

The logo for the National Literacy Trust, featuring the text "National Literacy Trust" in white, stacked vertically, inside a dark blue, rounded, irregular shape.

National  
Literacy  
Trust

Change your story

# Changing Stories Together

How we'll empower more people with  
literacy skills for life between 2024-2027



# This strategy explains how the National Literacy Trust will change life stories between 2024 and 2027.

Literacy skills are the fundamental foundation of every child's learning. They are vital for social and emotional development and support wellbeing. In adult life, literacy skills are the basic requirement for your first job. They are the platform for accessing your rights, taking control of your life and having your voice heard.

One in six adults in England have very low levels of literacy. And it is the most marginalised in our society who find it hardest to gain these skills, causing them to fall even further behind. This strategy explains how the National Literacy Trust will be on their side, working in the heart of the most challenging communities, in the schools with the highest levels of child poverty, and in prisons and refuges to create new opportunities.

Literacy itself is changing. In 2024, we celebrate the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the National Literacy Trust. We were founded by visionaries who knew that the UK's levels of literacy, static since the Second World War, were a time bomb. Our charity was created to support the individuals and communities who were at risk because of their low literacy skills and to work with them to change their futures. Today, the literacy skills we need to flourish as individuals, communities and a nation are at a higher level and more complex than ever before. To have low levels of literacy risks social and economic exclusion. This strategy builds on the ambitions of our founders. It commits us to using literacy to build a more equal society by seeing literacy as the core competence required to confidently navigate the world both off-line and on-line.

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 8,000 schools, and over 90 businesses, with the BBC, Arts Council England and great trusts and foundations, and we are grateful for the support of writers, illustrators, poets and the skilled teams of 46 publishers. We are publishing this strategy to invite new partners to join our mission.

Low literacy skills and their impact on lives and society are not inevitable. With your support we can change stories, creating new hope and new opportunities.



**Joanna Prior - Chair**  
and  
**Jonathan Douglas - CEO**

# **Our mission: 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 it 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 are 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. One in six adults have very low levels of literacy in the UK today, but this increases to as many as one in three in some of our poorest communities, where our support is most concentrated.

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, drives social mobility, and is crucial to tackling 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 base everything we do on sound evidence and evaluation 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

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.

More information about our Values can be found [here](#).



# Our commitment to equity, equality, diversity and inclusion

The foundation of this 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. So, **over the next three years we will particularly focus on improving access and inclusion for children and families who have special educational needs, or experience disability or neurodiversity in the poorest communities.**

We will work with people from our partner communities with these characteristics to co-create inclusive approaches, ensuring that there are no barriers to their full participation. We will work in partnership with them to improve their access to our online activities and resources, our events and our programmes, identifying and removing barriers to participation and strengthening their inclusion in our delivery work and our strategy, and ensuring that they are positively represented in books and resources we promote.

# Our commitment to the environment

We are passionate about sustainable development and supporting communities where both current and future generations have the literacy skills to thrive. 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.

# How we make change happen



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 needs to be sophisticated and evidence-based.

From 2024-2027, we will work in four ways to empower people with the literacy skills to succeed in life.

## **By directly supporting literacy skills and building confidence.**

Whether you're a parent not sure how to talk to your baby, a teenager who finds reading boring, or an adult facing life challenges without literacy skills, the National Literacy Trust will be there to support you, with information, digital content, classes, free books, encouragement and our knowledge and expertise.

## **By helping professionals increase the quality of literacy provision.**

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

## **By standing side by side with communities to tackle literacy inequality.**

By 2027, we will have 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 work in partnership with these communities to change stories. They sit at the heart of our charity's capability to fulfil our mission.

## **By influencing leadership and policy to create lasting change.**

National and local government policy determines how education is delivered; we're keen to ensure literacy is a priority and influence policy using our insights and experience. We also work 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 priorities for 2024-27

To develop our priorities, we have identified the three changes which would have the biggest impact on our vision for a more equal society, driven by literacy. We refer to these as “Breakthroughs”. As we work towards our Breakthroughs, the UK’s literacy challenge will change forever.

We know that these are aspirational and that we can’t achieve them on our own, but we also know that unless we name them and aim for them, then we are not honestly addressing our mission.

Over the next three years we will commit to focusing our energy and resources on these three Breakthroughs.

## Breakthrough 1:

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

***Literacy to grow***

## Breakthrough 2:

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

***Literacy to learn***

## Breakthrough 3:

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

***Literacy to thrive***

## **Breakthrough 1: 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 communications skills they need. 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.

Early years speech and language is also the place where literacy inequality first emerges: in 2022, only 50.9% of disadvantaged children had good levels of early language and literacy at 5.

**Between 2024 and 2027, the National Literacy Trust will support the early language and literacy skills of children in their early years in disadvantaged communities. We will do this:**

### **1. By directly supporting literacy skills and building confidence**

- We will work with 60,000 families using our evidence-based interventions to empower parents to support their children's early language and literacy
- In the midst of the cost of living crisis, we will give families 150,000 books and literacy resources so they can feel confident to chat, play and read with their children
- We will run local campaigns to raise awareness of the significance of early speech and language and empower parents to change their behaviour

### **2. By helping professionals increase the quality of literacy provision**

- We will work with 300 settings in the communities of the UK facing the biggest challenges, training, supporting and inspiring staff

### **3. By standing side by side with communities to tackle literacy inequality**

- By 2027, we will have 20 teams on the ground in the communities with the biggest poverty and literacy challenges. All these teams will be working to support early speech, language and communication, as part of Early Words Matter campaign

### **4. By influencing leadership and policy to create lasting change**

- Following the launch of the Literacy All-Party Parliamentary Group's report Building Firm Foundations, we will campaign for a commitment to early language and literacy as a priority in the 2024 General Election and the new Parliament

## **Early Words Matter – the National Literacy Trust's headline early years campaign.**

Between 2023 and 2028, Early Words Matter will support the early language and literacy of 250,000 children in 20 communities. All National Literacy Trust local teams are working directly with the families who need the greatest help. They are supported by the Literacy and Business Council. Companies including Very and WHSmith are funding community action in locations close to their main offices. The Department for Education is enabling us to link the campaign into the Family Hub network. And a partnership with BBC's Tiny Happy People campaign is enabling us to reach and empower parents with high quality information and resources.



## **Breakthrough 2: 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.

### **Libraries for Primaries**

By 2028, the National Literacy Trust's Libraries for Primaries campaign aims to have created a library and trained a member of staff to run it in all 2,900 primary schools in the UK without one. 1 in 7 primary schools are without a library. By April 2024, the campaign will have already created libraries in 1,000 primary schools, benefiting over 250,000 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.

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. Between 2024 and 2027, we will do this:

#### **1. By directly supporting young people's literacy skills and building their confidence**

- 1,001,500 children and young people will take part in our literacy interventions and projects in schools
- We will distribute 1,500,000 books and literacy resources targeting the 1 in 12 children who don't own a book of their own

#### **2. By helping professionals increase the quality of literacy provision**

- We will create 1,500 libraries in schools who currently don't have one, giving a further 525,000 children access to a school library
- We will train and support the professional development of 19,000 teachers and school leaders

#### **3. By standing side by side with communities to tackle literacy inequality**

- By 2027, National Literacy Trust local teams and local campaigns will be working with 9,500 schools in the areas of the UK with the biggest literacy challenges

#### **4. By influencing leadership and policy to create lasting change**

- Our Libraries for Primaries campaign will work with the Government and the publishing industry to develop and fund a sustainable development model for universal primary school library provision in the UK

## The impact of our work in schools – Connecting Stories

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 in our 20 Hub Communities. 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 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: Everyone leaving the criminal justice system has improved literacy skills to help them thrive**

One in six adults in England have very low levels of literacy; in Scotland, this figure is as high as one in four. 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 had literacy levels below those expected of an 11-year-old. By working with 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.

### **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.



Between 2024 and 2027, we will grow our impact in the criminal justice sector:

**1. By directly supporting literacy skills and building confidence**

- 13,000 people in the justice system will take part in our reading and writing programmes
- We will expand our work in Young Offender Institutions, to work with 1,600 young people in eight institutions

**2. By helping partners increase the quality of literacy provision**

- All our projects will work with partners – librarians, education departments, enrichment teams, and prison staff – increasing their knowledge of literacy issues and how to support people in the justice system

**3. By working with communities**

- By 2027, we will innovate and pilot through-the-gate offers to be delivered in the community, working with National Literacy Trust Hubs, probation, approved premises and partners offering support post-release

**4. By influencing leadership and policy to create lasting change**

- The National Literacy Trust will expand its research function around literacy in the justice sector and publish new evidence detailing effective practice and medium term impact based on an ever-growing evidence base

## Extending our work with adults with literacy issues

The National Literacy Trust will expand its work to engage and support adult literacy. We will focus on our Hub communities where up to 40% of the adult population of some wards have very low levels of literacy. We have already initiated partnership programmes with colleges, employers, women's centres, and other community partners. Over the next three years we will expand and evaluate these, and work with new OECD literacy research expected in 2024, to determine how best we can grow our support for adult literacy.



# The foundations of our impact

We can only be effective as a charity if we are true to our values and build an effective organisational culture. We will:

**Focus on our team, strengthening our workplace and culture.** Our people are our most important asset. Respecting, developing and building them as individuals and a happy team will continue to improve our effectiveness.

**Become a more diverse organisation, better at listening and responding to others.** Our commitment to EDI creates a powerful value-driven force strengthening our ability to fulfil our mission.

**Increase our brand profile and build a deeper connection with our partners and supporters.** We will strengthen our impact through growing alliances and communicating with impact and passion. By working with us, we believe everyone can change their story in a positive way.

**Invest in technology and our digital platforms to enhance our reach and engagement.** Technology is changing literacy, so we need to be confident with our engagement and use of technology and maximise opportunities offered by AI to improve our effectiveness.

**Continue to lead research and innovation in the literacy and education sectors.** We are an evidence-based organisation. All our work is built on insights, research and evaluation. It is the foundation of our credibility and our impact.

**Recruit new supporters and manage our resources effectively.** We welcome all who share our mission and values to support us. We commit to maximising the impact of their support.



# Why now?

We have identified three external factors that are directly influencing our strategy and priorities.

## Technology is changing what it means to be literate

From the invention of writing to the invention of generative AI, what it means to be literate has been changed by the technology we use to communicate. We are committed to ensuring that our programmes and support are focused on the literacy skills that are needed to succeed in a rapidly changing world. Our digital literacy research and news literacy programmes with Google, Facebook and the Guardian Foundation have helped us understand the opportunities and challenges associated with literacy in a dynamic technological context. Today, being literate increasingly includes the skills of interacting and engaging with AI. 60% of teachers believe they are now regularly receiving AI-completed assignments, and it seems they're spot on, as 67% secondary students have reportedly used generative AI for their homework<sup>1</sup>. As we increasingly interact with the texts created by generative AI, more complex and critical literacy skills take on heightened importance. We need to work with teachers and policy makers now to help them develop concepts of literacy fit for the new technological world.

1 <https://www.rm.com/news/2023/artificial-intelligence-in-education>

## The pandemic has created new literacy challenges

The impact of the pandemic on children's literacy is becoming increasingly apparent. Long periods spent out of school and the closure of many early years settings has increased the attainment gap between poorer and more affluent children. In particular, it has had a serious impact on the early speech, language and communication development of babies and toddlers from disadvantaged communities. These children will be in the education system for the best part of the next two decades. Supporting their literacy development is a priority.

## Links between poverty and literacy are increasing

Partly due to the experience of the pandemic and partly as a result of the cost of living crisis, the relationship between child poverty and literacy is increasingly concerning. We know that child poverty leads to low literacy and as a result the experience of poverty in childhood can have lifelong impact. Child poverty has been growing at a faster rate than it has for at least the last century, especially in regions of the UK where it was already high. Our ability to act fast to support the literacy of the increasing numbers of children growing up in poverty is an imperative.

## How we developed this strategy

This strategy has been developed through a six-month process of research, consultation, discussion and reflection. Conversations have been held with charity and business partners. The National Literacy Trust's policy and research teams have led a horizon scanning activity looking at the future political, economic, social and technological context for the Trust's work. This was presented to all staff. Working groups looking at Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion priorities and the opportunities and challenges presented to our mission by AI have met and advised on priorities. The Trust's youth ambassadors have met and had discussions with the CEO and presented to a full staff meeting of National Literacy Trust employees. The whole organisation has been engaged in discussions about the Breakthroughs.

Every member of the National Literacy Trust's team has been actively engaged in the development of this strategy. We want all members of the team to own it, to recognise their values and beliefs in it, and to feel inspired by its vision.

## How we will know we're making a difference

Evaluation of outcomes is key to our work. It enables us to be certain of our impact, to reflect on and improve our approaches, and to advocate for the adoption of effective approaches at a national level. We have a strong internal evaluation and research team and we work with a range of external partners to ensure all our work is robustly evaluated.

Underpinning our strategy is an organisational Theory of Change. This explains why we can confidently link our activities to literacy outcomes and to our mission.

This strategy contains output targets – the number of children we will work with, the number of people in the justice system who we will support. We will use these as Key Performance Indicators. On an annual basis, we will develop a business plan which will set our annual targets against these three year targets. They will be monitored by our trustees and reported on to the Charity Commission.

