

TransformED NI

Guidance for Primary Schools: **Developing Effective Phonics Provision**

October 2026



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1. Purpose of this guidance

The Department of Education is committed to ensuring that all pupils in Northern Ireland develop strong literacy skills as a foundation for learning, personal development and success in school, work and life.

The Department's **Strong Foundations: A Literacy Framework for Primary Schools** sets out the evidence, principles and practical approaches for strengthening literacy teaching and learning. It is accompanied by eight evidence-informed **guidelines** designed to help schools develop coherent whole-school literacy provision.

The Literacy Framework highlights the strong international evidence demonstrating that systematic phonics teaching is one of the most effective ways to support children in learning to read. It recommends that all schools adopt a structured and systematic approach to phonics and notes systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) as an effective method for teaching early reading and spelling.

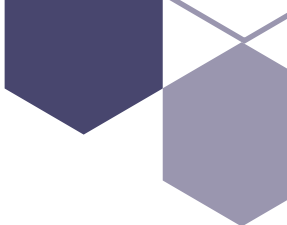
The draft Foundation Stage English curriculum within Curriculum 2028 also identifies phonics as a priority, recognising its important role in helping pupils begin to read and spell words with increasing accuracy.

This guidance supports schools to evaluate and strengthen their phonics provision. It sets out the key features of high-quality provision, principally in the Foundation Stage, and explains how phonics knowledge should be consolidated and extended as pupils progress through primary school. It also provides a number of case studies. This guidance should be read within the context of the broader literacy curriculum set out in the Literacy Framework.

Schools will note that this guidance has not been developed for the teaching of Irish- or English-language phonics in Irish-medium schools. While some aspects of the guidance, including the review of phonics provision, may be relevant, Irish-medium education operates within a distinct linguistic context. The Department is working with the sector to consider appropriate guidance and support for Irish-medium settings.

Why phonics matters

There is a global decline in literacy and Northern Ireland is no exception. The recently published Key Stage outcomes indicate that by the end of primary school almost 3 in 10 pupils are not at the expected level in literacy (27%). If we consider that some pupils have been exempted from the assessments for a variety of reasons, including special educational needs, the outcomes are starker. Critically, the gap between pupils entitled to Free School Meals and their peers is significant and widens during their school careers.



More than 40% of pupils entitled to free school meals are not at the expected levels in literacy by the end of primary school **(Key Stage Outcomes)**.

Over several decades, a substantial body of international research, often referred to as the Science of Reading, has transformed our understanding of how children learn to read.

Drawing on evidence from cognitive psychology, linguistics, neuroscience and education, this research has consistently shown that, unlike speech, reading does not develop naturally for most children. Rather, successful reading depends on high-quality, explicit instruction. It is therefore essential that approaches to teaching reading are informed by the best available evidence about how children learn and how teachers can support that learning most effectively.

Phonics is an essential foundation within a comprehensive, evidence-informed approach to literacy.

Evidence from reading outcomes, referral patterns and engagement with schools, however, suggests significant variation in phonics provision across Northern Ireland. While many schools demonstrate effective practice, there is a need to ensure that provision is aligned with best practice, evidence-informed and implemented consistently.

Primary schools should therefore review their phonics provision, building on existing strengths and identifying where improvement is needed. Schools may use School Development Days and TransformED Days to support this work. This guidance provides a framework to support that review.

Learning to read requires children to develop secure decoding skills. Accurate and increasingly automatic word reading enables pupils to focus their attention on understanding, interpreting and engaging with what they read. Where decoding is insecure or effortful, reading comprehension can be adversely affected.

Strong early reading skills also enable pupils to access learning across the curriculum and help to prevent gaps in attainment from becoming entrenched. High-quality phonics teaching therefore plays a crucial role in improving outcomes for all children, particularly those who may be at risk of falling behind.



Introducing the Year 2 Phonics Check

As part of wider work to support literacy development, the Department has introduced a Year 2 Phonics Check. The first check will take place in June 2027. The check will provide a short, age-appropriate assessment of pupils' decoding skills and their ability to apply phonics knowledge when reading familiar and unfamiliar words.

The primary purpose of the check is to strengthen teaching and learning. It will help schools identify pupils who may require additional support at an early stage and provide valuable information about how effectively phonics is being taught across the education system. Alongside other assessment information and classroom evidence, the check will help schools evaluate their phonics provision, identify where improvement is needed and provide appropriate support for pupils.

The check is not intended to be a high-stakes accountability measure. **Outcomes will be published at system level only.** In addition, results will not be reported to parents during the first three years of implementation, allowing time for schools to become familiar with the assessment and to embed effective phonics practice.

Supporting literacy improvement

The phonics check is one part of the Department's wider work to improve literacy. Now is the time to ensure that phonics teaching across Northern Ireland is consistent, evidence-informed and effective. This is especially important in the context of international evidence pointing to declining reading attainment and lower levels of reading engagement among young people.

Across many jurisdictions, there are concerns about falling reading standards and reduced reading for pleasure. Similar trends have been observed in Northern Ireland, where recent Key Stage assessment outcomes have reinforced the need to strengthen foundational literacy skills and ensure that every child develops the confidence and capability to become a successful reader.

The Department will support schools to use this guidance through professional learning, practical resources and support with implementation.

Who is this guidance for?

This guidance is primarily for:

- Principals;
- Senior Leaders;
- Literacy Coordinators;
- Teachers and other staff who teach or support phonics; and
- Governors.

2. Reviewing phonics provision

Why review phonics provision?

Phonics has been an important feature of literacy teaching in Northern Ireland for the past two decades. The renewed focus on evidence-informed literacy practice through the Literacy Framework provides an opportunity for schools to review their phonics provision.

Schools should undertake this review over the next two academic years through their existing self-evaluation and school-improvement arrangements. Schools will wish to ensure that their approach to phonics is aligned with evidence-informed practice and that provision is coherent, implemented consistently and responsive to the needs of pupils.

Areas for review

In reviewing their phonics provision, schools should give particular attention to:

- **Curriculum and progression**, including whether there is an agreed cumulative teaching sequence;
- **Teaching and learning**, including the quality and consistency of explicit teaching routines;
- **Reading practice**, including the availability and use of reading materials that are closely matched to what pupils have been taught;
- **Assessment and additional support**, including how assessment informs teaching and identifies pupils who require prompt additional support;
- **Staff knowledge and professional learning**, including effective teaching of phonics, matched reading materials, appropriate assessment approaches and prompt additional support for pupils who are not keeping pace; and
- **Leadership and implementation**, including how leaders monitor whether phonics is being taught consistently and its effectiveness in improving pupils' learning.

The review should consider whether the school's approach is well designed, whether it is being used consistently across classes, year groups and additional support, and whether it is improving pupils' learning.



Phonics within a broader literacy approach

Consistent with the Literacy Framework, phonics should form part of a coherent overall approach to literacy. It is essential for developing word recognition but is not the whole of reading. Effective literacy provision also develops:

- Spoken language;
- Vocabulary;
- Reading fluency;
- Comprehension;
- Orthographic mapping;
- Spelling;
- Writing; and
- Reading for pleasure.

Applying the Literacy Framework principles

In undertaking their review of phonics provision, schools should apply the following five core principles set out in the Literacy Framework:

- Coherence and consistency:** Literacy teaching should be a whole school priority, aligned across year groups, with consistent routines, clear language and planned progression.
- Inclusion:** All pupils should have access to high-quality literacy teaching, regardless of background, starting point or home language. This means recognising cultural and linguistic diversity, supporting multilingual learners and using texts that reflect varied experiences.
- Evidence-informed practice:** Teaching should be guided by robust research and proven methods. Approaches with limited evidence should be replaced with structured, explicit instruction.
- Literacy across the curriculum:** Literacy should be embedded within all areas of learning across the curriculum recognising that literacy skills are foundational to learning in all subjects. It is important to develop disciplinary literacy: supporting pupils to read, write and communicate using the conventions and reasoning of each subject, such as scientific explanation, historical argument or mathematical precision.
- Self-evaluation and continuous improvement:** Schools should regularly reflect on and review current practice using the 'Looking Inward, Looking Outward and Looking Forward' model (see Literacy Framework page 11) to identify strengths and weaknesses, compare with best practice and plan next steps.

These principles are intended to support system-wide consistency that supports high standards and reduces variation across schools.

The review should also be informed by the Department's guidance on reading and structured literacy set out in Chapter 3 of **the Literacy Framework**.



3. Understanding phonics

What is phonics?

Phonics teaches the relationship between sounds (phonemes) and their written representations (graphemes). Pupils learn sound–spelling relationships, and how to blend sounds to read words and segment words into sounds for spelling. The aim is to develop increasingly accurate and automatic word reading and spelling.

Through phonics, pupils learn how letters and groups of letters represent sounds and how this knowledge can be applied to read unfamiliar words and spell words accurately. As learning becomes secure, word recognition becomes increasingly automatic, supporting reading fluency and confident writing.

What is systematic synthetic phonics (SSP)?

There are several approaches to phonics instruction, each with distinct features and implications for pupil outcomes (see Literacy Framework pages 41-42). Systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) teaches sound–spelling relationships explicitly in a planned, cumulative sequence. Pupils are taught the sounds (phonemes) associated with letters in isolation and then to blend individual sounds to read words and segment spoken words into sounds for spelling.

The term *systematic* refers to the careful sequencing of knowledge and skills with new learning building on what has already been taught. The term *synthetic* refers to the process of synthesising, or blending, individual sounds to read words.



Teaching should include clear explanation and modelling, guided practice and opportunities to apply learning in reading, spelling and writing. Effective SSP teaching also includes regular review of previously taught knowledge and skills, alongside assessment to identify pupils' next steps.

SSP should form part of coherent wider literacy provision, alongside the development of spoken language, vocabulary, reading fluency, comprehension, spelling, writing and reading for pleasure.

Why phonics matters

Learning to decode accurately and increasingly automatically is key to reading. When decoding is slow or insecure, it requires greater effort, leaving less attention available for understanding and engaging with the text. Secure word reading also helps pupils read independently and access learning across the curriculum.

Reading comprehension depends on pupils being able to recognise words accurately and efficiently. As word recognition becomes more automatic, pupils can focus more fully on understanding, interpreting and responding to what they read.

The Literacy Framework identifies extensive evidence supporting systematic phonics in the Foundation Stage and recommends that all schools adopt a systematic approach to phonics. It also notes that synthetic phonics is a highly effective approach to early word reading.

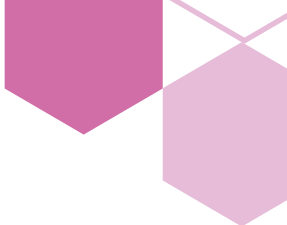
Effective phonics provision depends not only on the approach selected but also on the quality and consistency of implementation. This includes effective teaching, knowledgeable staff, appropriate assessment, matched reading materials and prompt additional support for pupils who are not keeping pace.

The Literacy Framework does not prohibit the use of other additional phonics approaches including analytic and analogy phonics. Indeed, it highlights that analogy phonics which teaches new words by comparing them to known word families or rhyming patterns may be a useful additional strategy to help children learn patterns in the English language.

The Literacy Framework also highlights most children learn letter names easily and Year 1 pupils should be taught them explicitly. To support decoding and spelling, pupils need to understand the alphabetic principle: that letters represent sounds and that sounds may be represented by one to four letters.

Pupils must also develop automatic word recognition to become fluent readers. It is advisable to teach high-frequency words in a pre-determined sequence so that children can begin to read connected text.

While most pupils develop secure decoding skills through high-quality classroom teaching, some will require additional support and practice. Early identification and timely intervention are important to reduce the risk of literacy difficulties becoming entrenched.



Coherence and consistency

Pupils benefit when teaching, practice, assessment and additional support follow a clearly defined cumulative sequence and use consistent routines, language and materials. This is sometimes described as implementation fidelity: maintaining the core sequence, teaching routines and decoding processes of the agreed approach. Consistency helps pupils build secure knowledge and reduces unnecessary variation that may cause confusion or hinder progress.

Where a single published programme is used, schools should implement its core sequence and teaching approach consistently, taking account of relevant provider guidance.

Where a school is using more than one published programme, it should ensure that no aspects of the teaching scope are omitted and that the sequence of delivery is seamless, with consistent classroom routines, terminology, assessment approaches and reading materials. Departing from this approach by combining elements from different programmes may result in confusion for pupils and reduce the effectiveness of instruction.

Consistency does not mean teaching every pupil in exactly the same way. In response to assessment, staff may adjust pace, the amount of practice or level of support while continuing to follow the agreed teaching sequence and retaining blending for reading and segmenting for spelling.

Choosing books

Pupils need regular opportunities to practise reading with decodable texts that are closely matched to the sound-spelling relationships they have been taught. Using these texts for independent or small-group decoding practice helps pupils apply and consolidate their phonics knowledge and develop increasingly accurate and automatic word reading.

Texts used in shared and whole-class reading serve a different purpose: through teacher-led shared and whole-class reading of rich, authentic texts, pupils can encounter language, vocabulary, ideas and text structures beyond those they can yet read independently. These approaches support the development of oral language, vocabulary, fluency, syntax, comprehension, knowledge and reading enjoyment alongside the systematic development of decoding.

Where guided reading is used for decoding practice, texts should be closely matched to pupils' taught phonics knowledge so that teachers can respond to emerging needs. Teaching should reinforce decoding as the primary route to identifying unfamiliar written words. Pictures, context and initial letters may support understanding, but should not be used as alternative strategies for identifying unfamiliar words.

Books or other materials provided for reading practice at home should also be matched to pupils' taught phonics knowledge. Parents and carers should receive clear information about the purpose of these materials and how they can support reading practice at home.

4. A framework to support self-evaluation

Using the framework

The indicators below describe features of effective practice identified through research evidence and established principles of effective implementation. They cover six key areas of phonics provision:

- **Curriculum and progression;**
- **Teaching and learning;**
- **Reading practice;**
- **Assessment and additional support;**
- **Staff knowledge and professional learning; and**
- **Leadership and implementation.**

These areas are interdependent and should be considered together as part of a coherent school-wide approach, rather than treated as separate checklists. Effective provision depends on these elements working consistently.

Supporting self-evaluation and improvement

Schools may use the reflective questions and indicators below as part of the 'Looking Inward, Looking Outward and Looking Forward' approach to self-evaluation described in the Literacy Framework. Schools should examine how well their current provision is working, compare it with relevant evidence and effective practice elsewhere and agree manageable priorities for improvement.

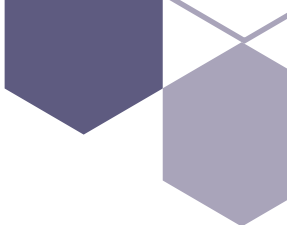
Schools may draw on existing planning, assessment, classroom practice, reading materials and professional discussion. The framework is intended to support professional reflection and improvement planning.



Reflective questions and indicators

Self-evaluation question	Indicators of effective practice
Curriculum and progression Is there a defined and cumulative sequence for teaching phonics?	• Scope: an agreed sequence begins in Primary 1 and provides a structured route through phonics (phonemes, graphemes, and the alphabetic code), with continued explicit teaching where decoding is not yet secure. • Order: the sequence indicates the planned order and progression of teaching, provides a shared understanding of how pupils progress through the phonics programme and supports timely review so that pupils can be supported to keep pace. • Application: planning, lessons and materials reflect the agreed sequence and support decoding and spelling. • Coherence: additional materials do not introduce conflicting content, terminology, routines or assessment arrangements.
Teaching and learning – phonemic awareness Are pupils taught explicitly to identify and manipulate sounds (phonemic awareness)?	• Sound–grapheme connection: pupils are taught to hear, identify and manipulate sounds within spoken words and connect them explicitly with the corresponding graphemes. • Instruction: activities involving spoken sounds are purposeful and linked promptly to graphemes. (See phonemic awareness tasks in the Literacy Framework page 45) • Additional practice: further explicit practice for phonemic awareness is provided to support improved word recognition when pupils need it.
Teaching and learning – explicit teaching Is phonics taught regularly and explicitly? Are pupils taught explicitly to connect sounds with their corresponding graphemes (grapheme-phoneme correspondence)? Are pupils taught explicitly to read less regular words?	• Frequency: planned, explicit teaching takes place daily from early in Primary 1 until the children have reached automaticity in decoding and can apply this within continuous text. Older children who have not yet reached that point require daily practice until they reach this threshold. Practice, retrieval and cumulative learning are essential to connect pronunciation, spelling and meaning in long-term memory. • Instruction: teaching includes direct instruction, clear modelling, guided practice and accurate pronunciation of sounds. • Application: pupils apply taught sounds and spellings in reading, spelling and writing, including dictation where appropriate. • Handwriting: letter formation is taught alongside early sound–spelling work. • Focus: activities focus on the phonics knowledge or skill being taught, provide enough practice, and involve all pupils. • Less regular words: teaching identifies the parts of words that follow taught sound–spelling relationships and explains any less regular parts. Pupils apply existing phonics knowledge wherever possible rather than relying solely on visual memorisation. • Review: instruction should be responsive and informed by ongoing assessment of the letter-sound knowledge pupils possess.

Self-evaluation question	Indicators of effective practice
Teaching and learning - blending and segmenting Are blending for reading and segmenting for spelling taught explicitly?	• Blending: pupils are taught explicitly to blend sounds to read words. • Segmenting: pupils are taught explicitly to segment words into sounds for spelling. • Early reading and spelling: a defined set of sounds and spellings enables pupils to begin reading and spelling words from an early stage. • Word building: pupils use taught sound–spelling relationships to read and build words rather than being expected to infer the code from whole words. • Word identification: pupils use decoding as the primary route to identifying unfamiliar written words; pictures, context and initial letters may support meaning but do not substitute for decoding.
Reading practice Do pupils practise reading with decodable texts matched to what they have been taught? Are wider texts used appropriately?	• Range: pupils have access to decodable books and practice materials matched to their current phonics knowledge whilst experiencing rich, authentic texts read by the teacher. • Alignment: texts are matched to the agreed sequence and to the sounds and spellings pupils have been taught. Alongside this, language comprehension is supplemented by hearing wider texts that encompass different genres, build background knowledge, have rich vocabulary and varied sentence structures. • Practice: pupils have regular opportunities to apply and secure their decoding through matched texts. Schools should only discontinue the use of decodable books when pupils can read accurately and with increasing automaticity and fluency across a broader range of texts. • Home practice: books or other materials provided for pupils to practise reading at home are matched to the phonics knowledge they have been taught. This can be supplemented by encouraging parents to read wider texts to their children to cultivate a love of literature. • Fluency: pupils develop as increasingly accurate, automatic and confident readers through repeated reading and practice with appropriately matched texts. • Assessment: pupil progress is carefully monitored so that reading errors can be used to inform appropriate adjustments to provision.
Assessment and additional support Does assessment inform teaching and help identify pupils who require additional support?	• Assessment: diagnostic checks identify what pupils know, where there are gaps in learning, which pupils are not keeping pace and which pupils are ready to move on. • Next steps: identified needs may inform adjustments in teaching, frequency and type of practice or phonics groupings. • Response: additional support is focused on identified gaps and aligned with the taught sequence, classroom routines and correction approaches. • Progress: evidence over time shows whether pupils' decoding is becoming increasingly accurate and automatic. Teaching or support is adjusted where progress is limited.



Self-evaluation question	Indicators of effective practice
Staff knowledge and professional learning Do all adults who teach or support phonics have the knowledge, skills and professional learning needed to implement the approach accurately and consistently?	• Core knowledge and skills: adults have the knowledge and skills needed to implement the agreed approach accurately and consistently. • Professional learning: professional learning covers the sequence, routines, materials, assessment and arrangements for prompt additional support. • Induction: new staff are supported to understand the agreed approach before teaching or supporting phonics. • Consistency: adults use the agreed sequence, routines, language and correction approaches consistently across classes, groups and additional support. • Adaptations: assessment-informed adaptations respond to needs, retain the agreed sequence and core decoding processes, and are reviewed in the light of pupils' progress. • Programme-specific support: relevant professional learning and implementation support are available from programme providers.
Leadership and implementation Do leaders monitor implementation and evaluate impact?	• Oversight: leaders maintain an overview of phonics provision across classes, year groups and additional support arrangements. • Monitoring: leaders gather evidence through lesson visits, professional discussion, assessment information and pupils' reading and writing in lessons (as appropriate to the stage of the programme). • Evaluation: leaders use evidence to identify strengths, inconsistencies and priorities for improvement. • Professional learning: monitoring informs professional learning, coaching and support. • Impact: leaders evaluate whether provision is improving pupils' decoding accuracy, automaticity and ability to apply their learning in reading and spelling.

Deciding priorities for improvement

Following self-evaluation, schools may decide that some or all aspects of provision should be sustained, strengthened or improved.

Schools should determine whether improvement is needed because an appropriate approach is not being implemented consistently, or because the approach itself is unsuitable or ineffective. The action taken should reflect the nature and significance of the issues identified through the review.

Response	Typical characteristics	Possible actions
Sustain	Core features are secure, implementation is consistent and available evidence indicates that pupils are making the expected progress.	Maintain effective practice and continue routine monitoring and review, support induction of new staff and identify opportunities to refine and share effective practice.
Strengthen	The underlying approach is broadly sound, but some aspects of implementation are inconsistent or not yet fully embedded. Variations may exist between classes, staff confidence may vary or assessment and support arrangements may require closer alignment.	Refresh professional learning, strengthen implementation of agreed routines, improve alignment between teaching, assessment, reading materials and additional support, and review progress over time.
Improve	Significant weaknesses are evident in the coherence, implementation or effectiveness of provision. Assessment information, classroom evidence or pupil outcomes suggest that current arrangements are not consistently securing sufficient progress.	Identify clear priorities for improvement, address immediate concerns, develop an improvement plan with appropriate timescales and monitoring arrangements, and consider whether significant changes to provision or approach may be required.

Taking forward priorities

Schools should take forward priorities identified through self-evaluation using their existing leadership and school-improvement arrangements. Actions should be proportionate, build on effective practice and focus on changes most likely to improve implementation and pupil outcomes.

In smaller schools, responsibility for phonics may rest with the principal or class teachers rather than a designated lead, and separate staff may not be available to provide additional support. Schools should apply the guidance proportionately, using shared leadership, flexible deployment of staff and external professional support where available.

Considering significant changes to provision

Where self-evaluation indicates that provision is not securing the progress pupils need, schools should determine whether the principal issue is the implementation of the existing approach or the approach itself. Schools may need to strengthen existing arrangements or, where the evidence indicates that those arrangements are unsuitable or ineffective, consider significant changes to provision.

Schools should base decisions about phonics provision on whether the approach is evidence-informed, suitable for their pupils, capable of being implemented consistently and effectively, and sustainable over time. Schools should not retain approaches that are not meeting pupils' needs simply because they are familiar or already established.

When considering changes to provision, schools will wish to evaluate potential approaches carefully. The questions below will help leaders assess proposed approaches.

Schools should also consider the implications of change in terms of leadership capacity, staffing, professional learning arrangements, resources and implementation support required to introduce change successfully. Where substantial change is needed, schools may wish to introduce it in stages so that staff receive appropriate support and the new approach can be implemented consistently.

Success depends not only on choosing an effective approach but on implementing it well and consistently across the school.

Criterion	Questions for schools to consider
Cumulative sequence	Does the approach provide a clear, planned and cumulative sequence for teaching phonics?
Matched decodable texts	Are decodable texts and practice materials closely matched to the sequence and to the sounds and spellings pupils have been taught?
Assessment and additional support	Do assessment arrangements identify pupils' strengths and gaps, inform teaching, and provide prompt additional support aligned with classroom provision?
Professional learning and support	Are suitable initial and ongoing professional learning, clear teaching routines, implementation guidance and reliable support available?
Suitability for pupils	Is the approach suitable for pupils with different starting points and needs, and can assessment-informed adaptations retain the agreed sequence and core decoding processes?
Evidence and quality	Is the approach supported by relevant evidence? Are essential content, teaching routines, assessment arrangements and implementation expectations clearly specified?
Staffing and leadership	What leadership, staffing, time and oversight is needed to implement the approach accurately and consistently?
Full costs	What are the full costs of the approach, including professional learning, books, assessment materials, replacement resources and ongoing costs?
Transition and continuity	How will the school maintain continuity for pupils, align current and new materials and provide appropriate professional learning for staff during transition?

5. Additional support for pupils

Identifying pupils who require additional support

Explicit, systematic phonics is an important part of learning to read for pupils with special educational needs and pupils learning English as an additional language. The Literacy Framework emphasises the use of high-quality, up-to-date assessment information to identify appropriate next steps and match additional support to assessed need.

An identified or emerging need, or a pupil's stage of English-language development, does not mean that phonics is unsuitable. However, teaching and support may need to be adapted in response to the pupil's strengths, needs, and current knowledge.

Providing effective support

Assessment should identify pupils who are not keeping pace, their current phonics knowledge and any specific gaps or barriers to learning. Where pupils are not keeping pace, schools should:

- provide prompt, focused support;
- align support with the school's agreed sequence, classroom teaching and routines;
- ensure that support supplements rather than replaces pupils' usual phonics teaching;
- ensure that support is delivered by adults with the appropriate knowledge and professional learning;
- use words and texts matched to pupils' current phonics knowledge;
- review progress regularly; and
- adjust support or seek further advice where progress remains limited.

Adapting teaching to meet pupils' needs

Adaptations may include:

- adjusting the pace or amount of new learning;
- providing additional modelling and cumulative practice;
- using carefully selected visual or physical supports to reinforce teaching and support participation;
- reducing group size or allowing more time for pupils to respond; and
- teaching vocabulary and pronunciation alongside phonics.



Adaptations should respond to assessed need while retaining the school's agreed sequence and the core processes of blending for reading and segmenting for spelling. They should not replace decoding with guessing from pictures, context or initial letters. Any use of visual or contextual support should help pupils understand and engage with learning, rather than provide an alternative strategy for identifying unfamiliar written words.

For pupils learning English as an Additional Language, staff may need to distinguish between difficulties in applying the alphabetic code and gaps in English vocabulary or spoken-language knowledge. Pupils may be able to decode a word accurately without understanding its meaning or may know a word in spoken language without yet recognising its written form. Phonics teaching should therefore be accompanied by explicit support for vocabulary, pronunciation and oral language where needed.

Where a pupil continues to make limited progress despite appropriate support, assessment should inform whether teaching or support needs to be further adapted, including whether an additional evidence-informed approach may be appropriate.

The school should also consider, through its existing special educational needs arrangements, whether other factors may be affecting the pupil's learning and whether further assessment or specialist advice may be helpful. This may include consideration of pupils' hearing, vision, speech, language or communication needs. Schools should continue appropriate teaching and support while any further assessment or advice is being sought.

Explicit phonics teaching should continue for pupils whose decoding is not yet secure, regardless of age or year group, using materials appropriate to their age and stage of development. For older pupils, support should address identified gaps while using content or presentation suited to their age, interests and stage of development.

6. Progression beyond Foundation Stage

As set out in the Literacy Framework, phonics provides an important foundation for reading and spelling. As pupils progress, teaching should increasingly connect phonics with fluency, vocabulary, background knowledge and comprehension.

The stages below provide a broad guide to progression. They are not intended to prescribe fixed expectations for every pupil or year group. Teachers should use assessment to decide what pupils are ready to learn next and whether they still need explicit phonics teaching.

Stage	Main focus	Key teaching priorities
Foundation Stage	Developing knowledge of phonics	• learning sound–spelling relationships through an agreed cumulative sequence; • blending sounds for reading; • segmenting sounds for spelling; • applying taught knowledge in reading, spelling and writing; and • providing prompt additional phonics teaching for pupils who need it.
Key Stage 1	Securing accuracy and developing automaticity	• consolidating and extending phonics knowledge; • providing prompt, targeted additional support for pupils whose decoding is not yet secure; • decoding and spelling more complex words; • developing accurate and automatic word reading; • applying increasingly complex sound–spelling relationships and developing knowledge of recurring orthographic and spelling patterns, syllables and meaningful word parts, including age-appropriate prefixes, suffixes and base words; and • developing reading fluency through appropriate modelling and practice.

Stage	Main focus	Key teaching priorities
Key Stage 2	Extending fluency, spelling and word knowledge	• providing timely and targeted support for pupils whose decoding is not yet secure; • developing accurate, fluent and expressive reading; • applying spelling patterns and conventions; • extending knowledge of morphology, including prefixes, suffixes and roots; • developing knowledge of word origins and how these relate to meaning and spelling, where appropriate; and • applying wider word knowledge in reading and writing across the curriculum.
Additional consideration at all stages	Supporting pupils whose decoding remains insecure	• explicit phonics teaching should continue in response to assessed need, rather than be determined solely by a pupil's age, year group or completion of a programme; and • teaching and support should respond to identified gaps and use materials appropriate to pupils' age and stage of development.

Teaching about syllables, spelling patterns and conventions, morphology (including prefixes, suffixes and roots) and word origins should build on pupils' existing phonics knowledge. It should support fluent reading, spelling and vocabulary development, while retaining decoding as the primary route to identifying unfamiliar written words.





CASE STUDY 1

Strengthening phonics provision

This case study illustrates how a school used phased implementation to strengthen phonics provision.

Context and reason for change

We are a large co-educational primary school in an urban area with approximately 800 pupils from nursery to Primary 7, including two nursery classes and four classes in each year group.

Although phonics was already taught across the school, changes in our intake, including more pupils with English as an Additional Language and identified or emerging special educational needs, highlighted the need for a more systematic and consistent approach. We wanted stronger foundations for reading through a clear cumulative sequence, consistent teaching across classes and year groups, closer alignment between teaching and reading books, better use of assessment and more effective support for pupils who were not keeping pace.

What we did

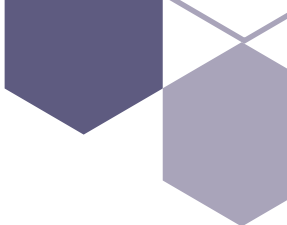
During 2025-26, we reviewed a range of SSP programmes and began with a focused trial in Primary 2 and learning support rather than changing provision across the whole school immediately. We selected an approach that offered clear progression, ready-to-use teaching routines, robust assessment and decodable books closely matched to classroom teaching.

Staff development covered accurate pronunciation, blending and segmenting, cumulative review, retrieval practice, assessment and effective use of decodable texts. Phonics was positioned within a wider literacy strategy encompassing vocabulary, oracy, fluency, comprehension, writing and reading for pleasure.

Implementation

The staged trial allowed staff to build confidence, evaluate the approach in our context and resolve practical issues before extending it. Phonics was taught explicitly and daily through a structured sequence that revisited previous learning, introduced new sounds and spellings, developed oral blending and segmenting, and applied learning through word reading, spelling, sentences and decodable texts.

The literacy coordinator and the learning support team monitored implementation, assessment outcomes and pupils' independent application in reading and writing. After the 2025-26 trial, the approach was extended to Primary 1 and Primary 3, with professional learning for relevant teachers and classroom assistants, further investment in matched decodable books and communication with parents so that home reading complemented classroom practice.



What worked well and the difference reported

The trial enabled staff to test and refine the approach before expansion. A consistent lesson structure and shared progression improved continuity and professional discussion across year groups, while assessment strengthened communication between class teachers and the learning support team and enabled prompt, targeted support, including more intensive intervention where appropriate.

We found that matching teaching with decodable books increased pupils' engagement, success and willingness to attempt unfamiliar words without relying on pictures or context. Staff also reported greater consistency in teaching and in pupils' experience, alongside increased pupil confidence in recognising taught sounds and spellings, blending words and applying their learning in writing. During the Primary 2 trial year, our assessment information also indicated a reduction in the number of pupils requiring additional phonics support. We are continuing to monitor whether this is sustained as the approach is extended.

Challenges and next steps

Maintaining consistency across many classes required sustained leadership attention. Protecting daily teaching time, funding sufficient decodable books and assessing large numbers of pupils regularly also presented challenges.

Our next priorities are to embed the approach across year groups, monitor implementation, expand resources, strengthen professional learning and evaluate longer-term changes in reading accuracy, fluency and confidence, while retaining strong wider provision for oral language, vocabulary, comprehension, whole-class reading and reading for pleasure.

Key learning

The most important lesson was that improving phonics provision involves more than purchasing a programme. It depends on a clear rationale, high-quality professional learning, consistent implementation, assessment that informs teaching, prompt additional support and strong leadership oversight.

We believe that the improvements reported arose from this combination of elements rather than programme choice alone.



CASE STUDY 2

Developing a coherent whole-school approach to reading

This case study illustrates how phonics can sit within coherent wider literacy provision and how the implementation and wider-literacy principles can be developed through professional learning and phased change.

Context and reason for change

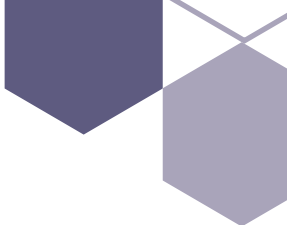
We are a co-educational primary school with approximately 350 pupils. We have two classes in each year group from Primary 1 to Primary 7, alongside a nurture group and specialist provision for pupils with additional needs.

Our work began in 2022, when professional learning introduced staff to the evidence about how pupils learn to read. Reading and comprehension were already school-improvement priorities, but aspects of instruction had become compartmentalised. We wanted a shared understanding of how phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, spelling and writing work together to develop skilled readers.

What we did

We began by exploring the evidence on reading and introducing staff to an organising model that connects word recognition with language comprehension. Staff first developed their understanding of the theory and then trialled approaches relevant to their phase or year group. In Foundation Stage, this included reviewing the phonics sequence, strengthening the explicit teaching of blending and segmenting, matching decodable books more closely to taught content and teaching less regular words by identifying both their regular and less regular parts. At Key Stages 1 and 2, staff trialled whole-class reading, teacher modelling of fluent reading, supported and repeated oral reading, explicit vocabulary instruction and teaching about morphology and word structure.

We also invested in decodable books, class texts, fluency materials, professional reading and shared literacy resources to support implementation. Year-group teams reviewed existing materials against the agreed progression and identified where additional texts or teaching resources were required.



Implementation

Implementation was gradual and manageable. Staff received a series of professional learning sessions, trialled approaches in their classrooms and used staff meetings to review progress, discuss challenges, evaluate resources and agree next steps. We mapped progression across word recognition and language comprehension so that phonics, fluency, vocabulary, morphology, rich texts, discussion and reading across the curriculum formed a more coherent pathway. Year-group teams identified what pupils should already know, the knowledge and skills to be taught during the year and how these would prepare pupils for the next stage. Staff used this mapping when planning lessons, selecting texts and discussing pupils' next steps.

What worked well and the difference reported

Giving staff time to build understanding and confidence was central to the work. Teachers focused on one aspect, trialled it, evaluated it and shared what they learned before wider adoption. This helped us avoid introducing several disconnected changes at once and enabled staff to refine routines before agreeing how they should be used more widely.

We found that whole-class reading supported more explicit teaching and stronger links between reading, vocabulary, grammar and writing; fluency work changed how teachers approached oral reading; and the revised teaching of less regular words strengthened early reading and spelling.

We consider the most significant change to be the development of a shared whole-school understanding of reading. Staff reported clearer connections between different aspects of literacy, increased pupil engagement and confidence in discussing texts, and stronger links between reading, classroom learning and the wider curriculum. We also kept parents informed through curriculum meetings and school communications, including explanations of the approaches pupils would encounter and how reading could be supported at home.

Challenges and next steps

The main challenge was helping staff translate complex ideas into classroom practice without creating too much change at once. Teachers needed time to trial approaches, evaluate implementation, review impact and build confidence so protected time for professional discussion and reflection was essential. Our next priorities are to strengthen morphology in Key Stage 2, develop more systematic fluency assessment, map reading progression against the developing curriculum framework and continue reviewing our phonics provision as part of wider literacy improvement.

Key learning

Our experience suggests that improving reading depends on more than a single programme or initiative. We attribute the progress reported to a combination of professional learning, evidence, manageable classroom trials, staff collaboration and careful evaluation, while maintaining a coherent connection between systematic phonics and the wider knowledge and skills required for reading.



CASE STUDY 3

Using self-evaluation to strengthen reading provision

This case study shows how a school might use self-evaluation to recognise strengths and identify shared priorities.

Context and reason for change

We are a medium-sized primary school with two classes in most year groups and pupils with a wide range of starting points and additional needs. We undertook a whole-school self-evaluation as part of our wider work to develop reading provision.

The aim was not to evaluate individual staff or classes, but to recognise effective practice, understand variation across year groups and establish shared priorities for professional learning and improvement.

What we did

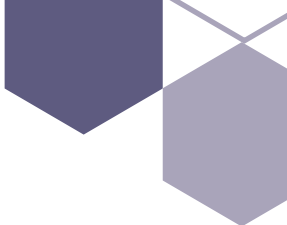
Each year group completed a baseline review using a structured reading-curriculum evaluation tool selected by the school (the Reading League's Curriculum Evaluation Guidelines 2026, 3rd edition). We used the tool to support professional discussion rather than to make a judgement about individual teachers or year groups.

Staff considered phonics and decoding, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, spelling, writing, assessment and wider reading provision. Year-group teams reviewed planning, teaching materials, assessment information, pupils' work and the texts used for teaching and independent practice. Each team recorded examples of established practice, areas where provision varied and questions requiring further whole-school discussion.

The process did not generate a score; instead, it captured professional reflections and built a qualitative picture of provision across the school. Leaders then brought the findings together to identify recurring strengths and issues, while avoiding conclusions based on a single class, resource or source of evidence.

What the self-evaluation found

We identified important strengths, including explicit teaching and modelling, integrated teaching of spoken sounds and their corresponding graphemes, phonics instruction, supported oral reading, varied texts and growing connections between reading, spelling and writing.



We also identified variation in four areas:

- **Decoding:** some classes still used pictures, context or initial letters to identify unfamiliar words rather than applying the alphabetic code consistently.
- **Progression:** staff needed greater clarity about what should be taught at each stage and how pupils' learning should develop from Primary 1 to Primary 7.
- **Decodable texts:** access and use were inconsistent, and some books were reserved mainly for pupils who were struggling with their reading rather than matched systematically to phonics teaching.
- **Wider reading:** vocabulary, morphology, fluency and comprehension were being taught but not always through a clearly planned whole-school approach.

How we used the findings

Rather than introducing several new programmes, we used the findings to agree a manageable set of whole-school priorities: clearer principles for reading instruction; progression from Primary 1 to Primary 7; consistent decoding prompts; better use of decodable texts; stronger vocabulary, morphology and fluency teaching; more explicit comprehension instruction; improved assessment; and closer links between reading, spelling and writing.

What worked well and the difference reported

We found that the self-evaluation created a common language for discussing literacy, recognised effective practice already present in classrooms and helped leaders distinguish isolated initiatives from priorities requiring a coherent whole-school response. It also provided a shared foundation for professional learning, curriculum development and improvement planning.

Challenges and next steps

The main challenge was converting a broad review into a manageable improvement plan without losing existing strengths. Our next steps are to sequence the agreed priorities, provide focused professional learning, monitor consistency across year groups and review whether changes are improving pupils' reading experience and outcomes. We will use a combination of classroom evidence, assessment information, pupils' work and professional discussion rather than relying on a single measure.

Key learning

The main learning was that effective self-evaluation recognises strengths as well as identifying areas for development. When staff use it together, self-evaluation can identify patterns across classrooms, support useful discussion and help us agree shared priorities. Its value lies not in producing a score or completing a checklist, but in supporting an evidence-informed and manageable process of improvement.

