

**National
Literacy
Trust**



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Change your story

Connecting Stories 2 Evaluation: Changing life stories

October 2021 to April 2023

Foreword



Darren Henley, Chief Executive of Arts Council England

This summer, I was lucky enough to visit the National Literacy Trust's Hub in Stoke. Sitting at a long table in Burslem's Middleport Pottery, surrounded by beautifully crafted examples of the ceramics that are at the heart of Stoke's great past, I listened to people speaking with hope and excitement about its future. I met with the Hub's passionate, committed staff and volunteers who do so much to bolster literacy and reading for pleasure in a city where, for years, literacy levels have been harmfully low. And I heard directly from the children whose lives have been changed by the Hub's work in the place where they were born and where they live. I heard them talk about the ways in which reading activities had boosted their confidence, supporting them to become Literacy Champions in their schools, and, from there, to mobilise their parents and others in the wider community to get involved and read for pleasure, too. I came away

feeling inspired: both by the model of working deeply and responsively in place which the National Literacy Trust has so successfully espoused, and by the excitement and enthusiasm of the children and families with whom the Hub has engaged. I felt sure that the National Literacy Trust's work in Stoke had made the future brighter for all of them.

It has been uplifting, therefore, to read this report, and find that the personal testimonies of those involved in or impacted by the work of The National Literacy Trust in Stoke is both borne out in data terms, and replicated in the 13 other *Connecting Stories* Hubs that have been established in other places of significant literacy vulnerability around the country. The evidence in this report is remarkable. It combines robust data with insights into how *Connecting Stories* has positively affected children and families. From the uptick in the use of public libraries – trusted and welcoming places at the heart of their communities – to the scale of national partnership and community participation, and the increased enjoyment in reading and writing reported by children, it demonstrates irrefutably that the outcomes of *Connecting Stories* are proving vital and welcome.

Our funding for *Connecting Stories*, the National Literacy Trust's place-based approach to increasing literacy, continues into 2025, and it is work that I, personally, am proud to support. I'm looking forward to visiting more Hubs, in more places – from Swindon to Blackpool; from Redcar to Hastings – and hearing in more detail of the profound and tangible dividends which reading for pleasure pays, for children and families, and for the communities in which they live. At Arts Council England, it is our business to look to the future. This report shows clearly that *Connecting Stories* is brightening futures wherever it goes.

What is Connecting Stories?

Connecting Stories is an ambitious project to increase access to literature in places where people are most likely to be facing poverty, have low social capital and poor literacy skills. It is a National Literacy Trust programme funded by Arts Council England, which is transforming literacy in some of the most disadvantaged areas in the country.

Working across the 14 communities that are most in need of support, Connecting Stories is addressing the literacy attainment gap and increasing children and young people's access to literary experiences and books, alongside their families. The campaign launched in December 2020 and has reached more than 200,000 people.

Connecting Stories 2, which ran from October 2021 to April 2023, created more exciting opportunities for children and young people to engage with inspirational authors, illustrators, and a diverse range of books. Using our rich data sources, we identified specific council wards within our larger Hub areas which face the biggest literacy challenges. Adopting a **place-based approach**, we worked directly with schools and the wider community in those wards to identify what was needed at a local level and empowered local people to take active roles in shaping and delivering our work.



Our impact

Over 18 months, we...

- **Reached over 500,000 people** with online author sessions, competitions and public events and directly engaged with over 180,000 people through local projects and activities.
- **Mobilised over 600 people** who live and work in our priority communities to become volunteers through our Literacy Champions programme – contributing more than 125,000 hours.
- Reached a wider audience through our media work and local behaviour change campaigns, **which have gained more than 95 million views, interactions and online impressions.**
- **Partnered with 43 publishers and 158 authors, illustrators, storytellers and creatives.**
- **Gifted over 160,000 books** donated by publishers.

Connecting Stories 2 has had a measurable impact on children and young people from these communities. When compared to the national average, children from schools in the disadvantaged areas that we worked with most intensively, showed more positive attitudes and behaviours towards reading and writing:

22%

more enjoy
reading at school

37%

more write daily
in their spare
time

40%

more use their
public library

Connecting Stories in communities



Across our Hubs we've been celebrating reading, authors and books, in fun and interesting ways – including author visits to local schools, creative writing competitions, book donations, and activities for families to enjoy. Each Hub has planned their activities with the support of local organisations and their community engagement groups – tapping into local assets, moments and interests. These activities often feature local creatives and storytellers, and profile local partners like the library service.

A great example of this is in Middlesbrough, where the National Literacy Trust has been working to improve the literacy of children since 2013.

On 14 July 2022, our Middlesbrough Hub held *The Big Boro Book Bash*, a city-wide celebration of children's literature. Over 470 children from 12 participating primary schools took part in a series of author-led workshops, with bestselling authors Louie Stowell, Jamie Russell, Gabrielle Kent and James Harris, while Middlesbrough Council's environment team ran a recycling and environmental sustainability-themed workshop, tying into themes discussed by author Chitra Soundar.

Pupils created their very own Norse God with Louie Stowell, learnt all about what inspired Chitra Soundar to become an author, drew fantastical monsters with James Harris, asked themselves 'what if?' with Gabrielle Kent, and discovered why

video games are actually good for you with Jamie Russell.

Feedback from schools and pupils was universally positive, with all schools rating the event as 'excellent' and telling us that they wanted it to become an annual celebration of reading and children's literature:



We would be delighted to attend another Big Boro Book Bash. We thoroughly enjoyed the day and found it very aspirational. Some of our children had read the books previously and felt they were meeting someone really famous. Some of them were very much in awe. It was lovely to see an author from Middlesbrough – I think this really made a difference and was relatable for our children. They could see that they too, if desired, could become an author.





In Stoke, during the 2022 summer holidays our Stoke Reads Hub worked with Stoke-on-Trent Libraries to deliver *Tales in the Park* – seven free and fun storytelling festivals in parks across the six towns of Stoke-on-Trent. Through the events, we wanted to encourage an active and healthy lifestyle, inspire families to enjoy stories together and develop a love of reading. We also wanted to inspire as many people as possible to use their local libraries as a sustainable way for them to engage with literacy.

One mum told us after one of the events:

“

Great organisation, so many things for the children to try, and a bonus that it was all free! It is great that reading is being encouraged in such a way. Loved the storyteller and he was great at involving the children. ... all in all a great success, thank you for all your efforts.

”

We're delighted that 4,650 children came to the Tales in the Park event and 502 people joined the library as a result.

Place-based working, works

At the National Literacy Trust, we know that improving literacy outcomes is not just the result of placing a book in a child's hands but is the result of an entire community and its interactions. So, we've used a place-based approach to deliver Connecting Stories 2 in 14 communities around the country that face the biggest literacy challenges. We put those communities at the centre of our activities and built a network of partners and programmes around them, based on the needs in the area.

This place-based working model has a transformative effect on communities because – by bringing like-minded partners together to achieve a common goal based on the needs of their community – it encourages and inspires other activities too.



Hastings is a fantastic example of how support from Connecting Stories has enabled a local community library to expand its reach, build new partnerships and increase its number of members.

Ore Community Library is a volunteer-led library in Ore – an area of high deprivation in Hastings. It's run by Ore Community Library Group (OCLG), a registered charity and it opened to the public in May 2021. It is the only community resource in Ore that directly supports local people to improve their literacy.

Our Hastings Hub has been working with the library to grow its membership and generate a love of reading among local residents. Since March 2022 we have donated 1,170 books to the library. As well as providing a high-quality and more diverse stock of books for local people, it has also enabled the library to deliver community outreach activities, including storytelling, and reading and writing for pleasure activities. This, in turn, has opened doors for the library to expand its reach and work with their local communities. The library has developed partnerships with other organisations in Ore, including Dom's Food Mission, The Salvation Army (Hastings Citadel) and Morrisons community team.

Measuring the wider success of place-based working

To demonstrate the wider, strategic importance of place-based working and understand how effectively it has been implemented in Connecting Stories 2, each local area used a self-assessment tool in 2022 and 2023 to track change across eight characteristics – including for example, that there are clear, agreed outcomes for our work; how well communities are involved; and the quality of communication between partners. **Overall, 60% of the hubs showed improvement over the year.** Mature hubs with stronger existing results, such as Peterborough and Nottingham, have remained consistent, with the newer areas showing the most improvement.

We're also proud of our strong partnerships with a diverse range of local organisations, that enable us to reach and engage effectively with our target audiences. So, we also surveyed 72 local partners, including local community organisations, sports clubs, businesses, health organisations, and schools from eight different locations:

Partners also had positive views towards the impact and benefits of working with us:

Almost all

97%

agreed that since working with the National Literacy Trust, they are using more local assets to achieve their aims.

94%

are working with more local organisations with aligned aims.

84.8%

agreed that since working with the National Literacy Trust, they are involving communities more closely in the design and delivery of their work.

91%

agreed that since working with the National Literacy Trust, they better understand the specific literacy challenges in the community and have reached new groups within the local community.

90.9%

said that they used a place-based approach to some, or to a great extent, compared with

75.8%

a year ago.

Harnessing the power of our Literacy Champions

The delivery of Connecting Stories 2 would not have been possible without our “Literacy Champions”. We now have more than 600 of them: amazing volunteers from the local areas that we work in, of all ages and backgrounds, who work with us to develop and deliver new, exciting ways to promote literacy in their communities.

Literacy Champions are a huge asset in meeting our diversity and inclusion ambitions too. Many of the communities we serve in our Hubs are not only deprived, but are also ethnically and linguistically diverse. Many of our Literacy Champions live in those areas themselves, so they often have connections to communities that we may find it more difficult to engage with otherwise, as well as having the language skills and insights to make our work more impactful. As one Literacy Champion told us:



I work in a deprived area with families in disadvantaged situations, where kids get little help or support from parents for reading and literacy. Our sessions provide a fun time to interact together as a family and with others too. Everyone gets to own a book after the sessions and swaps it in the next session if they want to. Kids have the opportunity to read aloud a short story they have written on their own or with parents' help, building confidence and improving reading and writing skills.



We received feedback from 143 Literacy Champions across 11 locations in the UK. They mentioned a variety of benefits of their role, both personal to themselves, and to those that they were able to support:

- **9 in 10 (91.2%) agreed** that being a Literacy Champion made them more aware of how they can improve literacy in their community through different means.
- **More than 3 in 4 (77.4%) agreed** that it increased their personal understanding of the importance of literacy.
- **77.7% said** that it increased their confidence to deliver informal literacy provision in their community.
- **4 in 5 (82.5%) agreed** that being a Literacy Champion made them more aware of the best ways to support literacy in their community overall.
- **7 in 10 (69.9%) said** that it increased their confidence to take a leadership role in promoting literacy in their community.

Outcomes for children and young people... and communities

To evidence change for children and young people, we use the Annual Literacy Survey – a national, annual survey of thousands of 8 to 18-year-olds. Now in its eighteenth year, this survey asks children and young people about their enjoyment of reading and writing, how often they engage in these activities, their attitudes towards reading and writing and their motivations for doing so.

We also collect background data from these children and young people about their gender, age, whether or not they receive free school meals and their ethnic background. And, because the survey is completed through schools, we collect data about the school they attend, its location, type, free school meal uptake, and crucially, whether it is a school we work with as part of our Hubs work.

64,066 children and young people aged eight to 18 participated in our Annual Literacy Survey from January to March 2023. For

the purposes of this report, we focused on responses of three specific groups to identify any differences in literacy attitudes and behaviours:

High-priority: Children and young people (3,453 people) who attended the schools we've worked with most intensively. These schools serve the communities from our high-priority wards in Hubs and are therefore in the UK's most disadvantaged communities.

Local area, lower priority (Hubs): Children and young people (11,826 people) who attended schools in the local areas we work in. They would have received some of our offer – for example, author events and access to public activities – but are classified as lower priority, based on needs.

National: Children and young people (48,787 people) who attended schools we didn't work with directly and that were not located in the local areas we work in.

This is what we found:

| | High priority wards | Hubs | National |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------|-------|----------|
| Enjoy reading at school | 53.5% | 44.2% | 44.0% |
| Enjoy reading in their spare time | 46.3% | 41.3% | 43.7% |
| Write daily | 25.1% | 21.9% | 18.3% |
| Attend public library | 32.6% | 25.2% | 23.3% |

The results show that more children and young people from our high-priority areas enjoyed reading at school and at home, wrote daily and used their school library, than children and young people from the other two groups. We also wanted to promote engagement with local libraries and we were pleased that library engagement was highest for those in our high-priority schools.

A core aspect of Connecting Stories is delivering events and other literacy-related activities in these areas, and we also wanted to know if there had been a positive change among adults, parents and other members of these communities. We surveyed people from a cross-section of our Hubs in England and 178 people answered questions about their reading and writing, and engagement with cultural events in their area:

- **More community members agreed that they felt very confident** (44.8%) about writing now compared with six months ago (40.2%).
- People's confidence in reading with children also improved. **More than 4 in 5 (81.8%) parents said that they feel very confident reading to their child** compared with 3 in 4 (75%) six months ago.
- **More community members said that they engage in other cultural activities too.** More visit the bookshop now (50.8% vs 45%), library (48.9% vs 44.6%), theatre (41.7% vs 35.7%), museum (32.8% vs 30%), gallery (19.1% vs 17.1%), or another cultural space (25% vs 19.4%), very or quite regularly, compared with six months ago.



Conclusion

Connecting Stories is an ambitious project and we are delighted that it has not only fulfilled its original objectives, but gone beyond them to firmly establish community-led, partnership working. Together we have empowered hundreds of thousands of children and young people across the country – along with their parents and carers – to improve their literacy attitudes and habits, and ultimately the literacy skills that they need to succeed in life.

Looking to the future, we are very excited about the next phase of the project. Connecting Stories 3 will build on our successes so far, reach out to more children, young people and families, develop more partnerships, and will continue to change life stories.



About the National Literacy Trust

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

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

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

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