

Audiobooks: A survey of UK adults in 2021

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Previous research by the National Literacy Trust has found that audiobooks can have a positive impact on the literacy outcomes of children and young people. For example, they can encourage reading more widely, promote vocabulary acquisition and help build positive wellbeing outcomes.¹ This was particularly marked during lockdown, where 1 in 4 children and young people said that they listened to audiobooks more during lockdown (Best and Clark, 2020). However, to date, we have not explored how audiobooks might benefit adult readers. We do know that audiobooks continue to grow in popularity among adults: while sales have been on a steady rise year-on-year, this spiked in the UK during the national lockdowns: in the first six months of 2021 the audiobook market was up 71% on the same period in 2019, increasing from £45m to £76m (Bayley, 2021).

We commissioned OnePoll to survey 3,000 adults across the UK in June 2021, asking questions about their listening habits and attitudes, their attitudes to reading, and their social media engagement. We were particularly interested in the impact of audiobooks on wellbeing as well as their impact on elderly populations, many of whom had been vulnerable to intensified feelings of isolation and anxiety during the pandemic (Mental Health Foundation, 2021).

At the National Literacy Trust, we also run a range of programmes that utilise audiobooks to build literacy. While most of our programmes are for children and young people, our work in the criminal justice sector is adult facing and highlights the power of audiobooks to support

¹ See <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/?talking=audio&filter=true> for more information and to read previous research into audiobooks and podcasts.

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particular groups. As such, this report includes ‘spotlight on’ sections on wellbeing, elderly populations and on the criminal justice sector.

One aim of our work around audiobooks has been to help build an evidence base for the [Axe the Reading Tax](#) campaign. While the VAT on e-books was eliminated in May 2020 – they now have the same status as physical books – audiobooks are still subject to 20% VAT. Launching this campaign with a [webinar](#) in partnership with Audible UK and the Publishers Association, we have looked to promote the importance of removing as many barriers as possible to adults accessing audiobooks. Our hope with this report is that not only will we show the current ways in which adults are listening to audiobooks, but we will also show the importance of making audiobooks more accessible so that the number of people benefitting from the power of hearing stories can continue to increase.

Key findings

- Over 2 in 5 (44.3%) UK adults said in 2021 that they listened to audiobooks in their spare time, with nearly 3 in 10 (27.1%) listening to them at least once a week.
- Nearly 2 in 5 (38%) of the 44.3% who listened to audiobooks said that they had listened to more audiobooks during the pandemic.
- Audiobooks allowed many respondents to fit stories into their busy schedules. Nearly half (48.2%) said one of the reasons they did so is because they could carry out other tasks at the same time.
- Over 1 in 4 (27.1%) said that they found it easier to access audiobooks than physical books, while nearly 1 in 5 (18.3%) said that audiobooks allowed them to access stories that poor eyesight prevented them from reading.

Audiobooks and mental wellbeing

We also asked adults about any potential benefits of listening to audiobooks on their mental wellbeing:

- 7 in 10 (72%) said that listening to audiobooks kept their brain stimulated.
- 7 in 10 (70%) said that listening to audiobooks made them feel less stressed and anxious, while a similar percentage (67%) said that listening to audiobooks cheered them up when they were feeling down or feeling depressed.
- 2 in 3 (67%) UK adults said that listening to audiobooks gave them a sense of companionship. Similarly, over 1 in 2 (55%) said that listening to audiobooks made them feel connected to the world. These benefits were more relevant during the pandemic, with around 3 in 10 UK adults telling us that these benefits increased during lockdown.

Audiobooks and elderly populations

We were also interested in the use of audiobooks in adults aged 65 and older

- Listening to audiobooks decreased with age, with only 1 in 4 (24.9%) adults aged 65+ doing so compared with 2 in 3 (68.9%) of those aged 18 to 24. However, nearly 3 in 10

(27.8%) of those aged 65+ said that they had listened to audiobooks more because of lockdown.

- While engagement with audiobooks was lower for older populations, the motivations for listening to them were the same as for other age groups, with 4 out of 5 (80.1%) listeners in this age group saying audiobooks helped keep their brain stimulated (vs 77.4% of those aged 18-24) and that they allowed them to complete other tasks (50.0% vs. 42.1% of those aged 18-24).
- Open-ended comments suggest that for some older people, audiobooks had been particularly beneficial during lockdown both in terms of providing companionship and easing anxieties around the pandemic.

“As I live alone, it is another sound source to hear which gives interesting information and entertains in equal measure.”

Audiobooks and criminal justice

- The National Literacy Trust runs a range of audiobook-related programmes in prisons and young offender institutions (YOIs). In the latest evaluation, 17 out of 20 participants said that they enjoyed listening to stories read out loud to them.
 - Feedback suggests that accessing audiobooks has positively impacted on the wellbeing of many people in custody, for whom hearing stories can be a distraction from anxieties.

“I find the quiet words help me to not get too caught up in my demons.”

- Audiobook clubs run in prisons during lockdown brought opportunities for connection and conversation between listeners and authors that might not otherwise have happened during a time of increased isolation.

Adults who don't listen to audiobooks

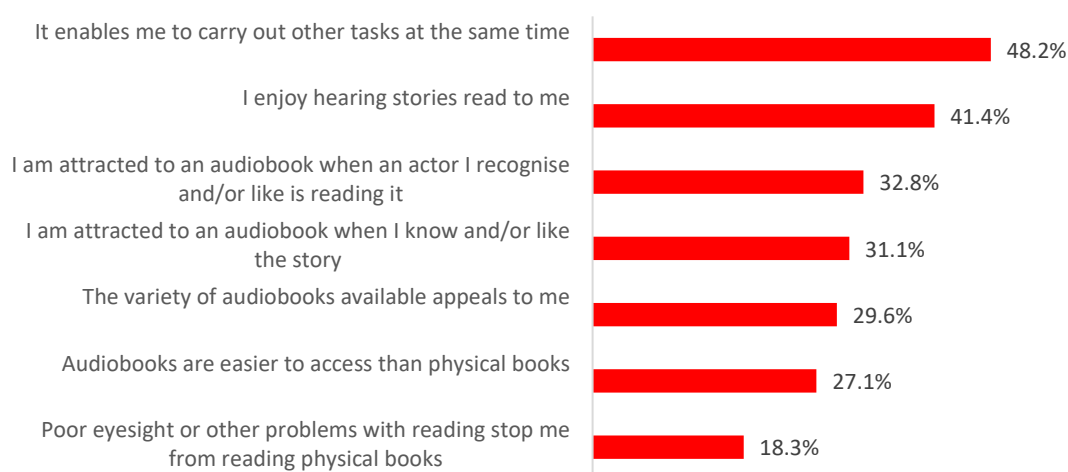
- Just over half (55.7%) of adults said that they did not listen to audiobooks. The most common reason given for not listening to audiobooks was that they preferred to read print or e-books (63.1%), while 1 in 3 (34.5%) adults didn't listen because they didn't have access to audiobooks, either because they couldn't afford them (12.6%), didn't have a device (13.5%) or didn't know how to access them (8.4%).

Audiobooks in 2021

Our survey showed that over 2 in 5 UK adults said that they listened to audiobooks in their spare time, with nearly 3 in 10 listening to them at least once a week. Of these, 1 in 8 listened either once a day or several times a day. However, 1 in 2 told us that they never listened to audiobooks in their spare time, a group of people we will discuss in more detail later.

Of those who listened to audiobooks, nearly half did so because it allowed them to carry out other tasks while doing so, while 2 in 5 said that they enjoyed hearing stories read to them (see Figure 1). Access was another motivator for people, with over 1 in 4 saying that they found it easier to access audiobooks than physical books, while nearly 1 in 5 said that audiobooks allowed them access to stories that their poor eyesight prevented them from reading.

Figure 1: Motivations for listening to audiobooks in 2021



Some provided further details on this in response to an open-ended question:

“I am dyslexic so listening to classics can be easier than reading them.”

“I like to listen later in the evening when I am too tired to read.”

Some comments suggested that elements unique to audiobooks, such as hearing them read by the author or by professionals, were considered an additional benefit of accessing books and stories in this format:

“I especially like to listen to audiobooks on walks. I also like to listen to memoir type books read by the author – I feel like I have more of a connection with the author that way.”

“I really enjoy hearing the voice actors. It brings life to the story when they [...] talk in certain tones etc. It makes ‘reading’ more exciting.”

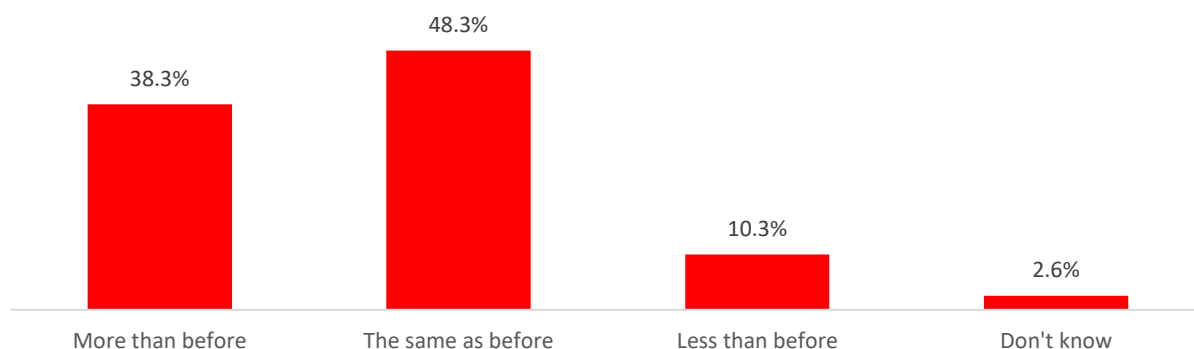
“It’s nice to listen to a good story being read with an engaging style.”

Increased listening during lockdown

Nearly 2 in 5 said that they had listened to more audiobooks during the pandemic (see Figure 2). This echoes what we found in our 2021 report on audiobook listening among

children and young people, where nearly 1 in 5 (18.9%) said that they had listened either more or for the first time during lockdown (Best et al., 2020).

Figure 2: Changes in audiobook listeners' habits during lockdown



Indeed, as with our earlier study, time was cited by our adult respondents as a key factor in their increased listening practices:

“More time alone, more time outside going on walks, purchased a better smartphone, which made downloading audiobooks easier.”

“More time to actually listen.”

Interestingly, some respondents who said they had listened less during lockdown said that they had done so because they had more time to read print or digital books, and as such their listening to audiobooks had decreased:

“I took to physical reading during lockdown as I was not as active at work and found it hard to settle to other tasks.”

“I have more time to read either physical or e-books as I am travelling less and can read at home comfortably.”

“I have been reading more digital books and therefore listening to audiobooks less.”

In addition, during lockdown, many said that audiobooks played into their desire to use the additional time to broaden their interests.

“I just wanted to broaden myself – there are so many classics that I have been listening to. I feel better listening to them.”

“Had a lot more time to focus on myself and productive, positive leisure.”

Increased time also reflects what we found among children and young people, many of whom cited time as a key factor in their increased reading, writing and listening during lockdown (Clark & Picton, 2020 and Best et al., 2020).

Further, some respondents noted that online access to audiobooks helped mitigate the lack of access to physical books during the pandemic:

“Able to access audiobooks online for free via my local library at a time when it has been more difficult to access physical copies.”

“[I] wanted to try out audiobooks for a change [and the] library promoted the site to me.”

“I took up a subscription offer.”

Drop in listening during lockdown

While, for many, listening increased during lockdown for reasons cited earlier, others said that they were listening less. Changes related to differing commuting patterns have been cited as a cause for a drop in audiobook listening, with more people working from home (see, for example, Guren et al., 2021). This is also reflected in some of our comments:

“I used to listen every day on my commute to the office but now I am working from home.”

“I listen when I’m in the car and I’ve travelled less.”

Ways of listening

When respondents were asked when they listened to audiobooks, there was a relatively even split between doing so before going to sleep (42.3%), commuting or travelling (48.5%), when doing housework or chores (40.9%), and when doing nothing (41.3%; see Figure 3). In addition, some respondents suggested that listening to audiobooks could support their creative activities:

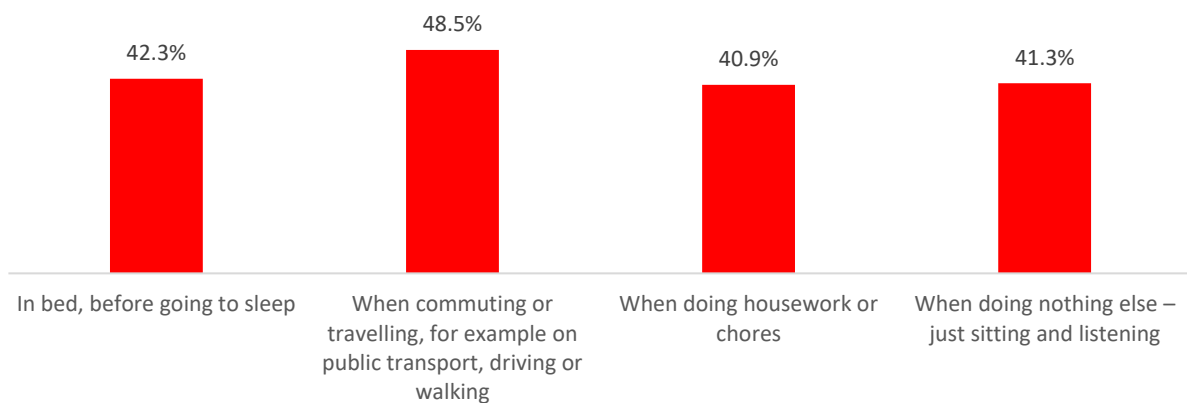
“I especially enjoy listening when I am drawing or painting, it is surprisingly inspiring.”

“When working in my workshop.”

“While crocheting.”

“I tried listening while drawing and found it helped my concentration.”

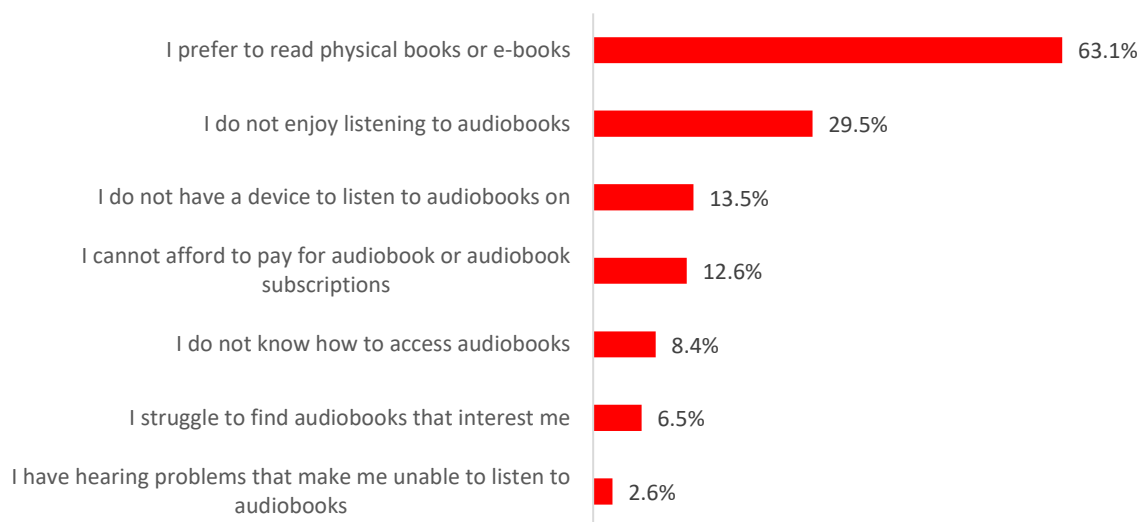
Figure 3: Listening behaviours among audiobook listeners



Who was not listening to audiobooks?

The most common reason given for not listening to audiobooks was that people preferred to read print or e-books, with the next reason being that they simply did not enjoy listening to audiobooks (see Figure 4). Fewer said that different forms of access were a barrier, such as not owning a device (13.5%) and the cost of audiobooks or audiobook subscriptions (12.6%), or not knowing how to access audiobooks (8.4%). This means that in total, 1 in 3 (34.5%) adults didn't listen because they didn't have access, either because they couldn't afford them, didn't have a device or didn't know how to access them.

Figure 4: Reasons given for not listening by respondents who said they never listened to audiobooks



Issues around access were also highlighted in some of the open-ended comments:

“They're expensive, and I can't justify the cost.”

“[I] don't know how to find ones I'd like for free or very cheaply.”

Others said that they struggled to concentrate on audiobooks, or that the pace was slower than they would like:

“I tend to 'tune out' when listening.”

“I find I don't concentrate on the spoken word.”

For others, audiobooks simply hadn't been on their radar:

“Never thought to do so.”

“I just do not have it in the list of things I do.”

“I have just never thought about it.”

Encouragingly, some respondents said that while they didn't listen currently, they planned to do so in the future:

“At home with my partner during covid there is no gap in the day – I may do so when I am back to a long commute.”

“I probably will listen in the future.”

“Do plan to but currently don't have time.”

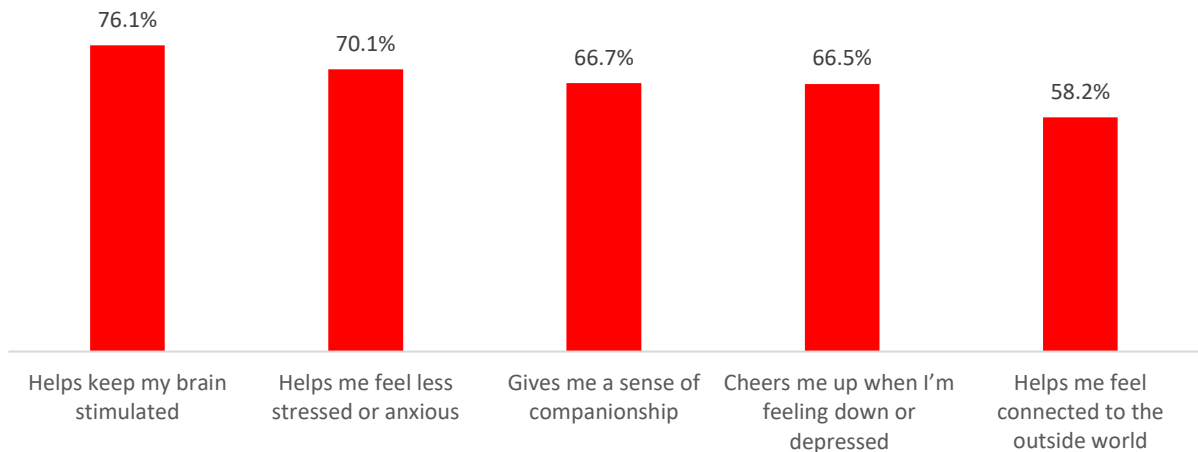
In the second part of this report, we will look in detail at three key areas in which audiobooks could be of particular benefit: wellbeing, elderly populations and in the criminal justice sector.

Spotlight on: wellbeing

Links between reading and wellbeing have been well-documented: in our 2020 Annual Literacy Survey of children and young people, 3 in 5 (59.3%) told us during lockdown that reading made them feel better. Comments from children and young people also showed that this extended to audiobooks.

Findings from this survey showed a similarly positive impact on wellbeing in adults, with a high level of agreement among audiobook listeners that different positive wellbeing outcomes were attributable to their listening habits. As shown in Figure 5, 3 in 5 listeners agreed that audiobooks helped them feel connected, 3 in 4 agreed that they helped stimulate their minds and imagination, 3 in 5 felt that they gave them a sense of companionship, and 7 in 10 found that it helped them reduce stress.

Figure 5: Agreement among listeners with statements about wellbeing outcomes of audiobook listening

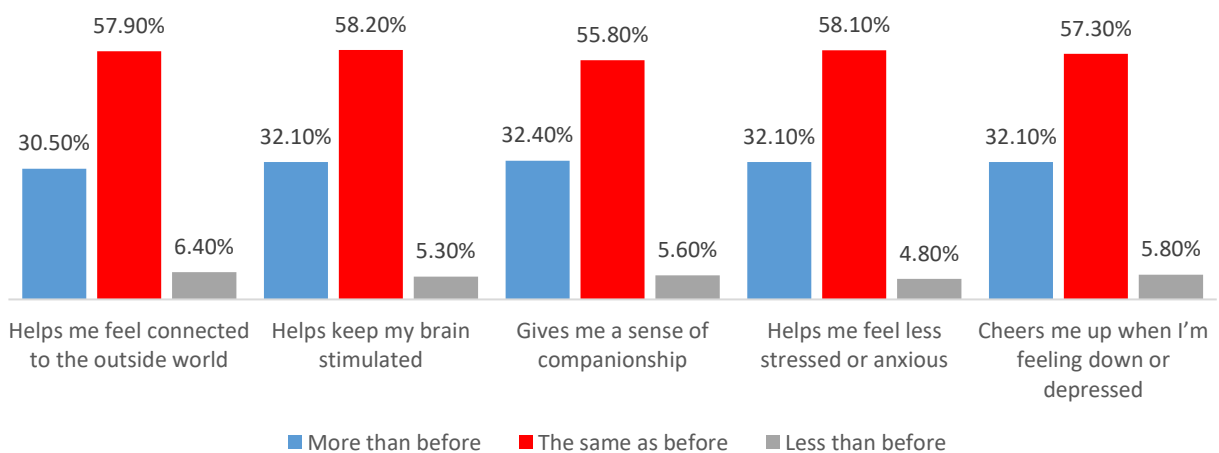


Wellbeing during lockdown

Reports suggested that a higher proportion of the population had experienced feelings of loneliness and isolation during the various lockdowns. For example, while 1 in 10 (10%) UK adults reported experiencing feelings of loneliness in the 'previous two weeks' shortly before the first lockdown, this had increased to 1 in 4 (24%) in early April 2020 during the first lockdown (Mental Health Foundation, 2021). Similarly, the Office for National Statistics (2021) found that 21% of adults in the UK had experienced some form of depression from January to March 2021, a percentage that had doubled from before the pandemic (10%).

When asked whether the positive wellbeing outcomes and feelings associated with audiobook listening had increased during lockdown, around 1 in 3 listeners agreed across the board (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Changes in wellbeing outcomes over lockdown



In addition to the outcomes listed above, respondents quoted other wellbeing outcomes and motivators related to listening to audiobooks. Relaxation was clearly key:

“As a key worker, listening to audiobooks is a good way to relax.”

“To relieve stress.”

“[I listen] to escape.”

Many also suggested that audiobooks could be a good distraction to ease the specific anxieties of the pandemic:

“I was made redundant, so I needed something to distract me from the stress of Covid.”

“When I feel worried during lockdown, I listen [to] audiobooks.”

“I have had more me time available due to furlough; also it helped me to escape what was really going on with the pandemic.”

For others, feelings of isolation related to lockdown meant that audiobooks provided a form of companionship:

“Because I’m spending more time at home with not much to do.”

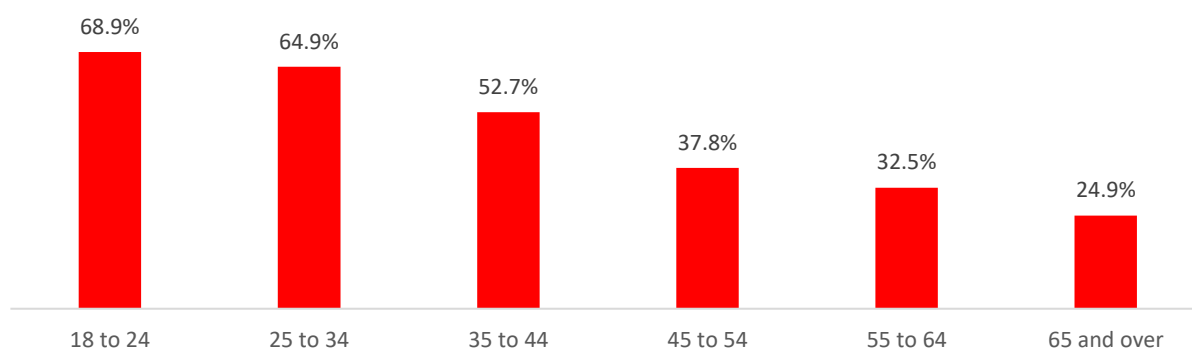
“During the lonely times of Covid-19 lockdown, the audiobook became my companion.”

Spotlight on: elderly populations

Listening habits among elderly populations

Younger generations are leading the way with listening and there is a steady decrease by age in the number of adults who say that they listen to audiobooks in their free time (Figure 7). Indeed, only 1 in 4 of those aged 65 and over said that they listened to audiobooks in their spare time.

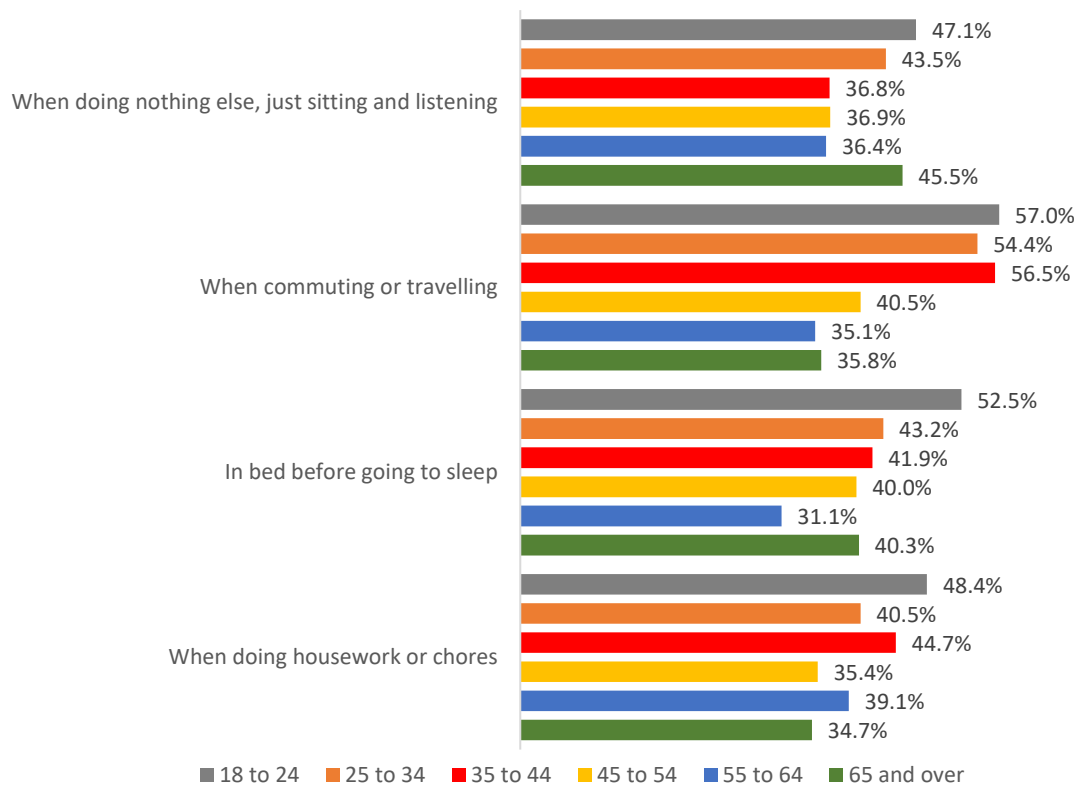
Figure 7: Age groups of people who listen to audiobooks



Interestingly, more adults aged 65 and over reported listening to audiobooks when doing nothing than when doing housework or chores, whereas younger age groups mainly listened when commuting or travelling (see Figure 8). This is in line with previous research, which has

shown that that elderly populations are more likely than younger populations to listen for entertainment rather than to multitask (Harris Interactive, 2020).

Figure 8: activities while listening to audiobooks by age

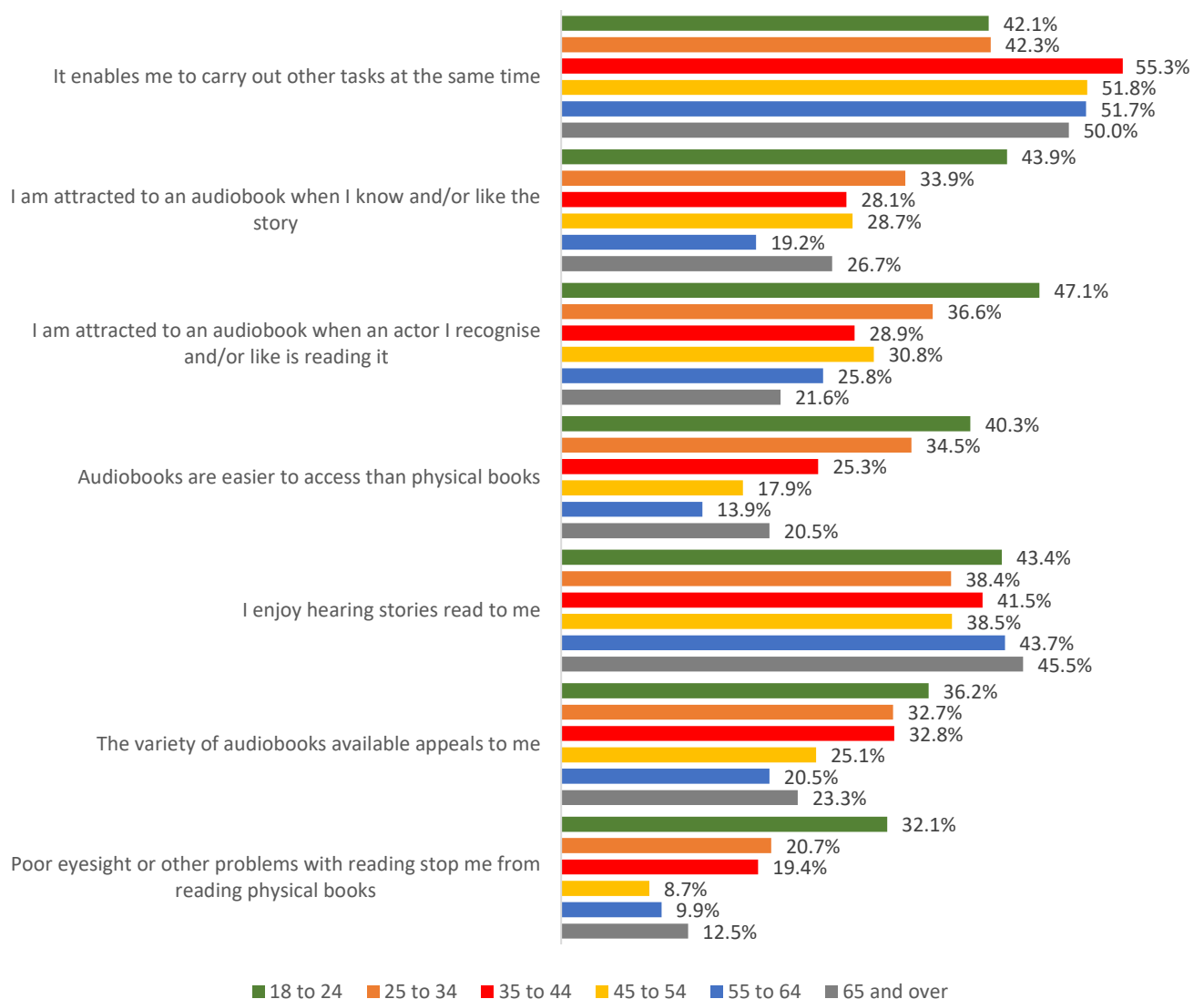


Motivations for listening among elderly populations

The benefits of and motivations for listening are broadly similar for those aged over 65 as they are for younger generations. Interestingly, while more respondents in this age group said they listened while doing nothing else, the ability to carry out other tasks at the same time was nevertheless the most popular response, with 1 in 2 listeners citing this reason, closely followed by enjoying hearing stories read to them (Figure 9).

Compared with other age groups, 42.1% of respondents aged 18-24 said that audiobooks enabled them to carry out other activities at the same time, and 43.4% in this age group said that they enjoyed hearing stories read to them. Conversely, far fewer respondents aged 65 and older said they would listen to an audiobook because they knew the story (26.7% vs 43.9% of those aged 18-24) or because they recognised an actor (21.6% vs 47.1% of those aged 18-24).

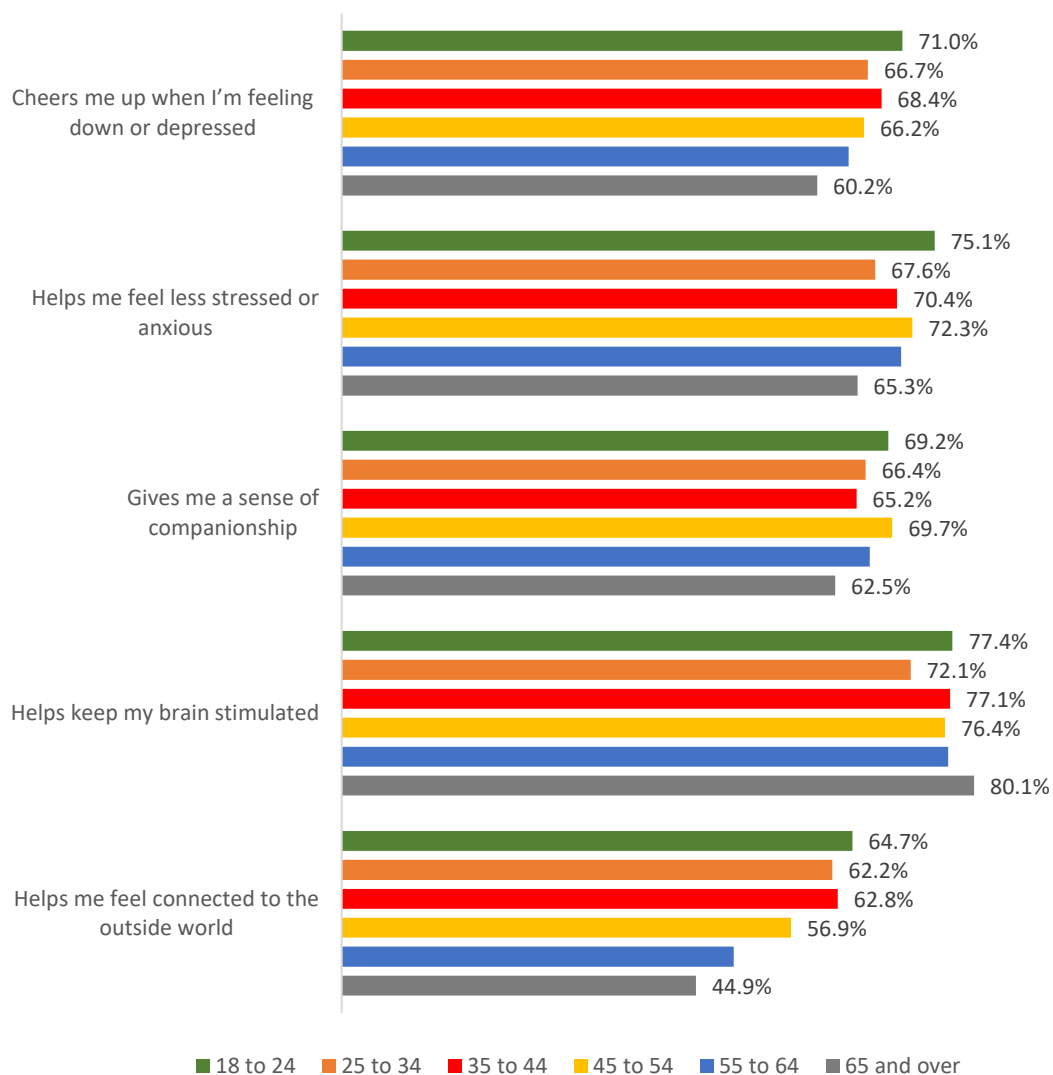
Figure 9: Motivations for listening to audiobooks



Benefits of listening among elderly populations

When asked to reflect on statements relating to audiobooks, 4 in 5 (80.1%) respondents aged 65 and older agreed that listening to audiobooks kept their brain stimulated, compared with 77.4% of respondents aged 18-24 (see Figure 10). It is encouraging to see that this benefit persists throughout different age groups. Interestingly, far fewer older adults agreed that audiobooks helped them feel connected to the outside world, with fewer than 1 in 2 (44.9%) agreeing with this statement compared with 64.7% of those aged 18-24. Perhaps more encouragingly, more than 3 in 5 (62.5%) agreed that listening to audiobooks gave them a sense of companionship, compared with 69.2% of those aged 18-24.

Figure 10: Benefits of listening to audiobooks by age



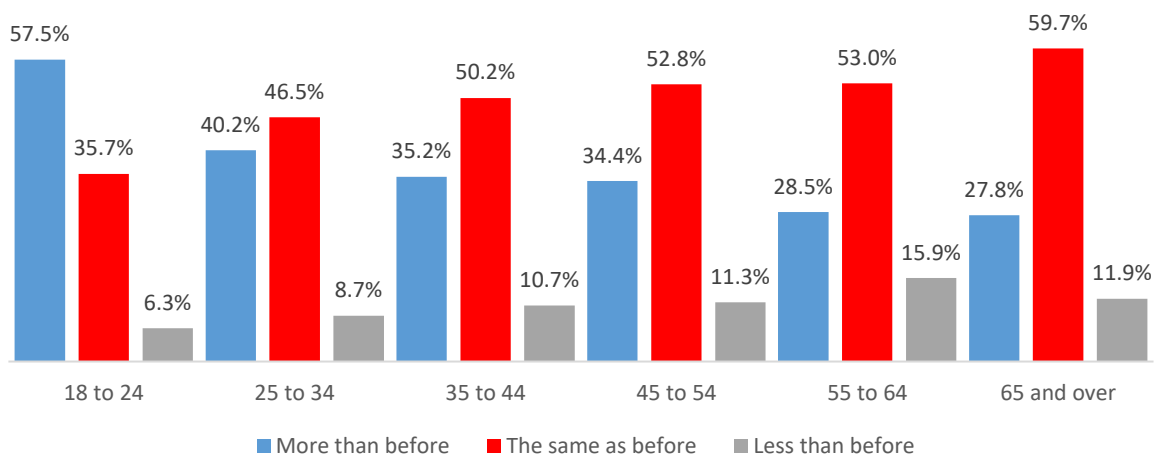
Elderly populations and lockdown

We found that lockdown provided an opportunity for elderly populations to enjoy audiobooks, with some older adults reporting that they were introduced to audiobooks during lockdown.

“I discovered audiobooks during the first lockdown and I have kept on listening to them.”

In fact, 27.8% of adults aged 65 and over had listened to audiobooks more during lockdown (see Figure 11).

Figure 11: Changes in listening habits among audiobook listeners by age group



The main reasons for this increase were that older adults had more time to listen to audiobooks, and that audiobooks provided a distraction from Covid-19-related stress. Indeed, 17.6% reported that they agreed with the statement ‘listening to audiobooks makes me feel less stressed or anxious’ even more since lockdown began, which is important because 34% of older adults have felt more anxious since the start of the pandemic (Age UK, 2020). This was also reflected in some of the comments made by respondents in this group:

“I listen more in lockdown because I had more time couldn’t go out I was isolating.”

“[audiobooks] helped to take edge off worrying about effects of COVID.”

Elderly populations were also at risk of feeling lonely and isolated due to the pandemic. Armitage and Nellums reported that ‘[i]f health ministers instruct elderly people to [...] avoid social contact with family and friends, urgent action is needed to mitigate the mental and physical health consequences’ (Armitage & Nellums, 2020). We found that older adults used audiobooks to ease these feelings.

“As I live alone, it is another sound source to hear which gives interesting information and entertains in equal measure.”

“[I listen] because I never see anybody.”

Older adults who don’t listen to audiobooks

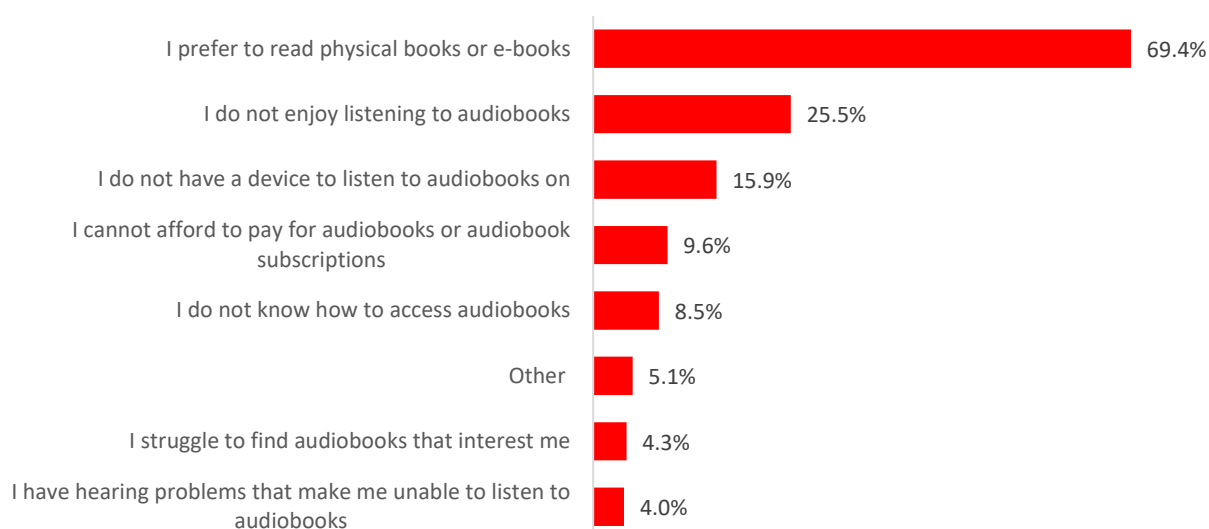
As shown in Figure 12, of the older adults who didn’t listen to audiobooks, nearly 7 in 10 listed ‘I prefer to read physical books or e-books’ as a reason. Other reasons adults in this age group gave for not listening included:

“[audiobooks] put me to sleep.”

“Just not interested.”

“Don’t concentrate on the spoken word.”

Figure 12: Reasons why adults aged 65 and over didn't listen to audiobooks



Overall, our findings show that adults aged 65 and over mainly listened for entertainment and stimulation as they enjoyed hearing stories read to them and agreed that audiobooks kept their brain stimulated more than younger adults did. Therefore, elderly populations could greatly benefit from listening to audiobooks, as they did during the Covid-19 pandemic when they provided a source of comfort, entertainment and stress relief. However, 1 in 6 (15.9%) said they didn't listen to audiobooks as they lacked a device that allowed them to access audiobooks, and 1 in 10 (9.6%) missed out because they couldn't afford audiobooks. In addition, 1 in 12 (8.5%) didn't know how to access audiobooks. This suggests more could be done to support those in this age group who might benefit from access to audiobooks, such as by helping them find easy and cost-effective ways to access books and stories in this format.

Spotlight on: criminal justice

Audiobooks meet a unique need in secure settings where access to books even before the Covid-19 pandemic could be limited, and over subsequent lockdowns became even more difficult. In places where movements are restricted, being able to transport a story through the airwaves and into cells is incredibly powerful.

Our Books Unlocked programme serialises audiobooks via National Prison Radio, which is broadcast into 80,000 cells in England and Wales, offering Booker Prize-longlisted and shortlisted titles to the custodial estate.² In the 2019-20 evaluation, 13 out of 23 participants reported higher levels of wellbeing since taking part. In the latest evaluation, 17 out of 20 participants said that they enjoyed listening to stories read out loud to them.

In open-ended questions, listeners often talk of being introduced to new books they would never pick up to read, the importance of having the next instalment to look forward to, or the

² Find out more: <https://literacytrust.org.uk/programmes/books-unlocked/>

joy of being able to close their eyes and escape the chaos of their daily life by entering a completely different world.

“You make the hours, weeks and months pass a lot easier.”

“I feel as though I can put myself into the character in the book's shoes. It's always the wonder of what happens next.”

Audiobooks also have the added benefit of being accessible to people who may not be able to read the physical book on account of skill level, learning difficulties and disabilities, or having English as an additional language. Nearly two-thirds (62%) of people entering prison were assessed as having the literacy skills expected of an 11-year-old, which is more than four times higher than in the general adult population (15%) – Department for Business Innovation and Skills (2012).

During the first lockdown, we ran an audiobook club as part of our New Chapters project, broadcasting a book alongside an interview with the author and inviting participants to pose questions that would be answered in the next interview.³ This rare opportunity for a conversation at a time when people couldn't leave their cells or homes highlighted the capacity of audio to transcend the physical environment.

Finally, in partnership with Audible, we recently introduced 30 devices, preloaded with a range of audiobooks, to HMYOI (Her Majesty's Young Offenders Institution) Feltham. This has allowed young adults to engage in activities, whether listening on their own for some escapism, listening to a book as a group ahead of the author coming to visit, learning beginner French or researching a historical figure for an assignment. Staff have reported that this has transformed education delivery, offering access to information on subjects not covered by core education. The tablets enabled staff to set up audio book clubs and engage young people in reading via introducing them to titles through audio. It is our hope that easier access to audiobooks will be enriching for the young people in Feltham and that, in discussion with them, we can discover all the ways the audio can support their learning and wellbeing.

As outlined elsewhere, audiobooks can have a positive impact on mental wellbeing, either as a form of distraction, stimulation or companionship. Such outcomes were echoed in the testimonials received by Books Unlocked participants:

“I suffer from chronic pain – I find listening to books helps distract from the pain when reading is too much work. It's easier to float into a story – which helps the pain go away.”

“I have been in prison since last May and have been trying to keep myself positively engaged through all of the lockdowns and reduced regimes. [...] I spend a lot of time reading, sometimes for escapism, largely for education and enlightenment. I also listen to your feature on the radio each night

³ Find out more: <https://literacytrust.org.uk/programmes/books-unlocked/inside-stories/>

'Books Unlocked' as I find the quiet words help me to not get too caught up in my demons."

The use of audiobooks in these projects, and the positive outcomes identified here, underscore the power of audio to help lift people out of difficult, frightening or isolating situations.

To sum up

The findings from this report highlight that mental stimulation and a sense of connection were key outcomes for those who listened to audiobooks, and that these outcomes had increased for many during lockdown. It is encouraging to find that so many adults enjoyed hearing stories, and to see how many younger people were listening to audiobooks, suggesting that the resurgence of audiobooks will continue as these younger audiences grow.

This is the first study we have done into adults' listening habits and as such it gives a broad overview. There is scope to explore this further. For example, we have a wealth of insight from our work in the criminal justice space, which we could also use to further explore wellbeing benefits in a setting that has used audio in such a concentrated way. Meanwhile, while this report provides some insight into the barriers to listening, more work will need to be done to minimise these barriers.

In the meantime, we are delighted to see that many people of all ages are listening to audiobooks, that so many have found solace and comfort through them during these uncertain and difficult times, and that just like for children and young people, hearing stories is as exciting now as it ever was.

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About the National Literacy Trust

Our charity is dedicated to improving the reading, writing, speaking and listening skills of those 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.

Literacy is a vital element of action against poverty and our work changes life stories.

Visit www.literacytrust.org.uk to find out more, donate or sign up for a free email newsletter. You can also find us on Facebook and follow us on Twitter.

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