



Reading Rights

Interim Report
Spring 2025

**Books build
a brighter future**

“Our modern world should meet all children’s basic needs. Every single child in our society should grow up feeling safe, loved and secure in the knowledge that they are valued. Sadly, this isn’t the case. Books cannot be eaten or provide a physical refuge or home, but they can be a tool promoting empathy, escapism and reassurance. As children, books enabled us to envisage different worlds – worlds where children like us, the outsiders, could save the day. Or worlds where we could laugh with characters that shared our challenges. Or simply worlds where we felt seen and understood without judgement.”

Patrice Lawrence MBE, Author

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Waterstones Children’s Laureate**

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Foreword

Frank Cottrell-Boyce, Waterstones Children's Laureate

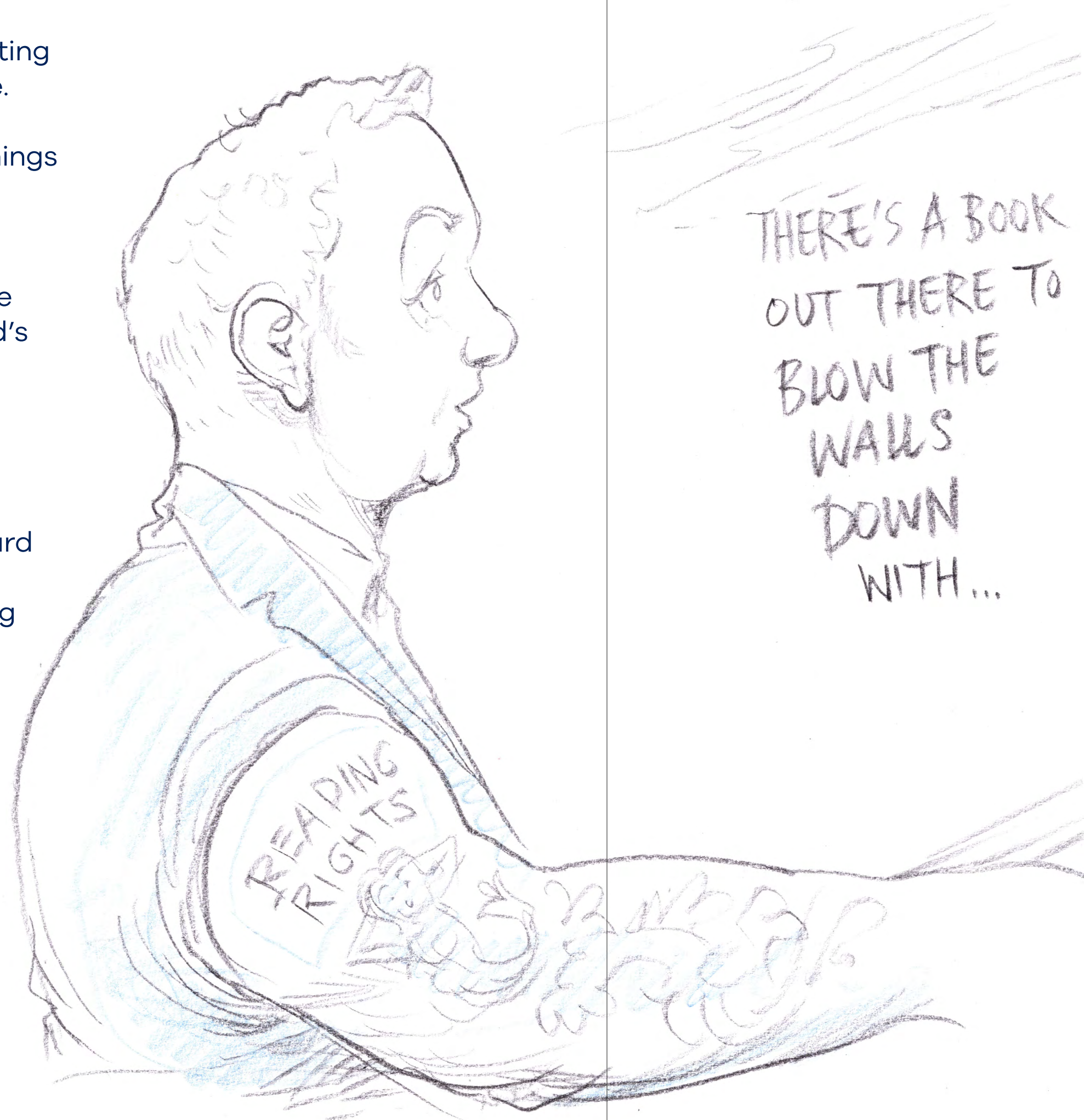
I spent my first few months as Children's Laureate visiting places where shared reading was making a difference.

I visited family hubs, prisons, schools and medical practices. I saw things that made my heart sing and things that made my heart break. Often on the same day.

We visited the Baby Development Lab at the University of East London, where Professor Sam Wass wired up the brains of a baby and her mother while the mother read to her. We watched in wonder as the child's hectic chaotic brain activity calmed down and synchronised with that of her mother. We were seeing emotional attachment happen at a biological level. We were watching the apparatus of happiness being built in real time.

At a family centre in Shirecliffe in Sheffield, we heard how a shared-reading project had helped bring a fractured community together. Young mums struggling with multiple deprivations were drawn out of their isolation, drawing strength from each other and pooling resources to deal with poverty.

Inspired by cases like these, in January, BookTrust convened a summit, calling together practitioners, scientists, academic experts, people from literacy projects and from politics in the hope that by sharing what we had found we would be able to highlight what a powerful, accessible, efficient and inexpensive tool shared reading could be when it comes to improving resilience in children and mitigating some of the effects of poverty.



The highlight of the event for me was looking out across the hall to see delegates from different sectors – from different worlds – exchanging phone numbers. De-siloing power.

Within a few weeks, people had already started new projects. They acted quickly; not least because the evidence is there – scientific evidence and social evidence – but also because they could see that the case is urgent.

Childhood is fleeting.

Children who have not been given the vast invisible privilege of being read to will all too soon be parents themselves and, without support, will pass on that disadvantage to their children. The task is urgent and vital, but it is also achievable and full of joy.

In the end, it comes down to remembering who we are. The storytelling species.

This report tells the story of how we can turn invisible privilege into a universal right for all our children. I know we can give this story a happy ending.

Frank Cottrell-Boyce
by Chris Riddell

 Click to listen to
a recording of Frank

Foreword

Diana Gerald MBE, Chief Executive of BookTrust

It is our huge privilege to be working with Frank Cottrell-Boyce on the Reading Rights campaign. As the UK's largest children's reading charity, BookTrust's work is grounded in the knowledge and understanding that reading brings profound and wide-ranging benefits that have a lifelong positive impact on children's lives. Reading stories with an adult is a child's first experience of arts and culture. Our reading programmes support millions of children living in diverse communities across England, Wales and Northern Ireland every year and our sister charity Scottish Book Trust does similar work in Scotland. But too many children continue to miss out on the life-changing benefits of shared reading. This is what the Reading Rights campaign sets out to change.

Our vision needs change and action. To make early shared reading and storytelling an everyday part of all children's lives, we need policy, workforce training, research, investment and partnerships working at national and local levels. We recognise that this may require a shift in how we serve our communities, but the goodwill, enthusiasm and unanimous support from the Reading Rights Summit speakers and delegates fill us with optimism and hope that this change is achievable and wanted.

We want this report to unite us, inspire us and give focus to our shared commitment to improving children's lives. Success will depend on us breaking down barriers between sectors and forensically putting children at the heart of our thinking. The Reading Rights campaign invites leaders and frontline workers across all sectors to share ideas and contribute to our next steps. Over the



Diana Gerald
by Chris Riddell

coming months, we will put together a tangible plan to take the work forward.

It is important to recognise that capacity and services are stretched across the system at all levels, with partners making difficult decisions with every penny. Shared reading is a highly cost-effective approach. In this report, our intention is to start the conversation and consider how we can draw on existing opportunities and infrastructure without pushing already-stretched practitioners beyond the brink of their capacity.

I am enormously grateful to the people who already demonstrate their commitment to this work in so many ways. BookTrust's activity is only possible through a partnership of support from publishers, local authorities and other community partners, as well as funders including those in the statutory sector. For their wide-ranging and long-standing support, particular mention goes to Arts Council England, Waterstones and the Mohn Westlake Foundation.

Finally, my thanks go to the incredible people on the frontline of reading and story-sharing. These are the librarians, childcare workers, health visitors, teachers and many more who work on the ground to bring reading and stories to life for children and families every day, and the amazing authors and illustrators whose creativity stands behind that work – brilliantly exemplified by the fantastic Chris Riddell who illustrated our summit live, and whose work enriches this report.

We invite everyone who cares about the health, wellbeing and happiness of children to join the Reading Rights campaign and help make a difference.

Our Vision

This report spotlights some of the amazing initiatives and excellent practices we have seen while travelling around the UK.

We hope it is an inspiring read. But it will mean nothing if nothing changes.

Every child should have the best start in life. Every child should have the opportunity to hear stories and experience books in their early years. As things stand, this is a privilege: a privilege shared by fewer and fewer children.

We see the price of that loss every day in the increasing anxiety levels of our children.

We believe that it is not only necessary but also entirely possible to turn the tide. We have seen what can happen when people understand the amazing power of sharing stories in early childhood. How it can build relationships, bond communities and create opportunity. In many places, we have seen what can happen when local leaders and services, community networks and professionals working in childcare, education, health and culture come together to empower parents and carers to harness the power of shared reading. How professionals and practitioners lacking confidence or understanding of how to share stories can develop their skills and play a vital role. How even those who are most often marginalised – children in the social care system, communities that are under-served in terms of infrastructure and investment – can be reached with enough goodwill and good work.

But “many places” does not mean all places, and goodwill is not inexhaustible.

This report shows what can be done.

We need government support to make sure that it is done equally and for all.



Click to listen to a recording of Frank

READING
RIGHTS

EVERY CHILD
DESERVES THE
RIGHT TO BE
A READER



“If we vacate that space – that space where human love slows the world down and makes it a bit more navigable – we will cede it to something that is not human, that will not slow down. Something that, in place of calm and connection, produces anxiety and fury.”

Frank Cottrell-Boyce, Waterstones Children’s Laureate

Our Next Steps

We know what kind of early childhood reading experiences we want all children to benefit from and why these are so important. This report describes our vision for early childhood reading and gives voice to the experts, leaders and practitioners who do such valuable work in this area. A number of these came together at our Reading Rights Summit to explore ideas for making this vision a reality. Together we identified five areas where change will lead to positive results on the ground. Our next steps will be to drive these forward, to make progress over the next 12 months and beyond:

Workforce training: Supporting all early years professionals and practitioners working with young children and their families to understand the benefits of early reading and to be confident in sharing stories and showing parents and carers how to read with their children. This means making sure that workforce education and training includes skills for storytelling to support shared reading. **We're asking professional and training bodies and institutions to suggest where training and education for the early years workforce should include shared reading.**

Policy, guidance and frameworks: Making sure that early childhood reading shows up in policy, guidance and frameworks – wherever it can make a difference. **We're calling on system leaders and policy makers in government, as well as regulators and professional bodies, to help us identify and amend the guidance, policies and frameworks where calling out the role of reading could have the most impact.**



Access to books: Ensuring that children and families, through early years professionals and practitioners, all have access to high-quality books that are representative of the contemporary UK. Books can be provided at low cost and can be read again and again, so this is not an expensive request – but access to engaging, high-quality books is essential for making our vision a reality. **We are calling on local leaders and those running services on the ground to identify where new resources could make the most difference; and for funders to consider this request in designing criteria for future funding rounds.**

Sharing high-quality research and evidence: Sharing the evidence base about reading in the early years with everyone involved in supporting children and families, in ways that are clear and meaningful and that will drive change. **We're calling on leaders, opinion formers and organisations working with research and evidence to help share what we know.** Where there are gaps in research – for example, in relation to the role that reading can play to support attachment for children in the social care system – **we are working to provide high-quality research and are asking experts and funders to help us.**

Multi-agency leadership: Demonstrating the positive impact of early shared reading when effective practice is implemented in a coordinated manner by a wide range of local leaders across a community or region. Embedding a place-based, early childhood reading model could transform early years experiences and demonstrate the case for similar action across the country. **We're calling on leaders and those delivering services to consider how they could do this across their local communities.**

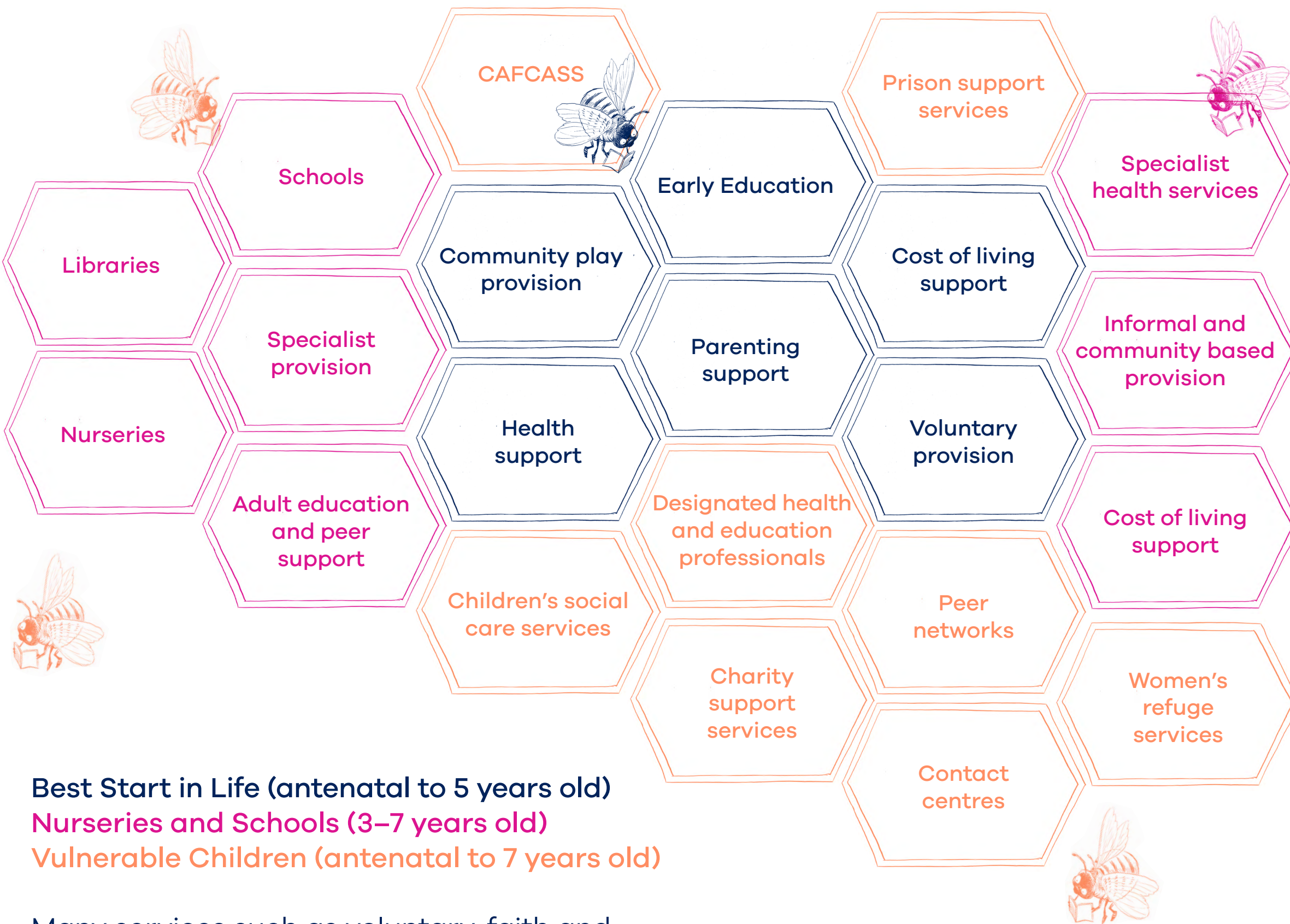
If you can help us make progress in any of these five areas, please get in touch with us at:

readingrights@booktrust.org.uk.

We'll publish an update describing progress in these five areas in 2026.

The Early Years Ecosystem

for Children Aged 0–7 and Their Families



Many services such as voluntary, faith and community provision work across all sectors and age groups. This infographic is just an illustration of the complexity and diversity of the support services and cannot convey the multiplicity of specific services across all regions and nations.

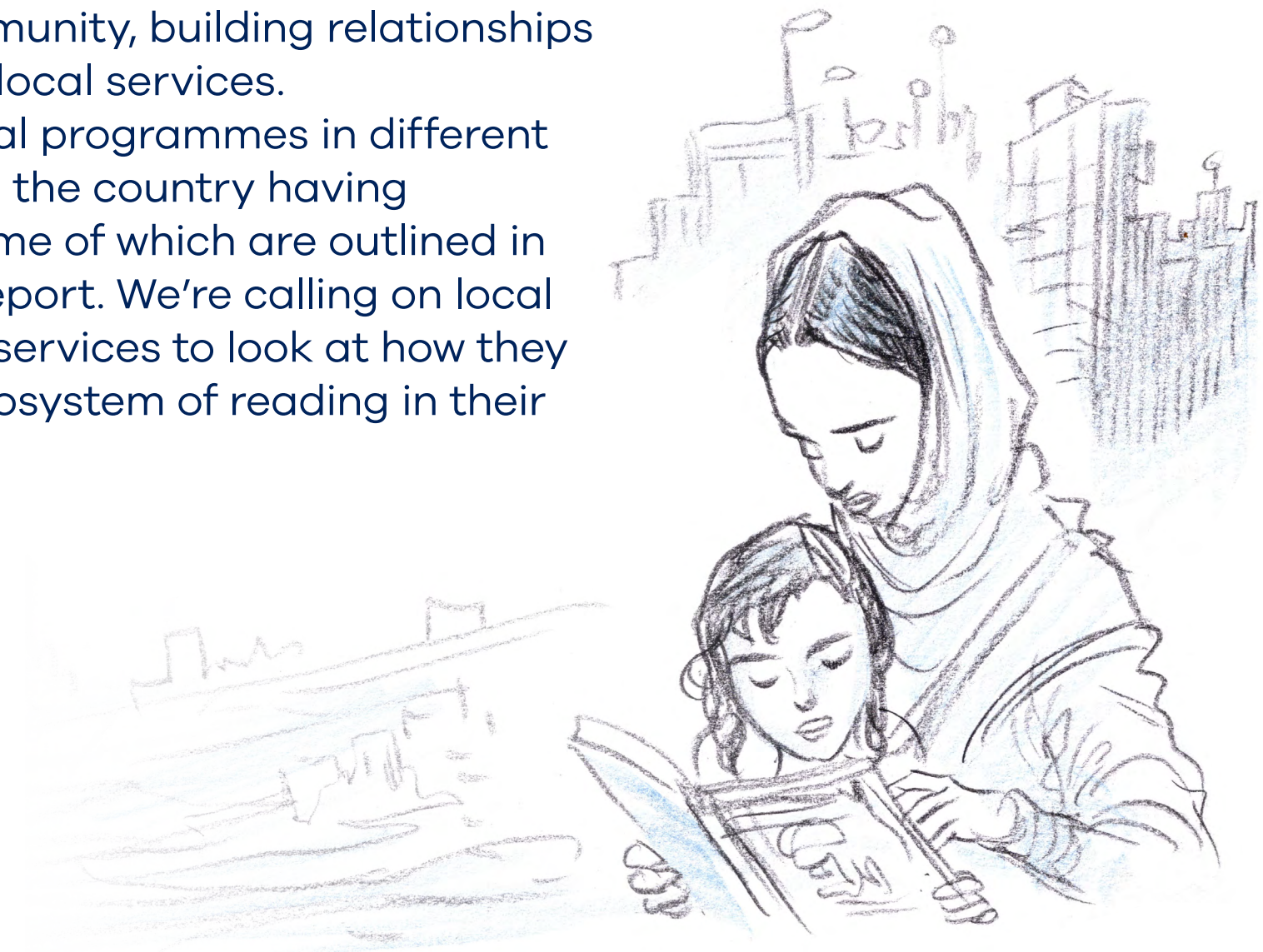
Place-Based Storytelling

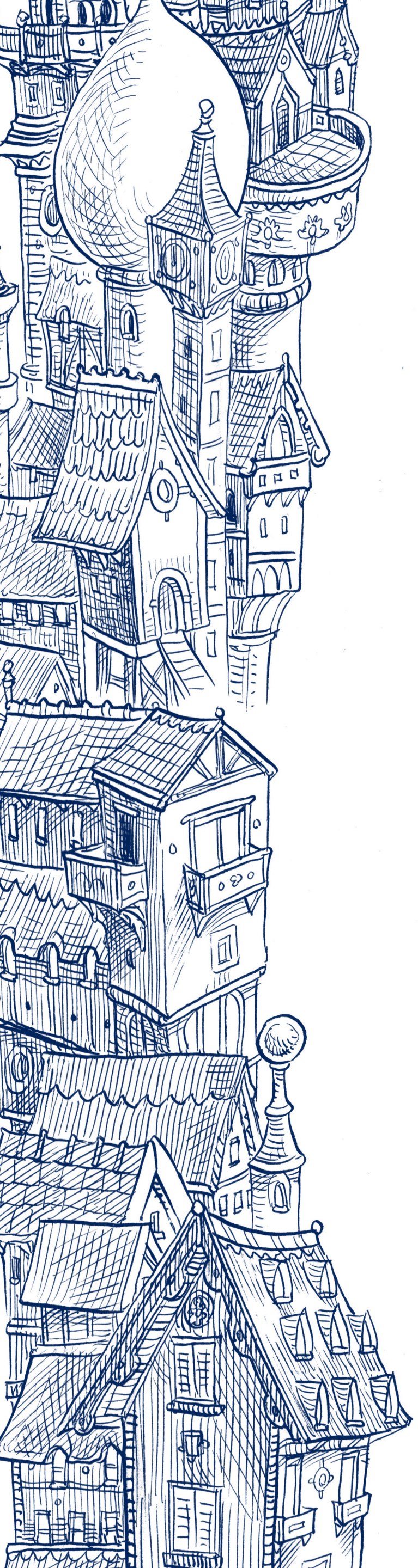
The importance of involving Local Communities

The chances of a child having access to books and stories – and all the emotional and developmental wealth that implies – are massively increased where books and stories can become part of family life. Especially in those crucial early years.

That's why BookTrust works with trusted services and people across the early years and health sectors to ensure that families – whatever form they take – have the support and resources they need to give their children access to that wealth. BookTrust's work has helped to create networks of diverse, committed partners in local authorities, early years education, health and third-sector providers – developing a kind of ecosystem of reading. A place-based approach means activity is tailored to meet the needs of each community, building relationships and interconnections across local services.

We have seen inspirational programmes in different locations and regions around the country having a transformational effect, some of which are outlined in the case studies within this report. We're calling on local leaders and those delivering services to look at how they could encourage a similar ecosystem of reading in their own areas.





CITY OF STORIES

A City of Stories is a place where early childhood reading and storytelling is part of everyday life for every family. This happens through a joined-up approach across the community, involving antenatal services, health visitors, midwives, library services, GP practices, third-sector providers and Family Hub 0–19 Services. BookTrust has for some years been collaborating with local authorities to embed our programmes into early years provision through Family Hubs and early years networks, an approach that extends our reach and impact. The long-term vision is to develop a sustainable and replicable model that can be scaled and adapted across other regions – in both rural and urban environments – in line with the specific needs of the local community.

The role of partners

A local reading ecosystem needs partners like these:

Local authorities: In Birmingham, shared reading is embedded in the multi-agency early years provision delivered through children's centres, family hubs, libraries and health visitors. Practitioners model how to read with babies and young children, providing practical support and advice for parents on shared reading. Along with gaining confidence, parents are given books and resources through Bookstart Toddler and Bookstart Pre-schooler programmes.

Public health services: In Barnsley, health visitors are planning to promote the benefits of reading to expectant parents, to help establish positive routines from before the baby's birth through the early years, using services like midwifery. Support and advice on the importance of

shared reading will be reinforced through trusted places in community settings, where parents will be encouraged to share stories in parent-and-child groups. The 0–19 team plans to work with libraries to help overcome the barriers faced by some families. Anna Hartley (Executive Director of Public Health for Barnsley Council) says: "It's about using every bit of resource at my disposal to get every child to read. And that's my passion."

GP surgeries: Millbrook Medical Centre, a practice and part of Kirkby Primary Care Network in perinatal health, have developed the Kirkby Kitchen, which provides practical parenting support and guidance for new and often young parents. Inspired by the Reading Rights Summit, one of the practice partners, Dr Michael Merriman, is working with BookTrust to advocate the benefits of shared reading as a parenting skill.

SureStart centres: Practitioners at the Glenbrook SureStart Centre in Northern Ireland use reading and Bookstart resources to target developmental delay, boost parental confidence and engagement, strengthen parent-child relationships and build social skills. Some families are referred by hospitals before a child is born, others by health visitors from check-ups in the first couple of years of a child's life and some from family centres, or as self-referrals.

We want to support an area to establish a place-based, community-wide pilot scheme, and monitor and share the positive impact that it makes, so that we can demonstrate the case for similar action across the country.



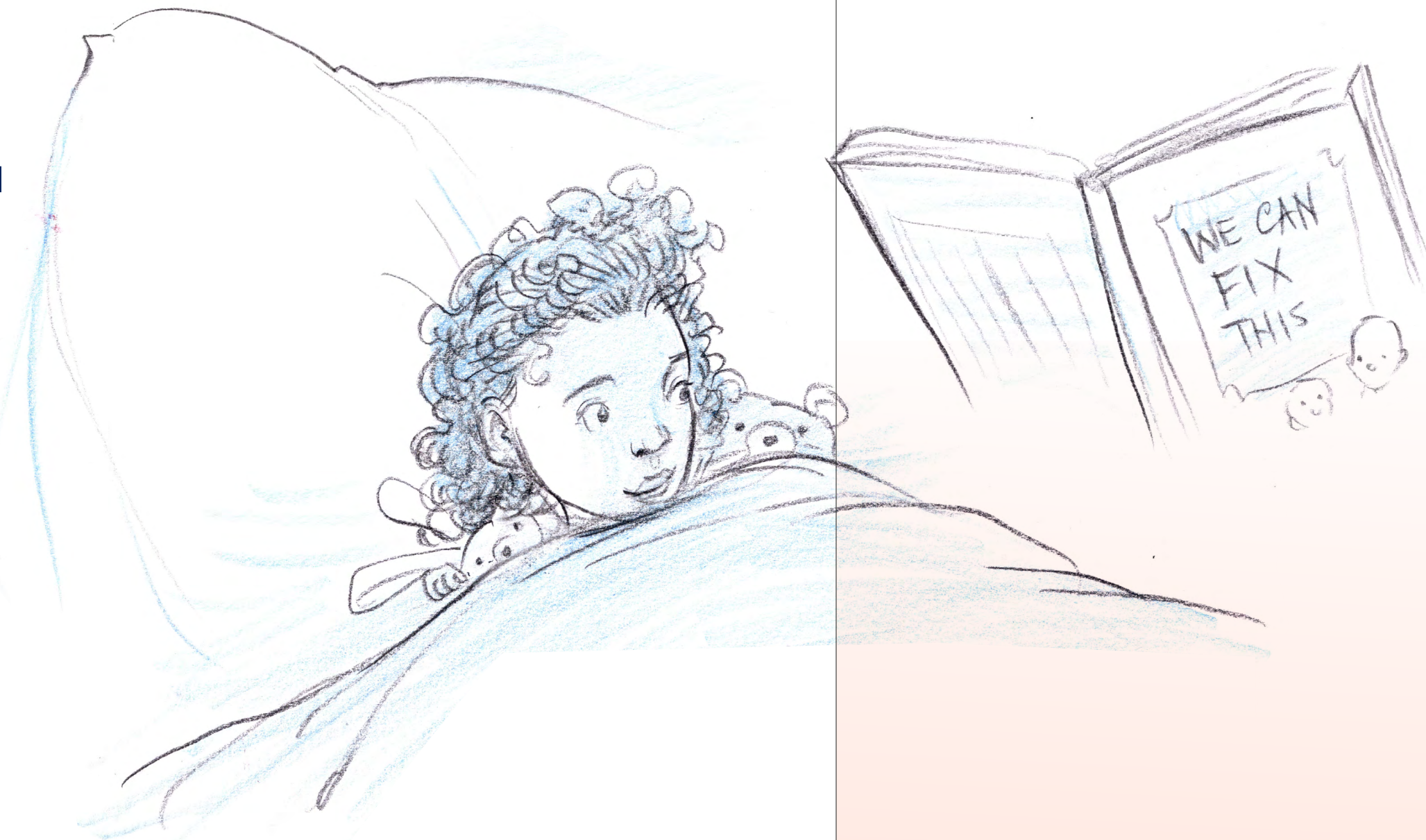
Reading for the Best Start in Life

Our vision

- Early shared reading takes place in all families, regardless of the barriers they are facing, and becomes part of all children's early experiences.
- **Parents and carers are supported to enjoy reading** with their children in ways that work for them, and which drive positive social, emotional and cognitive developmental outcomes.
- **Local leaders, services and networks join up** to promote shared reading and storytelling everywhere as an effective developmental strategy and a wellbeing intervention in children's earliest years.
- **Professionals** working with families antenatally and in the first years of life understand the importance of reading together and **have the skills and capacity to support families** to embed shared reading in early family life.

Why does it matter to start reading to children from birth?

The first years of a child's life are critical for cognitive, emotional and physical development. Babies' brains grow and change faster than at any other stage, drawing on new experiences to create the neural connections that will determine and shape how they develop. Secure and loving



relationships are as important for brain development as a safe environment, a healthy diet and sleep.

Anyone who has read to their own baby or watched an adult and young child sharing a book together will have seen the power of this shared experience in building connections, closeness and contentment. We now have the evidence to prove it. Research carried out by neuroscientists shows that, when a book is shared, extraordinary things happen in both the baby's brain and the adult's.

Shared reading helps children's emotional and social development

Children who are read to from their earliest years are more likely to develop secure relationships with their caregivers and have better mental wellbeing and social skills. Reading to a child and sharing a book together can be a deeply bonding experience for both the adult and baby, building emotional closeness and connection from the first days after birth.

Stories can be powerful. When we identify with characters and feel emotionally connected to their experiences, we develop soft skills like empathy, understanding and the ability to connect with others. There's a strong evidence base that language is the foundation of children's thinking and socio-emotional wellbeing. Children who can talk about their feelings fare better in life, and shared reading creates a space to share and talk about our feelings.

"If your first encounter with a book comes when you're tucked up with someone who loves you, then you're being given a huge invisible privilege. A hug that will last the rest of your life."

Frank Cottrell-Boyce, Waterstones Children's Laureate

Shared reading routines create positive habits

When sharing stories happens consistently, becoming an established part of children's daily routine, there's a sense of security, comfort and structure. We wrap our children in a nurturing cocoon of safety and love when we bond over a book, and it's this connection, not the proficiency of the reader, that matters.

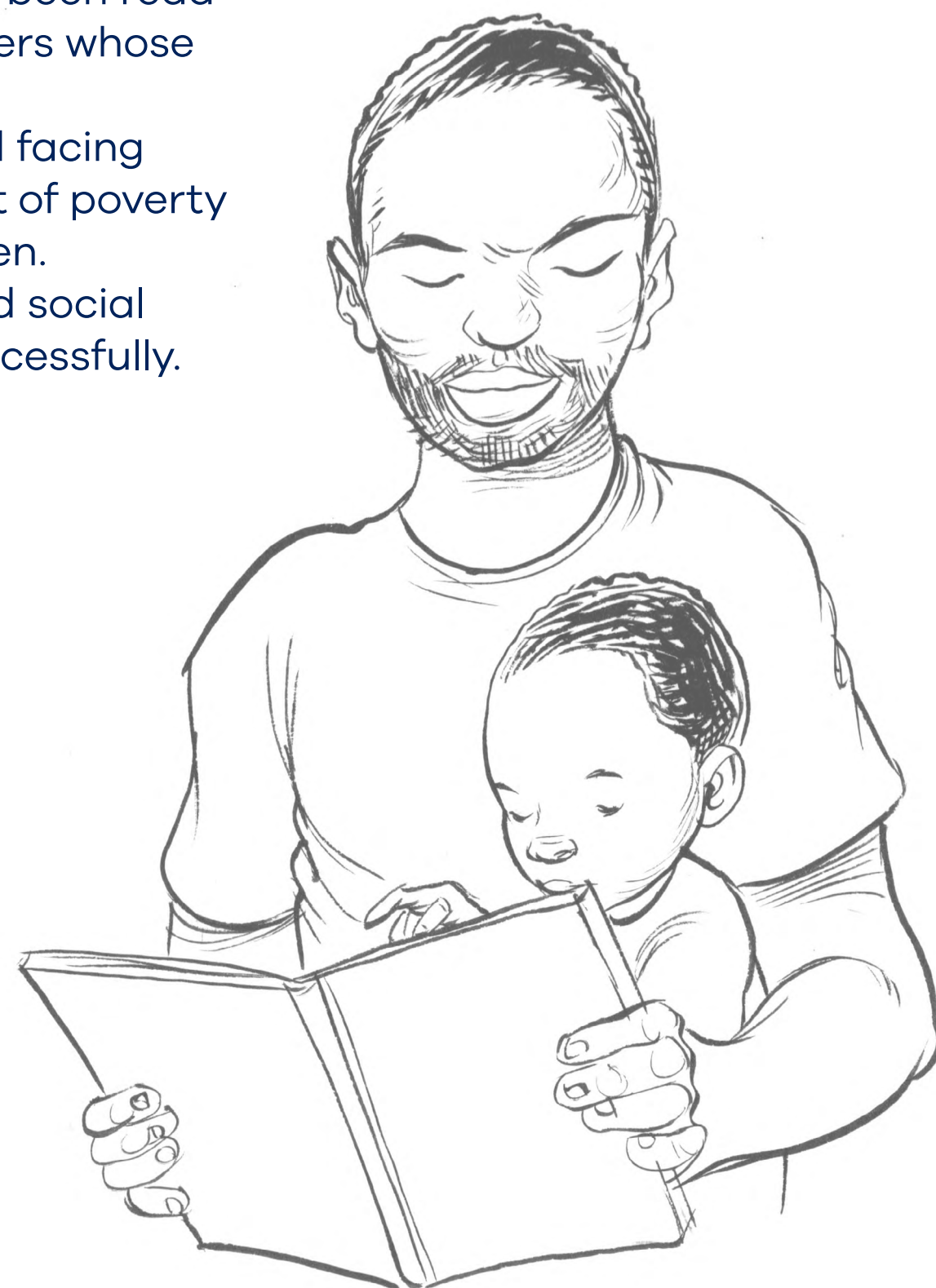
Shared reading also helps overcome disadvantage

Children who are read to from their earliest years are more likely to overcome socio-economic inequalities. Economic hardship can put restrictions on parents' or carers' time, capacity and resources, in turn affecting children's life chances. But we know that shared reading makes a difference. Data shows that children from families with a low income who do well at the end of primary school are twice as likely to have been read to at home in their early years than their peers whose home experience did not include it.

Overall, those growing up in poverty and facing barriers have a better chance of moving out of poverty as adults if they are read to as young children.

Shared reading builds the emotional and social literacy all children need to navigate life successfully.

To read the research behind these benefits, go to [BookTrust: The benefits of reading](#)



Case study Riverside Community Health Project in Benwell, Newcastle-upon-Tyne

Riverside is a community hub in the west end of Newcastle that tackles the impact of poverty and social disadvantage through a collaborative project-based approach to services and initiatives. For the centre's specialist health visitor team, books and shared reading have been a game-changer in the way in which they're supporting families, including those coping with complex issues such as addiction and mental health needs.

When Frank Cottrell-Boyce visited the centre to find out first-hand how specialist health visitors are using BookTrust's programmes for shared reading, he was struck by the high morale among the 10 professionals he met: their commitment to their vocation stood out. "Right now, almost any group of professionals you talk to are at the end of their tether. These health visitors absolutely were not. They were glowing with purpose. Their staff retention is enormous. It was such a joyous thing to see."

Reading together builds parents' confidence

Many new parents find talking to their baby intimidating. Learning to share a book with their child gives them new parenting skills and opportunities to bond and connect. Because they are gifted a book to take home through the Baby Box project (supported by the Children's

Foundation and BookTrust), they can use and practise the techniques modelled by Riverside staff, establishing healthy routines from their baby's earliest days.

Using shared reading as a diagnostic to assess developmental milestones

As a tool to assess developmental progress, whether that's social, emotional or motor skills, observing a child's interaction during shared reading allows practitioners to identify strengths and weaknesses, and also support their development. One of the specialist health visitors for complex and vulnerable families said, "The way we can use books in the most creative way to assess and develop a child at a certain development stage is just unreal. You can't do that with many things other than a book."

What’s the picture now?

Feedback from BookTrust’s early years partners reveals that 9 out of 10 are working with families who have too many other things they feel they need to prioritise, meaning shared reading loses out.¹ This is despite 84% of parents and carers agreeing that sharing books and stories is important for giving their children the best start in life.²

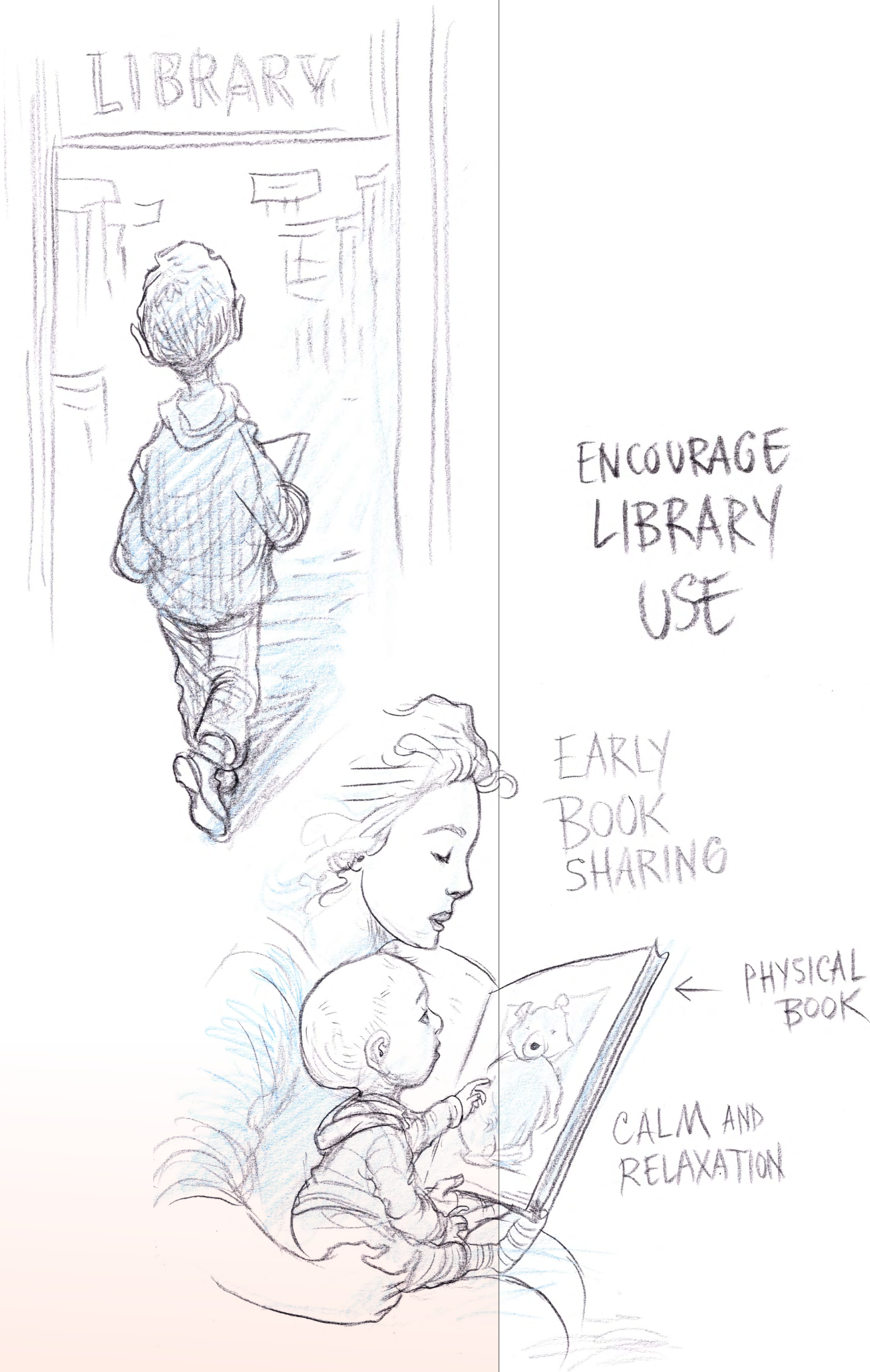
For 36% of children aged 0–4 who are growing up in poverty³, the barriers to being read to regularly through childhood can be hard to overcome.

- BookTrust research carried out with families on low incomes⁴ shows that:
- 95% of carers and parents agree it’s important to read with their child, but only 40% say a bedtime story is part of their normal routine.
 - 49% do not have a library card.
 - 38% don’t read with their child due to lack of time.
 - 30% say that reading isn’t a big part of family life.
 - 28% don’t find reading with their child easy, while 21% lack confidence in choosing books their child will enjoy.

We can’t change the economic circumstances for a third of the children in our country, but we can ensure that we do more to support families facing additional barriers to sharing stories, making a difference to children’s life outcomes.

“I’ve seen the impact it has on families and when you break down those intergenerational barriers to sharing books ... the benefits are endless.”

Majella Maguire, Early Help and Family Hubs
Locality Manager, Sefton Council



What are the barriers?

Being read to from a young age isn’t a universal experience. For adults who’ve grown up in homes without reading and books, shared reading isn’t associated with positive interactions and experiences of childhood. Reading can feel daunting, stressful or irrelevant, and this is made worse when it’s hard to find books that reflect the culture, life experiences, values and beliefs of our diverse society.

For many parents of newborn babies, the early days can feel overwhelming and exhausting. 86% of BookTrust’s early years partners agree that one of the challenges some families experience is lack of time to read with their child.¹ Reassurance and guidance at this early stage is essential to help parents and carers create this valuable space when they may be feeling uncertain about how or why to engage with books.

Not all homes have books. BookTrust research carried out with families on low incomes showed that for 72% the books included in BookTrust’s Bookstart Baby pack were among the first they owned for their child.⁵ While Bookstart Baby packs reach 90% of all newborn babies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, this is just the start. Putting more books into the hands of all parents and carers is essential.

Many parents and carers believe they don’t know how to read with their infant and young child. 87% of BookTrust’s early years partners say one of the challenges faced by families they work with is a lack of confidence in how to read with their young child.¹ English isn’t the main spoken language in all homes, and we support parents and carers through schemes such as dual-language book programmes. Together we need to find methods of reassuring parents and carers that there isn’t a “right” way and a “wrong” way. This is about the shared moment, the closeness and the connection, not about the performance.

Practice box

UEL Institute for the Science of Early Years

Professor Sam Wass is a developmental cognitive neuroscientist who runs the Institute for the Science of Early Years at the University of East London. His lab carries out research into how babies' brains work and develop, focusing closely on the interaction between parent and baby. Using brain-imaging technology and clinical observations, the lab has given some fascinating insights into how shared reading changes babies' physical and cognitive states as their rhythms synchronise with their parents'. At the Reading Rights Summit, Sam talked about what happens when a baby and adult share a story together.

The physical closeness of reading shapes our body rhythms

When we are close to one another, our body rhythms such as our breathing pattern, heart rate and movements tunes in to the other person's. For babies and young children whose body rhythms are messier, more erratic and unpredictable than adults', sharing a story can help establish stronger, more stable and predictable rhythms. This, in turn, brings calmness and sustained concentration. Co-regulation is a critical first step in being able to self-regulate, which means that babies who are soothed by being read to have a head start in being able to focus, concentrate and learn.

Why sharing books is different from sharing screens

When we're sharing a book, we go at the child's pace and follow the child's interest, repeating words that may be new and talking about the things that interest them. We may stay on a picture for a long time, or go backwards and skip ahead, rereading some pages or the entire book. Babies' brains process information much more slowly than an adult's, and pictures in books depict emotions that are "frozen" in time. When a baby is staring at a picture, they are absorbing information at the speed at which they need to learn. Crucially, reading together is child-led, matching the pace at which children's brains work, whereas the speed at which content is presented on-screen can't be so easily controlled by the child.

These are just some of the ways in which shared reading enables children to flourish and thrive. To read the research behind these benefits, go to [BookTrust: The benefits of reading](#)

"I was privileged enough to talk to the children who call Spellow a second home, to hear their excitement at the library being reopened, their wonder at what new books would await them... I believe that when we close the door to the worlds in these pages, we're stealing from our children. And I believe that your ability to unlock your imagination and find escapism and solace in a good book should not be a postcode lottery."

Alex McCormick, community fundraiser, on her work to reopen the Spellow Hub following the riots of summer 2024



Reading in Nurseries and Schools

Our vision

- Early education and care standards and frameworks recognise the broad and foundational role that reading plays in children's wider development beyond literacy and curriculum outcomes.
- Early years professionals working in nurseries and schools have an excellent understanding of shared, interactive (dialogic) reading, and the role it plays in developing children's language skills, social and emotional development and cognitive capacity. They use it regularly and confidently throughout the day.
- All nurseries and schools are equipped and supported to ensure that every child experiences regular reading for enjoyment through access to expertise, high-quality books and reading resources.
- Nurseries and schools promote the benefits of shared reading to parents, so that children and families enjoy reading together at home. It is especially important that families understand the importance of continuing to read together for enjoyment when children transition to school, alongside learning to decode words for themselves and practising independent reading.

"There was a child who saw a book when he first joined nursery and [he] said: 'What's that?'"

Cheryl McEaney, Reception Teacher at St Francis De Sales Infant and Nursery School



Why does it matter for shared reading to sit at the heart of a child's educational experience?

The more children are read to, the more likely they are to flourish and succeed academically, socially and emotionally.

Pre-school children whose early education experience is rich with shared stories and book-led play are more likely to be school-ready. There's a greater likelihood they will be on track with their speech and language milestones. Nurseries and childcare settings that prioritise shared reading can compensate for the disadvantages of social inequality and poverty, so every child has an equal chance of success.

Shared reading develops children's communication and language skills

Book language can be rich and varied; it draws on a wide vocabulary and syntax that we don't use in everyday speech. A range of research studies shows how shared reading of picture books in the first few years of a child's life boosts their vocabulary and communication skills, helping children to make connections between new words and their meaning, and boosting memory, focus and concentration.

Children with good speech and language skills have better social skills and emotional wellbeing

A particularly powerful form of reading together is interactive, or dialogic, reading. This is when an adult encourages a child to become an active participant while sharing stories by inviting comments, speculating about the characters' behaviour, repeating the words and encouraging the child to think beyond the text. Interactive reading is recommended by the Education Endowment Foundation as a low-cost but high-impact initiative.

Ofsted’s “[The Best Start in Life](#)” (informed by BookTrust research) supports early years practitioners in raising the quality of early years education through evidence-based practice, and says that interactive reading “benefits children because it develops their linguistic and cognitive skills at the same time”.

Dr Julian Grenier (Senior Content and Engagement Manager at Education Endowment Foundation) explained how shared reading boosts children’s early language and communication: “We know that language is the foundation of children’s thinking, but it’s also foundational to their socio-emotional wellbeing. So, children who can talk about how they feel are the children who can share their worries, share their joys, make friends, solve conflicts and, generally, get on well in the world. **We know that shared book reading is one of the most powerful tools we’ve got to promote children’s early language development.**”

Unsurprisingly, research links children’s early development of communication and language skills to improved educational and life outcomes, including better employability and improved mental health.⁶

Schools are crucial in developing positive attitudes to reading

Teachers also play a crucial role in developing positive attitudes to reading by prioritising and making time for reading purely for enjoyment throughout the day, by signposting children to a wide range of books, and by setting family expectations about the importance of continuing shared reading for enjoyment at home.

Sharing stories supports happier, calmer learning environments

Research studies show that reading supports children’s wellbeing by reducing stress, enhancing empathy and strengthening resilience. Children who are most engaged with reading are three times more likely to experience higher levels of mental wellbeing than those who are least engaged.



“Every child needs the opportunity to begin to build the apparatus of happiness within themselves. Shared reading – especially in early years – is an essential component of that apparatus.”

Frank Cottrell-Boyce, Waterstones Children’s Laureate

Storybooks promote new ways of thinking and making sense of the world

Overall, while learning to read requires heavy cognitive lifting on the part of the learner, in reading for enjoyment the storybook does the heavy lifting, enabling the child to learn seemingly effortlessly, as illustrated by our Practice Box on page 27.

To read the research behind these benefits, go to [BookTrust: The benefits of reading](#)

What’s the picture now?

The systematic structured approach to reading set out in the English National Curriculum has created a generation of children who are among the most proficient readers in the world. Based on PIRLS, an international reading test for 10-year-olds, England is ranked among the top-performing countries in the world for reading performance. However, when asked about reading enjoyment, it’s a different picture. Only 29% of 10-year-olds in England, compared with 42% around the world, say they like reading “very much”.⁷ BookTrust statistics also show that reading enjoyment declines as children progress through school, dropping from 33% of 7-year-olds who love reading to 25% by the end of primary school.⁸

Given the deep and lifelong benefits associated with reading regularly and by choice, we urgently need to halt the decline in children’s reading enjoyment. When children start school, regular reading at home declines.⁹ Teachers

have a crucial role in nurturing children's love of reading. Without this, too many children are being switched off reading.

At the same time, the wellbeing benefits offered by reading are more important than ever before. The latest data shows that currently 1 in 5 children have a probable mental health condition (around 6 children in each classroom) and that half of all mental health issues develop before the age of 14.¹⁰ Social, Emotional and Mental Health is now the second most common category of SEND support in schools.

Data on levels of sharing stories and reading aloud to children for enjoyment, in educational settings, is hard to find. 62% of parents and carers report that their children regularly listen to an adult reading a book or story during lessons, which suggests for over one third of our children this is not the case.⁸



"Our children are near the top of the global leagues when it comes to the mechanical skill of reading but near the bottom when it comes to reading 'for pleasure'. We've taught them all the steps and the names of all the tunes. But they're not dancing."

Frank Cottrell-Boyce, Waterstones Children's Laureate



Practice Box

***Where the Wild Things Are* – why children need storybooks**

Where the Wild Things Are is a familiar and much-loved storybook created by American author and illustrator Maurice Sendak, and was published in the 1960s. It's a simple, sparsely written but beautifully illustrated book that explores children's fascination with the anarchy of wild behaviour, and the comfort and security of being safe and loved. At the summit, poet and author Michael Rosen used it to demonstrate how multimodal texts scaffold young children's understanding of the world around them, facilitating sophisticated interpretations of characters' actions. He recounted his own son's response to a critical moment in the story.

"And Max, the king of all wild things, was lonely and wanted to be where someone loved him best of all."

"Our 3-year-old, who had 'used' this book many times for deep study and reflection, hardly making any comments, said one day, in response to this line, 'Mummy!'"

"I've written about this as an example of 'interpretation', not 'retrieval' or 'inference', because it is neither a correct or incorrect response... There is no 'Mummy' in the text. There is a 'mother' whose sole action at the beginning of the book is to send Max to his room and whose 'experience' is to receive Max's threat to 'eat her up'. There is no internal explanation or reason to think that 'Mummy!' is the 'someone' who



would love Max (or the reader) 'best of all'. In other words, the main way you can arrive at 'Mummy!' as a response is through bringing your own experience to bear... At the end of the story when Max is seemingly rewarded with a plate of hot food, again the text doesn't say who has provided this. It is an 'open' text. It invites the reader to interpret the 'gaps'."

"Interpreting the gaps" is a strategy we learn as experienced readers. And yet here we see a young child making a huge cognitive leap. This is the power of storybooks. While phonics books designed to teach children how to decode words are valuable learning tools, they simply cannot – nor are intended to – replace storybooks. It's books like *Where the Wild Things Are* that create the internal landscape that shape our identity as individuals and help us make sense of our world.

Case study

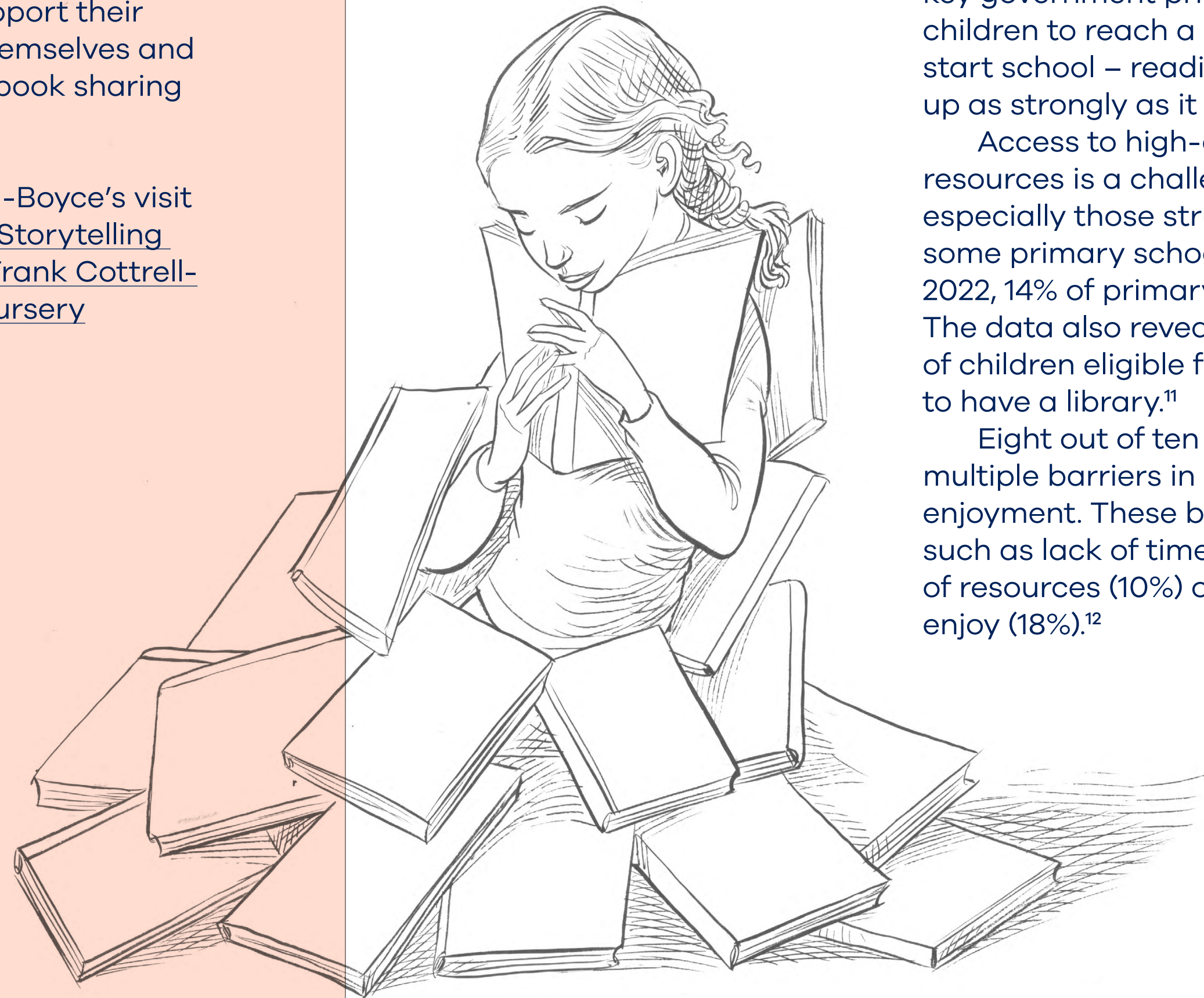
Meadows Community Nursery

Meadows Nursery is run by Sheffield Hallam University as part of the Early Years Community Research Centre. It's not just an early years setting; it's part of a multi-agency project that brings together professionals across the region's family support services. The community it serves has been deeply affected by austerity, the pandemic and the cost of living crisis. Sally Pearse (Strategic Lead for Early Years and Director of the Early Years Community Research Centre at Sheffield Hallam University) says their relationship with parents is based on trust gained through listening to and hearing their experiences.

"Our starting point is always 'what's happened to you', not 'what's wrong with you'. A lot of the families arrive saying, 'our children don't like books', 'our children aren't interested in stories'. And what we found was that was not the case. And it was not the case for our parents either. But it's finding the bandwidth, among everything else that's going on, to engage with things. Through careful listening and support, things have changed. Within the nursery, we use the Twitch programme, which was developed by a colleague of mine and focuses on repeated reading of stories. So those young children become the enthusiastic experts in that story. They take those stories home, they retell them in the nursery, they retell them to their siblings, and they retell them to their peers.

What's been amazing is their confidence in telling their story to ministers, to policy makers and to the *Panorama* documentary-making team last year. We've got big plans. Storytelling has been at the heart of things, but our parents have also trained as trainers in a course called 'Knowledge to Nurture'. That's the knowledge about how to support their children, but also to know themselves and to support themselves, and book sharing is part of that."

To read about Frank Cottrell-Boyce's visit to Meadows Nursery, go to ["Storytelling can be a shared pleasure": Frank Cottrell-Boyce's visit to a Sheffield nursery](#)



What are the barriers to reading and books being at the heart of every child's early education?

Early years practitioners and professionals tell us that many staff lack confidence in reading aloud. Similarly, some tell us they lack confidence in supporting families to continue to read together at home, as part of supporting a rich home-learning environment and home-school engagement. Despite the wide range of benefits associated with reading, and the role it plays in meeting key government priorities – for example, in supporting children to reach a good level of development as they start school – reading together does not always show up as strongly as it could in policy guidance frameworks.

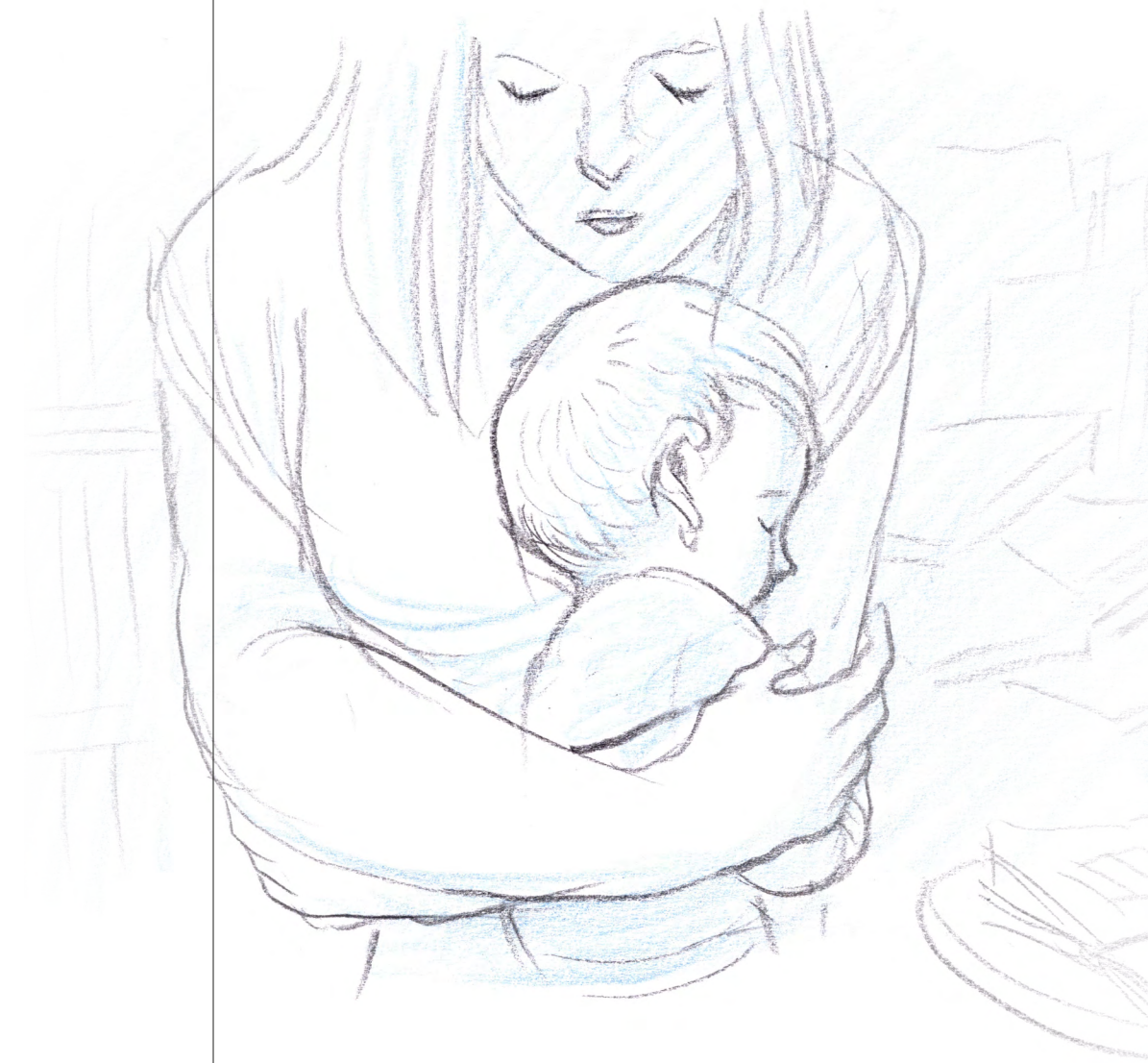
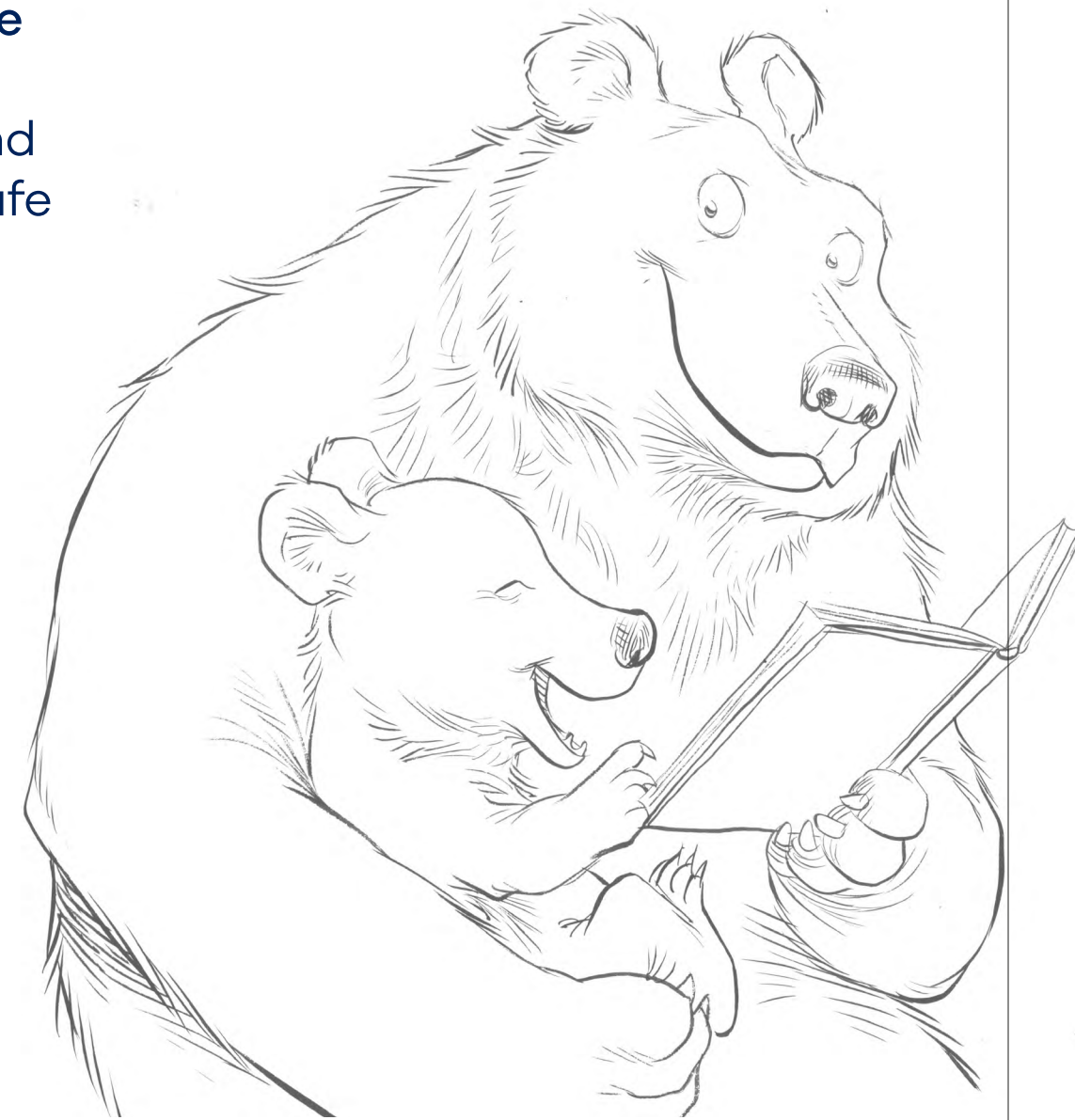
Access to high-quality books and reading support resources is a challenge for many early years settings, especially those struggling with funding levels, and for some primary schools too. Based on data gathered in 2022, 14% of primary schools do not have a library area. The data also revealed that schools with higher numbers of children eligible for free school meals were less likely to have a library.¹¹

Eight out of ten (81%) primary teachers point to facing multiple barriers in encouraging pupils to read for enjoyment. These barriers include resource challenges, such as lack of time to let children read (36%), lack of resources (10%) or lack of available books that pupils enjoy (18%).¹²

Reading for Children in Contact with the Social Care System

Our vision

- Research into the positive impact and value of shared reading to children in contact with the social care system makes clear the **benefits of early shared reading experiences for bonding and attachment, stability and identity.**
- Professionals working with children and families in foster care, kinship care and adoption understand the **importance of shared reading** as a strategy to use alongside specialist interventions for building trust and relationships, healing from trauma and providing a safe space for young children whose life experiences have been difficult or challenging.
- Services and organisations working with children in contact with social care are helped to integrate **shared-reading strategies into training and support.**
- Families are provided with **high-quality books and resources** that meet the needs of children in contact with social care, and are given the support they want and need to enjoy sharing stories with the children in their care.



CONNECTION BEFORE CORRECTION

Why does it matter?

Early shared reading matters for all children. When babies and children have had early relationships disrupted, or have experienced trauma, abuse or neglect, shared reading can be especially transformative. Reading together supports attachment and bonding and can help children feel secure and loved. It provides: escapism, which acts as a protective factor against adversity; a sense of stability; a mechanism for discussing difficult and charged issues; and a way of reconnecting with experiences and emotions.

Based on personal testimonies and research, we know that sharing stories generates both immediate and longer-term benefits for children and the adults that care for them.

Research carried out by BookTrust shows that 90% of foster carers who read with the child in their care reported that it had made a positive difference to the relationship between them. The more frequently carers read with their child, the more likely they were to report that reading had improved their relationship. In interviews, carers said that spending quality time sharing a book was one of the best ways to connect with their child.¹³

Books create connections and help to build trust

Bonding over a shared story helps create trust. For children dealing with trauma, spending one-to-one time reading a book can create a safe emotional space. It shows them that they matter, that they have the undivided attention of an adult and are safe. Even if there have been moments in the day that haven't gone well, reading together can reassure the child that they are loved. We heard from practitioners who describe it as "a hug, a cuddle, a snuggle", a way of offering connection and closeness.

Books provide routine, structure and predictability

Children in contact with social care will have experienced changes and transitions that are profoundly unsettling and often traumatic. Books and shared reading can help in a range of ways by introducing predictability, routine and structure. Storybooks are typically structured around a clear narrative arc, ending with a satisfying resolution that resolves any tensions or issues in the story. This is predictable, comforting and reassuring. The language of storybooks uses rhythm, rhyme and repetition to encourage children to anticipate what will happen next and join in with the words. This helps young children's brains to anticipate and prepare for change before it happens, thus reducing stress and allowing children to focus.

Books support identity development

When children can see themselves and their families and communities in the books they read, and identify with the characters and stories, this validates their experiences. Through positive reinforcement of identity, children build self-worth and confidence. For children who feel little agency over the decisions made about their day-to-day lives, offering a choice of which book to read can provide a much-needed moment of control.

Books can promote an enhanced sense of wellbeing

There is a growing body of evidence that points to the wellbeing outcomes of reading. Stories provide a safe mental escape, promoting relaxation and helping children manage anxiety by immersing them in different worlds or perspectives. We learn from the behaviour of characters in books because we can see into their thoughts, feelings and emotions. This can give us new insights into our own and others' behaviour, and we can even borrow coping strategies from the books we read. For children who have had painful or traumatic experiences, books are a safe way to explore feelings like anger, fear and sadness.

"Shared reading is an act of love that slows down the rest of the world and can calm the chaos."

Frank Cottrell-Boyce, Waterstones Children's Laureate

Shared reading is joyful

Books can be funny, playful, ridiculous and safely subversive. Many children's books invite the adult and child to collude in hilarity and laughter. Anyone who has watched or participated in reading stories together knows this, and will have delighted in the shared joy and happiness and the connection that this brings. For carers who may feel overwhelmed and anxious about how best to provide support, sharing a book is a practical activity that is simple and easy to do.

To read the research behind these benefits, go to [BookTrust: The wellbeing benefits of reading for children](#)

What's the picture now?

The costs of children's social care are high and growing against a backdrop of declining spend on early intervention services. The number of children experiencing social care as a proportion of the UK child population is increasing, and there are many more children in kinship care¹⁴ – often in informal arrangements with carers who feel invisible or under-supported. Children in contact with the care system and those with experience of kinship care are more likely to have special educational needs: for example, research by Kinship shows that 31% of children in kinship care have diagnosed or suspected social, emotional or mental health needs.¹⁵ And children in care have poorer educational outcomes on average than other children, including being less likely to meet age-related expectations in reading.¹⁶



Case study

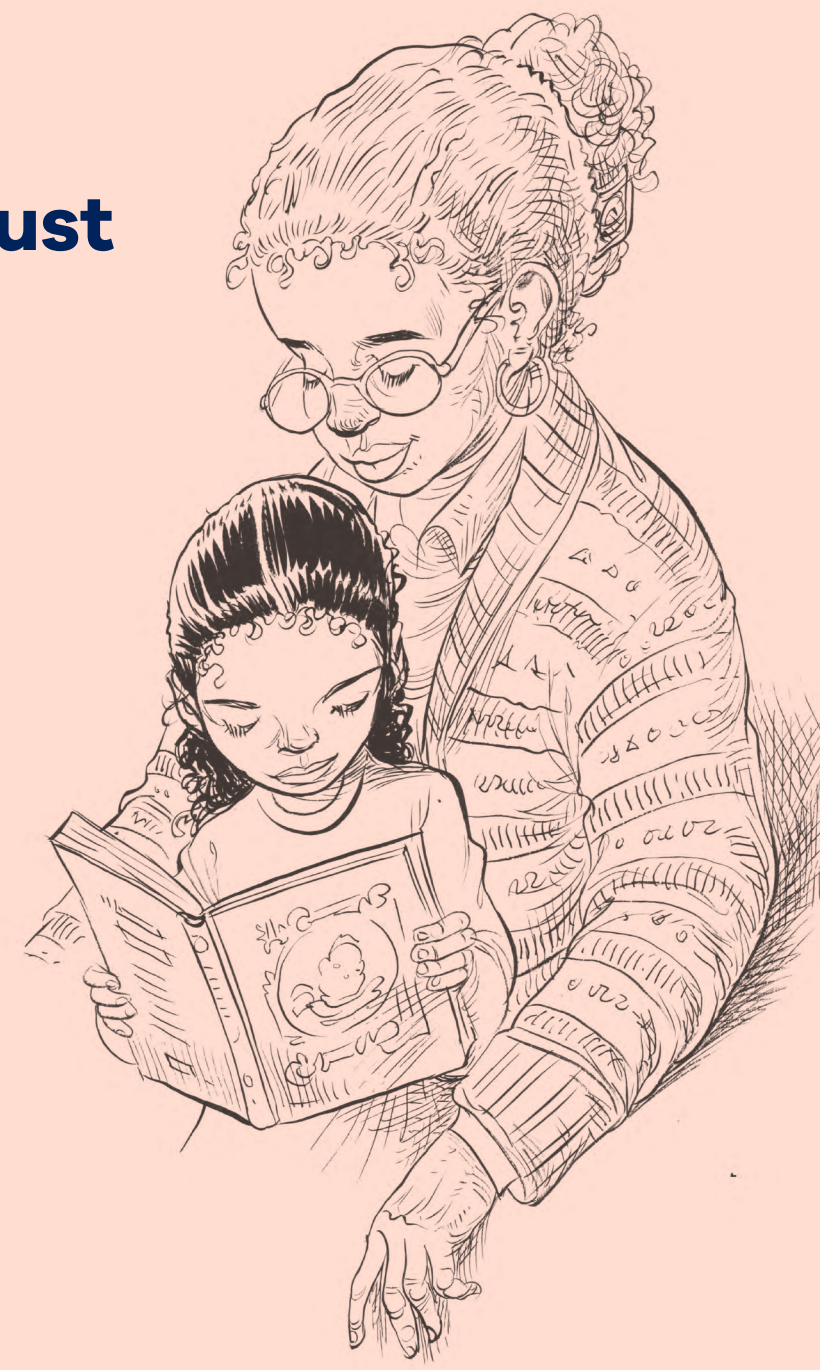
Bradford Children and Families Trust

Bradford Children and Families Trust provide children's social care for Bradford Council. They have adopted a partnership-based approach involving children's social care, health, education, police and other partners working together to support children's needs.

As the Executive Director of Social Care and Practice, Ruth Terry is a passionate advocate for the power of shared reading to ensure that children in the trust's care have the best possible outcomes. At the Reading Rights Summit, she outlined the ways in which reading together can build connections between children and adults, creating a sense of safety and security, supporting carers' attunement and promoting emotional wellbeing among children.

"We're looking at training around reading. Do people really know how to read to children? What does that look like? We're working with social workers, foster carers, residential workers and others around how to do that, and how to support parents to read with their children. We did a huge piece of work on that in Leeds a few years ago and it was really, really successful. Again, it's just galvanising that workforce around this agenda."

One of the programmes Bradford Children and Families Trust delivers through the virtual school to these children and families is BookTrust's [Letterbox Club](#)



programme. Over 250 children in foster care in Bradford benefited from this programme this year. The programme is designed to spark a joy and love of reading in children in foster care. In addition, a recent workshop in a kinship carer peer group in Shipley provided carers with support to build confidence and skills in shared reading, as well as a selection of books to support conversations around identity and emotions.

What are the barriers?

A number of foster parents, kinship carers and adoptive families all struggle to get the support they need and that would best support the children they care for. Kinship carers in particular might often struggle financially because of their caring responsibilities, and can find themselves outside the services designed to support families.¹⁵

Being able to find representative and relatable books for the children in their care is important to families, but they need help to find them – and support to access them, since purchasing new books can be unaffordable. For families that don't read regularly and that are managing emotional and behavioural difficulties, the expectation of creating an idealised calm reading experience can feel daunting, and they will need help to find what works for them and their children. Social workers often see the value of reading and love being able to provide books but might struggle to find time and resource for this, given the pressure of workload and competing professional priorities.



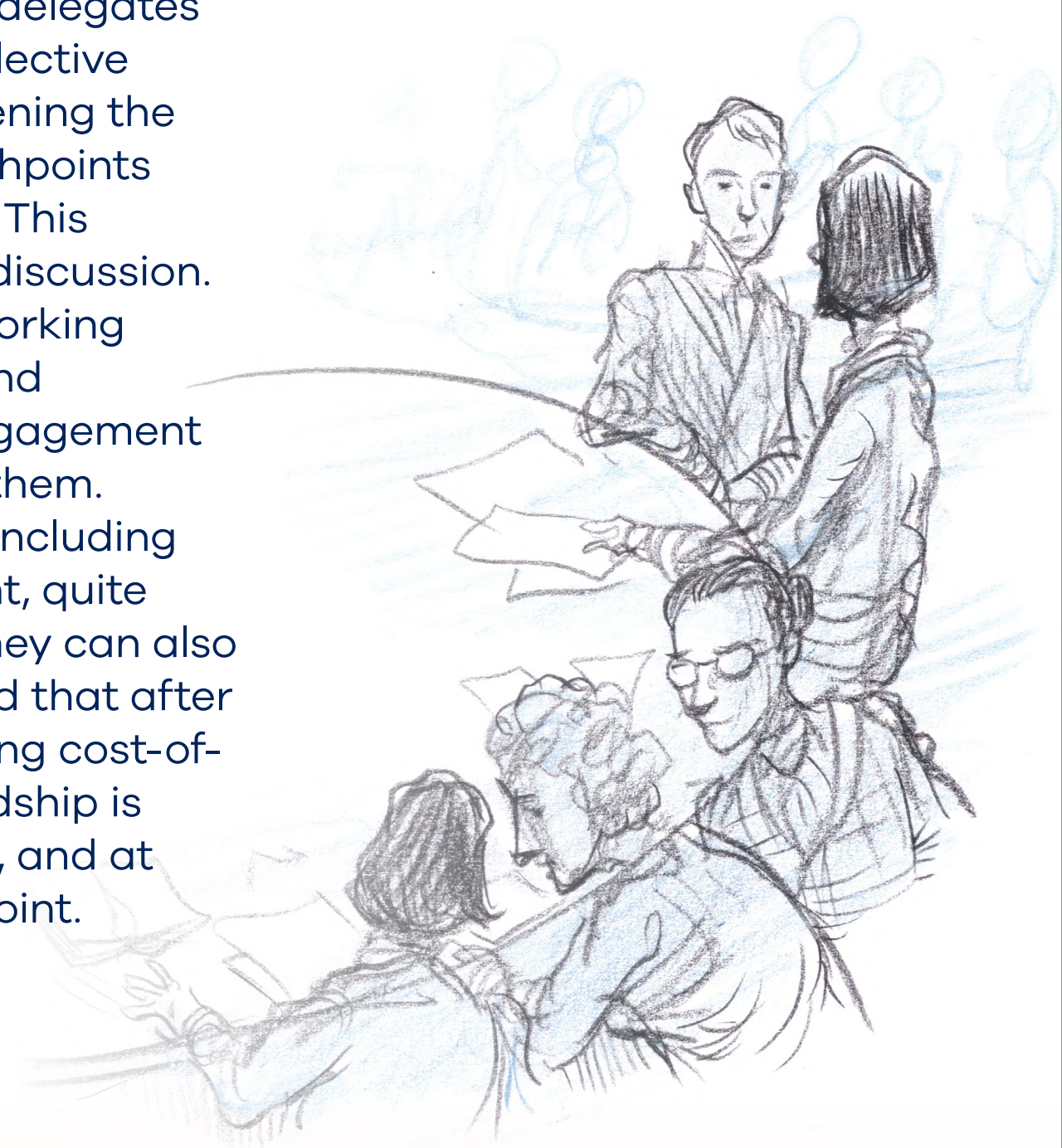
Ideas from The Summit

Over the course of the Reading Rights Summit delegates mind mapped their ideas for individual and collective action, for joining up services and for strengthening the case for children's reading – creating new touchpoints and expanding the reach of existing initiatives. This section of the report summarises some of this discussion.

We heard from practitioners and leaders working in communities where trust between families and government has been eroded, leading to disengagement with some of the services intended to support them. Others noted that cultural places and spaces, including libraries, can often be a welcoming environment, quite different from institutional spaces – but that they can also be intimidating for some families. We also heard that after years of austerity, the pandemic and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, the number of families living in hardship is increasing. Capacity in the system is stretched, and at the same time many families are at breaking point.

“Hearing the discussion today and the evidence on how shared reading promotes routine formation and emotional regulation, I’m thinking about the children on our safeguarding register and how I will ensure shared reading is part of their specific and bespoke daily provision when in school and is an action following safeguarding meetings... so all stakeholders are aware of the importance and impact shared reading has.”

Kiran Satti, Deputy Principal at Oasis Academy Woodview



Ideas to explore

Make small changes in every setting and sector

We heard from colleagues planning to put shared reading into children's social care plans as a wellbeing intervention, and from teachers planning to embed it in school safeguarding strategies.

Make shared reading part of antenatal care and early years health services

Colleagues asked what more could be done to give the early years health workforce the tools to maximise the effectiveness of contact points with families. There were suggestions that this could be done through additions to training for health visitors or embedding new skill requirements in proficiency standards.

Promote the wellbeing benefits of shared reading for children in contact with social care

Because shared reading is often seen as a literacy intervention that boosts language and communication, the wider wellbeing benefits are sometimes overlooked in the children's social care system. Colleagues spoke about the need to better demonstrate and record the ways in which shared reading can support children in care.

Action to reach children living in poverty

We heard suggestions for a collective call on government to embed reading rights as a critical approach to reducing child poverty.

Embed shared reading in schools and home-learning

Colleagues suggested exploring statutory change as a lever – or the development of exemplar school reading policies (building on the Department for Education Reading Framework) that prioritise home-school engagement on shared reading and reading enjoyment.

Include regular shared reading and reading for enjoyment within national guidance and statutory frameworks

Embed shared reading and reading for enjoyment in the Early Years and Primary Stage National Curriculums, for example, and regulatory guidance such as the Ofsted Inspection Framework or Estyn Common Inspection Framework.

Ensure access to a diverse range of books

Colleagues in the summit talked about places where children can access books – from libraries to supermarkets – and about the need for these to be stocked with high-quality books that reflect children's lived experiences. We also heard from publishers about ways to champion and support authors and illustrators from a range of backgrounds in the industry, and strategies to widely distribute these books.

Actions

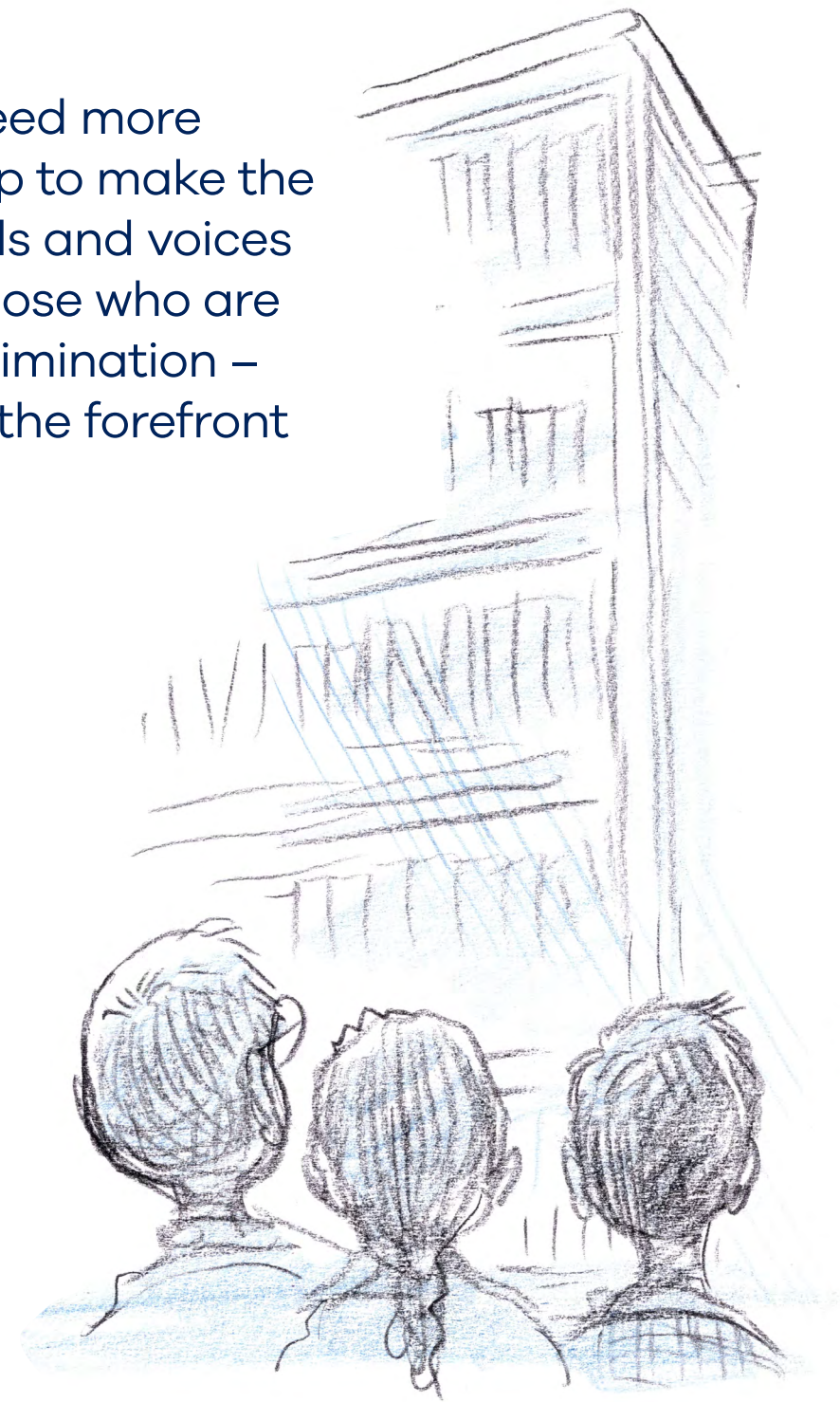
This report is just the starting point. We will need more data, listening, understanding and partnership to make the ambitions of the campaign a reality. The needs and voices of children and young people – particularly those who are under-served by the system or who face discrimination – and the adults who support them must be at the forefront of our collective thinking and action.

What happens now:

- Publication of this report, sharing it with the government and other stakeholders
- Round-table talks with partners
- Partnership meetings at local and national level
- A second Reading Rights Summit in early 2026
- A second Reading Rights Report, which details progress, in summer 2026

This report is a call to action for leaders everywhere to take action in five areas where change will lead to real transformation on the ground. To explore the possibilities of workforce training; policy, guidance and frameworks; more access to books; sharing high-quality research and evidence; and multi-agency leadership to integrate reading everywhere.

We want this report to unite us, inspire us and give focus to our shared commitment to improving children's lives.



“Today has to be the beginning. It means nothing if we don’t change something.”

Frank Cottrell-Boyce, Waterstones Children’s Laureate

“We need to prioritise shared book reading. It’s one of the most powerful pedagogical techniques we have in the early years... We need real momentum, focus and privileging around that space of sharing books and stories, as it will have lifelong benefits to the children involved.”

Julian Grenier, Senior Content and Engagement Manager for Early Years, Education Endowment Foundation

“In society, we talk a lot about how children who’ve been through trauma need specialist provision – and that is true for many of them – but there are also just as many moments of care, love and being with and together, through fostering provision, that can have just as profound an impact in relation to their recovery from their trauma and their healing. We need to talk less about reading being about education and more about the benefits of reading for connectivity, for love, for relationship building, for just being together.”

Sarah Thomas, CEO, The Fostering Network

Language and Definitions

In putting this report together, we have been very aware that each set of stakeholders (early years, education, health and culture) uses different language, technical terms and shorthand to describe their practices. Sometimes the same word means different things in different sectors. We are attempting to create a document that brings these players together in a common framework, and have therefore included this glossary to help us with that shared understanding. This report uses the social model of disability as an underpinning framework and aims to use inclusive language so every child and family feels seen, valued, and central to the story.



Children in contact with the social care system: Children who are supported by children’s social services to access safe, stable and nurturing home environments. This includes a range of care arrangements including adoption, fostering and kinship care.

Community settings: Local, accessible and trusted places within a community – such as libraries, parent-and-child groups or health services – where families can receive support and advice.

Early intervention services: Identifying and providing effective early support to children and young people who are at risk of poor outcomes.

Early years: The first years in a child’s life, which are critical for their cognitive, social and emotional development. Typically considered to be from birth until they start school, but in this report, we consider children’s early years from 0–7 years.

Ecosystem of reading: A local network of interconnected people, services and organisations – such as local authorities, early years education, health services and community groups – that work together to embed shared reading in the lives of children and their families.

High-quality books: Books that are a tool for learning, connection and joy. They contain rich language and illustrations that are

developmentally suited to support a child’s early literacy, emotional development, imagination and curiosity.

Interactive/dialogic reading: When an adult encourages a child to become an active participant while sharing stories by inviting comments, speculating about the characters’ behaviour, repeating the words and encouraging the child to think beyond the text.

Intervention: An action, strategy or policy designed to improve outcomes. For example, in a specific area, such as children’s wellbeing or literacy.

Invisible privilege: An invisible advantage only granted to some due to unequal access to early shared reading.

Multimodal texts: A multimodal text combines two or more modes of communication to create meaning such as text, images or sound.

Identity: A person’s understanding of who they are, as shaped by their experiences, relationships, culture, beliefs, values and the communities they belong to. Children’s identity develops over time through interactions with others and the world around them, helping them build a sense of who they are, where they belong and what makes them unique.

Reading for enjoyment: Voluntary reading for pleasure and personal satisfaction, rather than for educational purposes.

Safeguarding: The policies, practices and procedures put in place to ensure that all children are safe, protected and well cared for.

School-ready: Children’s level of preparedness to successfully engage with a school environment. This includes social, emotional, physical and cognitive skills.

SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities): Children who have a learning difficulty or disability which requires special educational provision to be made for them, as defined in the Children and Families Act 2014. In Wales, this is recognised as Additional Learning Needs (ALN).

Shared reading: The process of reading and sharing books with a child in its broadest sense – including reading aloud to them, reading collaboratively, and creating opportunities for interaction, discussion and connection around the book.

Socio-emotional wellbeing: An individual’s ability to recognise, manage and express their emotions and build positive relationships.

Storytelling: The pedagogical practice of sharing stories and reading aloud with children in

the early years. Adults use voice, facial expressions and gestures to engage young children and bring narratives to life. It supports language development, builds listening and attention skills, nurtures creativity and imagination and helps children make sense of the world around them.

Touchpoint: A moment or opportunity where individuals, services or communities connect and engage to support a shared goal. Touchpoints are key opportunities to link services, collaborate and expand the reach of reading initiatives.

Trusted places: Familiar, reliable and supportive locations within a community where families can access services, resources and guidance. Trusted places may include community centres, libraries, health services and parent-and-child groups.

Under-served communities and peoples: People or communities that have been overlooked or inadequately supported by systems. This could be due to a lack of investment leading to poor infrastructure.

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About Waterstones Children’s Laureate

Frank Cottrell-Boyce is a multi-award-winning children’s book author and screenwriter. *Millions*, his debut children’s novel, won the prestigious CILIP Carnegie Medal. His other books include *Cosmic*, *Framed*, *The Astounding Broccoli Boy*, *Sputnik’s Guide to Life on Earth*, *Runaway Robot*, *Noah’s Gold*, *The Wonder Brothers* and *The Blockbusters!*. He has enjoyed a long-time collaboration with award-winning illustrator Steven Lenton. Frank’s books have been shortlisted for a multitude of prizes, including the Guardian Children’s Fiction Prize, the Whitbread Children’s Fiction Award, the Roald Dahl Funny Prize and the Blue Peter Book Award.

Frank is the current Waterstones Children’s Laureate. The Waterstones Children’s Laureate is the foremost representative of children’s literature, awarded biannually to a renowned writer or illustrator in recognition of exceptional talent. Managed by BookTrust and sponsored by Waterstones, this prestigious role celebrates creativity and storytelling, promotes the vital importance of reading and children’s literature and champions the right of every child to enjoy a lifetime enriched with books and stories.

About BookTrust

BookTrust is the UK’s largest children’s reading charity, reaching over 1.3 million children and families each year in every community in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We prioritise support for children and families from low-income and vulnerable family backgrounds, and early shared reading – since the benefits of reading together in the early years are transformative. Children who choose to read and who read regularly are happier and healthier. They form stronger bonds and relationships. They do better at school and are more creative. They enjoy more success in life. This is why we work with over 6,000 partners across health and early education, schools, libraries and local authorities, to support families with evidence-informed programmes that we know get children reading regularly and by choice. Our President is Sir Michael Morpurgo and our Patron is Her Majesty The Queen.

Further research on children’s reading and the benefits of reading is available through the links below and at booktrust.org.uk/research-impact:

- [Children’s reading habits in the early years](#)
- [Primary school children’s reading](#)
- [The role of multiple ‘reading influencers’ in supporting children’s reading journeys](#)
- [Reading in the early years: supporting generational cycles of readers](#)
- [Benefits of reading](#)
- [The role of reading for children experiencing vulnerability: building strong foundations for life](#)

Acknowledgements

This report is inspired and informed by the Reading Rights Summit, held in Liverpool on 22 January 2025, which brought together expert voices across the political, education, literacy, early years, arts, library and health sectors.

Over the course of the summit, there were contributions from national and local government leaders, including Liverpool City Region Mayor Steve Rotheram, Children’s Commissioner Dame Rachel de Souza and Executive Director of Public Health for Barnsley Council Anna Hartley. Professor Sam Wass shared his work on the neuroscience of what happens to a baby’s brain when an adult reads to them, and Dr Julian Grenier from the Education Endowment Foundation talked about the educational importance of shared reading.

There were testimonies from Sarah Thomas (CEO of Fostering Network), Lucy Peake (CEO of Kinship) and Ruth Terry (Executive Director of Social Care and Practice at Bradford Children and Families Trust) on the role of shared reading in helping children navigate trauma, and how books can be the first step in rebuilding trust and connections between children and their carers. Sally Pearse (Strategic Lead for Early Years at Sheffield Hallam University) explored the importance of listening to families and co-creating solutions.

Former Waterstones Children’s Laureate Michael Rosen demonstrated how a deceptively simple story can convey complex ideas, enabling children to go beyond the text and pictures. Cressida Cowell (another former Waterstones Children’s Laureate), Neil Leitch (Chief Executive at Early Years Alliance) and Matthew Courtney (English Hub Co-Lead Wandle Learning Hub) all reminded us of the huge pressures faced by working parents, and how we need to work together to overcome challenges of inequality that exacerbate social divides.

Community fundraiser Alex McCormick told us why she spearheaded the campaign to reopen Spellow Hub after it was destroyed in the riots of summer 2024, and what having access to books and reading meant to the community.

Our huge thanks go to all of the above.

Frank Cottrell-Boyce and BookTrust would also like to thank the following for their input and support in compiling the Reading Rights Report: Chris Riddell, Melissa Mackinlay, Lizzie Crump MBE, Samantha Stimpson, Nzinga Orgill and Wendy Shakespeare.

We would like to thank the many individuals, companies, trusts and foundations who generously support our work, including Arts Council England, Waterstones and the UK children’s publishing industry.

**“Shared reading creates happiness.
Surely there is no greater endeavour than seeking
to build the happiness of our children.”**

Darren Henley
Chief Executive, Arts Council England

**“Reading shouldn’t be a luxury,
it should be a necessity.”**

Steve Rotheram
Mayor of Liverpool City Council

**“The right of every child to read is
something so fundamental, yet so often
undervalued and overlooked.”**

Dame Rachel de Souza
Children’s Commissioner for England

