

**National  
Literacy  
Trust**

Change your story

# Annual Report 2023-24



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# Letter from the Chair



The National Literacy Trust exists to increase literacy skills so society becomes fairer and stronger and more prosperous. The impact of the Cost of Living Crisis and increasing levels of poverty – especially child poverty – have made this challenge more relevant than ever before. We know that poverty has grown most severely in areas of the country which have the lowest levels of literacy.

As an organisation committed to working in these areas, with 20 community teams leading local Literacy Hubs, the charity has also been acutely aware of the impact of local government financial challenges, on the same communities.

In this context I have been especially proud of the work of our 20 Hub teams in the last year. In locations from Dundee to Cornwall, where our activity is most vibrant and most needed, they have continued to lead literacy activity. Through programmes like Connecting Stories, our partnership with Arts Council England and over 40 publishers, they are making a demonstrable difference to the reading lives of thousands of children; bringing happiness today and by increasing literacy skills, hopefully mitigating the lifelong impact of child poverty.

Our Libraries for Primaries campaign is, at heart, addressing the same challenge. Increasing levels of poverty mean that there are increasing numbers of children without books of their own at home. The opening of our 1,000th library means that the campaign so far, is enabling 370,000 children to become readers. A practical response to the phenomenon of book poverty.

I am incredibly grateful to all our volunteers, funders, supporters and to our great staff team for the achievements of the past year.

The Trustees and staff are also incredibly grateful for the inspiration and support of our Patron, Her Majesty The Queen. It has been an honour to welcome Her Majesty to two of the fifty Coronation Libraries we have created, to mark The King and Queen's Coronation. We are also very grateful to Her Majesty for inviting young people from our Hub areas to Westminster, to be part of the Coronation celebrations.

In March this year we launched our new strategy. It focuses our impact on the three breakthroughs which we know have to be secured, if our vision of a society, where everyone has the literacy skills to fulfil their potential, is to be fulfilled. It is focused on ensuring children start school with the communication and language skills they need; that they leave school with the literacy skills they need for life and that everyone who participates in the justice system has the opportunity to strengthen their literacy skills.

In response to our new strategy we have launched Early Words Matter – our five year early language campaign, which will support the early literacy of a quarter of a million children. As this report explains, we have also significantly grown our work in prisons and young offender institutes.

Our new strategy is already shaping and strengthening our impact and I know it's clear ambitions will enable us to grow more partnerships and strengthen our impact, in our mission to change life stories.

Joanna Prior  
Chair

Date: 18 July 2024

# **We empower people from disadvantaged communities with the literacy skills they need to succeed in life**

**Literacy changes everything. It gives you power to shape your future. It's the key to knowledge, confidence and inspiration. It's better results at school and leads to better jobs. If you grow up without the tools to communicate, without books to read or the skills 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. This is a big issue – 1 in 6 adults have very low levels of literacy in the UK today. It is also concentrated in the poorest communities. We support these communities, where as many as one in three people have low levels of literacy.

As well as the foundation of personal success, literacy is also a national priority. It sits at the heart of our nation's economic success and sustainability, driving social mobility and the challenge of regional inequality. The National Literacy Trust leads the national campaign to raise awareness of the issue and find solutions. We aim to break the relationship between low literacy and poverty to give a new generation the skills to fulfil their opportunities.

We are proud to be a dynamic and fast-moving organisation, and we think creatively about how to inspire and engage people with literacy. Partnerships of all kinds are at the heart of our approach and they're how we have most impact. We are proud to work in partnership with 9,015 schools, and over 90 businesses and are grateful for the support of writers, illustrators, poets and the skilled teams of 40 publishers.

We base everything we do on sound evidence and we aim to provide cutting-edge research on all aspects of literacy. From exploring the relationship between technology and literacy, to investigating the impact of role models on reading, to understanding the impact of the pandemic on young children's language skills.

# Our values and beliefs

The National Literacy Trust's values are well understood and embedded in the charity's culture, our induction, appraisals and staff development and are the guiding principles for the way in which we are effective.

We are **focused** on our impact with the people who need us most: helping them change their life chances through the power of words.

It's in our DNA to be **enterprising**: we make a difference because we are willing to do things differently.

We make change happen together; by **connecting** with others, we can do so much more.

We are **respectful** to everyone we work with, valuing each person's unique contribution.

## 32.7%

of children say they have not seen themselves in what they have read.

*National Literacy Trust Annual Literacy Survey*

“ When I was growing up I didn't see myself in books...which is why I wrote my book about a Bengali Muslim family. When you see yourself in books you feel like you belong. ”

*Burhana Islam talking at an event in Manchester*



## **Our commitment to equity, equality, diversity and inclusion**

The foundation of our strategy is our shared commitment to **equity, equality, inclusion and diversity**. Our mission to increase literacy levels is fundamentally about addressing inequality. We know that **becoming a more diverse and inclusive charity, better at listening to and working with communities, is key to increasing our impact and fulfilling our mission**.

Our programmes and campaigns are focused on the needs of children, families, adults and groups who are most likely to experience injustice and exclusion. By working with community consultation groups in all our Hub areas, we develop approaches based on the many strengths and unique qualities each community has – languages, stories, experiences, skills and knowledge.

Our mission is to break the link between literacy and socio-economic inequality. Poverty is the major driver and effect of low literacy in the UK. But we know that other characteristics can make it harder for people from poorer communities to develop strong literacy skills.

We take this challenge seriously: We have an EDI action plan which is discussed by our trustees at each board meeting. We monitor and set targets to improve the diversity and inclusivity of staff and trustees. Our CEO chairs our EDI working group. There is regular training for staff in recognising and addressing unconscious bias.

## **Our commitment to the environment**

We are passionate about sustainable development and the creation of communities that have the literacy skills to thrive, supporting both current and future generations. But a sustainable community is also defined by its relationship to the environment. So, it is essential that we operate in an environmentally responsible way. In 2022 we became a distributed organisation, allowing team members to live in their own communities, and conducting our meetings and management activities online. This supports communities across the UK and minimises travel requirements. We also aim to improve our contribution to environmental sustainability through our programmes and support the delivery of environmental messages and actions – for instance, through our Eco Literacy Champions project

# Our impact in numbers

We reached over  
**1.4 million**  
children and  
young people

We distributed  
**557,411**  
books

We supported over  
**1,100**  
active literacy  
champions

We worked in over  
**13,000**  
settings

We worked with over  
**9,500**  
parents of children  
under 5

We worked on  
the ground in  
**19**  
local areas



# Our strategy

Poverty leads to low literacy: by the time a child is 10.5 months old communication delay linked to poverty can already be detected. This lays the foundation for a lifelong pattern of literacy inequality impacting on earnings, health and wellbeing. But this is not inevitable – with support for children, families, schools and prisons this pattern can be broken. But we need to act now. If we can respond promptly and at scale, we can stop childhood experiences of poverty from having a lifelong and even intergenerational impact. We can create new opportunities, allow individuals to fulfil their potential and create new dynamics of social mobility.

The pandemic exacerbated the challenge. Its impact on literacy was worst for disadvantaged pupils in deprived areas (with a secondary pupils learning loss of 2.7 months in reading) and on preschool children's early language development.

The Cost of Living Crisis and the legacy of the pandemic, increases the scale of need for the National Literacy Trust's work and its urgency.

But it also increases our potential impact.



# How we made change happen in 2023/24

We know that the literacy challenge is complicated. Literacy is intergenerational; it is closely related to inequality; particular communities and particular characteristics make it more likely that you will have low levels of literacy. Our approach, therefore, is sophisticated and evidence-based. In the past year we have worked in four ways to empower people with literacy skills to succeed in life.

## **We directly supported literacy skills and building confidence.**

From parents not sure how to talk to their baby, teenagers finding reading boring or adults facing life challenges without literacy skills we supported people with information, digital content, classes, free books, encouragement and our knowledge and expertise.

## **We helped professionals increase the quality of literacy provision.**

We supported and inspired early years practitioners, teachers, librarians, tutors and professionals on the frontline. They are our nation's literacy heroes and the greatest resource the UK has. We are proud to work with them and learn from them, offer them evidence-based approaches, free resources and celebrate their achievements.

## **We stood side by side with communities to tackle literacy inequality.**

We lead 20 impactful Literacy Hubs – long term literacy action partnerships on the ground, driven by the communities themselves, in the places with the worst experiences of literacy and poverty in the UK. Our local teams worked in partnership with these communities to change stories.

## **We influenced leadership and policy to create lasting change.**

National and local government policy determines how education is delivered. We worked to ensure literacy is a priority and influence policy using our insights and experience. We also worked with leaders in the business community. As employers, through their markets and as corporate citizens, businesses have a key role to play in our mission.





## Our Literacy Champions

Improving literacy levels not only requires great teaching but it also requires language-rich communities, where reading and writing and story sharing are activities shared and enjoyed by everyone, and where everyone has access to books. This is not currently the case, literacy levels, reading levels and book ownership are all significantly lower in poorer communities.

To help us change the culture around reading and writing and stories in our 20 Hub communities, we have recruited 1,333 Literacy Champions, volunteers who are community literacy activists. They use their love of literacy and their commitment to their communities to change the lives of their neighbours, colleagues and friends. 336 are Youth Literacy Champions.

They work in communities, hospitals, workplaces and faith settings to bring literacy alive. Through book trails, creating library shelves, supporting literacy in other families and by being advocates for reading in their communities, these volunteers are changing the face of literacy, growing engagement and offering wonderful experiences in some of the UK's most disadvantaged communities.

**69% of participants of activities run by Literacy Champions said they were more likely to read and 50% said they were more likely to read with their family.**



Participants also became advocates for literacy in turn, after working with the volunteers, with 88% reporting they were more confident in supporting the reading and writing of those around them.



# 2023–24 Research insights

Our research has had children and young people's views on, and experiences of, literacy at its heart since 2005.

Our Annual Literacy Survey, which reached more than 70,000 children and young people aged 5 to 18 in 2023, is our flagship research activity. However, we also conduct research on specific topics.

In 2023/24, we published more than 25 research and evaluation reports spanning topics from reading and writing trends to reading comics, lyrics and poetry, reading for wellbeing and young adult's confidence when communicating.



Our research findings not only provide the foundation for all our programmatic and campaigning work but it also informs teachers and the wider literacy community, nationally and internationally, about trends in reading, writing, speaking and listening enjoyment, behaviour and confidence.

Key insights from our research during this time include:

**Just 2 in 5 (43.4%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 said they enjoyed reading – the lowest level we have recorded since 2005.**

**1 in 8 (12.4%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 who received free school meals (FSMs) said they did not have a book of their own at home. This was double the percentage of their peers who did not receive FSMs (5.8%).**

**1 in 5 (19.3%) children and young people wrote something daily, a decrease of over a quarter since 2010.**

**Almost 1 in 2 (47.4%) young women aged 16 to 30 said a fear of saying the wrong thing contributed to low confidence when speaking compared with 1 in 4 (27.4%) young men.**

# Breakthrough 1: Literacy to Grow

Every child starts school with language and communication skills ready to grow and learn at school.

Early years speech, language and communication is the foundation of all literacy. Yet in September 2022, 32.9% of children started school without the early literacy, language and communication skills required. Children who struggle with language at age 5 are five times more likely not to reach the expected level in reading and writing at age 11. From this point inequalities in earnings and health can accurately be projected.

**In 2023/24 we delivered programmes to 4,259 families to empower them to support their children's early language and literacy.**

The evaluation of these programmes has demonstrated their impact on parenting and also on children's development.

**In 2023/24 we gave families 659,006 books and additional resources so they can feel confident to chat, play and read with their children.**

“ My kids 1 and 3 years old love it. The rhymes have really helped with their speech. They pick books they like and engage more now. The group atmosphere has given me and my kids friends also. ”  
*Parent*

“ They're excited... Finding the different books and talking about the books and sharing that. So 100% it's increased. I've been doing this for a long time. I've never seen it happen quite this quickly. We wouldn't have been able to do it before. ”  
*Practitioner*

“ A family came to our play and stay session, the mother told us that she was a recipient of one of our starter packs. She told us that the pack had made such a difference to her life. She told us that the book that we gave her in the pack was her daughters first book and she still reads it to her every night. ”  
*Practitioner*

“ Thank you for the Eid story. ”  
*Parent*



## **We supported 1044 education professionals with training in 2023/24.**

We are working in 68 of the Government's family Hubs to help them reach more parents with effective early language support. We held a national Early Years Literacy and Language Conference.

**“ For us as a team, it's been very insightful to be able to expand our skills and develop our expertise/knowledge in working with 1-2yrs olds and their parents. It's not often library staff get the opportunity for training for under 5s activities, let alone 1-2yr olds.**

*Practitioner*

We worked with the Literacy All Party Parliamentary Group and published their report *Building Firm Foundations* calling for a stronger political commitment to early language and literacy as a priority in the 2024 General Election.

**“ I haven't had a panic attack in 19 days. I think it's this group – the exhaustion has lifted. Took C swimming on Saturday and went back to church on Sunday. That's huge progress going back to my old church. I'm a lot less socially isolated now and have a lot of people I care about there. Thanks so much for this group, it was so helpful for me and probably contributed a lot towards me getting back on an even keel.**

*Mum with autism,  
National Literacy Trust Family Read  
Talk and Play pilot group, Dundee*

Our Early Words Matter campaign was launched in February 2024 with new research from Pro Bono Economics, commissioned for us by KPMG, showing lifetime economic costs of around £830m for early language failure in each year group starting school.

Our new 5 year campaign will address this by giving 250,000 children sustained support in early language development across all 20 of our Hub areas. Families will receive advice, resources, support and be able to take part in our programmes. We will work with local nurseries and settings to make sure they are able to offer the best possible development opportunities for children in their early years. We are also working with local authorities who commission and deliver local early years strategies, to ensure alignment with our work.

Early Words Matter is supported by the DfE, the BBC and a consortium of trusts and foundations and businesses including KPMG, Very, WHSmith and the Premier League.

We are now delivering Early Words Matter in our Hub communities.



# Breakthrough 2: Literacy to learn

Every young person, wherever they grow up, leaves school with literacy skills for life.

Literacy is the key to education and is crucial in successfully navigating life. Literacy levels determine employment options, earnings, the ability to participate in democracy and even health outcomes. It's not just about acquiring literacy skills, it's also about personally engaging with them – enjoying reading at 15 has a greater impact on your school grades than your parents' social class. Yet the 16–24 age group in England have the lowest literacy skills of any age group in society, and enjoying reading amongst young people is at an all time low. This is creating inequality, limiting opportunities and undermining social mobility.

We are committed to ensuring that every young person leaves school with the literacy skills they need to fulfil their potential. This means offering consistent support for their reading, writing and speaking and listening skills throughout their education.

## Libraries for Primaries

1 in 7 primary schools are without a library. This is worse in areas of the UK with higher levels of child poverty, where children are less likely to have books of their own – 18% of primary schools in the North East don't have a library, as opposed to only 6% in the South East.



**Pupils are talking less about computer games, and they're talking more about their reading. That's a big thing. When I arrived at this school, it was the other way round.**

*Libraries for Primaries teacher*



By April 2024 the National Literacy Trust's Libraries for Primaries campaign had created new libraries in 1,000 primary schools, benefiting over 370,000 children. Libraries for Primaries is also working with the publishing community to develop an approach to ensure that all primary school libraries have regularly refreshed, diverse and modern books. Libraries for Primaries also aims to create a library and train a member of staff to run, it in all 2,900 primary schools in the UK without one.

**The impact on pupils reading is immense: As a result of having being part of the programme 82.5% of pupils enjoy reading more.**

**The impact on teachers is also significant, with 95.6% saying that they have increased understanding of supporting reading for pleasure.**

In 2023 we launched a campaign to get this on the political agenda for the 2024 General Election. We are asking for investment of £14m which will ensure every primary has a library. In March we were thrilled to see that the successful candidate for the West Yorkshire Mayoralty carried a commitment to fulfilling this commitment in her manifesto. On World Book Day we welcomed Damien Hinds, Minister for Schools, to the new library at High Hazels academy in Sheffield.

**In 2023/24 we worked in partnership with 9,015 schools.**

**237,715 children took part in our literacy interventions and our projects in schools.**

These included our projects to increase reading for pleasure, develop literacy skills for employment and to use sport as a way to engage young people in reading and writing, working with partners including the Premier League. In West Yorkshire we worked with Simon Armitage, the Poet Laureate, to engage schools and young people in a Young Laureate programme.

We delivered online literacy events for Holocaust Memorial Day (38,000 young people participated), National Storytelling Week (159,000 young people), and World Book Day (over 500,000 young people).

3,000 children are suspended from school every day and well over 3,000 are now permanently excluded. Only 5% of them will pass GCSE English and Maths. We are delivering tailored programmes and support.

Manchester Metropolitan University's evaluation of our Represent programme, for girls aged 11 to 14 excluded from, or at risk of being excluded, found that it:

- increased students' self-confidence and confidence in reading.
- increased students' communication skills.
- positively impacted students' wellbeing.
- developed relationships between facilitators, students and, to a lesser extent, parents.



A child of Bangladeshi origin with trauma from her home environment found solace in identifying with a Muslim character in a series of stories. Her confidence increased and she enjoyed talking about the character and the stories. Reading has become a safe place for her.

*Teacher, London  
Young Readers Programme*



Where is a poem most alive—most it's living, breathing, dancing, thoughtful, quirky self? One answer is: when the poet is right there speaking it. I can't imagine anyone reading this collection not wanting to meet Alex.

*Year 4 Student who attended the  
Windrush event with Alex Wharton,  
Welsh Children's Laureate*



Having a year 8 student enable themselves to talk in front of other students and not feel judged. This student was selective mute and for her to answer questions in front of other students was a huge step for her but she felt like she needed to talk to put her ideas across.

*Alternate provision teacher*



**In 2023/24 we trained and supported the professional development of 773 teachers.**

**We delivered national primary and secondary conferences and 2,728 education professionals are members of the National Literacy Trust.**



## The impact of our work in schools and communities

With the support of Arts Council England, the National Literacy Trust is working in partnership with 46 publishers to bring extraordinary reading experiences to children in schools across our 20 Hub Community. This combines evidence-based reading interventions, with visits from authors, writing workshops and activities to create readers. These communities have the lowest literacy and reading engagement. However, as a result of Connecting Stories, children in the Hub areas are now enjoying reading at levels above average and in the most challenging wards, where Connecting Stories has been most intensely focused, the levels are significantly higher.

	High priority wards in Hubs	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%



# Breakthrough 3: Literacy to thrive

Everyone leaving the criminal justice system has improved literacy skills to help them thrive.

1 in 6 adults in England have very low levels of literacy, in Scotland this figure is as high as 1 in 4. This group is not equally spread across society but is focused on disadvantaged communities. The prison population has particularly low levels of literacy and around 90% of young people in custody have been excluded from school in the past. Recent data from the Ministry of Justice shows that 61% of adult prisoners have literacy levels below Level 1. By working in the criminal justice system, we can reach large numbers of people with low literacy who face significant challenges in other areas of their life, we can learn from them about how best to engage people in reading and writing, and we can see how literacy really does change life stories.

This year, the criminal justice team have delivered a total of 67 workshops across 13 prisons: HMP Humber, HMP Leeds, HMP Guys Marsh, HMP Askham Grange, HMP Swaleside, HMP Elmley, HMYOI Feltham, HMP Downview, HMP Brixton, HMP/YOI Isis, Oakhill Secure Training Centre, HMP Grendon and HMYOI Swinfen Hall. We have donated approximately 5,500 books to 100 prisons across our different projects and provided a huge range of resources – from activities to complete with children, to self-guided creative writing – to support people in prison on their literacy journey.

“ It was very good, informative and fun I now have words dancing in my brain!

*Creative writing participant  
HMP Askham Grange* ”

“ It was fantastic. I never thought poetry could make me feel so emotional.

*Literacy Innovation Fund participant  
HMP Askham Grange* ”

As part of our Books Unlocked project, we broadcast nightly audiobook installments via National Prison Radio, reaching more than 100 prisons and up to 80,000 people.

“ When I first came to prison 7 years ago and knew nothing and no-one, Books Unlocked was a saviour. [The] most important aspect is the ability to unlock some mind space for ‘the rabbit in the headlights’ new prisoner.

*Books Unlocked participant* ”

We distributed 3,500 books and hosted authors such as Sarah Waters and Max Porter, along with megastar Dua Lipa, who met with prison reading groups.

Our New Chapters creative writing programme was delivered in eight prisons, with workshops led by inspiring authors including Andy West, Ciaran Thapar, Lady Unchained and Moses McKenzie to more than 200 participants. Our annual anthology was published in February.

88% of participants said that engaging with the New Chapters project made them feel more confident about expressing themselves in writing.

We supported people in prison to develop and maintain crucial relationships with their children through Readconnect.

**This year we delivered 16 workshops and reached more than 150 parents and carers in custody, as well as donating 500 books to families.**

We distributed 200 resource packs to support people to connect with their children through in-cell activities, and posted books to families in the community to enable people to read stories over the phone.

**“ It made me feel confident that I could get my ideas down and that there are many stories I have to share, that my disabilities are not a block but something that can be climbed and turned into something positive. ”**

*Readconnect participant  
HMP Downview*

**100% of participants expressed a desire to become more involved in their child’s education going forward, and all felt inspired to support their child’s learning.**

Funded by the Ministry of Justice, the Literacy Innovation Fund (LIF) enabled us to provide holistic literacy support in six prisons across England, engaging people with below Level 1 literacy. In its first year, more than 800 people have attended our workshops and we have donated in excess of 1,000 books to support prison libraries.

**“ What I liked most about the workshop is seeing how strong men could let their emotions out without shame. ”**

*Literacy Innovation Fund  
participant, HMP Elmley*

As a result of attending a LIF workshop, 89% said the session inspired them to write more and 93% said the session inspired them to engage with other education opportunities in their setting. 47% had been assessed as having a literacy level below Level 1.

*LIF is being independently evaluated by the Ministry of Justice. The figures shared above are based on early internal monitoring data.*

## Changing stories in prisons

For many people we work with, their involvement in our projects is the first time they have engaged with literacy activities in a way that is enjoyable and empowering. Participants have reported that they plan to use the library for the first time on release, and parents and carers who attend our family sessions say that they have started reading with their children for the first time. Participants in Young Offender Institutions often begin their creative writing journey with us and young people regularly report finally feeling like their voice is being heard.

Evaluation has highlighted the impact of New Chapters:

**79.64%**

of people taking part, said the programme has encouraged them to write more

**72.56%**

of participants reported they now enjoy writing more

**82.32%**

said there were more confident about expressing themselves in writing since taking part



# Funders

The charity's work is funded primarily through donations from charitable trusts, foundations, businesses and individuals. Our core activities, including Literacy hubs, education programmes, research and advocacy, are supported principally by a number of key funders. These include:

- Amazon
- Arts Council England
- Audible
- Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society
- Bloomberg
- Bloomsbury
- Booker Prize Foundation
- British Land
- Bupa Foundation
- Chase
- Department for Education
- Department of Science, Innovation and Technology
- Dundee Volunteer and Voluntary Action
- Enterprise
- Estée Lauer
- Experian
- Fidelity Foundation
- Garfield Weston Foundation
- Goldsmiths Company Charity
- Hachette
- Harper Collins
- Irwin Mitchell
- Julia and Hans Rausing Trust
- Kindred Squared
- KPMG
- Lancôme
- McDonald's
- Ministry of Justice
- Money & Pensions Services
- Moondance Foundation
- Morrisons Foundation
- Mousetrap Productions
- National Lottery Community Fund
- Oxford University Press
- Pan Macmillan
- Pearson
- Penguin Random House
- Portal Trust
- Premier League
- Rothschild Foundation
- Slaughter and May
- Squarepoint Capital
- Sylvamo
- The Works
- TikTok
- Turner and Townsend
- Twenty First Century Brand
- University of Birmingham
- Vanquis Bank
- Wesleyan
- West Yorkshire Combined Authority
- WHSmith
- Worwin Foundation.