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Guidance

Validation of systematic synthetic phonics programmes: supporting documentation

Updated 28 April 2022

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The 2021 to 2022 phonics validation process

By ensuring high-quality phonics teaching the government wants to improve literacy levels to:

- give all children a solid base upon which to build as they progress through school
- help children to develop the habit of reading widely and often, for both pleasure and information

In April 2021, we published the revised core criteria for effective systematic synthetic phonics teaching programmes and launched a new process to [validate complete systematic synthetic phonics teaching programmes](#). This process is for both previously assessed programmes and new applicants.

A number of publishers have completed a self-assessment process based on these criteria, which were then reviewed by independent evaluators. A further 6 systematic synthetic phonics programmes have been validated in the most recent, February validations round, 4 of which are newly validated for use in schools.

Background

Validation will indicate that a programme has been self assessed by its publisher and assessed by a small panel with relevant expertise, and that both consider it to meet all of the most recent Department for Education (DfE) criteria for an effective systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) programme.

Validation will be of complete SSP programmes only, not of partial programmes, of supplementary

materials or of sets of readers that are not integral to a particular programme. A complete programme is one that provides all that is essential to teach SSP to children in reception and key stage 1 years of mainstream primary schools, up to or beyond the standards expected by the national curriculum, and provides sufficient support for them to become fluent readers. Although it may cover other aspects of reading, writing and spelling, or extend beyond key stage 1, these elements will not be included in the assessment or validation.

This validation supporting documentation covers:

- the 16 essential core criteria published SSP programmes must meet
- further explanatory notes
- details for publishers of new programmes and those wishing to bring a programme for validation based on Letters and Sounds
- timelines for the process
- details of the appeals and complaints procedure

Essential core criteria

Published SSP programmes must meet all of the following essential criteria. Further explanatory notes are offered below. If your programme is new, or you are developing a programme based on Letters and Sounds, please also refer to the [note for publishers of new programmes section](#).

The programme should:

1. constitute a complete SSP programme providing fidelity to its teaching framework for the duration of the programme (see [note 1](#))
2. present systematic, synthetic phonic work as the prime approach to decoding print (see [note 1](#))
3. enable children to start learning phonic knowledge and skills early in reception, and provide a structured route for most children to meet or exceed the expected standard in the year one (Y1) Phonics Screening Check and all national curriculum expectations for word reading through decoding by the end of key stage 1
4. be designed for daily teaching sessions and teach the main grapheme-phoneme correspondences of English (the alphabetic principle) in a clearly defined, incremental sequence
5. begin by introducing a defined group of grapheme-phoneme correspondences that enable children to read and spell many words early on
6. progress from simple to more complex phonic knowledge and skills, cumulatively covering all the major grapheme-phoneme correspondences in English

7. teach children to read printed words by identifying and blending (synthesising) individual phonemes, from left to right all through the word
8. teach children to apply the skill of segmenting spoken words into their constituent phonemes for spelling and that this is the reverse of blending phonemes to read words
9. provide opportunity for children to practise and apply known phoneme-grapheme correspondences for spelling through dictation of sounds, words and sentences
10. ensure that children are taught to decode and spell common exception words (sometimes called 'tricky' words), appropriate to their level of progress in the programme (see [note 2](#))
11. provide resources that support the teaching of lower-case and capital letters correctly, with clear start and finish points. The programme should move children on by teaching them to write words made up of learned GPCs, followed by simple sentences composed from such words as well as any common exception words ('tricky words') learned (see [note 3](#))
12. be built around direct teaching sessions, with extensive teacher-child interaction and involve a multi-sensory approach. The programme should include guidance on how direct teaching sessions can be adapted for online delivery (live or recorded) (see [notes 4 and 5](#))
13. provide resources to enable teachers to deliver the programme effectively including sufficient decodable reading material (see [notes 6 and 7](#)) to ensure that, as children move through the early stages of acquiring phonic knowledge and skills, they can practise by reading texts closely matched to their level of phonic attainment, that do not require them to use alternative strategies to read unknown words (important, see [note 7](#))
14. include guidance and resources to ensure children practise and apply the core phonics they have been taught ^{[\[footnote 1\]](#)} (see [note 8](#))
15. enable children's progress to be assessed and highlight the ways in which the programme meets the needs of those who are at risk of falling behind, including the lowest attaining 20% of children (see [note 9](#))
16. provide full guidance for teachers to support the effective delivery of the programme and appropriate, programme-specific training either directly, through appointed agents or remotely; with assurances that there is sufficient capacity to do so and that those delivering this training will have appropriately high levels of expertise and relevant experience (see [note 10](#))

Explanatory notes

A complete programme may consist of resources from 2 different publishers but will be assessed for validation as one programme. For example, one publisher may produce all components necessary for validation except texts that are fully decodable at each stage of the programme. Another publisher may produce these texts, but validation will depend on the components from both publishers.

Note that this does not preclude the right of any publisher to produce additional resources marketed to match a programme, in agreement with the publisher of that programme and not forming part of this application for validation.

Note 1

Phonics is best understood as a body of knowledge and skills about how the alphabetic system works, and how to apply it in reading and spelling, rather than one of a range of optional ‘methods’ or ‘strategies’ for teaching children how to read. A programme should promote the use of phonics as the route to reading unknown words, before any subsequent comprehension strategies are applied. It should not encourage children to guess unknown words from clues such as pictures or context, rather than first applying phonic knowledge and skills. It should not include lists of high frequency words or any other words for children to learn as whole shapes ‘by sight’. The focus should be on phonemes [\[footnote 2\]](#), and not on ‘consonant clusters’ (/s/+/p/+/l/ not /spl/) or ‘onset and rime’ (/c/+/a/+/t/ not c-at, m-at, b-at).

Note 2

Common exception (or ‘tricky’) words are those that include grapheme-phoneme correspondences (GPCs) that are an exception to those children have been taught., They include correspondences that are unusual and those that will be taught later in the programme (such as ‘said’ and ‘me’). Programmes should teach children to read and then spell the most common exception words, noting the part of a word that makes it an exception word. These words should be introduced gradually.

Note 3

At first, children should not be taught to join letters [\[footnote 3\]](#) or to start every letter ‘on the line’ with a ‘lead-in’, because these practices cause unnecessary difficulty for beginners. Children may be taught to join the letters in digraphs, but this is optional. (All resources designed for children to read should be in print).

Note 4

Direct teaching sessions should involve a routine so that teachers and children get to know what is coming next and minimum time is spent explaining new activities. Teaching and learning activities should be interesting and engaging but firmly focused on intensifying the learning associated with the phonic goal. Where computer-based resources are included, these should support or supplement direct teaching by the teacher, but not replace it.

Note 5

At each step, children should have sufficient time to practise reading and writing with the grapheme-phoneme correspondences they have been taught, cumulatively. For this purpose, the programme should provide:

- a) words and texts for reading practice
- b) teaching activities for writing practice (letter formation and spelling)

Resources provided as part of the programme such as:

- flash cards
- friezes
- word cards
- grapheme wall posters

should match the GPCs and progressions in the programme.

Note 6

The texts and books children are asked to read independently should be fully decodable for them at every stage of the programme. This means they must be composed almost entirely of words made up of grapheme-phoneme correspondences that a child has learned up to that point. The only exceptions should be a small number of common exception words (see [note 2](#)) that the child has learned as part of the programme up to that point. In the early stages, even these should be kept to a minimum. Practising with such decodable texts will help to make sure children experience success and learn to rely on phonic strategies.

Note 7

If a complete programme relies on guidance on the teaching of phonics from one publisher and decodable books from another, the programme publisher must demonstrate:

- a) where matching decodable books can be sourced
- b) how these decodable books match the phonic progression of the programme

Additionally, the programme publisher must state how they communicate this information to schools. To ensure ongoing validity and currency, programmes should regularly update the recommended sources of decodable books that match their programme (including publisher details) and share this with schools.

Note 8

A phonics programme should not include teaching and learning activities that are:

- over elaborate
- difficult to manage
- take children too long to complete
- will likely make children focus on something other than reading or writing

For example, it should not include finding letters in sand, because children are likely to focus more on playing with sand than on learning about letters. Teaching and learning activities like this may be valuable for other areas of learning including developing language but are not suitable for core phonics provision.

A publisher should consider testing and trialling teaching and learning activities to ensure they are effective for all children, particularly those children with additional learning needs.

Note 9

Full guidance should include clear expectations for children's progress. If the programme is high quality, systematic and synthetic it will, by design, map incremental progression in phonic knowledge and skills. It should therefore enable teachers to conduct frequent and ongoing

assessment to track and record children's progress and to identify those children at, below or above expected levels, so that appropriate support can be provided.

Children who are at risk of falling behind need extra practice to consolidate and master the content of the programme. Programmes should provide guidance on how to support these children so that they keep up with their peers. Options for support could include 1 to 1 tutoring. They should not suggest or provide a different SSP programme for these children.

Note 10

High-quality training is an essential element of an SSP programme and is key to ensuring it is effectively implemented with fidelity and consistency within settings. A comprehensive programme of training must ensure continuous professional development of all those leading or delivering phonics teaching, assessing children's progress and supporting children who are at risk of falling behind the expected pace of the programme.

Programmes should demonstrate how they will ensure those delivering the training are appropriately qualified and that they have the capability, capacity and resources to provide on-going support to those teaching phonics in different settings. Programmes should also demonstrate a responsive approach to changing circumstances and an ability to adapt delivery methods when required.

Note for publishers of new programmes

Every programme must meet all of the essential criteria in order to achieve validation. However, the panel will ensure that expectations are proportionate for new programmes in the following areas:

- demonstrating that the programme has a fully published collection of matching resources including decodable books - fully decodable books are an essential part of a complete SSP programme, if a new programme is producing their own books (independently or in partnership with a publisher), they must provide clear evidence to the panel that these books are in the final stages of development, for example, through sharing full digital drafts for review, they must also provide a timeline for when these resources will be ready for use alongside the programme in schools
- demonstrating how the programme's training package is effectively supporting teachers and leaders to deliver the programme in schools
- providing details of three schools where the programme is being delivered and evidence of the

positive impact of the programme in those contexts

The panel may want to include a flag on the published list if it has used its discretion to include a programme whilst some of this evidence is awaited and may want to discuss this with the programme publisher before doing so.

Note for those bringing a programme based on Letters and Sounds to validation

The 2007 Letters and Sounds handbook, published under the previous government, has never been a full SSP programme.

For a number of years, effective teaching using Letters and Sounds has relied on schools themselves building a programme around the handbook. We recognise, however, that for many schools, especially those who want or need to improve their practice, 2007 Letters and Sounds is not fit for purpose and does not provide the support, guidance, resources or training needed.

We would therefore like to encourage anyone interested in creating full SSP programmes based on 2007 Letters and Sounds to be tested at validation to do so.

The name Letters and Sounds is not currently trademarked. However, we have an interest in ensuring that no one claims or gives the impression that their Letters and Sounds is somehow official or endorsed by the Department for Education. Therefore, anyone wishing to submit their programme for validation may use the name Letters and Sounds, but must preface this with either the name of the organisation, the individual producing their version of the programme or another distinguishing descriptor, for example, John Smith's Letters and Sounds. This also allows for schools to differentiate between programmes.

Timelines

The self-assessment form and evidence submitted by each programme will be reviewed by a small, independent panel with relevant expertise.

There will be 3 validation panels and there is a separate deadline for applications for each panel.

Panel	Deadline date
Panel 1	Deadline has passed

Panel 2	Deadline has passed
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Resubmission window	Deadline has passed
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Panel 3	Deadline has passed
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Resubmission window	Provisionally set for late June 2022
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Resubmission windows are only available to programmes who have already submitted their application in a previous validation round. Panel 3 (as with panels 1 and 2) was open for new submissions and resubmissions.

Some SSP programmes are currently validated through previous self-assessment (2011 to 2014) and 'Importance of Phonics catalogue' (2011 to 2013) routes. These programmes will remain validated – and remain eligible for English Hubs Programme and Accelerator Funding – until they are successful in the remaining 2022 validation rounds.

Appeals and complaints procedure

A systematic synthetic phonics programme must meet all 16 criteria to be added to the validated list. The role of the panel is to verify that each publisher has effectively demonstrated that their SSP programme meets each of the criteria.

They will do this using the following supporting evidence:

- self-assessment form
- examples of programme resources
- evidence from schools on the impact of the programme in action

The panel will consist of at least 3 people and the Chair will have the deciding vote if the decision is split. A DfE official will be present during all panel decision making meetings.

There will be no grading of responses and each criterion will be marked as fully met or not met.

If there are any ambiguities and further clarification is needed for the panel to make a decision, an official will contact the publisher on behalf of the panel to address the point of clarification. The publisher will have 5 working days to respond to this request after which point the criterion will be classified as not met if a response has not been received.

The validated list will not rank SSP programmes and no new applications will be considered for this round of validation after 31 March 2022.

Appeal of a decision

All SSP programmes that apply for validation will receive an electronic letter informing them of the panel's decision.

Panel assessments will not be made public, but summary, anonymised feedback will be provided to the publisher on request, in the case of self-assessments where the final outcome is that the criteria has not been met.

Publishers will have one opportunity to re-submit their programme for validation if it does not meet the criteria on its first submission.

In any re-submission, publishers will be expected to clearly outline where changes have been made to the programme and to demonstrate how the criteria has now been met.

If the decision of the panel remains that the publisher's programme has still not met the criteria, this decision will be final and no further appeal can be made.

Complaints about the process

Any complaints about the process should be sent to phonics.validation@education.gov.uk.

When we receive a complaint, we will immediately refer it to an appropriate member of staff who will then carry out an investigation. We will:

- reply in writing, or by telephone, within 10 working days from when we receive your complaint
- let you know if it is not possible for us to fully respond to you within this time and tell you what we are doing to deal with your complaint, when you can expect the full reply and from whom
- acknowledge where things could have been done better and tell you what we will do to avoid the same thing happening again - equally, if we don't agree with your complaint, we will let you know why

What to do if you aren't satisfied

The full reply to your complaint will include details of who to contact next if you think we haven't dealt with it properly. This will normally be an appropriate senior departmental official. That is the final stage of review for any complaint at the DfE.

Next steps

Once a programme has passed validation, the name of the programme will be published on GOV.UK.

We are currently exploring options for the frequency with which new programmes will be able to bring an application to be considered for validation beyond this round and will provide an update when further information is available on this.

Please use the phonics.validation@education.gov.uk email address for any questions about validation or for further information about appeals or complaints.

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1. This should include providing examples of adapted teaching approaches and materials that accommodate the learning needs of children with special educational needs and/or disabilities where required. This could include, for example, editable large dice, small magnetic whiteboards with magnetic letters as well as phoneme frames, foam magnetic letters and flash cards. [↩](#)
 2. Focus on phonemes includes those few cases where a letter or letters form a unit corresponding to two phonemes, e.g., 'x' as /k+s/ in 'box', 'ew' as /y+oo/ in 'few', 'qu' as /k+w/ in 'queen'. [↩](#)
 3. Children may be taught simple exit strokes for letters that end 'on the line' (a, d, h, i, k, l, m, n, t, u). [↩](#)

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