



Department  
for Education

# **Phonics screening check evaluation:**

## **Final report**

**Research brief**

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## Introduction

This summary reports the final findings from the evaluation of the phonics screening check (PSC), commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) and undertaken by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER). The check was introduced for the first time in 2012 and is taken by all children in Year 1, unless their teachers make the judgement to disapply<sup>1</sup> them. It consists of an individual, oral assessment requiring the reading of words and pseudo-words<sup>2</sup>. Since 2013, Year 2 pupils who do not meet the expected standard in Year 1 are reassessed.

This summary provides an overview of participating schools' phonics teaching practices and explores whether there is any evidence that the introduction of the check has had an impact on the standard of reading and writing. It also highlights any changes in schools' practices since 2012, when the check was first introduced. It draws on data collected from case study interviews and surveys with literacy coordinators and Year 1 teachers over three time points between 2012 and 2014. In 2014, this included interviews with staff in 19 primary schools and endpoint surveys of 573 literacy coordinators and 652 Year 1 teachers in schools. The most recent round of data collection commenced the week following the administration of the check in June 2014.

A number of methodological limitations have been recognised throughout the reporting of this evaluation. Because the PSC was introduced into all schools nationally at the same time, it was not possible for the study design to include a comparison group. Further, the PSC was introduced as an addition to a number of phonics policies which were already in place. Because of these limitations, it is impossible to ascribe any findings conclusively to the presence of the PSC, and the reporting below recognises this.

## Key findings

### The impact of the check on pupil attainment and progress in literacy

- *Phonics* attainment, as measured by the proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard on the check, improved over three years and there is some evidence that this may have been an impact of the introduction of the check.
- Analysis was undertaken of national results on the PSC, together with results for the same pupils one year earlier, on the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP), and one year later, at the end of key stage 1. The evaluation did not find any evidence of improvements in pupils' *literacy* performance, or in progress, that could

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<sup>1</sup> Children who are working well below the level of the screening check (for example, if they have shown no understanding of letter-sound correspondences), can be disapplied so they do not take part.

<sup>2</sup> Pseudo-words or non-words are included in the PSC because they will be new to all pupils. The rationale is that pupils who can read pseudo-words should have the skills to decode almost any unfamiliar word.

be clearly attributed to the introduction of the PSC. However, no conclusive statement can be made because of the methodological limitations described above.

- Pupils are unlikely to reach the expected standard in reading and writing at the end of key stage 1 without being able to demonstrate the phonics skills measured by the PSC.

### **Phonics teaching practices and views on phonics teaching**

- Teachers have been consistently positive about phonics as an approach to teaching reading throughout the three year evaluation. For example, more than half of the literacy coordinators surveyed in 2014 (58 per cent) agreed with the statement 'I am convinced of the value of systematic synthetic phonics teaching'. In the majority of schools, however, it appears that other strategies alongside phonics are also supported. For example, in 2014, 56 per cent of literacy coordinators reported that 'phonics is taught discretely alongside other cueing strategies' or that 'phonics is always integrated as one of a range of cueing strategies'.
- There is evidence that the introduction of the PSC has led to schools making changes to their phonics teaching and classroom practice in each and every year of the evaluation. Just under half of the literacy coordinators surveyed in 2014 reported doing so (48 per cent), compared with 56 per cent in 2013 and 34 per cent in 2012 (in 2012 the question concerned changes made in anticipation of the check).
- The most frequently reported change by survey respondents in 2014 was increasing the pace of phonics teaching, and this finding was supported by data drawn from the case studies. As in 2013, an increased focus on pseudo-words was also reported by participants in the survey and case studies, as well as increased assessment of phonics. Analysis did not determine what form this increased focus took.
- In terms of use of the results of the previous year's check, literacy coordinators reported that Reception teachers used these mostly to review or revise phonics teaching plans in general. Year 1 and 2 teachers were reported to have used the check results primarily for reviewing and revising phonics teaching plans for individuals and groups. Teachers reported using evidence from the check to make decisions about extra support for individuals, alongside their own records of assessment.
- For those children who had not met the standard in 2013, the most frequent type of support provided was to continue with systematic phonics teaching; this was followed by intensive learning in small groups.

## Teachers' views on the value of the check

- Year 1 teachers were positive about the usefulness of the check, with just over half (53 per cent) reporting that the check gave them useful information 'to a great extent' or 'to some extent'. These responses were also more positive than in 2013.
- Literacy coordinators were less positive: less than 30 per cent agreed with the statements 'The phonics screening check provides valuable information for teachers' and 'The phonics screening check provides valuable information for parents/carers'. The case study evidence suggested that the reason for this was a view that check results do not reveal anything of which teachers are unaware.

## What has been learnt from the national roll out of the check

- Most teachers reported they undertook less preparation for the check this year than they did when it was first introduced. The most frequent form of preparation, as captured in the literacy coordinator survey, was individual familiarisation with the *DfE Check Administrators' Guide*<sup>3</sup>. A quarter of responding Year 1 teachers reported undertaking no specific preparation for the check in 2014.
- Fewer Year 1 teachers reported having to stop the check early this year (2014: 41 per cent) than was the case last year (2013: 46 per cent). Of those that had to stop early, the majority reported finding it 'quite' or 'very easy' when making a decision to do so (85 per cent).
- Survey findings suggest that less than half of participating Year 1 teachers had to disapply children from the check. As the check becomes embedded into school practice it seems that schools feel more secure in their expectations and in the disapplication process.
- The costs associated with the introduction of the check and its on-going annual cost to schools and central government are around £400-500 per school, or £10-12 per pupil. The largest on-going cost for schools is for supply cover while the check is administered, at £150 per school, or £3 per pupil.
- There is evidence that over the last three years teachers have become more familiar with and accepting of the standard of the check. In 2014, more than three quarters of Year 1 teachers (77 per cent) reported that the standard of the check 'was about right' (an increase of 33 percentage points since 2012).
- Over the course of the study, a small number of respondents have expressed concerns that the check disadvantages higher achieving readers. However, analysis of the National Pupil Database (NPD) found no identifiable pattern of

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/check-administrators-guide-phonics-screening-check-2014>  
[23/02/15]

poorer performance on the check than expected in those children who are already fluent readers.

- The findings from the surveys suggest that most schools provide some sort of information to parents/carers prior to the administration of the check. Most schools communicate the outcomes of the check to parents/carers via end-of year pupil reports. A smaller proportion of literacy coordinators reported that additional information was given to parents/carers in 2014, both in terms of details of the in-school support planned (39 per cent in 2014; 50 per cent in 2013; 61 per cent in 2012), and in terms of information regarding how parents/carers can support their child (43 per cent in 2014; 59 per cent in 2013; 73 per cent in 2012).

## Scope of the evaluation

The evaluation has two main aims:

1. To explore whether issues raised in the 2011 pilot evaluation<sup>4</sup> have been addressed, specifically:
  - the confidence of teachers in the administration of the screening check and how schools have prepared for it
  - the appropriateness of the screening check for specific groups of pupils (specifically, those with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and English as an Additional Language (EAL))
2. To identify and track the impact of the check on teaching and learning, including:
  - understanding the impact of the teaching of phonics in primary schools
  - assessing the impact of the PSC on teaching of the wider literacy curriculum
  - quantifying the impact of the check on the standard of reading and assessing its value for money

## Methods

In Year 3 of the evaluation (2014) interviews were undertaken with senior school leaders, literacy coordinators, Year 1 and Year 2 teachers, Reception teachers and parents and carers in 19 case study schools. The schools were randomly selected to capture a diverse geographical spread, as well as diversity in terms of size, school type, and the proportion of pupils in receipt of free school meals (FSM), with SEN, and with EAL.

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<sup>4</sup> DfE recruited 300 primary schools to take part in piloting the PSC in 2011. The process evaluation report from the pilot can be found at:  
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/182621/DFE-RR159.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/182621/DFE-RR159.pdf)

Survey responses were collected from 573 literacy coordinators and 652 Year 1 teachers. Analysis of the school characteristics of those teachers responding to the surveys, such as key stage 1 performance band and the proportion of pupils eligible for FSM, revealed that respondents were from schools that exhibited broadly similar characteristics to primary schools nationally. Given this, the sample sizes achieved are large enough to detect statistically significant differences. Where appropriate, comparisons are made to responses collected in Years 1 and 2 of the evaluation<sup>5</sup>. Data collection commenced the week beginning 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2014, the week after the administration of the check. An analysis of results from the NPD was also undertaken. This involved a comparison of national results on the PSC, with results for the same pupils one year earlier, on the EYFSP, and one year later, at the end of key stage 1.

## Conclusions

This three-year evaluation has tracked developments in schools from the first national introduction of the PSC in 2012 to the current, 2014, round. Over this period, teachers' responses suggest that most of them now see the standard of the check as appropriate. Teachers have integrated information from the check with their other records of children's progress in phonics. Its introduction has required administrative effort in schools and gives rise to some, relatively low, costs in terms of time or resources. Little training is now required for teachers and many are familiar with the procedures for the check.

The three years have also seen a range of changes in schools which were, according to teacher reports, made in response to the check; the evidence suggests that a majority of schools have made some adjustments. These changes consist of improvements to the teaching of phonics, such as faster pace, longer time, more frequent, more systematic, and better ongoing assessment. Children are also introduced to the pseudo words that form part of the check. Most schools, however, continue to teach other strategies for word reading alongside a strong commitment to phonics. Nevertheless, according to these teacher reports, the introduction of the check has had impacts on *teaching*.

To assess whether its introduction also had impacts on pupils' *learning* is more difficult, as the national introduction of the check made it impossible to have a control group. A further complexity concerns the date of implementation of the PSC. It was introduced for the first time nationally in 2012, but was piloted in 2011. Awareness of the proposed

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<sup>5</sup> The methods used in the first and second year of the evaluation included interviews with senior school leaders, literacy coordinators, Year 1 and 2 teachers and Reception teachers. In 2012 (Year 1), interviews were undertaken with staff in 14 case study schools and survey responses were collected from 844 literacy coordinators and 940 Year 1 teachers: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/198994/DFE-RR286A.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/198994/DFE-RR286A.pdf) In 2013 (Year 2) interviews were undertaken with staff in 19 case study schools and survey responses were collected from 583 literacy coordinators and 625 Year 1 teachers: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/307229/Evaluation\\_of\\_the\\_phonics\\_screening\\_check\\_second\\_interim\\_report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/307229/Evaluation_of_the_phonics_screening_check_second_interim_report_FINAL.pdf)

introduction of the check may have given rise to a heightened emphasis on phonics in schools prior to its national introduction. The process evaluation of the pilot (Coldwell *et al*, 2011) found that the sample of schools in the pilot were already making some changes to their phonics practice.

While keeping these complexities and methodological limitations in mind, the national results show an improvement in performance in phonics, as measured by the check, which would be consistent with the adjustments to teaching methods reported above. Analyses of pupils' literacy (reading and writing) scores in the national datasets over four years were not conclusive: there were no improvements in attainment or in progress that could be clearly attributed to the introduction of the check; attainment and progress improved in the years both before and after its introduction. As far as it is possible to report, given the methodological limitations of the study, therefore, the evidence suggests that the introduction of the check has had an impact on pupils' attainment in phonics, but not an identifiable impact (or not yet) on their attainment in literacy. It will be of continuing interest to review the results at key stage 1 in future years and also the results at key stage 2 as the pupils who took the check progress through their later years of schooling.

## Reference

Coldwell, M., Shipton, L., Stevens, A., Stiell, B., Willis, B. and Wolstenholme, C. (2011). *Process Evaluation of the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check Pilot*. (DfE Research Report 159). London: DfE [online]. Available: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/182621/DFE-RR159.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/182621/DFE-RR159.pdf) [25 February, 2015].



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