluent handwriting style. This means knowing the correct starting point for each letter and following the correct movement pathways. Errors in letter formation are often the source of handwriting difficulties in children but are not always obvious to a reader after the event of writing.
- Teachers should observe pupils' letter formation to prevent incorrect patterns becoming embedded, leading to difficulties with fluency.
- Teachers can ensure practice is purposeful by targeting letters which are frequently formed inaccurately.
- Ten letters that seem more susceptible to formation errors and may require additional attention are: i, j, a, d, g, r, n, m, h and z.
- It is important to focus on the speed of pupils' writing as well as the accuracy. Slow or effortful transcription hinders writing composition, as pupils have to concentrate on monitoring their handwriting and spelling and are less able to think about the content of their writing.
- There is no quick way to develop these essential skills other than through regular, purposeful and substantial practice, supported by effective feedback. Practice should be extensive - a large amount of regular practice is required for pupils to achieve fluency in these skills.
- Spelling must be taught explicitly and systematically. Structured instruction helps pupils recognise and recall words accurately, strengthening overall language skills.
- The teaching of spelling is likely to work best when linked to curriculum content and when teachers encourage pupils to apply new spellings in writing to reinforce learning.
- Ness and Pace Miles propose a structured, research-based approach to help pupils orthographically map words and embed them into long-term memory.⁴

⁴ *Ness, Molly, and Pace Miles. Every Child a Super Speller: A Structured Approach to Orthographic Mapping. New York: Routledge, 2022.*

6. Teach pupils to use strategies for planning and monitoring their writing.

- Writing is a very challenging skill to learn and there is less evidence about the most effective ways to teach writing than there is about reading. Nevertheless, access to effective writing instruction is important. Pupils' writing can be improved by teaching them to plan and monitor their writing.
- Children need to be introduced to, then practise planning, drafting, revising and editing with feedback from the teacher and from their peers. The aim is for them to increase the fluency of these skills and techniques so that they become automatic.
- Teachers should introduce these strategies using modelling and structured support, which should be gradually reduced as a child progresses until they can complete the activity independently.
- Pupils also need to learn about text structure and how texts in different genres are formed. Studies show young children benefit from explicit teaching about the structure of narrative and information texts. Providing pupils with models of simple structures for different types of text can support this.
- Modelling is also important as pupils progress from constructing simple sentences to being able to combine sentences with more complex grammatical structures. Teachers could model these processes, for example, by explicitly demonstrating how to combine several related, simple sentences to make more complex ones.
- To support children with writing composition in the classroom, teachers need to consider appropriate scaffolding. It is unlikely that children will apply approaches like planning, editing and reviewing spontaneously without explicit teaching and encouragement.
- Planning is usually the first composition strategy to emerge followed by 'in the moment' monitoring, which prompts some editing to take place. Approaches like considering the audience or reader appear much later. Children may only be able to apply these strategies when spelling and handwriting require less of the child's working memory capacity.

7. Use high quality information about pupils' current capabilities to select the best next steps for teaching.

- Formative assessment should be integrated into classroom teaching strategies to identify pupils' needs and target instruction.
- Formative assessment involves eliciting evidence of learning from pupils on an ongoing basis and adapting teaching to meet pupils' needs. To do this, teachers should plan activities that will reveal what pupils are thinking, bringing to light learning gaps or misconceptions.
- Formative assessment strategies that can be used include:
 - **Effective questioning** - 'Yesterday we learned the word "amateur". Can you tell me what amateur means?'

- **All-pupil response systems** - 'Try spelling "immediately" on your mini-whiteboards then hold them up so I can see'; and
- **Carefully designed tasks** - these aim to assess specific learning gaps - 'Add apostrophes into the sentences on this handout.'
- It is essential to collect high quality, up-to-date information about pupils' current capabilities and adapt teaching accordingly to focus on exactly what pupils need to progress.
- This approach is more efficient because effort is spent on the best next step and not wasted by rehearsing skills or content that a child already knows well.
- When a teacher identifies that a pupil is struggling with aspects of literacy, the next step should be to accurately diagnose the specific issue(s) and then carefully plan how to support the pupil. Prompt identification of pupils' specific literacy needs and the provision of appropriate support are critical to ensuring sustained progress.
- A range of diagnostic assessments are available for different aspects of literacy and staff should be trained to use and interpret these effectively.
- Assessments should inform the next steps for teaching and sufficient time should be given for effective targeted planning. Targeted planning can appear daunting when pupils appear to have weaknesses in many areas, but more fully understanding pupils' specific literacy needs before planning support will help teachers to work out which areas to prioritise.
- Teaching can be adapted by:
 - **Changing the focus:** models of reading and writing, e.g. The Simple View of Reading, can be used to diagnose pupils' capabilities and select a particular aspect of literacy to focus on next.
 - **Changing the approach:** if a pupil is disengaged or is finding activities too easy or too hard, adopt a different approach to teaching the same aspect of literacy; or use the principles of scaffolding to provide the right level of support that fades as responsibility transfers to the pupil.
- Comparing the child's performance on an assessment before and after changing the focus or approach can provide useful information about the effectiveness of the change and whether further support is still needed.

8. Use high quality structured interventions to help pupils who are struggling.

- Schools should initially focus on ensuring they offer high quality in-class support.
- However, even when excellent classroom teaching is in place, it is likely that a small but significant number of children will require additional targeted literacy support.
- It is very important that schools use accurate assessment of capabilities and difficulties to ensure interventions are appropriately matched to pupils' needs.

- The use of one-to-one and small group tutoring involving structured interventions is likely to be the most effective approach to supporting literacy. There is consistent evidence this approach supports children struggling with aspects of literacy.
- Small-group support is more likely to be effective when: children with the greatest needs are supported by the most capable adults; adults have been trained to deliver the activity being used; and the approach is evidence-based and has been evaluated elsewhere.
- If a teacher is planning for a group to be run outside of whole-class teaching, it is vital to be confident that the alternative support is more effective than the teaching that is happening in class. If this is not the case, withdrawing children from whole-class teaching may lead to a widening of the attainment gap.
- It is critical to regularly review children's progress whilst they are part of the intervention to ensure the support is enhancing their learning.
- There is more detailed advice available to schools within the **Literacy Inclusion Toolkit | SEND Plan**. This toolkit has been developed to assist educators and educational settings in Northern Ireland to support those pupils who may experience or be at risk of developing literacy difficulties.



