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Language unlocks reading: supporting early language and reading for every child

Contents

Foreword, Lucy Powell MP 4

Foreword, Andrea Quincey, Oxford University Press 5

Executive summary 6

Roundtable participants list 7

1. Background and context 8

1.1 The language and literacy challenge in the UK 8

1.2 Language foundations for early reading 9

1.3 A renewed focus on supporting early language and literacy and addressing social disadvantage 9

2. Language learning to support reading development in early years and education settings 11

2.1 The processes at work when learning to read 11

2.2 A structured, targeted and explicit approach to learning language 13

2.3 Targeted support: the evidence for oral language interventions 15

2.4 Supporting early years practitioners and teachers 17

3. Language and literacy in the home and in the community 18

3.1 Strengthening the home learning environment 18

3.2 Place-based working 19

4 Recommendations: the policies and practice we need to support early language and reading development for all children 22

4.1 The need for sustained Government leadership 22

4.2 Maintaining the momentum around language and communication 23

4.3 Enhanced status for language learning in early years settings and schools 23

4.4. A stronger commitment to developing the skills of the early years and schools workforce 23

4.5 Ensuring early identification of delayed language and language disorders 23

4.6 Place-based solutions for communities where early language and literacy support is most needed 24

4.7 A sustained and multi-agency approach to supporting the home learning environment 24

Foreword from Lucy Powell MP, Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Literacy

Reading helps children to do well in school and in later life. It helps them to develop their understanding of the world and empathy for others. It is also intrinsically enjoyable – it feeds imaginations and gives children exposure to language and stories to enrich their lives.

However, last year in England, 160,000 11-year-olds finished primary school not having achieved the expected level in reading skills which they will need to learn, excel and reach their full potential[1]. This is a gap that if left unaddressed will hold them back at every stage of their lives[2].

Education policy has rightly focused on the importance of teaching reading through phonics, and there is considerable evidence as to the efficacy of this approach. But learning to read is a complex process and, in order for children to be able to understand phonics in the first place, they need to have sophisticated communication, language and literacy skills.

Currently too many children are starting school without the words, oracy and communications skills they need to flourish, so it is clear that a new approach must be considered. If we want to have a significant impact on children's educational outcomes, these skills should be taught in a more explicit and scaffolded way.

This was the focus of a recent roundtable hosted by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Literacy. We brought together leading policy makers, academics, campaigners, education professionals and health professionals to discuss how we can best support children to gain the early communication, language and literacy skills they need to become a skilled, confident reader.

We also looked at new strategies to support the groups of children who are most at risk of falling behind, including those from disadvantaged communities and those with speech and language difficulties. Indeed, children from the poorest communities start school 19 months behind their more affluent peers in language and vocabulary[3], while 10% of all children have long-term and persistent speech, language and communication needs[4].

This report sets out a new approach for structured, targeted and explicit language learning, in the home, in early years settings and at the start of school, and makes recommendations around how best to support this.

In order to make a meaningful difference to children's futures, particularly in the communities where language and literacy difficulties are deeply entrenched and intergenerational, we need to equip educators with the skills they need to identify and address language and communication needs, and to use language teaching in support of reading development. We must also empower local leaders to define how best to answer the specific early language challenges that exist in their communities.

We must ensure that every child, regardless of their background, has the words they need to succeed at school, at work and in life.

[1] Department for Education: **Key stage 2 and multi-academy trust performance, 2018 (revised)**

[2] Social Mobility Commission: **State of the nation 2016**

[3] Waldfogel, J. (2012) **Social Mobility Summit**, The Sutton Trust

[4] Norbury et al. (2016) The impact of nonverbal ability on prevalence and clinical presentation of language disorder: evidence from a population study. The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, Vol 57 (11), 1247-1257.

Foreword from Andrea Quincey, Head of English, Primary, at Oxford University Press

As someone who has worked closely with primary schools and experts in the field of primary literacy for many years, it has become clear to me that one of the key challenges facing primary teachers is the growing number of children starting school with a limited vocabulary and poor communication skills. This 'word gap' is a complex issue with a myriad of causes. But there is no denying the impact it can have on children's capacity to learn, on their ability to make friends and generally 'fit in' with school and, consequently, on their self-esteem and mental health.

In the autumn of 2017, Oxford University Press (OUP) carried out a survey of UK primary and secondary school teachers with the aim of better understanding the nature of this 'word gap' and exploring what we could do to help schools address it. Over 1,300 teachers responded to the survey and in April 2018 *The Oxford Language Report: Why Closing the Word Gap Matters* was published. Feedback from teachers confirms that a language deficit is a significant and growing issue for pupils in the early years; respondents to our survey reported that half (49%) of Year 1 pupils in the UK have a limited vocabulary to the extent that it affects their learning. Even more worryingly, this gap persists and continues to impact on pupils right through primary and secondary school. Over 60% of secondary school teachers reported that they believe the word gap is increasing.

So OUP was delighted to be invited to work with the National Literacy Trust and contribute to this All-Party Parliamentary Group roundtable and is proud to be the sponsor of this important paper. It is clear both from the research evidence and the excellent field-based examples shared as part of this discussion that the word gap is an issue that must be addressed with sustained, multi-disciplinary action if we are to close the widening gaps between the most and least disadvantaged in our society.

For further information visit the Oxford University Press website: **oxford.ly/wordgap** or follow OUP on social media @OUPPrimary @OxfordEdEnglish #wordgap

Executive summary

Based on insights from the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Literacy and a group of leading policy makers, academics, campaigners, education professionals and health professionals, this report outlines the ways in which we can best support young children to develop the early communication, language and literacy skills they need to unlock learning through reading.

1. **England is facing a huge language and literacy challenge, which starts in the early years:** The language and vocabulary gap between wealthier and poorer children is already apparent at 18 months of age[1]. By the age of five, children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are starting school 19 months behind their better-off peers, and struggle to catch up from then on[2]. Last year alone, 180,000 five-year-olds in England started school without the communication, language and literacy skills expected for their age[3].
2. **Good early language skills are crucial for children's futures:** Early spoken language skills are the most significant predictor of literacy skills at age 11. One in four (23%) children who struggle with language at age five do not reach the expected standard in English at the end of primary school, compared with just 1 in 25 (4%) children who had good language skills at age five[4]. Only 11% of those children who have not reached the expected standard in English at the end of primary school will go on to achieve a good pass grade (Level 4 equivalent or above) in English and maths GCSEs[5]. What's more, children with poor vocabulary age five are more than twice as likely to be unemployed at age 34[6].
3. **The importance of early language learning has gained public and political prominence:** In the past 18 months, government and public sector agencies have implemented a wide range of projects designed to support language learning in the home, in early years settings and in schools. The Government is funding a number of initiatives through its 12 opportunity areas, 32 English hubs and VCS grants, and a partnership with Public Health England is equipping health visitors with the early assessment tools and training they need to identify and support children with delayed language and their families.
4. **The evidence base on the link between early language skills and reading has been refreshed:** A renewed prioritisation of the importance of language development in the early years provided an opportune moment to draw out the evidence and learning from policy makers, academics, educators and health practitioners around the inter-relationship between early language and reading. The APPG on Literacy hosted a roundtable discussion, upon which this report is based, to highlight the particular dimensions of oral language that support emergent reading and enable children to achieve reading fluency, which is a vital foundation for educational attainment and broader life chances.
5. **The teaching of reading through phonics should be supported with a structured and explicit approach to language learning:** This report sets out a case for a structured, targeted and explicit approach to language learning for early years settings and schools to supplement and support the effectiveness of teaching children to read through phonics. Language learning – which encompasses dialogic reading, listening, shared narratives, vocabulary development and attuned adult-child interactions to build confidence and language exposure – provides a vital foundation to enable children to unlock reading.
6. **Language learning must be supported in the home, in schools and in the community:** To make the biggest difference to children's futures, parents, educators and local leaders must be equipped with the skills, resources and strategies to support early language learning and emergent reading.

[1] Fernald, A., Marchman, V. A., & Weisleder, A. (2013) **SES differences in language processing skill and vocabulary are evident at 18 months** Developmental Science, 16(2), 234–248
[2] Waldfogel, J. (2012) **Social Mobility Summit**, The Sutton Trust
[3] Department for Education (2018) **Early Years Foundation Profile results, 2017 to 2018**
[4] University College London, Institute of Education, on behalf of Save the Children (2016) **Early language development and children's primary school attainment in English and maths: new research findings**
[5] Education Endowment Foundation (2018) **The attainment gap: 2017**
[6] APPG on Social Mobility (2019) **Closing the regional attainment gap**

Roundtable event and participants list

On 4 December 2018, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Literacy and the National Literacy Trust held a roundtable discussion to explore the relationship between early language development and learning to read. The content of that discussion and the evidence and insights shared by participants forms the basis of this policy paper. This event took place under Chatham House rules. A full list of participants is below.

Lucy Powell MP (Chair)

Robbie Coleman, Head of Policy, Education Endowment Foundation

Janet Cooper, Early Language and Communication Strategy Lead, Stoke-on-Trent City Council

Teresa Cremin, Professor of Education (Literacy), Open University

Jonathan Douglas, Director, National Literacy Trust

Liz Dyer, English Adviser, North Yorkshire Coast Hub Manager, National Literacy Trust

Kamini Gadhok, CEO, Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists

Jean Gross, former Government Communication Champion for children

Imran Hafeez, Bradford Hub Manager, National Literacy Trust

Mary Hartshorne, Director of Evidence, I CAN

Megan Jarvie, Head of Coram Family and Childcare

Gill Jones, Deputy Director, Early Childhood, Ofsted

Kate Nation, Professor of Experimental Psychology, University of Oxford

Jane Pepper, Headteacher of Childhaven Nursery School, national leader of education and teaching

school lead, Scarborough Teaching School Alliance

Lisa Ponter, Deputy Head and Literacy Lead, Rillington Community Primary School

Andrea Quincey, Head of English, Primary, Oxford University Press

Bob Reitemeier, CEO, I CAN

Liz Robinson, Co-Director, Big Education and Headteacher, Surrey Square Primary School

Nancy Stewart, Principal Consultant, Early Learning Consultancy and Associate, Early Education

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We would like to thank all the roundtable participants for their involvement and support for this piece of work. Our particular thanks go to Mary Hartshorne from I CAN, Andrea Quincey from Oxford University Press, Jean Gross CBE, Kate Nation from the University of Oxford, Nancy Stewart from Early Education, Teresa Cremin from the Open University, Caroline Wright from RCSLT and Robbie Coleman from EEF.

1. Background and context

1.1 The language and literacy challenge in England

England is facing a huge language and literacy challenge. The skills gap is apparent at just five-years-old, where our poorest children start primary school 19 months behind their better-off peers in language and vocabulary[1] and struggle to catch up from then on. The 2018 Key Stage 2 National Curriculum Assessments (formerly SATs) revealed that one in four (25%) children, rising to two in five (40%) disadvantaged children, were not reading at the expected level by the time they left primary school[2]. This is a deficit that continues throughout a child's school life, with England having the lowest teenage literacy rates in the OECD[3].

In some areas of social deprivation up to 50% of children are starting school with delayed language and other identified speech, language and communication needs[4]. This means that their speech may be unclear, their vocabularies are smaller, the sentences they use are shorter and they are only able to understand simple instructions. This appears to be a growing problem: nearly three-quarters (74%) of health visitors surveyed in 2017 reported seeing a significant increase in children with speech and communication delay over the last two years[5], while a similar proportion of primary school teachers (69%), who were surveyed for the recent *Oxford Language Report* (2018), believe the number of pupils with limited vocabulary is increasing[6].

This language delay can have a significant impact on a child's ability to learn to read and succeed more widely at school. For example, the early development of phonological awareness – the building blocks of spoken language – is essential to ensure children can achieve reading fluency with phonics-based reading instruction. Children who do not achieve the expected standard of early language and communication skills at five-years-old are currently six times less likely to reach the expected standard in English at age 11[7]. In fact, early spoken language skills are the most significant predictor of literacy levels at age 11[8].

Nationally, some 10% of all children have long-term and persistent speech, language and communication needs: that's two or three children in every classroom[9]. For these children, specialist intervention, referrals to speech and language therapy and ongoing support may be required.

Low literacy and delayed language are problems that are frequently entrenched and inter-generational[10]. They are both a national issue and also often localised and closely linked to children's

experience of poverty[11]. *The Bercow: Ten Years On* report (2018) has highlighted key challenges in this area, including a postcode lottery in the availability of services that support children with speech, language and communication needs, which sadly leaves too many children vulnerable and without the support they need[12]. Literacy and language problems are long term in nature and as such they need stable and sustainable solutions.

1.2 Language foundations for early reading

Language and literacy are inextricably linked and both are vital foundations for life. These important skill sets support our ability to learn, to think about and understand the world, and are the basis for our interactions with others. They are hugely important to children's life chances, impacting on areas as diverse as educational attainment, health, employment prospects and income[13].

The best routes to supporting the development of communication and literacy skills start at the very beginning, when babies start their learning - principally through parental interactions and exploring the world around them. There is a wealth of research demonstrating the links in child development at each stage, showing how babies use early gestures to communicate as a precursor to language, while young children's language capabilities can in turn predict their literacy skills[14].

Policy and practice for this age group needs to ensure that every child gets the best possible opportunities to embed strong language and communication skills, which lay the foundation for reading. These skills will support children through emergent reading and towards the goal of reading fluency.

This paper articulates the growing need for a targeted, structured and explicit approach to supporting and teaching language and communication in the early years and at the start of primary school as the essential foundation for learning to read. While significant investment is currently being channelled in this direction as the result of a range of new initiatives (which are outlined briefly in the next section), many practitioners in childcare settings and classrooms lack the tools and training to support them to deliver evidence-based practice in this area.

In the context of rising need and cuts to funding for both school budgets and for children with special educational needs and disability (SEND), significant additional pressures are being placed on an already stretched system. This paper also looks at the broader systems change needed, highlighting both the importance of the home learning environment and the need for place-based approaches that are long term, rooted in local needs, and capable of tackling entrenched language and literacy development challenges.

Considerable best practice exists across each of these areas, and in this paper we signpost some examples, while acknowledging that a great many more exist than we have room to cover here.

1.3 A renewed focus on supporting language and literacy and addressing social disadvantage

One of the key reasons for the production of this paper is to build on current momentum from the Government and other public sector agencies who have unveiled a wide range of initiatives designed to support language development as the basis for strengthening literacy skills and addressing social disadvantage.

In the past 18 months, language and literacy development in young children has gained significant attention from government agencies. Ofsted's 2018 *Bold Beginnings* report on early years provision described language and literacy as the 'cornerstones of learning'[15], while a raft of measures to improve social mobility from the Department for Education includes the creation of 32 English hubs across the country. A group of 32 primary schools, selected for their expertise in teaching reading, will support schools in surrounding areas to develop high quality teaching in early language, reading for pleasure and phonics[16].

Literacy, language, poverty and place are inextricably linked, so place-based approaches can be immensely valuable in tackling early language and communication difficulties in the communities where this challenge is most prevalent. This is an approach employed by many sectors, including government agencies, in order to make the biggest difference in the communities that need it the most.

For example, in efforts to improve opportunities for children and young people across the country, the Government identified 12 areas in England where social mobility is weakest and where inequalities in educational outcomes for children are particularly acute[17]. In these 12 'opportunity areas', the Department for Education will work closely with local partners and high-quality providers to offer schools and local authorities extra support to meet their specific needs. The majority of the local action plans drawn up have children's early language as a focus area[18].

In August 2018, the Department for Education also announced its long-term ambition to halve the number of children finishing Reception year without the early communication or language skills they need to flourish by 2028. Key national agencies, including Public Health England, have also announced their commitment to addressing the challenge[19]; and the BBC has made early language and literacy one of the three strategic priorities for its 10-year education strategy to support and promote learning for all ages[20]. The Big Lottery's A Better Start initiative is targeting five local area partnerships to offer support during pregnancy and in the first three years of life, with one of the three key strands of work being around language and communication.

At the same time, the conversation around the 'word gap' has grown as an underpinning issue in educational inequality. The recent *Oxford Language Report* (2018) identified a significant 'word gap' in UK schools with half of teachers reporting that at least 40% of their pupils lacked the vocabulary needed to access learning[21]. Research by Hart and Risley (2003) found that children from poorer backgrounds had heard 30 million fewer words than their more affluent peers by the age of three, that they had smaller vocabularies at this age, and that this predicted their future language outcomes and their level of reading comprehension when aged nine and 10[22].

Concerns about the 'word gap' have come to encompass a wide range of issues, from early speech and language delay to gaps in academic language in secondary education and issues in young people's communication skills that have a negative impact on employability.

2. Language learning to support reading development in early years and education settings

The relationship between early language and the development of later literacy skills is well established. Emergent literacy stems from a foundation of oral language, which is built through the 'back and forth' of conversational turn-taking[23], exposure to a wide range of words to build vocabulary[24] and exposure to songs, rhymes, books and stories, including establishing regular reading habits and dialogic reading[25].

2.1 The processes at work when learning to read

A great many processes are at work when we read. While these processes are quite separate at the outset of learning to read, they gradually get more and more integrated and automatic, enabling faster and more fluent reading and comprehension of detailed and complex texts.

Dr Scarborough's Reading Rope diagram (Figure 1) demonstrates the range of oral language knowledge and the processes employed. It gives useful insight into the complexity of processes at work, spanning vocabulary, sentence structure, phonological awareness (the ability to hear the phonemes which are the component parts of words), as well as the application of general knowledge. The two main strands – word recognition and language comprehension – are supported by a broad academic consensus and underpinned by research evidence[26].

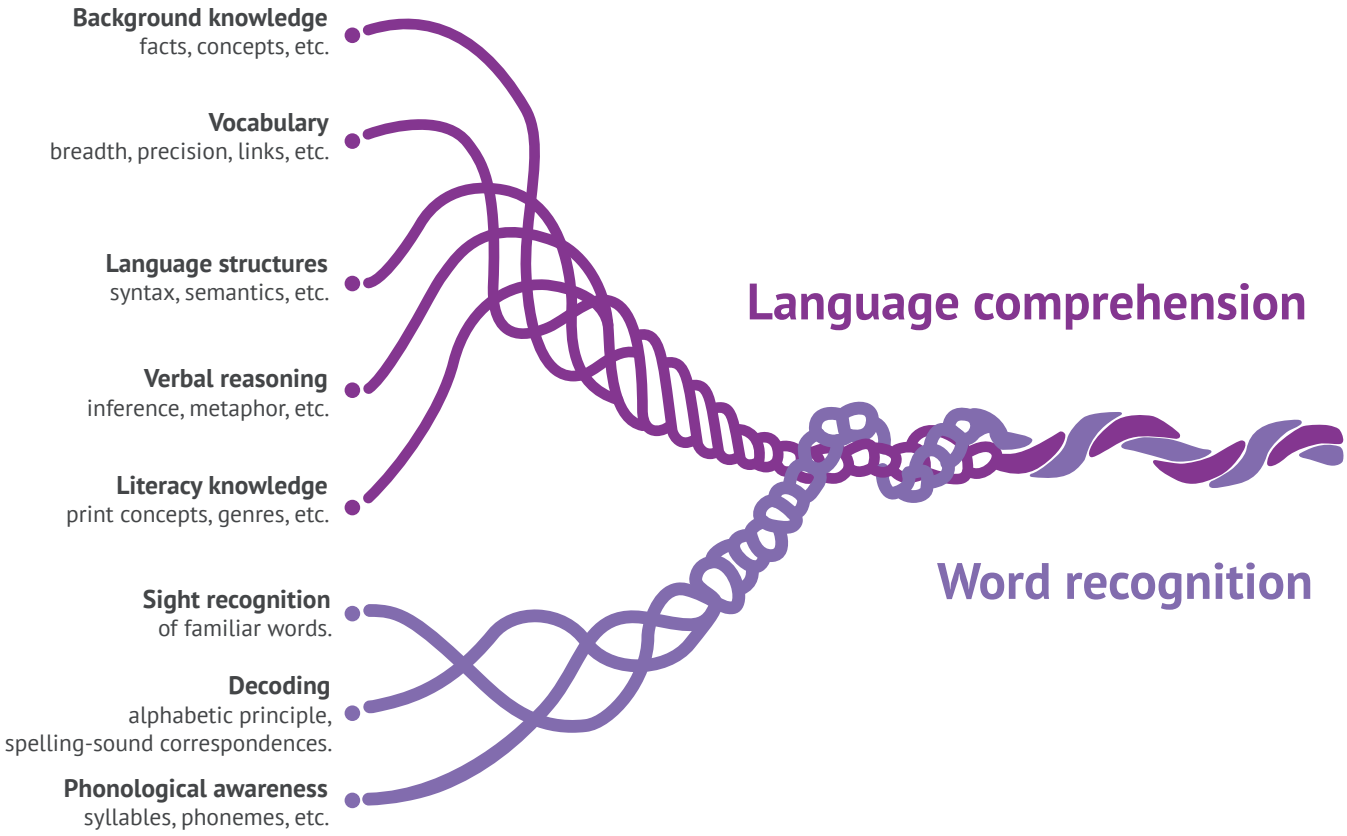

Figure 1: The many strands that are woven into skilled reading

Source: Scarborough, H. S. (2001) Connecting early language and literacy to later reading (dis)abilities: Evidence, theory, and practice. In S. Neuman & D. Dickinson (Eds.), Handbook for research in early literacy (pp. 97-110). New York: Guilford Press. Figure 1 has been adapted from the Education Endowment Foundation guidance report, Preparing for Literacy (2018)

The Reading Rope also functions as a diagnostic tool, enabling teachers to think about which processes their pupils need most help with, and to enable them to focus classroom time and resources accordingly.

The steps below show the processes required to read and understand a single word such as 'cat', when first learning to read. At almost every stage, learners need to call on their oral language knowledge, integrating it with their general knowledge, the alphabet and phonemes:

- Look at the letters of the alphabet and use letter knowledge to recognise them
- Think about how these letters map onto sounds or phonemes
- Read other letters in that same word, following the above pattern to map them onto their corresponding phonemes
- Put together the two (or more) phonemes to blend them aloud and so form a tentative first attempt at saying the word
- Make the correct sound for that word, speaking it aloud again to check with their reading partner (whether parent, carer or teacher) that they have said it correctly
- Call on vocabulary knowledge and conceptual understanding of what a 'cat' is, and general knowledge about the world to link the sound made to the known meaning of that word
- Employ knowledge of sentence and narrative structure to check the meaning
- Use inference and understanding of figurative language to link the sound of the word and the understood meaning to the sentence in which it appears, using any pictures or other contextual information conveyed by the reading material, to check and confirm understanding of the meaning of that word

The goal when teaching reading is to enable children to move beyond this arduous series of steps to a state of automaticity - the ability to quickly and accurately identify words. At this point these processes become automatic, intuitive, more fluent and thereby enable the reader to enjoy the process of reading. Oral language skills continue to be vitally important to children's ongoing developing literacy, supporting their ability to develop as readers and enabling them to comprehend text and experience reading enjoyment.

Education policy has focused on the importance of teaching reading through phonics, and there is considerable evidence as to the efficacy of this approach. But learning to read is a complex process and, in order for children to be able to understand phonics in the first place, they need to have sophisticated communication, language and literacy skills.

A key area of need is for more effective training to support the education workforce with an understanding of how oral language development can best be supported. A survey by the Communication Trust (2016) revealed that 49% of early years practitioners had received little or no initial training about speech, language and communication development, and 38% of primary school staff reported the same[27]. This skills deficit can weaken literacy teaching for children; it poses a particular risk of leaving behind those children with weaker language skills.

To develop the strong phonemic awareness that is essential for successful phonics teaching, children need the language and listening skills to be able to distinguish and manipulate phonemes. However, phonemic awareness itself is dependent on a child's wider phonological awareness, which describes their ability to detect and manipulate the sound structure of words and language. This is a metalinguistic process, which means the child requires a conscious awareness of language and words.

The Education Endowment Foundation has highlighted that it would be valuable to conduct more research to identify the most effective ways to develop phonics and phonemic awareness for children under the age of five. To date, very few studies appear to have assessed the impact of phonics instruction on three or four-year-olds. The Education Endowment Foundation's recent guidance report, *Preparing for Literacy* (2018), also cites evidence emphasising the importance of early language and communication[28]. Effective phonics teaching from five onwards relies on a wide range of language and communication skills, including listening comprehension, attention, breadth of vocabulary as well as phonemic awareness and phonological awareness. Teaching and supporting these language skills from birth will provide the vital foundation needed for improving reading and literacy skills throughout life.

2.2 A structured, targeted and explicit approach to language learning

Oral language learning in education settings needs to be structured, targeted and explicit. Key areas of language learning for early years settings and Key Stage 1 are outlined below:

High quality interactions

High quality interactions between adults (parents, carers or teachers) and young children represent valuable opportunities to both support and assess language development. They may include use of contingent talk (where adults talk about what the child is doing), commenting, questioning, narration, expansions and recasts (in the latter two, a phrase may be repeated back, slightly extended with one word added, or repeated back with the correct grammar). When engaging in high quality interactions with children, practitioners need to be highly tuned in to the child's capabilities and motivations, while nurturing their confidence and engagement through praise and affirmation[29].

Conversational turn-taking

A recent study (2018) has revealed the value of conversational turn-taking to improved scores on verbal language assessments and the development of language-related brain function in young children. A study of the home language experience of children, aged four to six and from diverse backgrounds, gathered data about the number of words spoken and the number of turns in conversations between caregivers and children. Children from all social and economic status groups who had experienced a higher level of conversational turns per hour had an increased verbal language test score, and this relationship remained significant even when allowing for differences in the quantity of words heard[30].

Another dimension to the study involved MRI brain imaging, to look at the activity in the language processing area of the brain (the 'Broca' area) during conversational turn-taking. The children who had experienced more conversational turns with adults had greater brain activity. The frequent conversational turns enable children to practice language and gain feedback from adults, while adults can better adjust their speech to the appropriate level of complexity to best support children's language development.

Teaching listening

Listening is also a vital component in language teaching, and one which is all too often overlooked. Listening activities for the nursery or classroom can include allocation of listening roles, including asking children to build on what they have heard, to summarise it, to compare it with other information, or to question the information to find out more[31]. A knowledge of the developmental stages in attention and listening among young children enables teachers and early years practitioners to better understand how they can support children with weaker listening skills.

Teaching vocabulary

Longitudinal research has identified the best types of input to support vocabulary growth at different stages of children's development. While the quantity of words was a strong predictor of vocabulary at age two and a half, lexical diversity (the number of different word types) and sophistication (the total number of rare words) were the strongest predictors of vocabulary by the time children reached three and a half. By age four and a half, the amount of decontextualized talk heard by a child (such as explanation, talk about pretence, story and narrative) was the strongest predictor of vocabulary[32].

Teaching techniques for younger children involve use of high quality interactions (as outlined above), as well as showing children lots of examples of use of the same word to support them to categorise that word. For primary schools useful guidance comes from speech and language therapists Parsons and Branagan whose books recommend the teaching of 'Goldilocks' words[33]. Put simply the method is to identify words that are not too easy or too hard but just right; they should have use beyond the immediate topic and be systematically taught and reviewed. This involves building a web of associations for new words around meaning, what they sound like, words that go with them, and how they can be used in a sentence.

Dialogic reading

Dialogic reading offers children the opportunity to extend their oral language skills, through the chance to hear a story and to talk about it. This can be approached in different ways, such as discussion about the pictures, questions about what is going to happen next, or exploring the emotional content by discussing how a character is feeling. In discussions about a story, practitioners and parents can scaffold children's language, explain new concepts or emphasise key words. The act of regularly reading together is also an opportunity to help foster a love of reading and good reading habits.

The language that is used in books is often more decontextualized language than that used in conversation and has greater lexical diversity. Children who engage in frequent dialogic reading are exposed to a greater number of words and syntactical forms, which helps to expand their vocabularies, extend their listening skills and develop their narrative skills[34].

Shared narratives

Research indicates the power of repeatedly re-visiting a story that all the children in a class have heard; building shared narratives, enabling them to explore their responses, and allowing them to re-visit or re-create the narrative through activities such as art, drama, role play games, use of puppets, writing activities such as labelling diagrams, creating posters or newspaper articles, or factsheets[35].

Oral narrative skills are another important foundational skill for reading and one which can be supported through the child-centred approach to storytelling and story acting developed by Vivian Gussin Paley[36]. Similarly to composing a written text, the skills involved in creating a narrative include the need for greater semantic clarity, planning and linguistic self-monitoring. Children taking part in this initiative engage in a process where each of them has the opportunity to devise their own stories, which the teacher first records and then reads aloud while the child acts out a part, and allocates any other parts to their peers.

Case study: storytelling and story acting

Research following a low-income nursery class over the course of a year found that the continued use of a child-centred approach to storytelling resulted in significant developments to the children's narratives. Children's confidence and enthusiasm for storytelling grew and they learned from one another, extending the narratives put together by their peers. Another notable change was from the predominant use of the present tense to predominant use of the past tense, as is more typical of books and stories. Children moved from drawing up lists of inactive characters to developing stories with active characters, and greater depth, as well as improved use of connectives to link together parts of the narrative and stories[37].

Case study: School 21 and Voice 21

School 21 is an all-age free school serving a disadvantaged area of London which operates on the principle that developing oracy skills is vital if its students are to get on in life. The skills are taught through an hour of dedicated curriculum time each week, and students also use oracy techniques in the classroom every day, in every lesson. For instance, when engaging in discussion, students have a system for turn-taking which ensures that everyone has a chance to contribute and that when somebody speaks their ideas are respected.

Together with the University of Cambridge, the school has developed an oracy framework to describe pupil progress. It looks at oracy skills across four areas, physical, linguistic cognitive and social and emotional: **educ.cam.ac.uk/research/projects/oracytoolkit/oracyskillsframework/**

2.3 Targeted support: the evidence for oral language interventions

For those children who need additional support with their language skills there are several high-quality oral language interventions which can be delivered in early years and school settings. A growing body of evidence demonstrates how such programmes can support children with delayed language and persistent speech, language and communication difficulties, and can help to support reading. Roundtable participants highlighted the value of several, including I CAN's Early Talk Boost programme and the Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI).

Case study: Early Talk Boost

I CAN's Early Talk Boost is a targeted intervention aimed at three to four-year-old children with delayed language. Groups of eight children take part in circle time activities, which are delivered by trained early years practitioners three times a week, over nine weeks. The fun, interactive sessions consist of games and activities which develop vocabulary, attention and listening, and sentence building, using specially written story books which children take home to reinforce what has been learned in group sessions. An evaluation of the intervention found that children made significantly more progress on a standardised language measure than a control group. Six months' progress was recorded after a nine-week intervention[38].

Case study: Nuffield Early Language Intervention

The Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI), delivered in partnership with the University of Oxford and Oxford University Press (OUP), is an evidence-based oral language intervention for children in nursery and Reception who show weakness in their oral language skills and who are therefore at risk of experiencing difficulty with reading. The intervention is delivered over 30 weeks by teaching assistants in groups of three to four children.

It has been shown to work well for children with severe language difficulties (those who meet the criteria for Developmental Language Disorder) as well as for children with milder problems. It has three main components: listening comprehension; vocabulary knowledge to aid listening, speaking and conceptual development; and narrative skills which allow a child to express themselves in spoken and written communication.

The latest trial programme was delivered with children in nursery for 10 weeks, followed immediately by a further 20 weeks once the children had moved into their Reception class. It was found to have a significant impact on language and pre-reading skills, such as vocabulary size. Grammar and sentence structure had improved and the children had better listening comprehension. There were also gains in phoneme awareness and letter-sound knowledge. Six months later, the children who had received the intervention had better reading comprehension than the control group – an impressive outcome considering that reading had not been taught directly[39].

Schools are often able to use pupil premium and other funding sources to resource targeted interventions such as these. For instance, in Nottinghamshire, under the 'Talking to Learn' development programme participating schools have seen a closing of the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers; almost all children receiving pupil premium gained age appropriate language skills compared to less than half at the beginning of the year[40].

However, there remain considerable challenges, for both early years settings and schools. Evidence suggests that there is significant under-identification of children struggling with language and that educators are not equipped with the skills they need to identify and support children with speech language and communication needs[41].

2.4 Supporting early years practitioners and teachers

In order to realise the goal of delivering a structured, targeted and explicit approach to teaching early language as a foundation for reading, a key challenge is to address skills gaps among early years practitioners and teachers. As we noted previously, around half of early years practitioners, and more than a third of primary staff, reported having little or no initial training in speech, language and communication development[42]. In the same survey only a quarter of the primary school workforce reported feeling very confident in their ability to support speech language and communication development. To successfully address needs, especially in areas of disadvantage where there is a high prevalence of language delay, all practitioners need access to initial training and continuing professional development on speech, language and communication, as well as having strong links with healthcare professionals, such as speech and language therapists and health visitors.

It has been established that children who attend higher quality education settings with highly skilled practitioners have stronger communication skills than their peers[43], suggesting that the quality of the early years setting and the skill level of its practitioners are both vital for developing a child's early language skills.

The Government's latest workforce survey (2018) shows that 70% of early years practitioners are employed in private, voluntary and independent nurseries or working as childminders[44], and these individuals are often employed on very low wages, earning less than the average wages across all UK employment sectors and barely half that of qualified teachers[45]. Early years practitioners' wages remain low, dependent in large part on the Early Years National Funding Formula which determines the level of pay received by early years settings for their provision under the free entitlement to childcare for two-, three-, and four-year-olds (95% of children now access some form of childcare through the free entitlement for three- and four-year-olds). With many early years settings operating as small businesses on very tight margins there may be limited opportunities for training and professional development.

Graduates play a key role in closing the gap in quality between disadvantaged and better-off areas and are able to provide quality support to children at risk of language problems[46]. Yet there are significant problems around recruitment, retention, employment conditions and professional development for graduate staff members in private, voluntary and independent nurseries. Currently 11,000 more graduates would be needed to employ one graduate in every early years setting, but just 364 enrolled to train in 2018/19, down 84% on 2013/14[47]. There is a clear need to improve early years graduate teachers' career progression, prospects and rewards.

Two new opportunities for skills development in the education workforce are the Early Career Framework for teachers (being rolled out from 2020) and the Early Years Professional Development Fund (currently out for tender). The latter initiative will support speech, language and communication knowledge for pre-Reception early years staff. A cohort of Continuing Professional Development Champions will be recruited and trained, working in the most disadvantaged areas, to support the early years workforce through a 'train-the-trainer' model of working. It is currently funded for two years; a more sustained programme of investment will be needed to help address the high level of need in this area.

3. Language and literacy in the home and in the community

Looking beyond early years and school settings, a crucial dimension of early language and literacy development takes place in the home, where parents act as their child's first educator. In this section we look at the home learning environment and then widen our lens to communities and place-based approaches, taking in the need for local partnerships, sustained commitment and cross-sector working to enable effective impacts on children's language and literacy development from birth up to the early years of schooling.

3.1 Strengthening the home learning environment

Language skills are shaped and nurtured by a child's home learning environment, which includes the physical characteristics of the home and the quality of the learning support they receive from parents and carers[48]. Conversations, make-believe play and reading activities are particularly influential and can build children's language skills, as well as observations and interactions on trips out, such as visiting friends, or going to the shops, park or library[49].

The quality of the home learning environment has a significant impact on future life chances; it supports children's cognitive, social and emotional development in the early years and the benefits continue until age 16[50]. In fact, the quality of the home learning environment is as important to intellectual and cognitive development as parental factors, such as occupation and education, suggesting that what parents do with their child is just as important as who they are[51]. Evidence shows that there are specific activities and ways of communicating which can help support a child's early language development[52].

Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are at a greater risk of language delay[53]. Research has shown an association whereby more enriching home learning activities take place in families with higher income and higher parental education[54]. In particular, children from middle- and upper-income households are more likely to be read to[55] and go on educational outings[56] in comparison with their peers from low-income households[57]. Children from middle- and upper-income households are also more likely to experience 'language rich' home learning environments involving frequent caregiver-child conversations that reflect the child's personal interests[58].

Programmes which support families to improve communication, language and literacy in the home can help to address the risk of delayed language[59].

The National Literacy Trust's Early Words Together programme and the behaviour change approach on the home learning environment drawn up by the Department for Education and the National Literacy Trust are two examples of initiatives designed to help parents support their child's language development at home.

Case study: Early Words Together

Early Words Together is a six-week intervention that enables families to improve the home learning environment and communication, language and literacy of children aged two to five.

The approach is delivered to small groups of families over six weeks at nurseries, early years settings and school foundation stage classes. It empowers parents to be more confident as their child's first educator, enabling them to support their child's early language and literacy at home. The programme is led by staff and supported by peer volunteers, to enable one-to-one or small group work.

Volunteers and practitioners model simple evidence-based activities that support the child's language, including sharing books, singing songs and rhymes, painting and drawing, and playing games. Evaluation findings show that Early Words Together significantly improves children's understanding of spoken language (successfully bringing them up to the level of their peers and national norms), increases their enjoyment of literacy activities (sharing stories, singing rhymes and songs) and enhancing their home learning environments (including promoting more book sharing and increased parent-child conversations)[60].

Case study: A behaviour change approach to the home learning environment

A new behaviour change model and campaigning approach has been devised by the Department for Education and the National Literacy Trust, which brings together the latest evidence on the home learning environment from the experiences of those working with families, to help promote early language and literacy development.

In order to promote positive parent-child interactions, the initiative utilises social channels (broadcasting, marketing), products and services, the power of popular brands, and the distribution of free books and other resources. The campaign will be delivered through a broad coalition of partners across government, voluntary sector, business, broadcast, media and public health.

Three simple concepts are at the heart of the approach:

- **Chat**: encourage talking but crucially, reciprocal communication
- **Play**: language thrives when children interact and explore in a playful and creative manner
- **Read**: sharing books, parents and children talking together

The behaviour change model is designed to tap into parents' intrinsic motivations. Some parents may be more likely to take part in activities that they believe contribute to their children's happiness, whilst others will be motivated by explicit messages about the importance of particular activities to their child's later outcomes. **Chat, Play, Read** cuts across the activities that make a good home learning environment and offers a simple basis to form a meaningful and engaging framework for activities and messages which brings together a range of stakeholders[61].

3.2 Place-based working

The most significant language and literacy challenges are often located in communities where poverty and disadvantage are most pronounced. For instance, in one cluster of schools in a highly disadvantaged part of Manchester, 50% of children attending school nurseries were found to have significant speech, language and communication difficulties, scoring at a level where they would be deemed in need of extra support. This picture continued across the age range into secondary level where 50% of 13-year-olds were assessed as having severe language difficulties, meeting criteria for the then Statements of Special Educational Needs (SEN). These pupils had limited vocabulary, difficulties constructing longer and complex sentences, difficulties with grammar and narrative skills, and poor reading comprehension[62].

It takes time for change to happen, especially in instances of very high need. Investments need to be made over a decade or more to deliver the system changes required, given the often entrenched and intergenerational nature of the problem. Addressing such language and literacy challenges requires strong leadership, convening and brokering skills to build partnerships, and a strong understanding of local community needs.

A mix of approaches, drawing on partnerships spanning the public health, healthcare and education sectors are required to deliver impact:

- Funding and programme delivery to address more immediate needs;
- Building community assets through investing in the skills and capabilities of community members (such as early years practitioners, education and health professionals, and volunteer community champions);
- Strategic system changes and integrated pathway approaches, building on the success of initiatives like Stoke Speaks Out and the Greater Manchester Early Years New Delivery Model[63].

Strategies will often require the development of a range of interventions, including programmes and services spanning the home learning environment, health, early years and school settings.

Joint commissioning, early identification of need, and workforce training are also important components of such work.

The recently renewed public and political focus on language and literacy has led to positive progress in development of system change approaches around young children's speech language and communication. The Early Intervention Foundation's new maturity matrix self-assessment tool supports development of such approaches to improve outcomes for children in the early years with a focus on speech, language and communication skills[64] and is being promoted for use as part of the local authority early years peer review programme, which is focused on improving early language outcomes.

Public Health England and the Department for Education have formed a partnership to address inequalities associated with speech, language and communication needs in the early years. Their programme of work includes training for health visitors on speech, language and communication needs[65]; the introduction of an early language assessment tool to support clinical decision-making; and the development of a model pathway for services for children aged 0 to five to promote language and early identification/interventions for children with speech, language and communication needs[66].

Case study: Stoke Speaks Out

Launched in 2004, this initiative successfully addressed very high levels of language delay in Stoke-on-Trent by developing a city-wide strategy for children's communication development. It trained and supported practitioners in the early years and primary education workforce, developed a practitioner network to share best practice, and created 'communication ambassadors' in local communities to spread key messages to parents.

In 2004, 64% of children in Stoke were starting nursery with a language delay; this was substantially reduced to 46% in 2013. The success of this initiative has been down to a long-term strategy that is integrated and aligned across a range of local agencies, making communication 'everybody's business'.

Most recently, a simple screening tool has been developed for use in all early years settings and schools in Stoke-on-Trent, giving data on 4,500 children each year and their level of language development. Training for early years practitioners and school teachers has enabled effective use of the tool and supported language development for every child, while additional training and resource inputs have ensured that targeted oral language interventions can be run to support children with a greater level of need.

Case study: The importance of trusted messengers

People living in the most disadvantaged communities are often disenfranchised, and their trust in public organisations and authority is low. Yet these are the people and communities where children's language delay and low literacy are most prevalent, so are most in need in support.

The use of trusted messengers can help to address this very real challenge. Trusted messengers are people in the local community who are trusted by their peers and can help to reach the families and individuals who need the most support with their child's early language development. They can play a valuable role in promoting the take-up of services that can support these families, as well as modelling simple parenting activities that support early language and literacy development.

Voluntary organisations, such as the National Literacy Trust and the Early Years Trust, are delivering programmes with volunteer champions in areas of high need. A recent evaluation of the National Literacy Trust's Bradford Literacy Champions programme revealed that a flexible and inclusive approach has enabled the project to be reflective of the community and increase trust and 'buy-in' to enable effective partnerships and behaviour change work to promote reading amongst families. Volunteers also reported that the programme gave them an opportunity to build self-confidence and to make a difference in their local community[67].

Case study: Every Child a Talker and the Early Language Development Programme

Every Child a Talker was a Department for Children, Schools and Families initiative to help early years professionals create a developmentally appropriate, supportive and stimulating environment in which children could enjoy experimenting with and learning language. Funding was targeted to local authorities where there was a high need around language delay, and later rolled out to all local authorities. Significant impacts were recorded in the four years that this initiative ran, from 2007-2010. Among the 11,400 children involved there was a reduction of between 10 and 14 per cent in the number of children showing language delay, across the local authorities involved. Added to which a national increase of 10 per cent in the numbers of children achieving a good level of development on the early years foundation profile's 'Language for Communication and Thinking' scale was recorded[68].

Building on Every Child a Talker, the Early Language Development Programme (ELDP), led by I CAN, the children's communication charity, trained local lead practitioners to cascade training of early language to local settings. Running between 2011 and 2015, the programme trained over 16,000 practitioners working with children under three, reaching over 150,000 families in some of the most deprived areas of England. An independent evaluation showed the ELDP training led to practitioners and parents feeling more confident and changing the way they supported early language. Standardised assessment found that after only two months, children supported by trained staff made significant gains in their language development[69].

4. Recommendations: the policies and practice we need to support early language and reading development for all children

4.1 Sustained Government leadership is needed around children's early language skills as the foundation for improving early reading and long-term life chances

We welcome the ambition and breadth of policy initiatives to improve children's early language and literacy skills, supported through work such as opportunity areas funding, VCS grants to address early years disadvantage, and the English hubs programme, to name just a few. These all represent important opportunities to address the challenges of low literacy and delayed language.

- The Government should build on the Department for Education's recent long-term commitment to address the level of communication skills in young children at the start of school, through ensuring that resources be made available for early language and literacy skills initiatives on a more sustainable and longer-term basis. Ideally they should be planning for resources to be made available over a decade or more. Such long term commitment is vital given the entrenched and complex nature of the problems being addressed.
- However, current funding commitments are often relatively short term, with just 18 months or two-year funding agreements around many programmes in this area. Such short timeframes make initiatives vulnerable to achieving little in the way of lasting change.
- The Department for Education should target funding to reach areas with high levels of disadvantage, ensuring that support goes to early language and literacy development in these areas.

4.2 Maintaining the momentum around language and communication

We welcome current initiatives to address communication and language issues in early years settings and the home learning environment and are keen to see that the impact of this work is built on and made sustainable.

This focus should be a point of cross-party consensus and should be immune to political changes. An intergenerational challenge requires a sustained focus across the generations.

4.3 Enhanced status for language learning in early years settings and schools

In this paper we advocate a structured, targeted and explicit approach to language learning in early years settings and schools, enhancing the status of language and acknowledging the vital role it plays in laying the foundation for literacy and unlocking children's reading skills. This approach should include: high quality interactions, conversational turn-taking, dialogic reading, use of shared narratives, teaching listening and vocabulary development.

- Evidenced pathway and assessment tools need to be adopted by all schools to enable better identification of speech, language and communication needs and to support schools to identify and address language delay and other speech, language and communication needs.
- We recommend that sufficient resources be put in place for speech and language therapy services and schools to ensure that all children with speech, language and communication needs can access the support they require.

4.4 A stronger commitment to developing the skills of the early years and schools workforce

To realise the goal of delivering a structured, targeted and explicit approach to teaching language and a systematic and focused approach to early reading skills, the key challenge is to address the current skills gaps among early years practitioners and teachers.

- The Department for Education should ensure that as well as the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics and strategies to promote reading for enjoyment, oral language teaching be incorporated within Initial Teacher Training and Continuing Professional Development, including the Early Career Framework and the Teacher Development Premium, equipping teachers with the relevant knowledge and enabling them to teach these skills confidently.
- The English hubs training programme commissioned by the Department for Education needs to draw out explicitly the links between early language acquisition and the teaching of phonics and help teachers understand their interdependence.
- We recommend that the Government consider developing an early years workforce strategy and reconsiders the planned early years workforce feasibility study.
- Barriers to progression for early years teachers should be removed in order to encourage the recruitment and retention of a skilled, high-quality early years workforce.
- The launch of the Early Years Professional Development Fund and the creation of early years Continuing Professional Development Champions creates an important opportunity to address skills gaps around early language and literacy development in the early years workforce. We recommend that funding in this area be sustained over the long term with an explicit link between early communication and reading skills.
- We recommend that best practice models, resources and guidance on early language and literacy development be produced and promoted to early years practitioners, to support their work in relation to the Literacy and Communication and Language goals in the Early Years Foundation Stage. These should be piloted alongside the revised Early Learning Goals.

4.5 Ensuring early identification of delayed language and language disorders

To enable early identification of delayed language and language disorders it is vital that early years practitioners, teachers and health visitors all have

access to simple language assessment tools and receive training around the use of those tools and language development in young children.

- We recommend that as part of the development and promotion of the early language assessment tools for health visitors, comprehensive training be given in the use of the assessment tool and interpretation of the findings, since assessments are only as good as the people using them. Speech and language therapists will have an important role in developing the tool and training. Data from this new assessment tool should be shared, analysed and reported to help gauge overall need and ensure effective targeting of resources.

4.6 Place-based solutions for communities where early language and literacy support is most needed

To successfully address language delay, especially in areas of disadvantage where there is a high prevalence, a long term integrated and aligned approach is needed, which is rooted in comprehensive needs analyses of local areas and delivered through strong partnerships and joint commissioning. The increasing complexity of the commissioning environment across healthcare, education and public health poses a challenge for local leaders, but where it has been pursued joint commissioning across these areas has been a highly effective strategy in tackling the entrenched language and literacy challenges mentioned in this paper.

- We recommend that the Department for Education positions place-based working as a key dimension in its approaches to promote social mobility by raising literacy and language skills. This should be a central theme in its discussions with HM Treasury about the Department's spending priorities in the 2019 Comprehensive Spending Review.
- To support replicability, the Department for Education should collaborate with the Local Government Association, local stakeholders and third sector bodies to analyse effective local campaigns and strategies to identify the key themes (leadership, inter-agency collaboration, capacity to broker partnerships, clarity of focus, joint commissioning, early identification of need etc.) which determine the effectiveness of place-based working.
- We recommend that resources supporting the development and embedding of a model integrated speech, language and communication pathway be sustained beyond March 2020 to ensure that it can be rolled out widely and support effective change in delivery.

4.7 A sustained and multi-agency approach to supporting the home learning environment

We welcome the commitment of the Department for Education, the BBC and Public Health England to strengthen and support the home learning environment. We are confident that this focus will impact on stronger language and communication development and will boost early reading skills and literacy attainment. We welcome the Department for Education's support for the business, community and voluntary sectors in addressing this challenge.

- To positively impact early speech, language and literacy skills across the country, we recommend collaboration between these stakeholders on a single campaign approach or at least develop clearly aligned messaging around the importance of the home learning environment to avoid confusion amongst parents.
- We also recommended a coordinated approach to working with local campaigns and partners. As we have highlighted place-based working is uniquely powerful in addressing this challenge. National campaigns must seek to strengthen and not subsume local messages, strategies and community campaigns.

Endnotes

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This report outlines the ways in which we can best support young children to develop the early communication, language and literacy skills they need to unlock learning through reading. It is based on insights from the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Literacy and a group of leading policy makers, academics, campaigners, education professionals and health professionals.

England is currently facing a huge literacy challenge, with two out of five children from disadvantaged backgrounds not reading at the expected level by the end of primary school, and teachers reporting an increase in numbers of children who have limited vocabulary. This report sets out a new approach for structured, targeted and explicit language learning, in the home, in early years settings and at the start of school, as a vital foundation for learning to read.

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