

Reading the data:

What can quantitative analyses tell us about the national impacts of the phonics screening check?

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This publication includes analysis of the National Pupil Database (NPD):

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/national-pupil-database>

The Department for Education is responsible for the collation and management of the NPD and is the Data Controller of NPD data. Any inferences or conclusions derived from the NPD in this publication are the responsibility of the Education Policy Institute and not the Department for Education.

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Executive summary

Supporting and enabling pupils' journeys in learning to read is one of the most critical roles of the education system. This report contributes to the evidence on potential impacts of the phonics screening check (PSC) on children's reading development, attainment and experiences during primary school. Because the PSC was introduced to all pupils nationally at the same time, in 2012, it is impossible to perform a definitive causal quantitative national evaluation of its impacts. Nevertheless, it is important to consider all evidence on the consequences of the check, because it is a key policy in teaching children to read and raising literacy skills.

Therefore, in this report, we build on previous descriptive evaluations of the PSC using the National Pupil Database (NPD). We look at what the data can tell us about children's reading and writing attainment at the end of key stage 1 and key stage 2, before and after the check was introduced. We look also at patterns of recorded provision for special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) over the same period. We test whether there is any support in this data for the hypothesis that the PSC has intervened to improve the reading of children in England.

Our analyses map the data for ten national cohorts: those who were in year 1 (the school year in which the PSC is undertaken) in 2009, through to those in year 1 in 2018. We therefore reach back before the check's introduction in 2012, and forward to the years after it had been established.

Our key findings are set out below.

Overall PSC pass rates:

- In line with other 'gaps' during primary school, children not registered for Free School Meals (FSM), autumn-born children, and girls have consistently been more likely to 'pass' the check.
- But in contrast to other literacy-related attainment 'gaps' during early primary school, there is little difference in the chances of 'passing' the check between

children recorded with English as an additional language (EAL) and those whose first language is English.

Trends in key stage 2 reading:

- Since the introduction of the PSC, children's subsequent results for key stage 2 (KS2) reading at the end of primary school have risen and then fallen (71 per cent overall reaching the 'expected level' in 2017; 75 per cent in 2018; and 73 per cent in 2019). Before the introduction of the PSC, they had risen from 84 per cent to 89 per cent between 2011 and 2015. They re-set in 2016 to 66 per cent, due to the introduction of new KS2 assessments. The 2017 KS2 cohort were the first to have taken the PSC, in 2012.
- As would be expected, children who 'passed' the PSC are more likely to go on to reach the 'expected level' in KS2 reading than those who 'failed'.

Trends in key stage 1 reading and writing:

- After the introduction of the PSC, an existing general upward trend in the proportion of children meeting the 'expected standard' in key stage 1 (KS1) reading continued, though at a slower and stalling rate compared to that before the introduction of the check. In the three cohorts immediately before the PSC's introduction, after controlling for pupil and school factors, 85 per cent (2010), 86 per cent (2011), then 88 per cent (2012) met the 'expected standard;' in the three cohorts immediately afterwards, 90 per cent (2013), 91 per cent (2014), and then 91 per cent (2015).¹
- As would be expected, children who 'passed' the PSC are more likely than those who 'failed' to go on to the 'expected standard' for KS1 reading.
- After the introduction of the PSC, an existing upward trend in the proportion of children meeting the 'expected standard' for KS1 writing becomes slightly steeper compared to that before the introduction of the check. However, this difference disappears once pupil and school factors are accounted for. In the three cohorts immediately before the PSC's introduction, 81 per cent (2010), 82 per cent (2011), then 84 per cent (2012) met the 'expected standard'; in the three cohorts

¹ Department for Education (2015a)

immediately afterwards, 86 per cent (2013), 87 per cent (2014), and then 89 per cent (2015) met the 'standard.'

Overall, there are no discontinuities – breaks in the general trend – or other patterns in attainment results at KS1 and KS2 that provide evidence that the PSC has improved national average levels of reading or literacy skills.

Trends in attainment gaps:

We also look at 'gaps' between different pupil groups, in case impacts have played out differently according to varying characteristics, and find:

- There is no evidence that attainment 'gaps' at KS2 reading for lower/higher attaining groups of children (according to FSM, birth season, gender) closed after the introduction of the PSC.
- Gaps by gender appear to widen slightly.
- After the introduction of the PSC, an existing trend of narrowing of 'gaps' for KS1 reading continued at a rate similar to that previous to the introduction of the check.
- After the introduction of the PSC, an existing trend of narrowing of 'gaps' for KS1 writing also continued at a rate similar to that previous to the introduction of the check.

So again, patterns of KS1 and KS2 attainment between higher and lower-attaining groups do not provide any evidence that the PSC has improved national average levels of reading or literacy skills, or contributed to a narrowing of reading and writing gaps among primary-aged pupils.

Trends in pupils being recorded with SEND:

Lastly, we look at whether there has been a shift in patterns of pupils being newly recorded with SEND in the year following the PSC (year 2) since its introduction. We hypothesise that this may have happened because the SEND Code of Practice states that teachers should 'identify pupils making less than expected progress given their age' and support them through SEND provision.² The PSC is intended to flag those children who have not 'learnt

² Department for Education (2015b)

phonic decoding to an age-appropriate standard,³ and to ensure they receive additional support. So, it is feasible that the introduction of the PSC may have resulted in an observable shift in the children identified with SEND in the NPD.

Against a backdrop of an overall fall in the numbers of children being newly recorded with SEND in year 2, we find:

- There is some evidence that the introduction of the PSC may be associated with a small shift in the chances of children being recorded with SEND.
- Specifically, children who ‘fail’ the check may be more likely to be newly recorded with SEND in year 2 than they would have been in the pre-PSC years.
- Correspondingly, children who ‘pass’ the check may be less likely to be newly recorded with SEND in year 2 than they would have been in the pre-PSC years.

We find no evidence that the apparent shift in patterns of recorded SEND support results in improved KS2 reading attainment.

Teacher surveys:

To complement these analyses of the NPD, we commissioned TeacherTapp to ask new questions of primary teachers through their daily survey phone app (flagged as ‘EPI-commissioned’).⁴ We also obtained TeacherTapp data from previous questions on phonics and the PSC for reanalyses (flagged as ‘TeacherTapp archive’).

We find:

- When asked their view on the PSC, the most common response from the options provided to surveyed teachers was that it ‘should be scrapped’ (39 per cent). However, 14 per cent said ‘It should be kept as it is now,’ and 24 per cent said, ‘A phonics check should be kept, but with significant changes.’⁵ This suggests that about half of the surveyed teachers who responded substantively perceived the check essentially negatively, while half supported its retention in some form.

³ Standards and Testing Agency (2012)

⁴ https://teachertapp.co.uk/school-surveys/?gclid=CjwKCAjwi_exBhA8EiwA_kU1MkC45z2JTPanWXESGHR90nl50DLUQdaGw0XVvHeiFbEQ5wEMEpjNgRoCSVgQAvD_BwE

⁵ TeacherTapp archive

- Around a quarter (27 per cent) of surveyed teachers reported that the PSC leads to ‘neglect [of] other curriculum areas that are important,’ while 15 per cent stated that the PSC ‘encourages us to focus on teaching the most important things.’⁶
- When asked about the amount of lesson time spent on phonics in the fortnight leading up to the check, 30-60 minutes a day was the most common response.
- Reported time spent varied according to other factors: older teachers, those in schools rated ‘outstanding’ by Ofsted, and those in schools with fewer FSM-registered pupils tended to spend less lesson time on phonics in the weeks leading up to the check.⁷
- Many surveyed teachers reported that their school teaches reading through both synthetic phonics and comprehension skills and language (37 per cent) – but a substantial proportion (33 per cent) reported a dominant focus on teaching synthetic phonics.⁸
- Most respondent teachers reported that reading comprehension is taught separately to phonics, at least to some extent.⁹
- Teachers reported using results from the PSC for various purposes, including ‘ability’ grouping, referrals to the special educational needs and/or disabilities coordinator (SENDCO), and decisions about pupils’ SEND.¹⁰
- While some teachers participating in previous evaluations have reported finding the PSC a useful tool, others have raised concerns that the PSC does not accurately reflect all pupils’ skills; that it does not provide new, useful information; and that it can lead to a focus on synthetic phonics at the expense of other reading strategies.¹¹

⁶ TeacherTapp archive

⁷ EPI-commissioned

⁸ TeacherTapp archive

⁹ TeacherTapp archive

¹⁰ EPI-commissioned

¹¹ Walker et al (2015)

Policy recommendations

As discussed below, in the introduction to this report, neither national data from the PIRLS study, previous research using the NPD, nor the new analyses here, find a discernible positive impact of the PSC on the reading levels of primary aged children in England. Some other research has questioned whether it is optimal as a national strategy in its current form, and suggested that it can have unintended impacts. The views of teachers appear mixed.

Strategy and strategic assessments for reading should be honed and informed by evidence to best serve children. Because reading is so important, we therefore recommend:

- The Department for Education should commission and publish a fresh, evidence-informed review of whether the phonics screening check is an effective national intervention that helps children learn to read.
- The Department for Education should transparently and widely consider the costs and benefits of the check, and of alternatives: including no check, and other strategies for supporting children's reading development.
- This review should be undertaken by independent experts with a range of knowledge, including of children's reading and literacy development, and of practices and pedagogies within primary schools.
- This review might be undertaken alongside and inform, or form part of, the overarching Curriculum and Assessment Review now planned by the new government.¹²

¹² Department for Education (2024a)

Introduction

The importance of reading

Reading is a crucial foundational skill. Reading:

...enables children to not only learn across the curriculum but also to access numerous aspects of daily life, influencing the opportunities that they have available to them in the future.¹³

Not only does fluency in reading underpin children's academic progress and future prospects: it contributes to a multitude of experiences and outcomes. These include wellbeing, pleasure and enjoyment, knowledge and understanding, information about the wider world, and insight and access to critical thought and imaginings.¹⁴

Therefore, supporting and enabling pupils' journeys in learning to read is one of the most important roles of the school system.

Policy and strategy: the phonics screening check

The statutory phonics screening check (PSC) was introduced nationally for all year 1 pupils in 2012.¹⁵ The Department for Education's stated intention is for the PSC to support children's progress towards fluency in reading, and to improve literacy, by monitoring their 'progress in developing word-reading skills.'¹⁶ It is part of the Department's strategy to prioritise 'systematic synthetic phonics teaching programmes'¹⁷ as the route through which children should initially establish foundational reading skills:

Phonics is a highly effective method of teaching word reading. Almost all children who receive high-quality phonics teaching will learn the skills they need to tackle new words.

¹³ Education Endowment Foundation (2022)

¹⁴ Department for Education (2012a)

¹⁵ Note that there was also a small pilot in 300 schools in the previous year (Department for Education, 2011), but information on this pilot (e.g. on participant schools) is not available to researchers.

¹⁶ Standards and Testing Agency (2012)

¹⁷ Department for Education (2023a)

They can then go on to read any kind of text fluently and confidently, and to read for enjoyment (Department for Education, 2023).¹⁸

The purpose of the PSC 'is to confirm whether each child has learnt phonic decoding to an age-appropriate standard' (Department for Education, 2012; Standards and Testing Agency, 2017).¹⁹ Schools are required to 'ensure any pupils...who do not meet the expected standard continue to receive support in phonics' (Standards and Testing Agency, 2024).²⁰

Evidence on the impacts of the Phonics screening check

Reading scores for children in England in the most recent wave of the Progress International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) have been drawn upon by the Department for Education in its assessment of whether the PSC is working effectively, as intended. The Department has concluded that PIRLS provides evidence of positive impact:

'This success follows on from a series of reforms to improve standards in reading including the introduction of the Phonics screening check' (Department for Education, 2023).

PIRLS results, the Department states:

...[show] that our approach is working. Thanks to...the introduction of the phonics screening check - more children are reading confidently and reaching their potential.²¹

PIRLS is administered by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. A sample of pupils from each participant country in a given year complete a reading assessment designed with the intention of being comparable across place and time. PIRLS cycles take place every five years, and in England, the sample is of year 5 pupils.²²

¹⁸ Department for Education (2023b)

¹⁹ Department for Education (2012b); Standards and Testing Agency (2012)

²⁰ Department for Education (2024)

²¹ Department for Education (2023c)

²² Lindorff et al (2024)

Figure 1, below, shows mean overall reading scores for England from the PIRLS study. Because the PSC for year 1 children was introduced in 2012, and children take part in PIRLS in year 5, those sampled in the 2016 cycle were the first to have also taken the PSC.

Were the PSC to have intervened significantly as a lever for reading improvement, this might be reflected by a substantial rise in scores in 2016 and 2021, compared to previous years.

Instead, Figure 1 shows that it is children who were in year 5 in 2011 (who were in year 1 in 2007, well before the introduction of the PSC) whose score is noticeably different compared to the previous cycle.

In addition, it is important to note that most differences here are proportionally very small, given the overall scale and range of scores (from a low of 529 to a high of 559). This is emphasised in the Department for Education's commissioned report on PIRLS results:

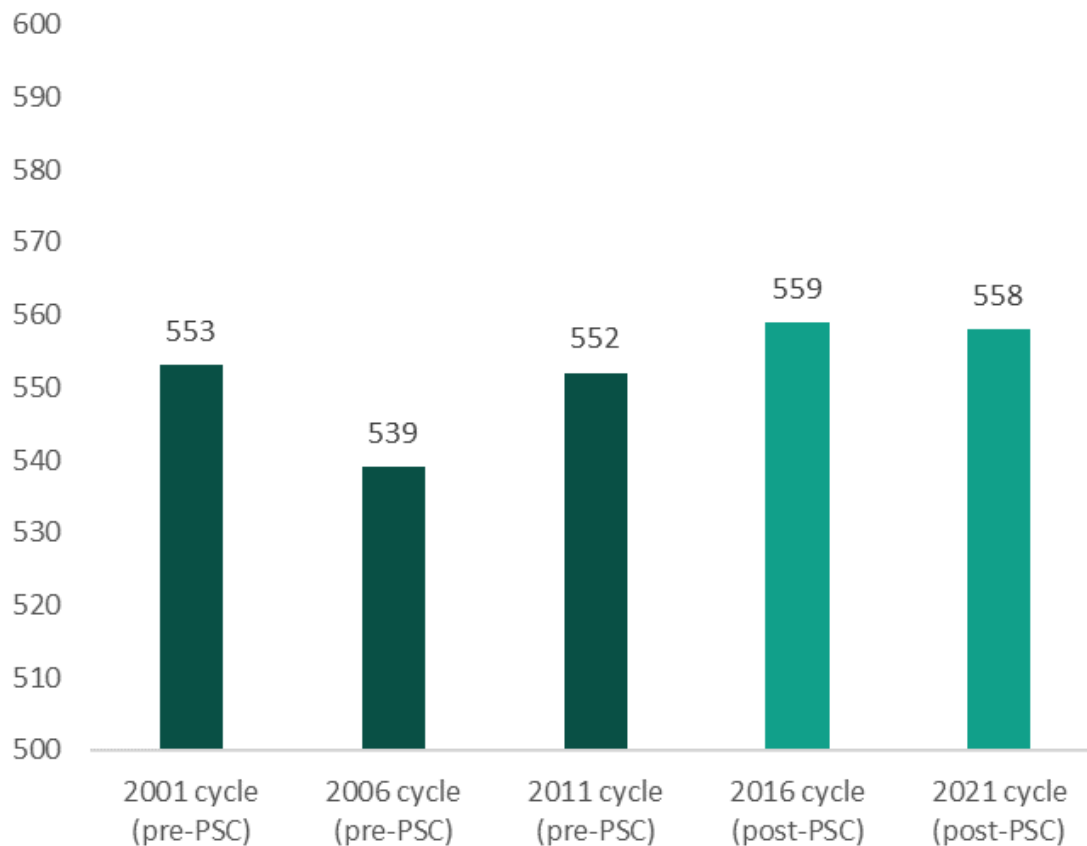
Comparing across all 5 cycles of PIRLS, England's overall score of 558 in PIRLS 2021 is significantly higher than England's score of 539 in PIRLS 2006, but not significantly different from performance in the 2001, 2011, and 2016 cycles. This means that any differences in England's overall performance scores between PIRLS 2021 and these 3 cycles should be interpreted with caution.²³

Given that the 2021 score is very close to the 2016 score, this demonstrates that there is little substantive variation between 2001, 2011, 2016 and 2021: 2006 is, for whatever reason, the anomalous low.²⁴

²³Lindorff et al (2024)

²⁴ Note that though '2021' is used here for consistency with other reporting, English pupils actually participated late in the '2021' cycle – in 2022.

Figure 1: PIRLS mean overall reading scores for England²⁵



As well as the reading skills assessment itself, PIRLS includes a pupil-completed questionnaire. It indicates attitudes towards, and experiences of, reading. The Department for Education’s latest analyses and reporting of these responses covers the 2011, 2016, and 2021 PIRLS cycles (because questions from the previous cycles lack comparability).

Though this is only three data points – so any trend should be treated with caution – the overall picture is one of a downward tendency: both in terms of pupils’ enjoyment of reading, and time spent reading outside of school. Figures 2 and 3 present selected illustrative results, and detailed findings can be seen in Lindorff et al, 2024.²⁶ Figure 2 shows a decrease in the percentage of pupils responding ‘agree a lot’ to the statement ‘I enjoy reading’, particularly among girls. Figure 3 shows an increase in the percentage reporting spending no time or less than half an hour reading outside of school each day (as opposed

²⁵ Source: Lindorff et al (2024)

²⁶ Lindorff et al (2024)

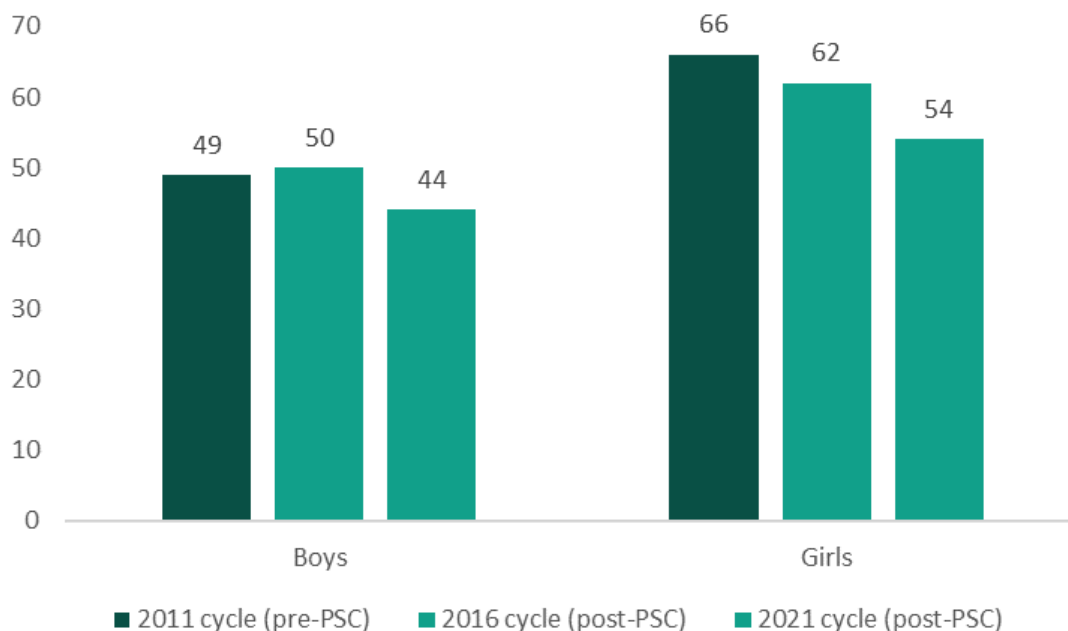
to the other response options, which range to ‘two hours or more.’), again, particularly among girls.

As enjoyment and participation in reading are an end in themselves, and a predictor of continued development of reading skills, and a predictor of success in terms of wider academic outcomes, this indication of a negative fall is concerning (Lindorff et al, 2024).²⁷

Any decline cannot of course causally be attributed on the basis of the data in PIRLS to the introduction of the PSC, because many factors may influence it. But at the same time, this pattern provides no support for the hypothesis that the PSC is contributing positively to children’s reading development.

Therefore, PIRLS results do not provide any indication that the PSC has positively impacted the reading skills of children in England. They do not provide evidence that the introduction of the PSC has improved English children’s reading: the efficacy of the PSC in relation to PIRLS results has yet to be demonstrated.

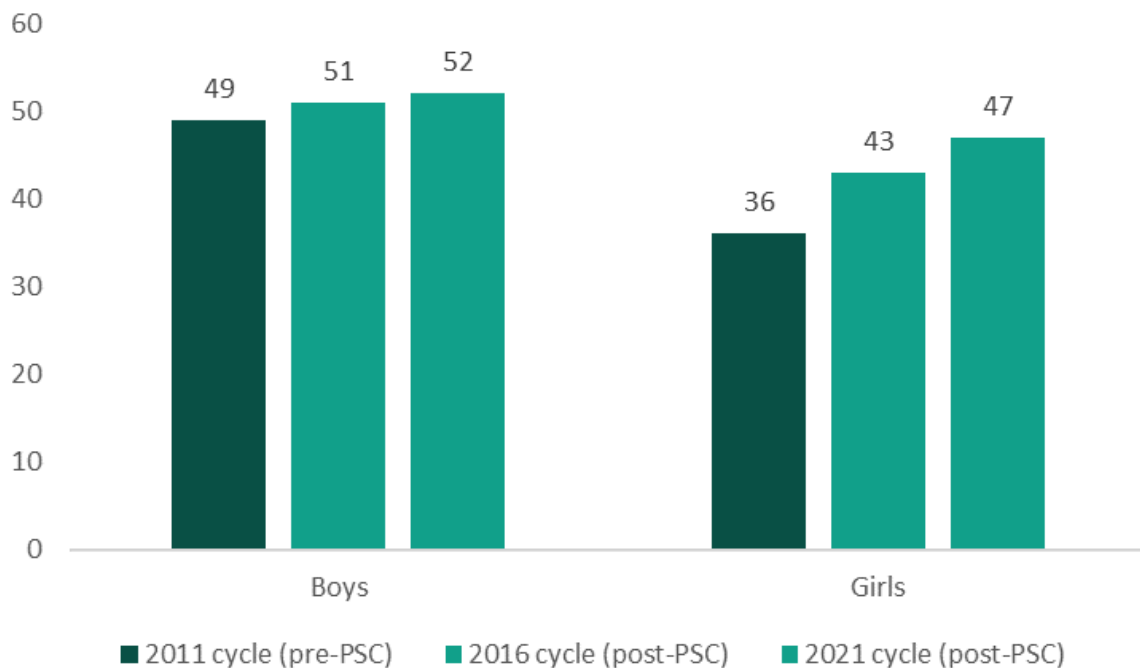
Figure 2: Percentage of boys and girls in England responding ‘agree a lot’ to the statement ‘I enjoy reading’ in PIRLS questionnaire²⁸



²⁷Lindorff et al (2024); Sullivan and Brown (2013)

²⁸ Source: Lindorff et al (2024)

Figure 3: Percentage of boys and girls in England reporting less than half an hour spent reading outside school each day in PIRLS questionnaire²⁹



In contrast to conclusions about the effectiveness of the PSC from the Department for Education, a variety of researchers have suggested that strategy in this area and the PSC in particular are not optimally effective in teaching reading.³⁰ For example, researchers from the UCL Institute of Education have suggested that, while ‘phonics teaching in general is one important component in the teaching of reading,’ their evidence review indicates a lack of support for England’s ‘phonics orientation to the teaching of reading’ – of which the PSC is one component.³¹

Research has also suggested that the PSC can have unintended consequences. A survey by Sheffield Hallam University for the National Literacy Association, for instance, indicated that teachers and headteachers felt that it, ‘is not fit for purpose,’ ‘impedes successful readers,’ and ‘misidentifies pupils.’³²

²⁹ Source: Source: Lindorff et al (2024)

³⁰ e.g. Bradbury (2020); Carter (2019); Carter (2020); Castles et al (2018); Darnell et al; Ellis and Moss (2013); Gibson and England (2016); Glazzard (2016); Glazzard (2017); Glazzard and Stones (2020); Grundin (2017); Patmore (2021); Shapiro and Solity (2015); Wyse and Goswami (2008)

³¹ UCL Institute of Education (2022)

³² UK Literacy Association (2012)

There is overall a dearth of aggregate quantitative national evidence on what changes have plausibly resulted from the introduction of the PSC in 2012, and on whether it is effective as a national reading policy. As detailed above, PIRLS does not provide evidence that it has improved reading. Earlier research commissioned by the Department for Education, using the National Pupil Database (NPD), and published in 2015, concluded:

The evaluation did not find any evidence of improvements in pupils' literacy performance, or in progress, that could be clearly attributed to the introduction of the PSC. However, no conclusive statement can be made because of...methodological limitations...³³

The current research

As noted in this 2015 evaluation, it has been difficult to estimate impacts because of methodological limitations. The PSC was rolled out to all children in England simultaneously. Therefore, there is no obvious, equivalent control group for comparison. We cannot definitively know what would have taken place should the PSC not have been introduced.

However, despite these restrictions on possible research, and because reading and the development of early reading skills – and therefore policy, practice, and interventions in this area – are so important, we reconsider the potential impacts of the PSC in this report. Using the NPD, we contribute to and update the national evidence on the PSC, and explore what can possibly be known, and what cannot be known, through quantitative data, about its impacts on reading.

We build on recommendations from the 2015 Department for Education evaluation that:

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.

...and...

³³ Walker et al (2015); see also Walker (2015)

It would be of interest to examine the impact of the PSC on KS1 reading and KS1 writing separately.³⁴

Analyses here cannot result in definitively casual conclusions. But like interpretations of data from the PIRLS study, and the Department for Education's previous commissioned investigation using the NPD, they can indicate whether there is evidence and support for the hypotheses that the PSC has improved the reading of children in England – or not.

³⁴ Walker et al (2015)

Analytical strategy

National Pupil Database analyses

The main analyses presented in this paper are of the National Pupil Database (NPD). This is a census of all children in England in state-funded education. De-identified individual-level records are available for use by accredited researchers within the ONS Secure Research Service. Only aggregate, anonymised results can be removed from the secure environment and reported.

The NPD contains records including children's results in assessments; their individual and family-level characteristics; and the school they attend. In these analyses we use information recorded against the following items:

- Phonics screening check (PSC) results;
- Key stage 2 reading results;
- Key stage 1 reading results;
- Key stage 1 writing results;
- Early Years Foundation Stage Profile results;
- Eligibility for free school meals;
- Gender;
- Home language ;
- Ethnicity;
- Special Educational Needs and Disabilities;
- School attended;
- Month and year of birth; and
- Academic year.

We address several questions, to contribute to the overall indicative evidence on whether there are any observable impacts of the PSC. Our strategy is thoroughly to explore the available data from various different angles. By doing this, we both add to the evidence, and demonstrate what the data can – and cannot – tell us.

Methods used include descriptive statistics, regression modelling, and propensity score matching, and are noted throughout where relevant.

Our questions are:

Scene-setting

1. What percentages of children have 'passed' and 'failed' the PSC in the years since its introduction?
 - a. How do these percentages vary according to key pupil characteristics?

Overall patterns of reading and writing attainment

1. How have patterns of reading attainment at key stage 2 (KS2) changed over the years before and after the introduction of the PSC?
 - a. How have these patterns of reading attainment varied among children who 'passed' and 'failed' the PSC, in the years after its introduction?
2. How have patterns of reading attainment at key stage 1 (KS1) changed over the years before and after the introduction of the PSC?
 - a. How have these patterns of reading attainment varied among children who 'passed' and 'failed' the PSC, in the years after its introduction?
3. How have patterns of writing attainment at KS1 changed over the years before and after the introduction of the PSC?
 - a. How have these patterns of writing attainment varied among children who 'passed' and 'failed' the PSC, in the years after its introduction?

Overall patterns of reading and writing attainment, controlling for pupil-characteristics

1. Is there a shift in the proportions of similar pupils meeting the 'expected standard' for reading at KS2 that corresponds to the introduction of the PSC?
2. Is there a shift in the proportions of similar pupils meeting the 'expected standard' for reading at KS1 that corresponds to the introduction of the PSC?
3. Is there a shift in the proportions of similar pupils meeting the 'expected standard' for writing at KS1 that corresponds to the introduction of the PSC?

Attainment ‘gaps’

1. Do ‘gaps’ in KS2 reading attainment between lower-and higher-attaining pupil groups close more rapidly after the introduction of the PSC?
2. Do ‘gaps’ in KS1 reading attainment between lower-and higher-attaining pupil groups close more rapidly after the introduction of the PSC?
3. Do ‘gaps’ in KS1 writing attainment between lower- and higher-attaining pupil groups close more rapidly after the introduction of the PSC?

Recording children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), and relationships between this and KS2 reading attainment

1. Are similar children who took and ‘failed’ the PSC more likely subsequently to be newly recorded with SEND in year 2 than counterparts in the years before the check was introduced?
2. Are similar children who took and ‘passed’ the PSC less likely subsequently to be newly recorded with SEND in year 2 than counterparts in the years before the check was introduced?
 - a. Do any differences pre- and post-PSC in the likelihood of newly-recorded SEND in year 2 vary according to key pupil characteristics?
 - b. Do any differences pre- and post-PSC in the likelihood of newly-recorded SEND in year 2 vary according to school composition?
3. Are children newly recorded with SEND in year 2 after introduction of the PSC more likely to rise up the distribution of KS2 reading attainment than those newly recorded with SEND in year 2 before introduction of the PSC?
 - a. Do any patterns here vary according to key pupil characteristics?
 - b. Do any patterns here vary according to school composition?

Teacher surveys

After presenting analyses of the NPD, to complement findings, we also present survey data on teachers’ perceptions of the PSC. Teachers are at the heart of implementing the PSC, and therefore in a position of knowledge and experience: regarding the PSC’s employment and perceived impacts, and regarding practices in supporting children’s progress in learning to

read. Including their voices here provides further context to our analyses of the NPD and aids interpretation.

Results

Scene-setting

What percentages of children have ‘passed’ and ‘failed’ the PSC in the years since its introduction?

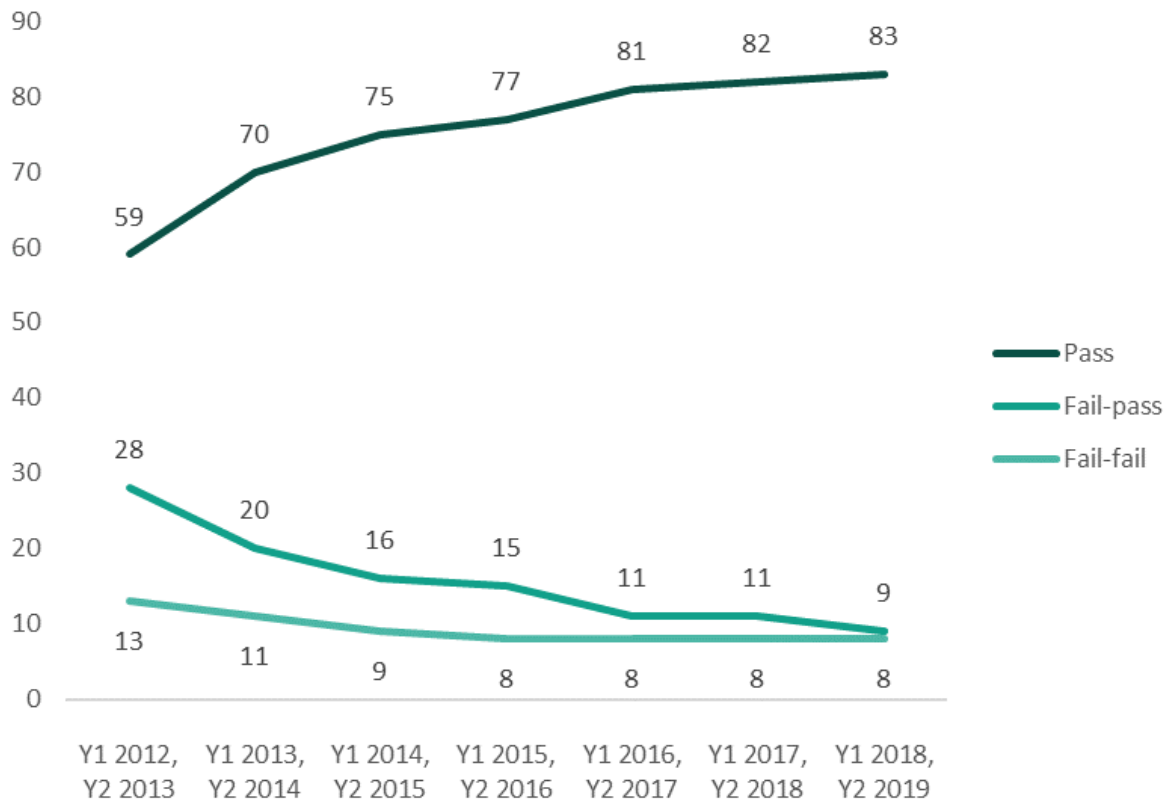
Children are assessed using the PSC in the summer of year 1. At this point, they can ‘pass,’ or ‘fail.’ Those who ‘fail’ are required to re-take the assessment in year 2. Again, at this point, they can ‘pass,’ or ‘fail.’ Therefore, there are three possible outcomes of the check: ‘pass,’ ‘fail-pass,’ or ‘fail-fail.’

Figure 4 shows the percentage of children present in year 1 who attained each outcome, in the years spanning the introduction of the PSC in 2012 to 2019, the final year with data before the Covid pandemic.³⁵

In the first cohort subject to the check – those in year 1 in 2012, and year 2 in 2013, 59 per cent ‘passed’ first time, in year 1; 28 per cent ‘passed’ second time, in year 2; and 13 per cent ‘failed’ both times. By the last cohort shown here – those in year 1 in 2018, and year 2 in 2019, 83 per cent ‘passed’ first time; 9 per cent ‘passed’ in year 2, and 8 per cent ‘failed’ both times.

³⁵ Children taking the PSC in year 2 who did not take it in year 1 (for example, because they have newly entered the school system), are not included here.

Figure 4: Percentage of pupils with each PSC outcome by cohort³⁶



How do these percentages vary according to key pupil characteristics?

Most of the patterns of attainment in the PSC vary by key pupil characteristics in ways that align with other patterns of attainment and ‘gaps’ in early primary school. For example, Figures 5a, 5b and 5c show that children recorded as eligible for FSM³⁷ are less likely to ‘pass,’ and more likely to ‘fail-pass’ and ‘fail-fail.’

Figures 6a, 6b, and 6c show that relatively older, autumn-born children are more likely than relatively younger, summer-born children to ‘pass,’ and less likely to ‘fail-pass’ and ‘fail-fail.’

³⁶ Source: author’s analysis of the National Pupil Database

³⁷ In year 1

Figure 5a: Percent with PSC 'pass,' by FSM

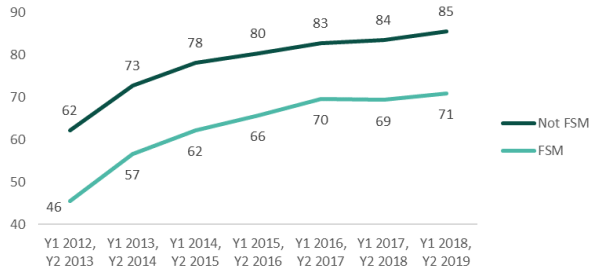


Figure 5b: Percent with PSC 'fail-pass,' by FSM

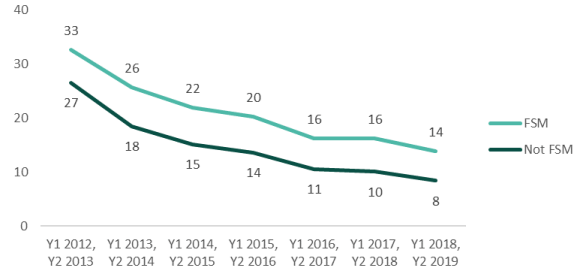


Figure 5c: Percent with PSC 'fail-fail,' by FSM

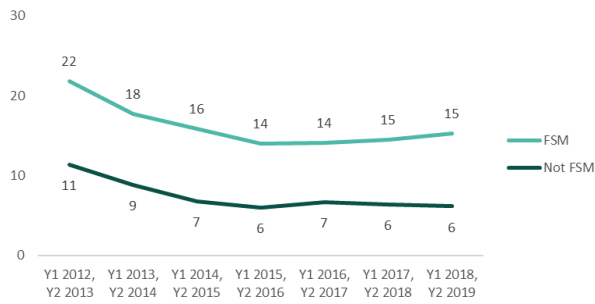


Figure 6a: Percent with PSC 'pass,' by birth season

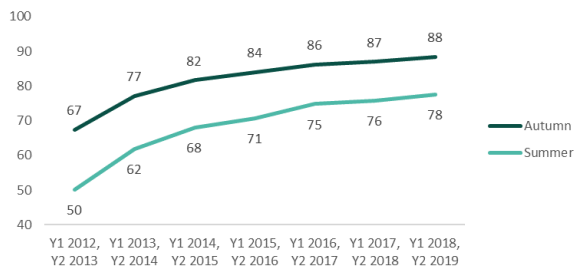


Figure 6b: Percent with PSC 'fail-pass,' by birth season

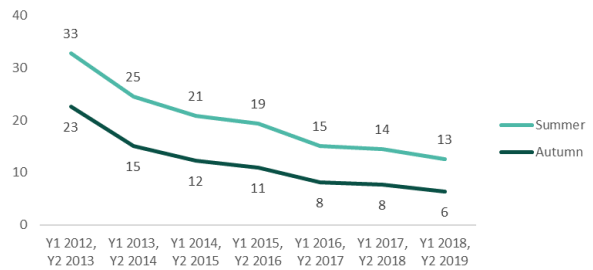
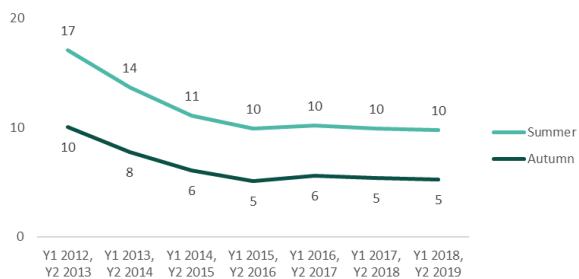


Figure 6c: Percent with PSC ‘fail-fail,’ by birth season



Figures 7a, 7b, and 7c show that girls are more likely than boys to ‘pass,’ and less likely to ‘fail-pass’ and ‘fail-fail.’

Figure 7a: Percent with PSC ‘pass,’ by gender

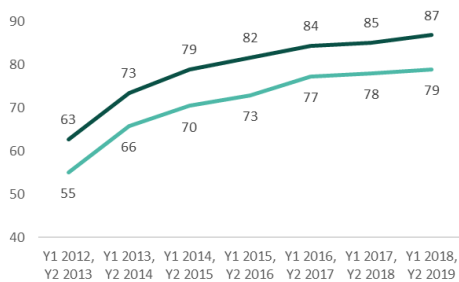


Figure 7b: Percent with PSC ‘fail-pass,’ by gender

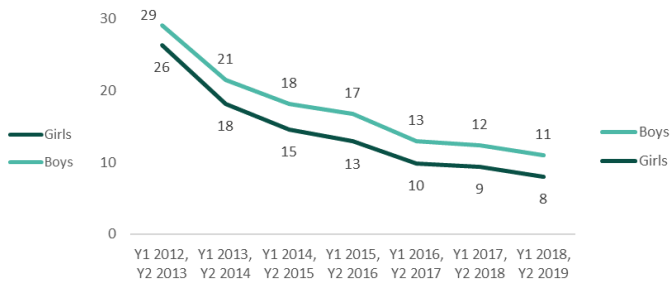
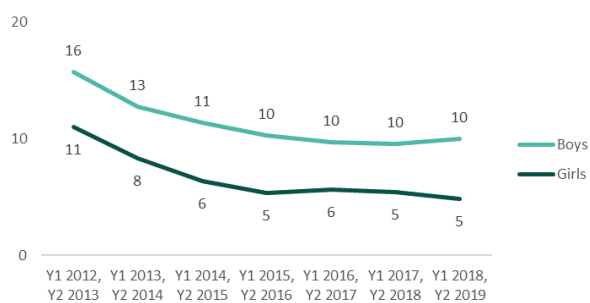


Figure 7c: Percent with PSC ‘fail-fail,’ by gender



However, Figures 8a, 8b and 8c show that pupils recorded with English as an Additional Language (EAL)³⁸ have extremely similar chances of ‘passing’ and ‘fail-passing’ the PSC

³⁸ In year 1

compared to those speaking English only. It is English-only speakers who have slightly higher chances, across years, of ‘failing’ the PSC in both year 1 and year 2.

This contrasts to results from assessments in the Foundation Stage Profile (FSP) the year previous to the PSC, in Reception – where EAL-recorded pupils are less likely to be assessed as having reached a ‘good level of development’ (GLD).³⁹ Notably, it also contrasts to recorded attainment at KS1, in year 2: where EAL-recorded children are scored lower at reading (and writing) than their English-only speaking peers.⁴⁰ As EAL-recorded children, on average, have chances at least equal to English-only-speakers of ‘passing’ the PSC, but go on subsequently to be scored lower in KS1 assessments of reading (and writing),⁴¹ this raises questions about the extent to which the PSC picks up the most important elements of reading and literacy development, that are key to children’s progress.

Figure 8a: Percent with PSC ‘pass,’ by EAL⁴² Figure 8b: Percent with PSC ‘fail-pass,’ by EAL⁴³

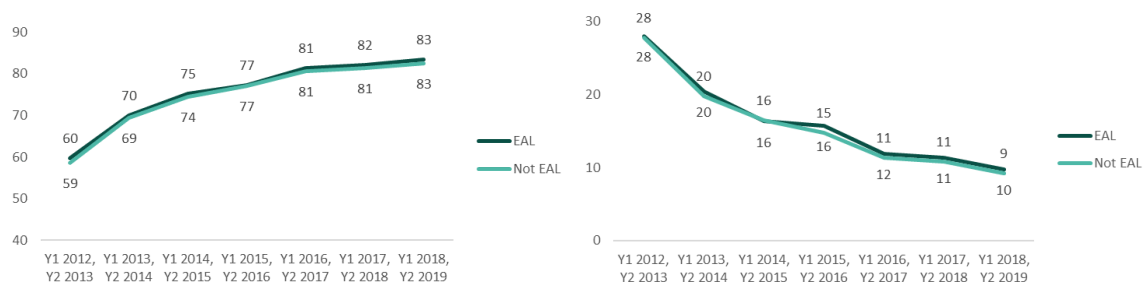
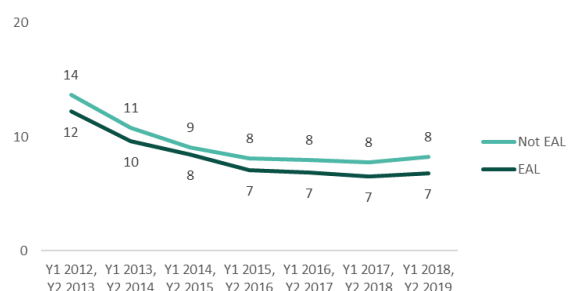


Figure 8c: Percent with PSC ‘fail-fail,’ by EAL⁴⁴



³⁹ Department for Education (2019a)

⁴⁰ Department for Education (2019b)

⁴¹ Department for Education (2023d); Strand et al (2015)

⁴² Source: author’s analysis of the National Pupil Database

⁴³ Source: author’s analysis of the National Pupil Database

⁴⁴ Source: author’s analysis of the National Pupil Database

Next, we look more closely at ‘failing’ the PSC first time, in year 1, exploring which factor(s) are the dominant predictors of this outcome. We regress the characteristics above, together with children’s FSP results, in a linear probability model. The outcome is ‘failing’ (vs passing). Specifically, the predictors are:

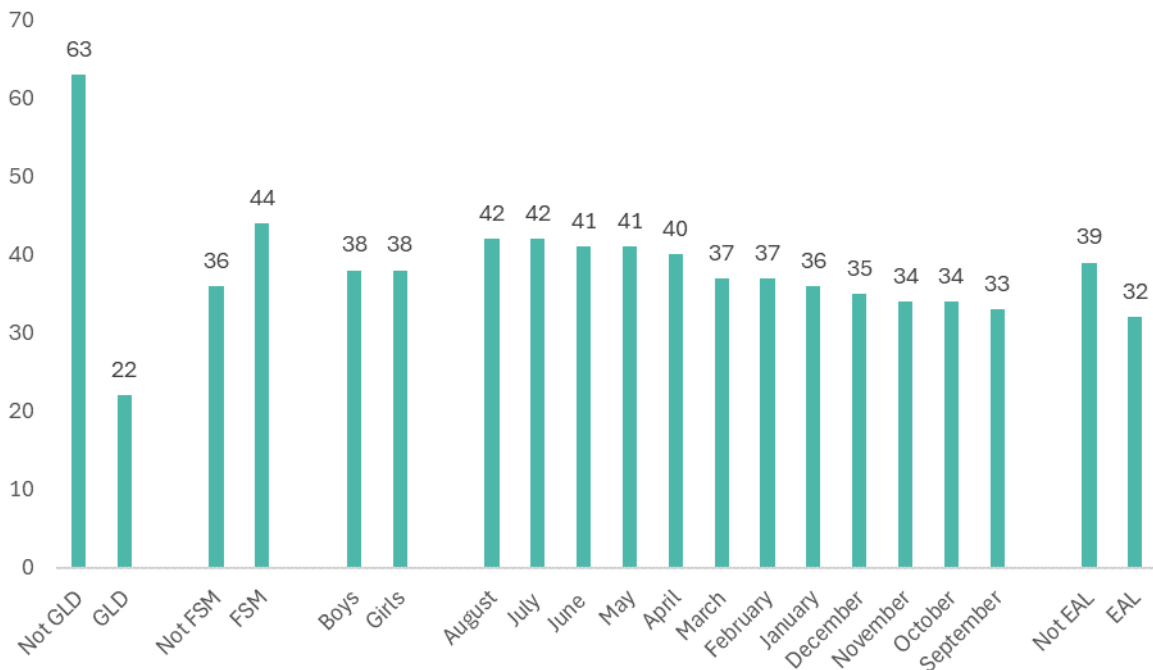
- FSM;
- Birth month;
- Gender;
- EAL; and
- FSP GLD.

Figure 9 shows that being assessed as having reached a GLD in the FSP is the most pronounced predictor of ‘passing’ the PSC in year 1, once all factors are considered together in this model. The relationships between other characteristics and ‘failing’ become less important, once the FSP GLD is taken into account.

According to these estimates (which use data from the first two PSC cohorts – those in year 1 in 2012 and 2013; N=1,215,849) – only around 22 per cent of those who get a ‘GLD’ go on to ‘fail’ the PSC. This compares to more than 60 per cent of those who are assessed as not reaching a ‘GLD.’ Once the GLD is taken into account, the difference between, for example, girls and boys is smaller.

This tendency holds in all years up to 2019. So, at the aggregate level, the FSP assessment provides a lot of the information intended to be gathered through the PSC, because children who ‘fail’ the FSP assessment are likely also to ‘fail’ the PSC.

Figure 9: Estimated percentage children with each characteristic failing the PSC in 2012 or 2013: taking each other characteristic into account



Section summary

- Increasing numbers of children have ‘passed’ the PSC in the years since its introduction.
- In line with other ‘gaps’ during primary school, non-FSM children, relatively older children (autumn-born children), and girls have consistently been more likely to ‘pass’ the check.
- But in contrast to other attainment ‘gaps’ during early primary school, there is little difference in chances of ‘passing’ the check between EAL children and those speaking English only.
- Being assessed as reaching a ‘good level of development’ in the FSP at the end of Reception is a strong predictor of subsequently ‘passing’ the PSC.

Overall patterns of reading and writing attainment

How have patterns of reading attainment at key stage 2 (KS2) changed over the years before and after the introduction of the PSC?

How have these patterns of reading attainment varied among children who ‘passed’ and ‘failed’ the PSC, in the years after its introduction?

Figure 10, below, shows the percentages of:

- All children in year 6;⁴⁵
- Children who ‘passed’ the PSC in year 1;
- Children who ‘failed’ the PSC in year 1 and ‘passed’ in year 2; and
- Children who ‘failed’ the PSC in year 1 and ‘failed’ again in year 2

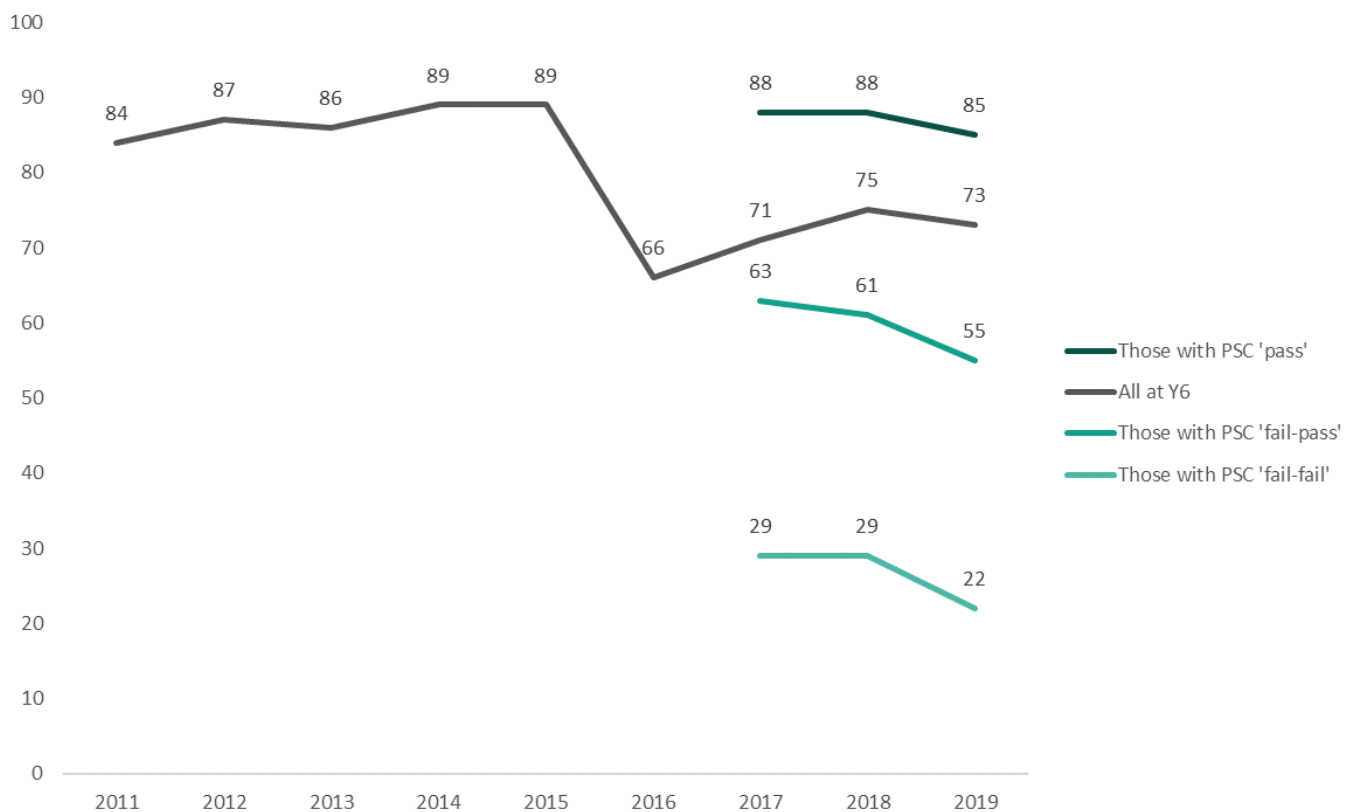
who achieve the ‘expected level’ in their KS2 reading national assessments at the end of primary school, each year.⁴⁶

Children in year 6 in 2017 were the first cohort to be subject to the PSC, in year 1 in 2012. The most notable change in the proportions of children assessed as at the ‘expected level’ for reading is on introduction of reformed KS2 assessments in 2016: this reflects the change in assessment, rather than measuring any underlying shift in children’s reading capabilities. The trend until 2016 is generally upwards: increasing numbers of pupils were assessed as reaching the ‘expected level’ to this point. From the break, at 2016, the trend is initially upwards once more – but the fourth year under the new assessment regime sees a dip in the percentage of children reaching the ‘expected level.’

⁴⁵ All children in year 6 are shown here for comparability to the pre-PSC years. Note that numbers for children who were present in both year 1 year 6 are very similar and make no difference to overall interpretation of patterns.

⁴⁶ Pre-2016, this is attaining a ‘level 4;’ post-2016, this is attaining the ‘expected level.’

Figure 10: Percentage of children at the 'expected level' for KS2 reading⁴⁷



Across the three cohorts who were subject to the PSC, children who 'passed' the check were most likely to go on to reach the 'expected level' for reading at KS2. In itself, this provides no causal indication of the PSC's efficacy as an intervention: it simply shows an expected correspondence between children's attainment at different points during primary school.

How have patterns of reading attainment at key stage 1 (KS1) changed over the years before and after the introduction of the PSC?

How have these patterns of reading attainment varied among children who 'passed' and 'failed' the PSC, in the years after its introduction?

Figure 11, below, shows the percentages of:

- All children in year 2;
- Children who 'passed' the PSC in year 1;

⁴⁷ Source: author's analysis of the National Pupil Database

- Children who ‘failed’ the PSC in year 1 and ‘passed’ in year 2; and
- Children who ‘failed’ the PSC in year 1 and ‘failed’ again in year 2

who were assessed by their teacher at KS1 as meeting the ‘expected standard’ in reading.

Children in year 2 in 2013 were the first to be subject to the PSC, in 2012. Again, there was a change of KS1 assessment in 2016, which disrupts the time-series: the change in proportions of children meeting the ‘expected standard’ pre- and post-2016 are not directly comparable.

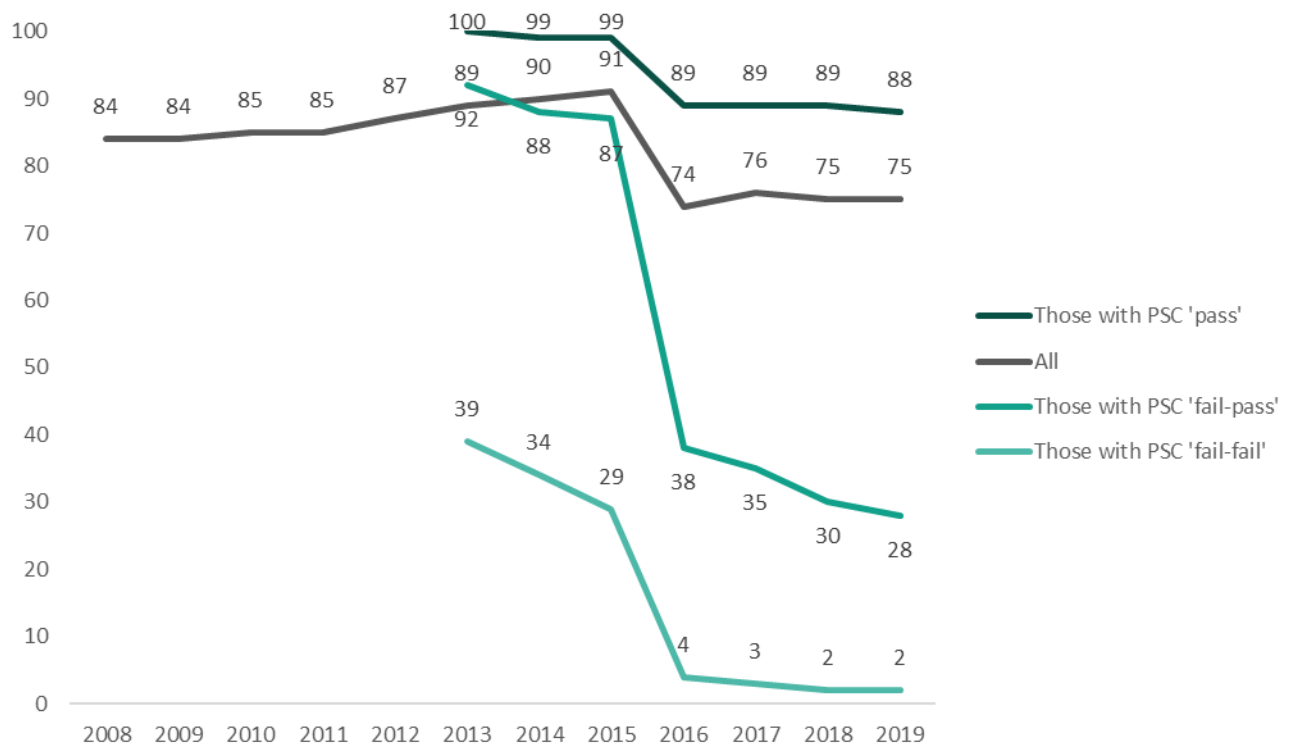
The trend to 2015 is generally upwards. The upwards trend is similar before and after the introduction of the PSC: from 85 per cent to 87 per cent of children meeting the ‘expected standard’ between 2010 and 2012; from 89 per cent to 91 per cent from 2013 to 2015. So, this provides no evidence that the introduction of the PSC improved reading levels (at least as assessed at this most proximal point). Were this to be the case, a sharper increase in the trajectory might be apparent.

In every year since the introduction of the PSC, children who ‘passed’ the check were most likely to go on to reach the ‘expected standard’ for reading at KS1 – like KS2. Again, this information in itself provides no causal indication of the PSC’s efficacy as an intervention.

It is interesting that there is a perfect correspondence in the first cohort subject to the PSC between ‘passing’ the check and reaching the ‘expected standard’ in KS1 reading, under the pre-2016 assessment regime. Like the strong correspondence shown earlier between FSP GLD attainment and passing the PSC, this highlights the similarity of the information picked up through different primary school assessments, and raises the question of how much additional useful information or formative value is added through implementing multiple different assessments at consecutive time points. It chimes with qualitative findings from the Department for Education’s 2015 evaluation that, among literacy coordinators, there was ‘a view that check results do not reveal anything of which teachers are unaware.’⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Walker et al (2015)

Figure 11: Percentage of children at the 'expected standard' for KS1 reading



How have patterns of writing attainment at KS1 changed over the years before and after the introduction of the PSC?

How have these patterns of writing attainment varied among children who 'passed' and 'failed' the PSC, in the years after its introduction?

We examine patterns of assessed writing attainment at KS1 separately to patterns of reading attainment, based on recommendations from the 2015 evaluation of the PSC published by the Department for Education (as noted earlier). The 2015 evaluation combined reading and writing KS1 scores, rather than analysing them separately, and advised that future research should 'examine the impact of the PSC on KS1 reading and KS1 writing separately.'⁴⁹

As for reading, Figure 12 shows the percentages of:

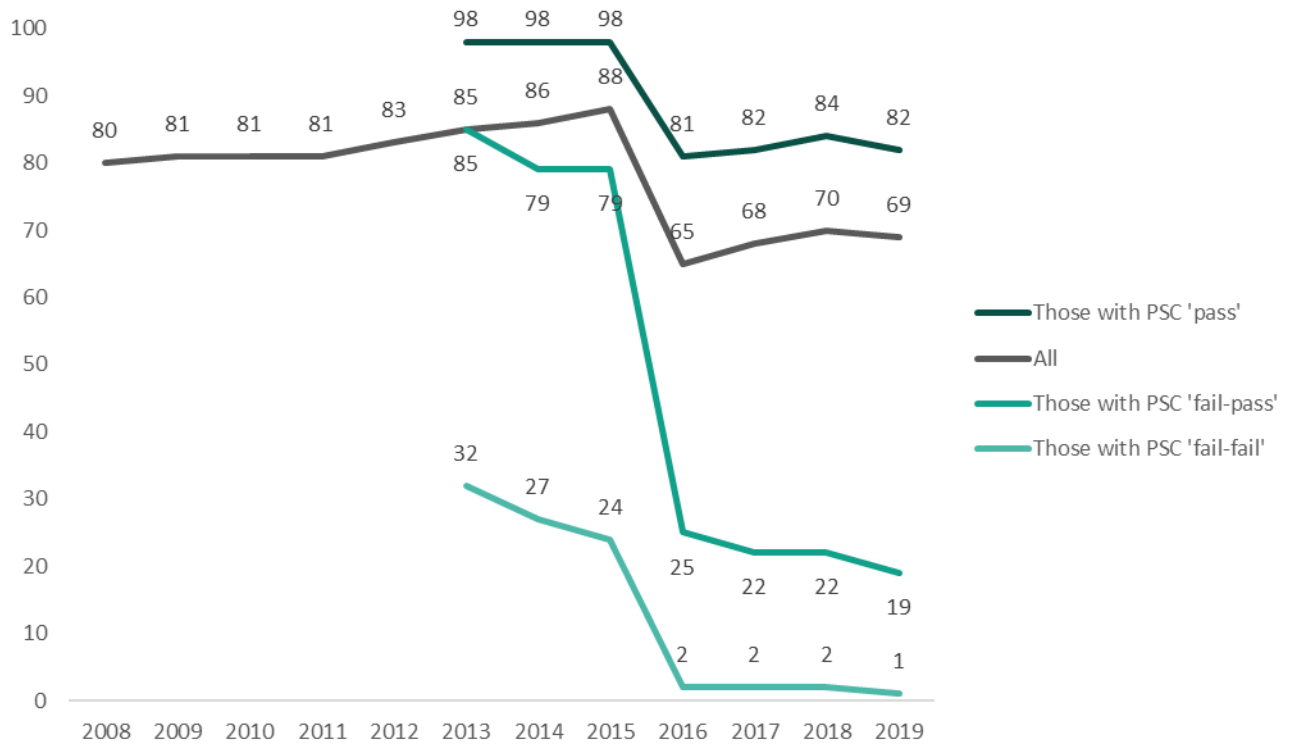
- All children in year 2;
- Children who 'passed' the PSC in year 1;

⁴⁹ Walker et al (2015)

- Children who ‘failed’ the PSC in year 1 and ‘passed’ in year 2; and
- Children who ‘failed’ the PSC in year 1 and ‘failed’ again in year 2

who were assessed by their teacher at KS1 as meeting the ‘expected standard’ in writing.

Figure 11: Percentage of children at the ‘expected standard’ for KS1 writing⁵⁰



Here we see that over the six years during which the assessments were consistent (pre-2016), which span the years on either side of the introduction of the PSC, there is again an upwards trend in the percentage of children assessed as attaining the ‘expected standard’ for writing. The trajectory is slightly steeper after the introduction of the PSC: moving from 81 per cent to 83 per cent of children meeting the ‘expected standard’ between 2010 and 2012; and from 85 per cent to 88 per cent from 2013 to 2015. This is a small difference, over a short time period with many other factors impacting assessment and attainment, and like everything in this paper, is descriptive and cannot indicate any causality.

⁵⁰ Source: author’s analysis of the National Pupil Database

Overall patterns of reading and writing attainment, controlling for pupil-characteristics

Now we take the descriptive statistics above one step further by focussing in on the three cohorts immediately before and immediately after the introduction of the PSC. We are interested in whether there is any discontinuity – any interruption of the general trend – of attainment and assessment results for children who were not compared to those who were subject to the PSC.

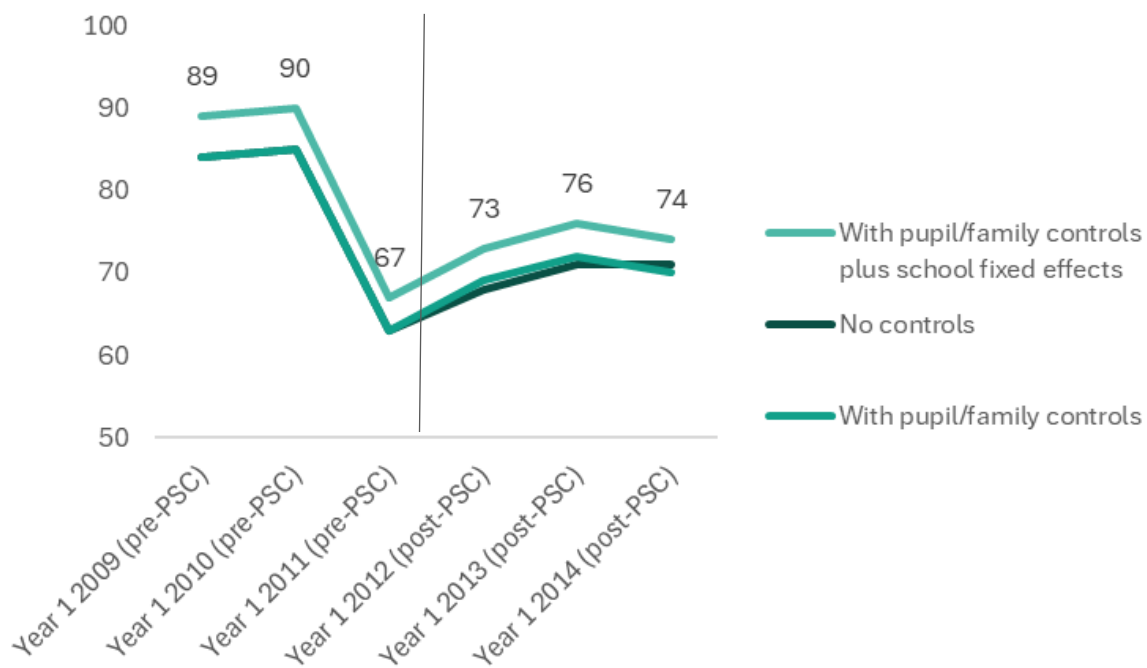
If there is an interruption in the general pattern – and children who took the PSC suddenly seem to do much better, or worse, than those who did not – this would provide a descriptive hint at some impact of the check.

We use linear probability models where the outcome is meeting the ‘expected standard / level’ for (respectively) KS2 reading, KS1 reading, and KS1 writing. In the first model specification we do not use any controls; in the second, we control for FSM, EAL and pupil ethnicity (because there is some compositional change in these background characteristics over time, that might impact assessment results); in the third, we control for the school attended by a pupil (fixed effects for the school at the time of the KS assessment), because school attended can influence recorded attainment.

Is there a shift in the proportions of similar pupils meeting the ‘expected standard’ for reading at KS2 that corresponds to the introduction of the PSC?

The main thing that Figure 13 highlights is the extreme difficulty, if not impossibility, of drawing conclusions about the effectiveness of the PSC based on pupils’ subsequent KS2 reading scores. Because new KS2 assessments were introduced in 2016, for the cohort who were in year 1 in 2011, this allows only one year of data pre-PSC under the KS2 regime that children who took the PSC were comparably subject to. Both with and without controls, percentages of year 6 children attaining the ‘expected level’ at KS2 reading after the new KS assessments are introduced rise and then flatten/fall.

Figure 13: Model-estimated proportion of children attaining ‘expected level’ for KS2 reading: cohorts in year 1 2009, 2010, 2011 (pre-PSC) and 2012, 2013, 2014 (post-PSC)⁵¹



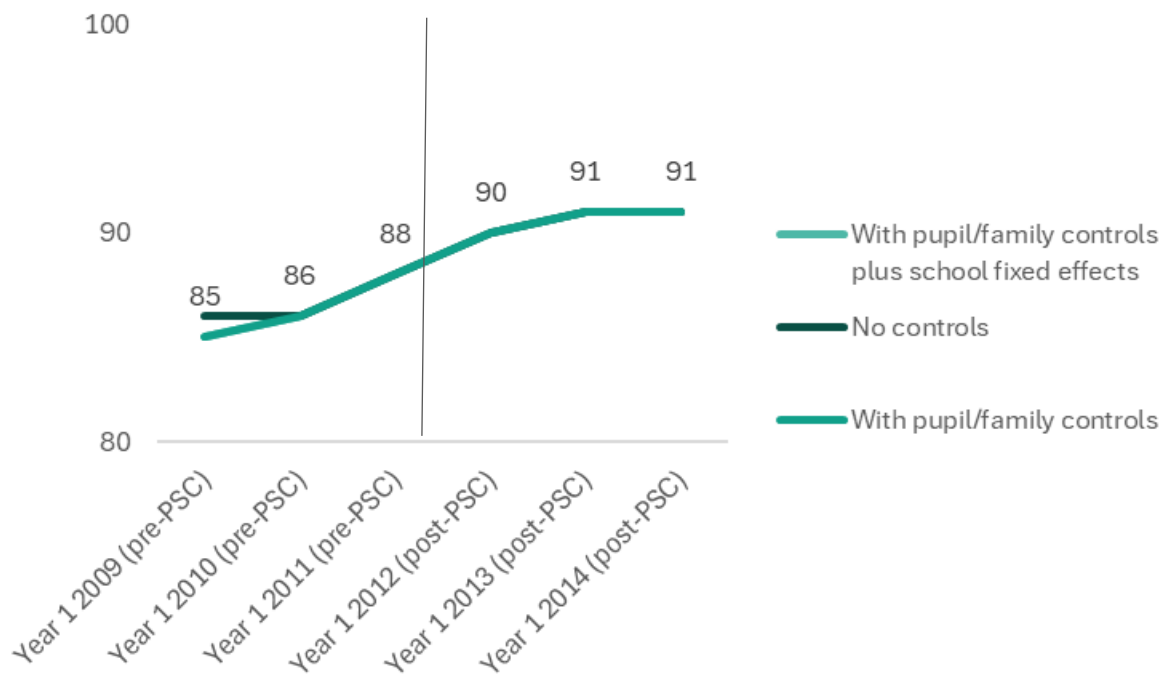
Is there a shift in the proportions of similar pupils meeting the ‘expected standard’ for reading at KS1 that corresponds to the introduction of the PSC?

Figure 14 shows that there is more scope for gauging possible impacts of the PSC using KS1 reading data because at least the same assessment regime was in place for cohorts in year 1 from 2009 to 2014, either side of the PSC’s introduction.

It shows no notable discontinuity on either side of the check – the general upwards trend continues. If anything, in the third model, with controls for FSM, EAL, ethnicity, and school attended, the upwards trajectory in KS1 reading attainment is more pronounced prior to the introduction of the PSC, and flattens afterwards. So this provides no evidence that the introduction of the check improved reading skills.

⁵¹ Common sample across specifications. N=3,347,454. Source = author’s analysis of the National Pupil Database

Figure 14: Model-estimated proportion of children attaining ‘expected standard’ for KS1 reading: cohorts in year 1 2009, 2010, 2011 (pre-PSC) and 2012, 2013, 2014 (post-PSC)⁵²



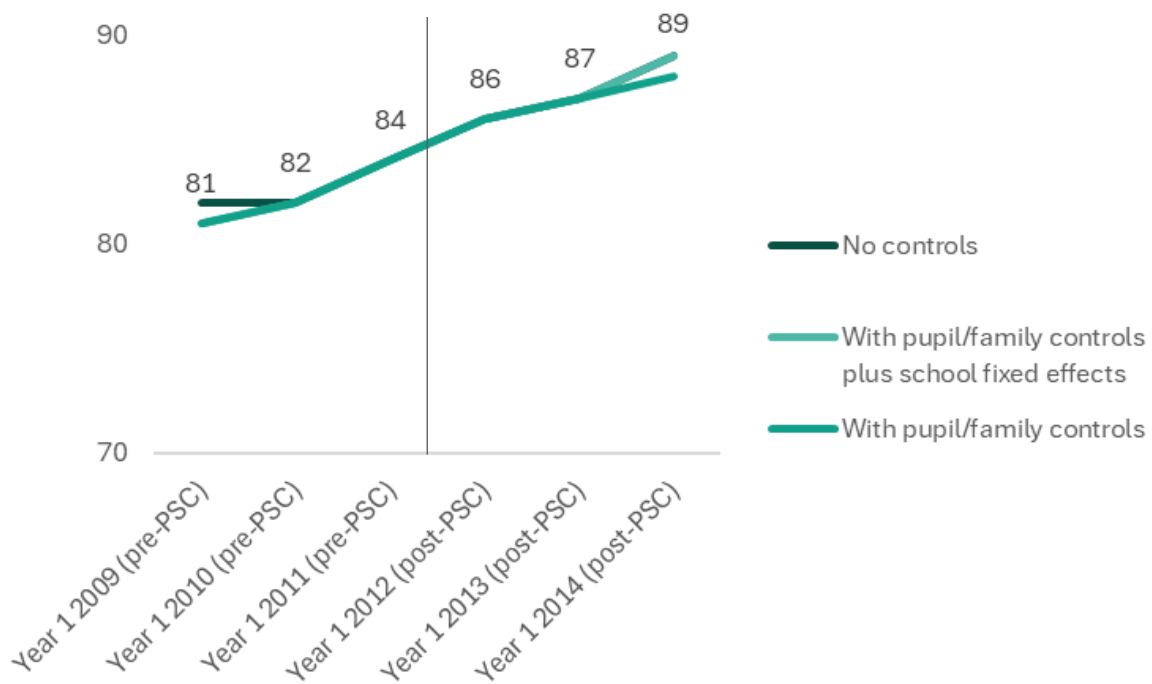
Is there a shift in the proportions of similar pupils meeting the ‘expected standard’ for writing at KS1 that corresponds to the introduction of the PSC?

Figure 15 similarly shows no interruption of the trend in children’s writing assessed at KS1. The indication (already very small) of a slightly more consistent upwards trajectory after the introduction of the PSC is negated once FSM, EAL, ethnicity, and school attended are accounted for, in the third model.

Together, then, the KS1 and KS2 attainment data provide no evidence that the PSC has had a discernible positive impact on children’s reading skills as measured by these assessments.

⁵² Common sample across specifications. N=3,432,784. Source = author’s analysis of the National Pupil Database

Figure 15: Model-estimated proportion of children attaining ‘expected standard’ for KS1 writing: cohorts in year 1 2009, 2010, 2011 (pre-PSC) and 2012, 2013, 2014 (post-PSC)⁵³



Section summary

- Since the introduction of the PSC, children’s subsequent results for KS2 reading at the end of primary school have risen and then fallen (71 per cent overall reaching the ‘expected level’ in 2017; 75 per cent in 2018; and 73 per cent in 2019).
- Children who ‘passed’ the PSC are more likely than those who ‘failed’ to reach the ‘expected level’ at KS2 reading (although this does not tell us anything about the efficacy of the PSC itself).
- After the introduction of the PSC, an existing upward trend in children meeting the ‘expected standard’ for KS1 reading continued, but at a rate slower and then flatter to that previous to the introduction of the check.

⁵³ Common sample across specifications. N= 3,432,784. Source = author’s analysis of the National Pupil Database

- Children who ‘passed’ the PSC are more likely than those who ‘failed’ to meet the ‘expected standard’ for KS1 reading (again, this does not tell us anything about the efficacy of the PSC itself).
- There is a perfect correspondence in the first cohort subject to the PSC between ‘passing’ the check and reaching the ‘expected standard’ in KS1 reading. This raises the question of how much additional information or formative value is added through implementing multiple different assessments at different time points during primary school.
- After the introduction of the PSC, an existing upward trend in children meeting the ‘expected standard’ for KS1 writing becomes slightly steeper compared to that previous to the introduction of the check. However, this difference disappears once pupil and school factors are accounted for.
- Overall, there are no discontinuities – breaks in the general trend – or other patterns in attainment results at KS1 and KS2 that support the hypothesis that the PSC has improved national average levels of reading or literacy skills.

Attainment ‘gaps’

Though the KS1 and KS2 data above provided no evidence that the introduction of the PSC improved children’s reading (or writing) attainment on average, it is feasible that different groups of children may have been impacted in different ways.

The PSC is intended to identify children, ‘who do not meet the expected standard [and ensure they] continue to receive support in phonics.’⁵⁴ Therefore it is possible, and an intention of the PSC policy, that the attainment of groups of children who tend to ‘fail’ the PSC, and who score less well in other primary reading assessments, may improve more rapidly than those who ‘pass.’

To explore whether this has taken place, we look at gaps before (for children in year 1 in 2009, 2010, 2011) and after (2012, 2013, 2014) the introduction of the PSC.

Reported below are gaps between:

- FSM-eligible children and others;
- Autumn / summer-born children; and
- Girls and boys.

We focus on these characteristics because they are consistently associated with both lower chances of ‘passing’ the PSC, and lower scores in reading at key stage assessments throughout primary school.⁵⁵

To examine these gaps, and whether they narrowed more after the introduction of the PSC, we use the final statistical model above (controlling for FSM, EAL, ethnicity, and school attended), and introduce an interaction between cohort and the respective characteristic of interest (FSM / or birth season / or gender).

⁵⁴ Department for Education (2024)

⁵⁵ We also performed the same analyses for children attaining / not attaining a GLD in the FSP. Results so far as they can be interpreted are consistent with those in the main text. There is a change to the FSP GLD assessment during the six years of interest, so the window for analysis is shorter / less informative. This is why gaps by FSP GLD are not reported in the main text, and why FSP GLD is not used as a control in models.

The estimates shown in Figures 16 to 19, below, are for children falling into each respective group, each year – for example for FSM children in year 1 in 2012, and separately for non-FSM children in year 1 in 2012, and so on.

Do ‘gaps’ in KS2 reading attainment between lower-and higher-attaining pupil groups close more rapidly after the introduction of the PSC?

Again, interpretations of the KS2 data are massively limited due to the introduction in 2016 of the new KS2 assessments, which are taken by only one cohort prior to the introduction of the PSC. The overall message in Figure 16, taking the three characteristics into account, is that there is no suggestion that gaps narrowed in a way that may be obviously attributable – in either direction – to the PSC. While gender gaps seem perhaps to slightly widen, it is impossible to know from this data how much any changing patterns are due to chance, the changing assessments, the PSC, or other factors, given the limited data points pre-PSC.

To attempt to address this lack of assessment consistency and to try an alternative manipulation of the data, as a sensitivity check, Figure 17 presents results from models where the outcome is standardised KS2 reading score (z-score) within cohort (rather than reaching the ‘expected level’). This shows where the different groups of children fall, on average, in the distribution of scores, within their year group. Results here are generally similar to those using expected levels, and the overall message is that there is not any consistent indication of a change in trends in gaps that corresponds to the introduction of the PSC.

Figure 16: Model-estimated proportion of children attaining 'expected level' for KS2 reading: cohorts in year 1 2009, 2010, 2011 (pre-PSC) and 2012, 2013, 2014 (post-PSC). Split by FSM, birth season, gender⁵⁶

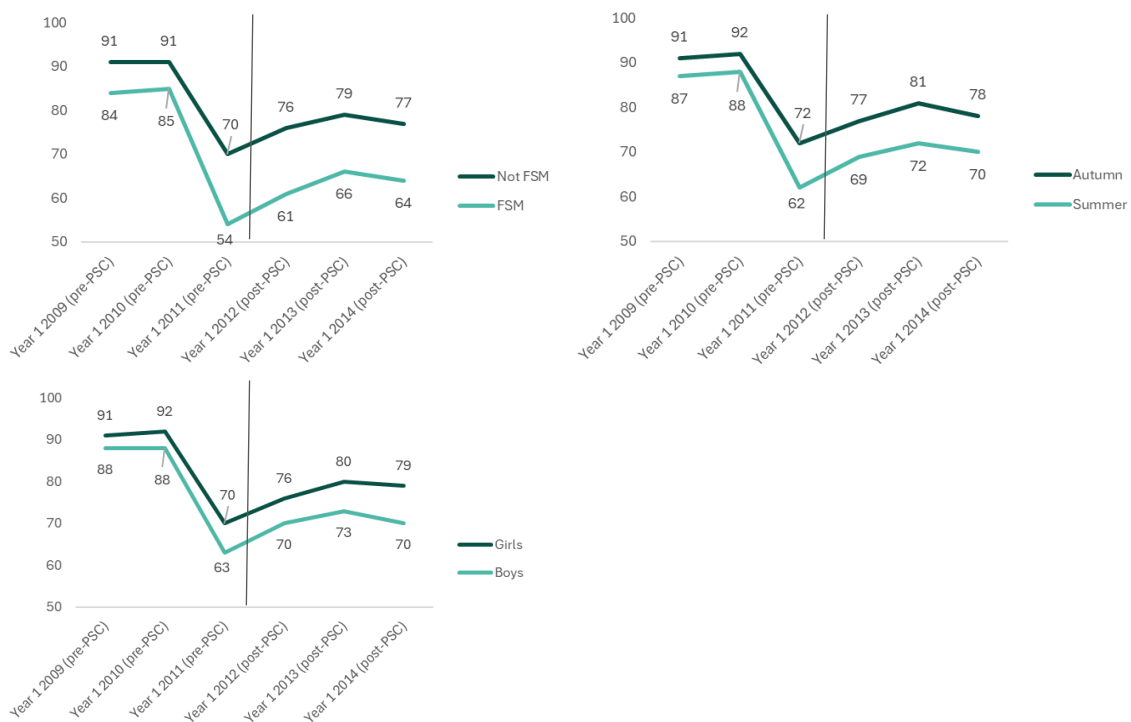
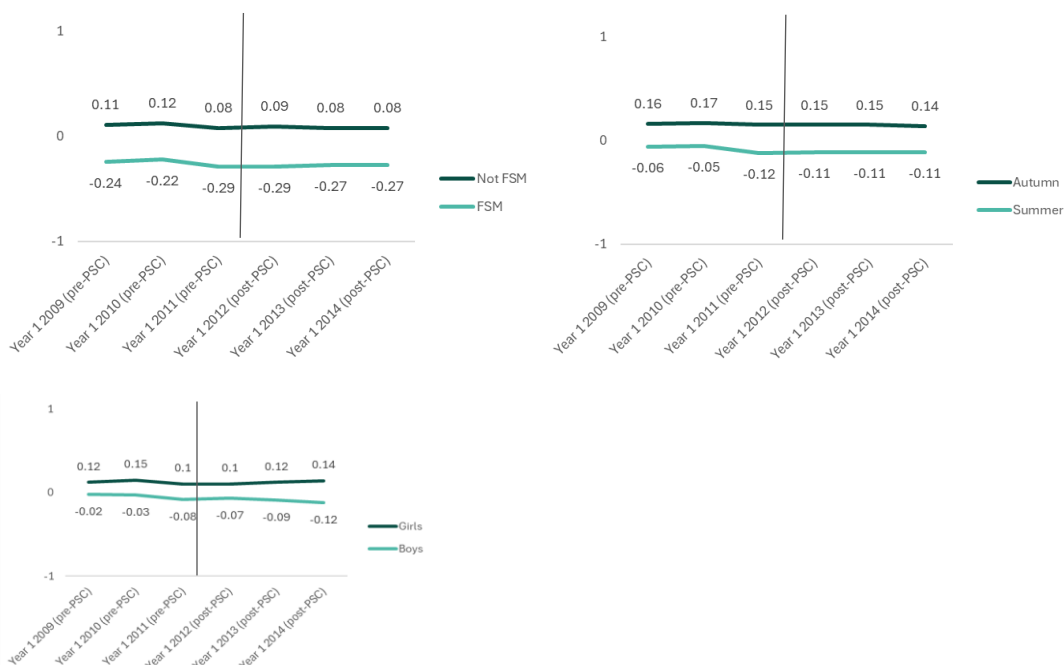


Figure 17: Model-estimated z-scores of children in KS2 reading: cohorts in year 1 2009, 2010, 2011 (pre-PSC) and 2012, 2013, 2014 (post-PSC). Split by FSM, birth season, gender⁵⁷



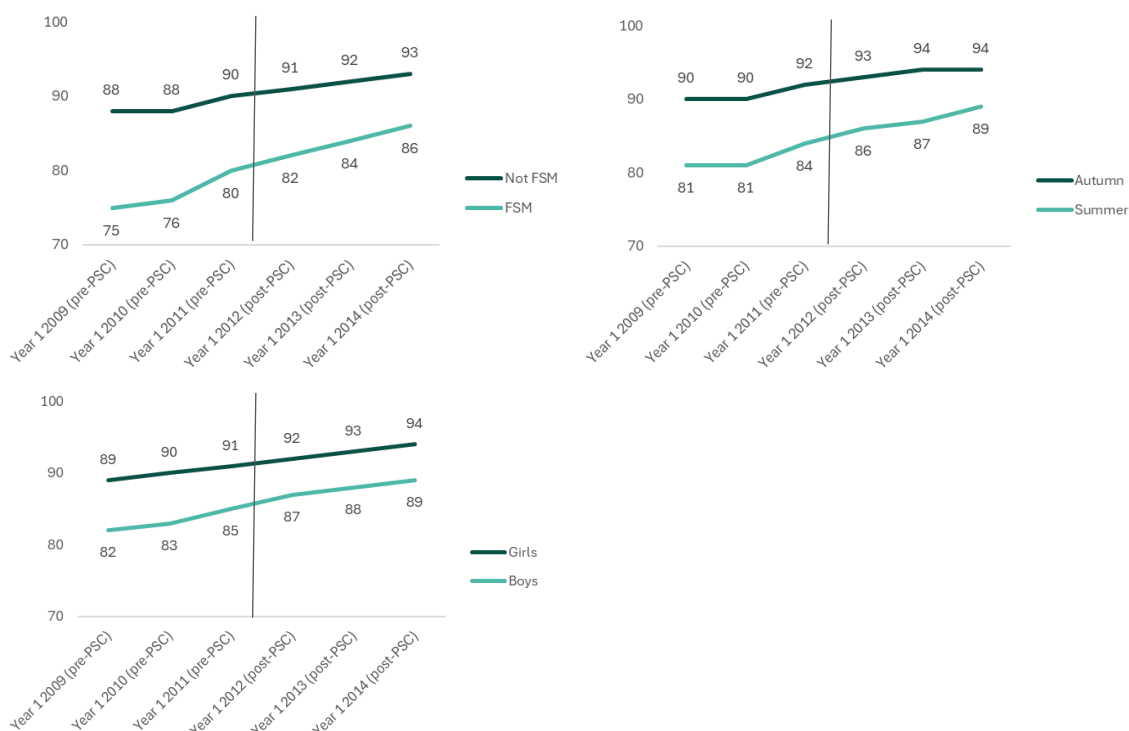
⁵⁶ Controlling for FSM, ethnicity, EAL, and school fixed effects. Common sample across specifications. N=3,347,454. Source = author's analysis of the National Pupil Database

⁵⁷ Controlling for FSM, ethnicity, EAL, and school fixed effects. Common sample across specification. N=3,347,454. Source = author's analysis of the National Pupil Database

Do ‘gaps’ in KS1 reading attainment between lower-and higher-attaining pupil groups close more rapidly after the introduction of the PSC?

Figure 18 shows a general narrowing of gaps, over time, in KS1 reading attainment. This was already taking place before the introduction of the PSC, and continues after its introduction. There is no notable discontinuity or interruption of the pattern that suggests the PSC itself intervened to accelerate the narrowing of gaps.

Figure 18: Model-estimated proportion of children attaining ‘expected standard’ for KS1 reading: cohorts in year 1 2009, 2010, 2011 (pre-PSC) and 2012, 2013, 2014 (post-PSC). Split by FSM, birth season, gender⁵⁸

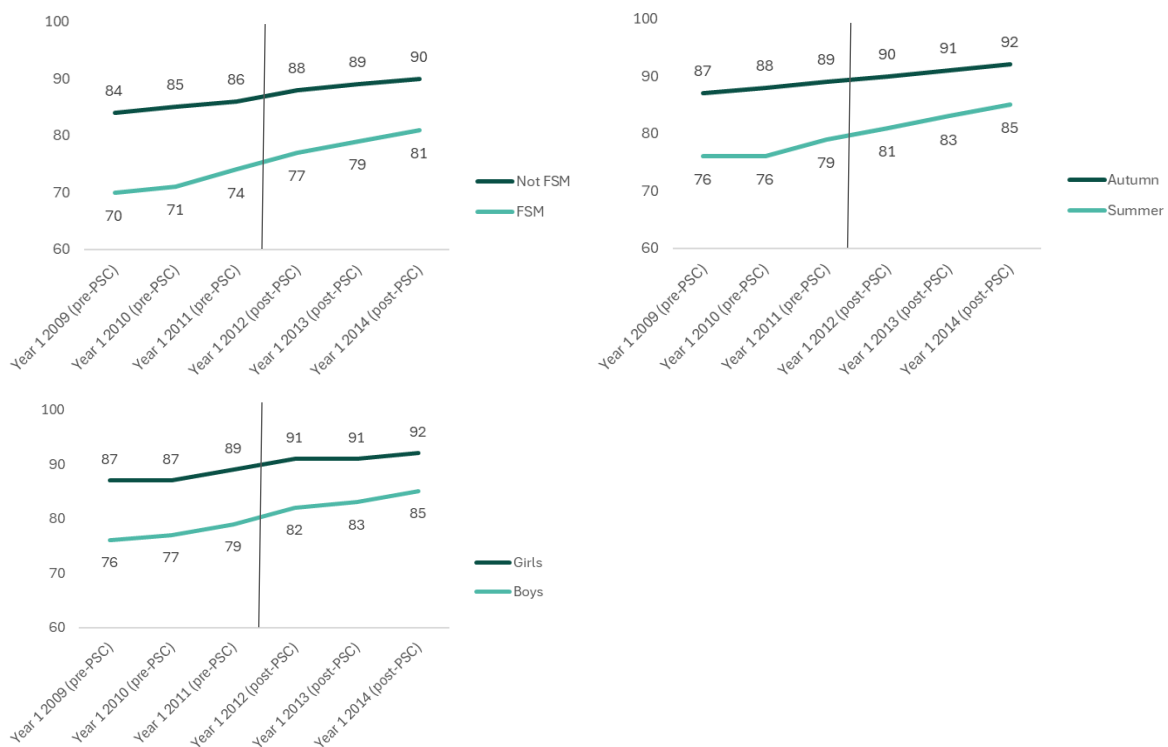


Do ‘gaps’ in KS1 writing attainment between lower-and higher-attaining pupil groups close more rapidly after the introduction of the PSC?

Similarly, Figure 19 shows a narrowing of gaps over time in KS1 writing attainment – but that it has already started before the introduction of the PSC.

⁵⁸ Controlling for FSM, ethnicity, EAL, and school fixed effects. Common sample across specifications. N=3,432,784. Source = author’s analysis of the National Pupil Database

Figure 19: Model-estimated proportion of children attaining ‘expected standard’ for KS1 writing: cohorts in year 1 2009, 2010, 2011 (pre-PSC) and 2012, 2013, 2014 (post-PSC). Split by FSM, birth season, gender⁵⁹



Section summary

- There is no evidence that attainment ‘gaps’ at KS2 reading for lower/higher attaining groups of children (according to FSM, birth season and gender) closed after the introduction of the PSC.
- Gaps by gender appear to widen slightly (but this cannot be attributed with any certainty to the PSC).
- After the introduction of the PSC, an existing trend of narrowing of ‘gaps’ for KS1 reading continued at a rate similar to that previous to the introduction of the check.
- After the introduction of the PSC, an existing trend of narrowing of ‘gaps’ for KS1 writing also continued at a rate similar to that previous to the introduction of the check.

⁵⁹ Controlling for FSM, ethnicity, EAL, and school fixed effects. Common sample across specifications. N=3,432,784

Recording children with SEND, and relationships between this and KS2 reading attainment

To delve deeper into the potential national impacts of the PSC, beyond and in addition to attainment results, we now test a hypothesis that the introduction of the check resulted in children who would not otherwise have been identified for SEND support being newly identified.

We hypothesise that this may happen because the SEND Code of Practice states that teachers should ‘identify pupils making less than expected progress given their age’ and support them through SEND provision.⁶⁰ The DfE’s (2015) evaluation of the PSC described how, ‘Teachers reported using evidence from the check to make decisions about extra support for individuals.’⁶¹ This is as planned, because the PSC is intended to flag those children who have not ‘learnt phonic decoding to an age-appropriate standard,’⁶² and to ensure they receive additional support. So it is feasible that it also resulted in a quantifiable shift in the children picked up and recorded formally with SEND in the NPD.

To test this hypothesis, we concentrate on children’s chances of being newly recorded with SEND in the NPD in the January of year 2 – the school year after taking the PSC in summer of year 1. We compare children in the two cohorts immediately previous to the introduction of the PSC (year 1 in 2010 and 2011) to those immediately after (year 1 in 2012 and 2013).⁶³

As Figures 5-9, earlier, showed, chances of ‘failing’ the PSC vary according to FSM, gender, month of birth, EAL, and whether children are recorded with a ‘good level of development’ (GLD) in the foundation stage profile (FSP). Figure 20 shows the percentages of children according to FSM, birth month, gender, and EAL (as recorded in year 1) who are newly recorded with SEND in year 2. Figure 21 shows the same for children who were present in reception, year 1, and year 2, and so have a FSP GLD result.

Figure 20 shows a few things that may hint towards support for the hypothesis that introduction of the PSC resulted in children who would have otherwise not being newly

⁶⁰ Department for Education (2015b)

⁶¹ Walker et al (2015)

⁶² Standards and Testing Agency (2012)

⁶³ We do not extend the window to three years because, as will be explained, one of our key variables in analysis here is FSP GLD – and the assessment of the FSP changes in 2014.

recorded with SEND. Firstly, against a backdrop of a general overall downwards trend in percent of children newly recorded, the slope for FSM children flattens more than that for non-FSM children in 2014 (the second cohort after introduction of the check). Secondly, children who do not have EAL become slightly more likely than those who have EAL to be newly recorded with SEND in year 2 (and pupils with EAL are slightly more likely to pass the check, as shown in Figure 8a). So the possibility potentially suggested is that these groups become, on average, more likely to newly be recorded with SEND compared to their counterparts as a result of 'failing' the check.

Figure 20: Percent children in each cohort and with each characteristic (FSM, birth month, gender, EAL) newly recorded with SEND in year 2

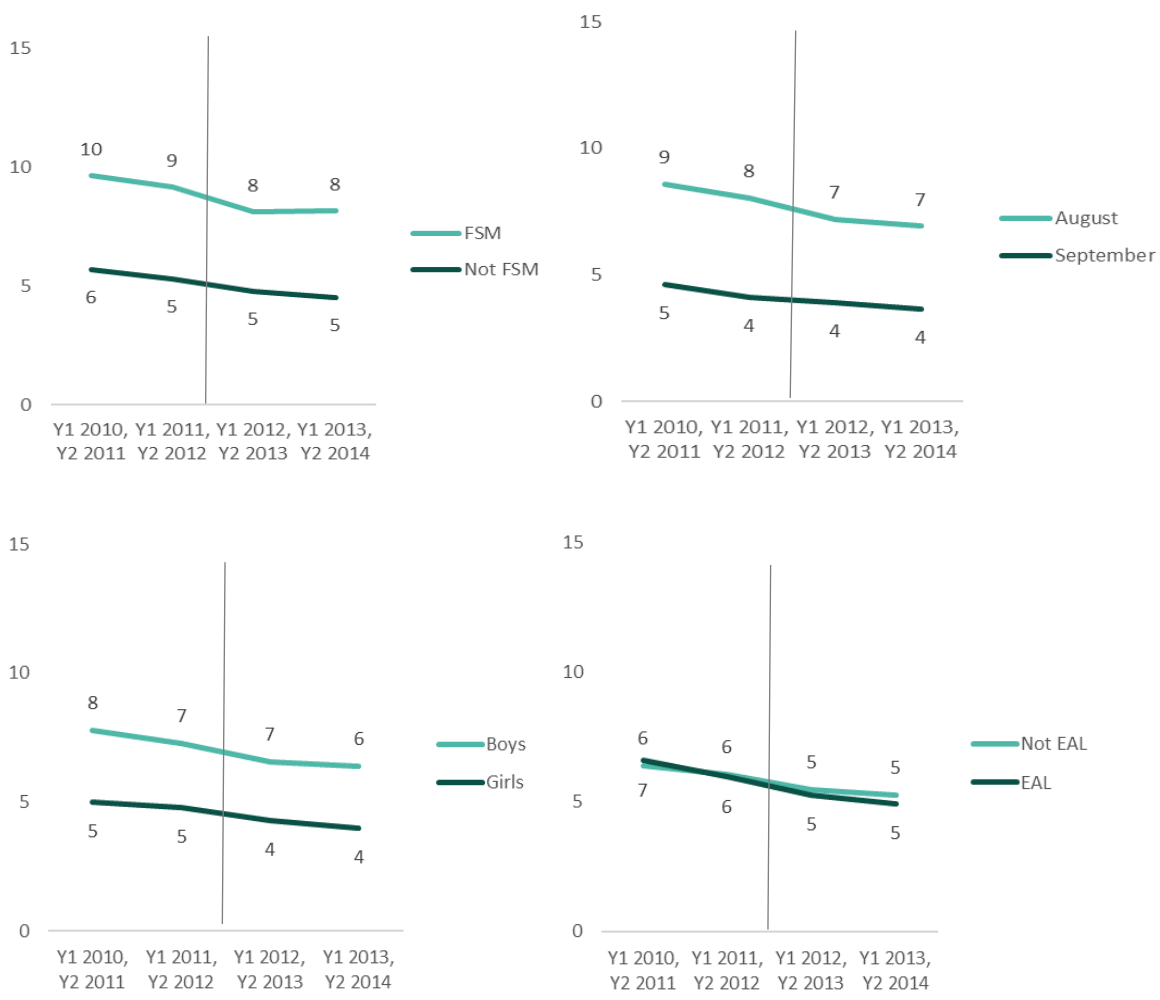
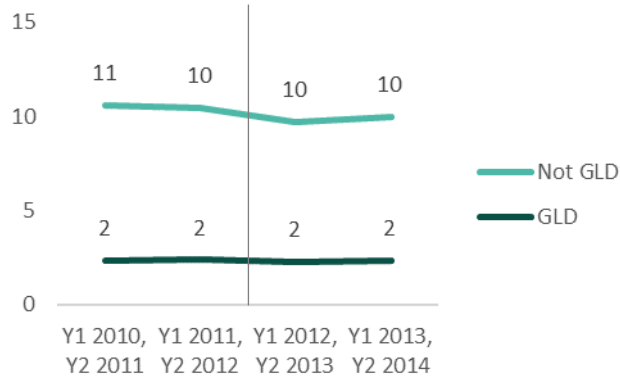


Figure 21: Percent children in each cohort and with and without a GLD newly recorded with SEND in year 2



Are similar children who took and ‘failed’ the PSC more likely subsequently to be newly recorded with SEND in year 2 than counterparts in the years before the check was introduced?

Are similar children who took and ‘passed’ the PSC less likely subsequently to be newly recorded with SEND in year 2 than counterparts in the years before the check was introduced?

Do any differences pre- and post-PSC in likelihood of new recording of SEND in year 2 vary according to key pupil characteristics?

Do any differences pre- and post-PSC in likelihood of new recording of SEND in year 2 vary according to school composition?

Against the overall trend, where the percentage of children newly being recorded with SEND in year 2 is lower for the two cohorts post-PSC than the two cohorts pre-PSC, it is possible to test this hypothesis slightly further.

Using propensity score matching, we firstly compare the children who were in year 1 in 2012 and 2013 and ‘failed’ the PSC to matched counterparts who were in year 1 in 2010 and 2011, and not subject to the PSC. We match on the factors above: FSM, birth month, gender, EAL, and FSP GLD.⁶⁴ As with all analyses in this paper, this is not causal – but it allows a look at whether children similar according to these recorded characteristics seem more likely to be newly attributed SEND having ‘failed’ PSC than when the check was not in place.

⁶⁴ Using teffects psmatch in Stata 16.

For analytical capacity / computational reasons, we use several random samples from the pool of children in 2012 and 2013 who ‘failed,’ and examine whether results are consistent across samples. Table 1 shows the average treatment effect (with caliper set at 0.1).⁶⁵ We then redo matching and analyses separately for:

- FSM children;
- Non-FSM children;
- EAL children;
- Non-EAL children;
- August-borns;
- September-borns;
- Children with a FSP GLD; and
- Children without a FSP GLD.

This is to explore whether there is evidence that potential impacts of the PSC in determining newly being recorded with SEND vary according to these characteristics. Lastly, we redo matching and analyses separately for:

- Children in low-FSM schools (those in the bottom 25 per cent FSM);
- Children in high-FSM schools (those in the top 25 per cent FSM);
- Children in low-GLD schools (those in the bottom 25 per cent recorded with a GLD); and
- Children in high-GLD schools (those in the top 25 per cent recorded with a GLD).

This is to explore whether there is evidence that potential impacts of the PSC in determining newly being recorded with SEND vary according to school composition.

The percentages in Table 1 are the estimated increase in the average chances of ‘failing’ children in year 1 in 2012 and 2013 being newly recorded with SEND, compared to children matched according to FSM, birth month, gender, EAL, and FSP GLD in 2010 and 2011.

As a sensitivity check, Table 2 shows results for all of the above analyses repeated but for the group of children who ‘pass’ the PSC in year 1 in 2012 and 2013. They indicate the estimated

⁶⁵ We also replicate analyses specifying the average treatment on the treated, and using nearest neighbour matching – results are similar and consistent.

percentage point decrease for these children in chances of being newly recorded with SEND in year 2, compared to matched children in the two years before introduction of the PSC.

The overall messages from Tables 1 and 2 are that similar (according to the selected factors) children who 'failed' the PSC may have been more likely to be newly recorded with SEND in year 2 than their earlier counterparts who did not take the check in year 1. But these changes in chances are arguably small in the scheme of things, at a difference probably under 4 percentage points. Congruent with this, children who 'passed' the PSC are less likely to be newly recorded than matched counterparts in the pre-PSC years (who are similar according to FSM, birth month, gender, EAL, and FSP GLD). Again, though, these differences seem small, at under 3 percentage points.

There are some variations according to other factors, including whether children have a FSP GLD or not, and school composition. Like the overall findings here (which while not in any way causal, and potentially due to unmeasured factors, support the hypothesis that the PSC shifted the chances of children being newly recorded with SEND) these differences are theoretically intriguing. They suggest, for example, that pupils in schools with fewer FSM peers may have been more likely to be newly attributed SEND in year 2 in the post-PSC years, as well as those in a school where most peers had a FSP GLD, and those pupils who 'fail' the PSC but have a FSP GLD themselves. However, again, these differences are within an overall context of an apparently small shift.

Importantly, they cannot in themselves tell us whether the apparent shift after introduction of the PSC is a good or a bad thing: whether it increases or decreases the appropriateness or usefulness of SEND designation in terms of support for children.

Table 1: Estimated percentage increase in chances of being newly recorded with SEND in year 2 among children ‘failing’ the PSC compared to matched comparators pre-PSC⁶⁶

	All	FSM	Non-FSM	EAL	Non-EAL	August	September	FSP GLD	Not FSP GLD	Low-FSM school	High-FSM school	Low-GLD school	High-GLD school
Sample 1	+3.5%*	+2.7%*	+3.6%*	+2.6%*	+3.7%*	+2.6%*	+3.3%*	+4.0%*	+2.4%*	+4.6%*	+2.3%*	+1.7%*	+3.6%*
Sample 2	+3.9%*	+2.3%*	+3.5%*	+2.7%*	+4.0%*	+3.3%*	+3.9%*	+4.5%*	+2.7%*	+5.4%*	+2.4%*	+2.0%*	+3.3%*
Sample 3	+3.2%*	+2.2%*	+3.6%*	+2.3%*	+3.7%*	+2.8%*	+4.1%*	+4.0%*	+2.4%*	+5.1%*	+2.8%*	+1.0%**	+4.1%*

*p<.001 **p<.01

⁶⁶ Ns: All children – S1=31,585; S2=31,528; S3=31,595. FSM – S1=33,231; S2=33,236; S3=33,270. Non-FSM – S1=37,358; S2=37,394; S3=37,429. EAL – S1=30,661; S2=30,641; S3=30,732. Non-EAL – S1=39,652; S2=39,652; S3=39,791. August - S1=37,663; S2=37,592; S3=37,654. Sept – S1=31,139; S2=31,263; S3=31,149. GLD – S1=45,268; S2=45,268; S3=45,268. Non-GLD – S1=32,979; S2=32,979; S3=32,979. Low-FSM – S1=24,713; S2=24,760; S3=24,663. High-FSM – S1=23,534; S2=23,497; S3=23,548. Low-GLD – S1=35,775; S2=35,838; S3=35,744. High-GLD – S1=24,132; S2=24,071; S3=24,087.

Table 2: Estimated percentage decrease in chances of being newly recorded with SEND in year 2 among children ‘passing’ the PSC compared to matched comparators pre-PSC⁶⁷

	All	FSM	Non-FSM	EAL	Non-EAL	August	September	FSP GLD	Not FSP GLD	Low-FSM school	High-FSM school	Low-GLD school	High-GLD school
Sample 1	-2.9%*	-4.4%*	-2.5%*	-2.5%*	-2.8%*	-3.5%*	-1.7%*	-0.8%*	-5.6%*	-2.2%*	-2.9%*	-4.0%*	-1.6%*
Sample 2	-2.8%*	-3.8%*	-2.3%*	-2.2%*	-2.9%*	-3.9%*	-2.0%*	-1.0%*	-6.0%*	-1.9%*	-3.6%*	-3.8%*	-2.4%*
Sample 3	-2.7%*	-4.2%*	-2.3%*	-2.6%*	-3.0%*	-3.9%*	-2.3%*	-1.2%*	-5.3%*	-2.4%*	-3.2%*	-4.1%*	-2.2%*

*p<.001

⁶⁷ Ns: All children – S1=38,318; S2=38,253; S3=38,293. FSM – S1=33,520; S2=33,474; S3=33,487. Non-FSM – S1=47,441; S2=47,406; S3=47,398. EAL – S1=38,284; S2=38,253; S3=38,265. Non-EAL – S1=47,774; S2=47,875; S3=47,846. August – S1=39,751; S2=39,703; S3=39,772. Sept – S1=43,125; S2=25,923; S3=25,901. GLD – S1=24,173; S2=24,173; S3=24,173. Non-GLD – S1=28,226; S2=28,226; S3=28, 226. Low-FSM – S1=15,582; S2=15,660; S3=15,414. High-FSM – S1=26,550; S2=26,553; S3=26,541. Low-GLD – S1=36,771; S2=36,759; S3=36,776. High-GLD – S1=23,668; S2=23,670; S3=23,645.

Are children newly recorded with SEND in year 2 after introduction of the PSC more likely to rise up the distribution of KS2 reading attainment than those newly recorded with SEND in year 2 before introduction of the PSC?

Do any patterns here vary according to key pupil characteristics?

Do any patterns here vary according to school composition?

To move one step further towards addressing this question, we look at whether the apparent shift in patterns of SEND attribution that may correspond to the introduction of the PSC corresponds subsequently to improved results in KS2 reading. If such a correspondence were indicated, this would suggest that introduction of the PSC had impacted positively on SEND identification and support.

To do this, we model predictors of reading score standardised within year (z-score) at KS2, as earlier (e.g. Figure 17). Now, we are looking at two things: gaps within cohort in standardised scores (between those children newly recorded with SEND in year 2 and those not newly recorded in year 2), and whether these gaps seem to alter in the post-PSC cohorts compared to the pre-PSC cohorts.

Figure 22 shows results for all children.⁶⁸ Those who are newly recorded with SEND in year 2 tend, on average, to be much further down the distribution of KS2 reading scores than other children, and this gap widens over the six years shown. But there is no obvious interruption to the trend for the cohorts after rather than before the introduction of the PSC.

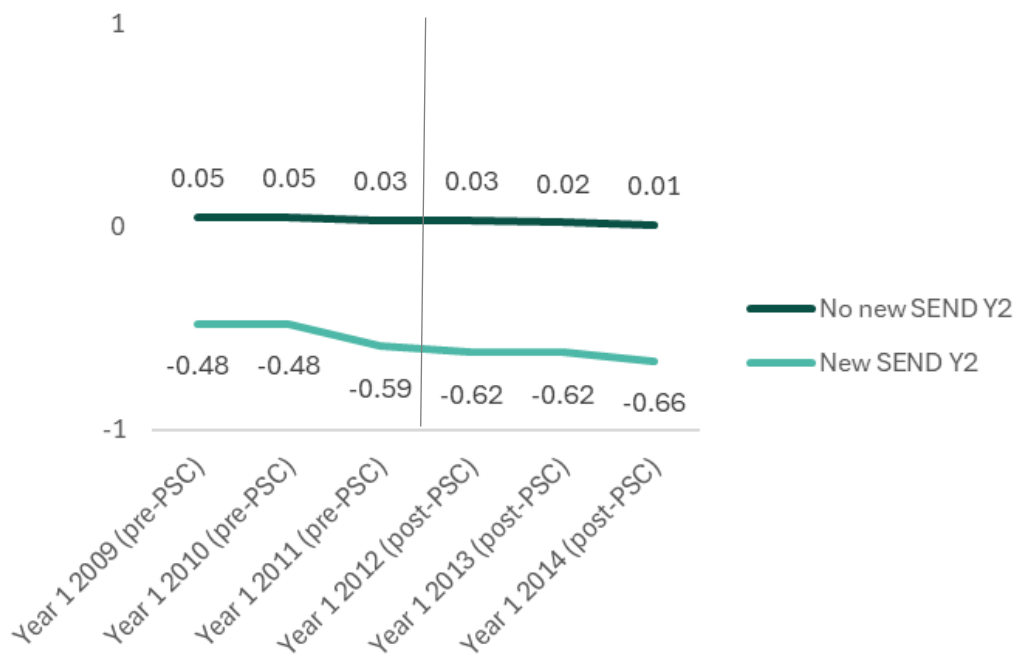
We also run models separately for children who are: FSM / Non-FSM, EAL / Non-EAL, August-borns / September-borns, recorded with a FSP GLD / without a FSP GLD; and for children in low-FSM schools (those in the bottom 25 per cent FSM), in high-FSM schools (those in the top 25 per cent FSM), in low-GLD schools (those in the bottom 25 per cent recorded with a GLD), in high-GLD schools (those in the top 25 per cent recorded with a GLD).

These splits provide no further suggestions that the fairly small shifts in identification of children with SEND that may correspond to the introduction of the PSC play out in improved KS2 reading attainment for any group.

⁶⁸ The model here is KS2 reading z-score (standardised within year) predicted by cohort, interacted with binary indicator of new year 2 SEND (or not), controlling for FSM, ethnicity, EAL, and school fixed effects.

This is not surprising, because generally, the suggested post-PSC differences in SEND recording are small in the scheme of things, because many other factors impact whether children are recorded with SEND, and because many other factors impact reading scores at KS2.

Figure 22: Model-estimated z-scores of children in KS2 reading: cohorts in year 1 2009, 2010, 2011 (pre-PSC) and 2012, 2013, 2014 (post-PSC). Split by whether children are newly recorded with SEND in year 2⁶⁹



Section summary

- There is suggestive evidence that the introduction of the PSC may be associated with a fairly small shift in the chances of children being recorded with SEND.
- Specifically, children who ‘fail’ the check may be more likely to be newly recorded with SEND in year 2 than they would have been in the pre-PSC years.
- And children who ‘pass’ the check may be less likely to be newly recorded with SEND in year 2 than they would have been in the pre-PSC years.
- Like all findings in this report, these are not definitively causal.
- We find no evidence that the apparent shift in patterns of SEND support plays through to improved KS2 attainment.

⁶⁹ Controlling for FSM, ethnicity, EAL, and school fixed effects. N=3,508,225

Teacher surveys

The Department for Education's previous (2015) commissioned evaluation of the PSC included surveys and in-depth case studies with teachers.⁷⁰ Reported perceptions of the PSC varied, as did reported strategies for teaching of phonics and reading more generally within primary schools. 'Almost all schools [surveyed] were committed to teaching phonics,' but many appeared to 'believe that a phonics approach to teaching reading should be used alongside other methods.'

Some teachers raised concerns that the PSC does not pick up on 'other strategies' children may use in learning to read, and 'under half of the schools that discussed the outcomes for different learners in the checks believed that the check reflected the true levels of the pupils.'

Some participants viewed the PSC as a useful tool, which 'makes sure that teachers know the expectations for children in terms of learning early reading skills. It makes sure that everyone is committed to that happening, that you're accountable for the children's progress earlier down the school.' Others, though, saw it as extraneous: 'The results mean nothing because by the time they do it it's too late. No teacher needs to do that test to know which children in their class are struggling in phonics.'

Discussing the PSC in the wider context of curriculum and learning, some teachers in the 2015 evaluation were positive about the 'phonics first and fast' approach as a whole: 'You have structure, sequence and endless resources to support you ... It seems logical and sensible to give every child a way of attacking reading... [i]t gives children access to reading and they realise there's a code they can follow and be successful.'

Others, however, cautioned against an overemphasis on phonics: 'I think it's one of a range of strategies. I think there's a little bit too much of an emphasis on it... it's right that schools that weren't using phonics at all should be but the trend for teaching of reading and spelling to be taught exclusively through phonics is wrong because there are a significant minority of children that just don't get it... it needs to be part of a whole toolkit of strategies.'

⁷⁰ Walker et al (2015)

New findings

To provide further, updated context on teachers' views and practices within schools, we commissioned TeacherTapp to ask new questions of primary teachers through their daily survey phone app (flagged as 'EPI-commissioned' questions below).⁷¹ We also obtained TeacherTapp data from previous questions on phonics and the PSC for our own analyses (flagged as 'TeacherTapp archive' questions).

TeacherTapp respondents are a self-selected convenience sample, but given inevitable non-response to more extensively sampled surveys, they provide a reasonable and pragmatic means through which to access the perceptions of a range of teachers, and are increasingly used as a tool in research.⁷² Weights are provided by TeacherTapp and aim to render the samples representative of teachers in England. They are used where appropriate for the findings reported below.

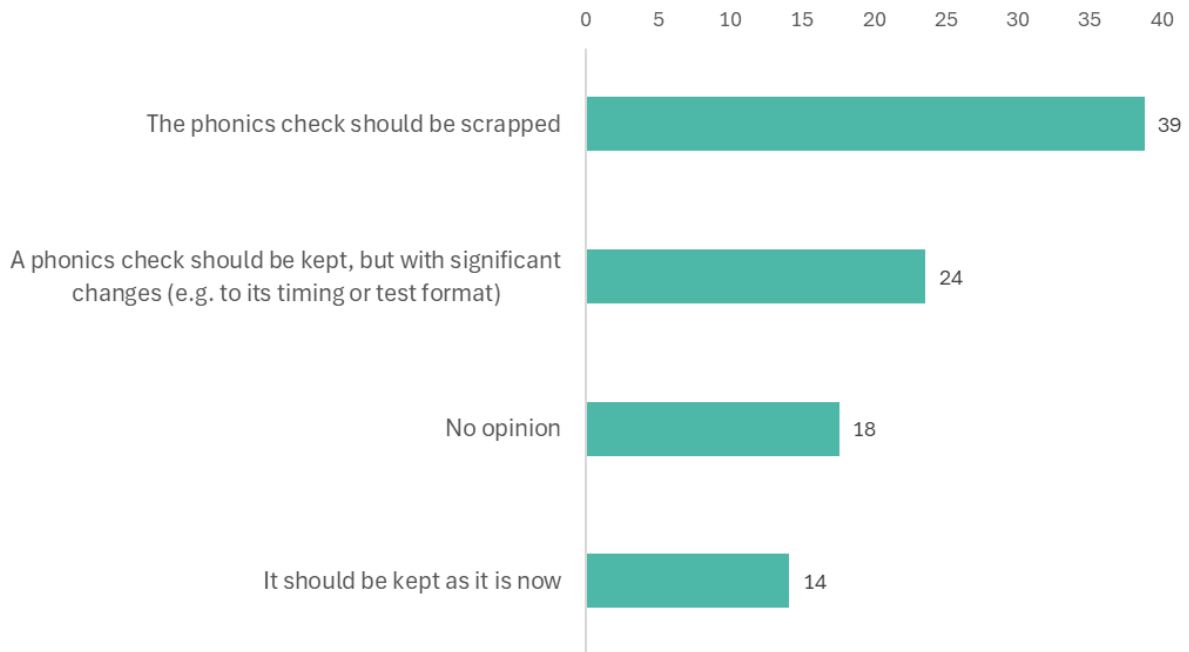
TeacherTapp archive question: 'The year 1 phonics check continues to be controversial amongst teachers and parents. On balance, which of these most closely fits your view on it?'

Surveyed teachers were asked this question in 2022. Figure 23, below, shows the percentage of participants choosing each response. Only 14 per cent of respondents stated that the PSC 'should be kept as it is now;' 39 per cent said it 'should be scrapped.' Twenty-four per cent said, 'A phonics check should be kept, but with significant changes.' This suggests that about half of the surveyed teachers who responded substantively perceived the check essentially negatively, while half supported its retention in some form.

⁷¹ TeacherTapp (online)

⁷² For example: Allen et al (2020); Baker et al (2024). See also: Jerrim (2023)

Figure 23: Teachers’ responses to the question: ‘The year 1 phonics check continues to be controversial amongst teachers and parents. On balance, which of these most closely fits your view on it?’⁷³



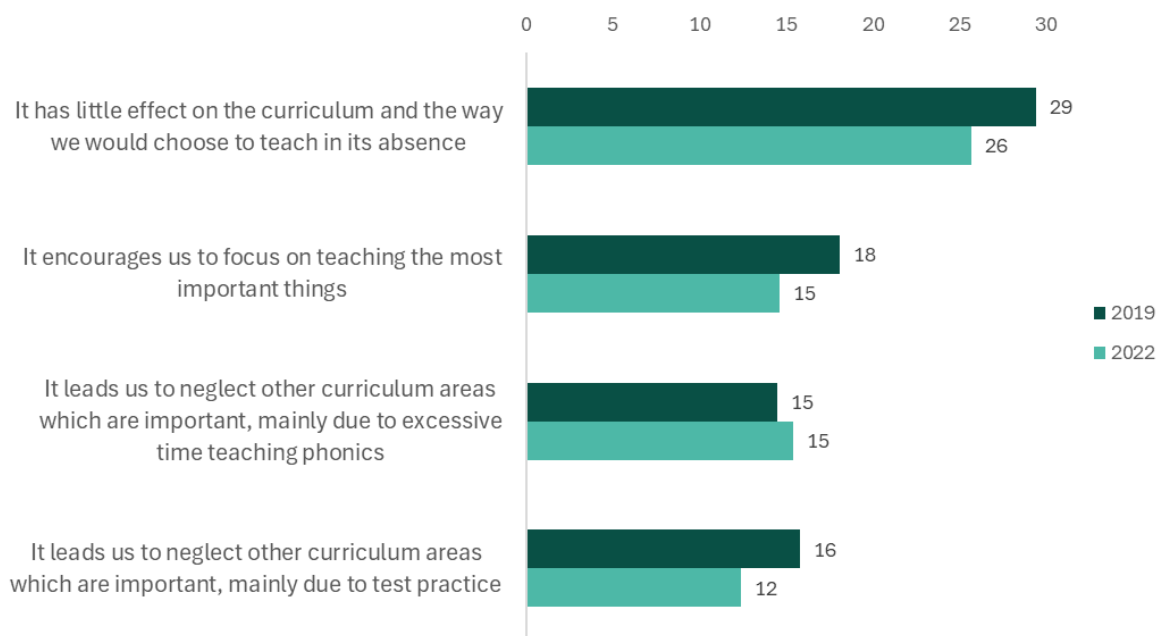
TeacherTapp archive question: ‘How do you feel the presence of the phonics check in year 1 (and 2) affects teaching in your school? (Please choose only one which best represents your view.)’

Teachers were asked this question in 2019, and again in 2022. Figure 24, below, shows the percentage of participants choosing each response. Responses were generally similar at the two time points, and the most common was that it ‘has little effect on the curriculum.’ This contrasts with findings in the 2015 evaluation for the Department for Education, which found that in the early years after the introduction of the check, there was ‘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.’ This may be because the PSC is now normalised and bedded-in, so by 2019, teachers perceived it as part of the norm.

⁷³ Teacher could also respond ‘Not relevant / cannot answer.’ Unweighted N=1,959.

In 2022, only 15 per cent of respondents stated that the PSC ‘encourages us to focus on teaching the most important things,’ while 27 per cent in total stated that it leads to ‘neglect [of] other curriculum areas that are important.’

Figure 24: Teachers’ responses to the question: ‘How do you feel the presence of the phonics check in year 1 (and 2) affects teaching in your school?’⁷⁴



EPI-commissioned question: ‘How much lesson time each day was spent on phonics in the fortnight before the Phonics screening check?’

To explore further the nature of the PSC’s presence within teaching and the curriculum, we commissioned this new question, which was answered by 1,952 primary teachers in mainstream state schools, in June 2024 – the week after the PSC was carried out.

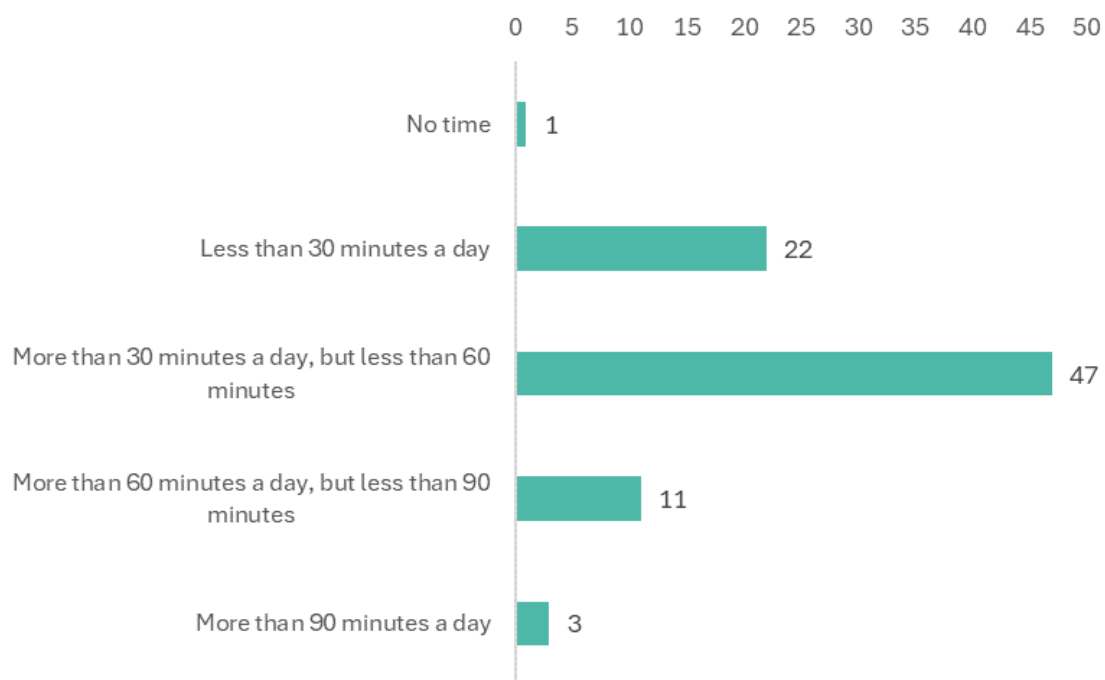
Figure 25 shows that most respondent teachers (47 per cent) reported 30-60 minutes per day being spent on phonics in the fortnight before the check. There was some variation according to the characteristics of schools and teachers. For example, Figure 26 shows that teachers in schools with higher numbers of FSM-registered pupils were more likely to report longer periods being spent on phonics, with 21 per cent of those working in schools with the most FSM-registered pupils reporting spending over an hour a day. Only 15 per cent of

⁷⁴ Teacher could also respond ‘Cannot answer,’ and, in 2022 only, ‘None of the above.’ 2019 unweighted N=973; 2022 unweighted N=1,959. Rounding to whole numbers is used for data labels to avoid false precision using the survey sample and may lead to bars differing where data labels do not.

teachers in these high-FSM schools reported spending less than 30 minutes per day on phonics, compared to 31 per cent in low-FSM schools.

There is also some patterning by school Ofsted rating (Figure 27), with only 12 per cent of teachers in schools with a 'Requires Improvement' or 'Inadequate' judgement reporting spending under 30 minutes per day, compared to 25 per cent of those in 'Outstanding' schools. And older respondent teachers reported spending less time on phonics in the two weeks leading up to the PSC than younger teachers: 21 per cent of teachers in their 20s replied that they spent over an hour, compared to 11 per cent of those aged over 50.⁷⁵

Figure 25: Teachers' responses to the question: 'How much lesson time each day was spent on phonics in the fortnight before the Phonics screening check?'⁷⁶



⁷⁵ We also found congruent patterning by school Ofsted rating, FSM composition, and teacher age across responses to other archived and new TeacherTapp questions.

⁷⁶ Teacher could also respond 'Not relevant / cannot answer.' N=1,952.

Figure 26: Teachers' responses to the question: 'How much lesson time each day was spent on phonics in the fortnight before the Phonics screening check?' – by proportion FSM-registered pupils in their school⁷⁷

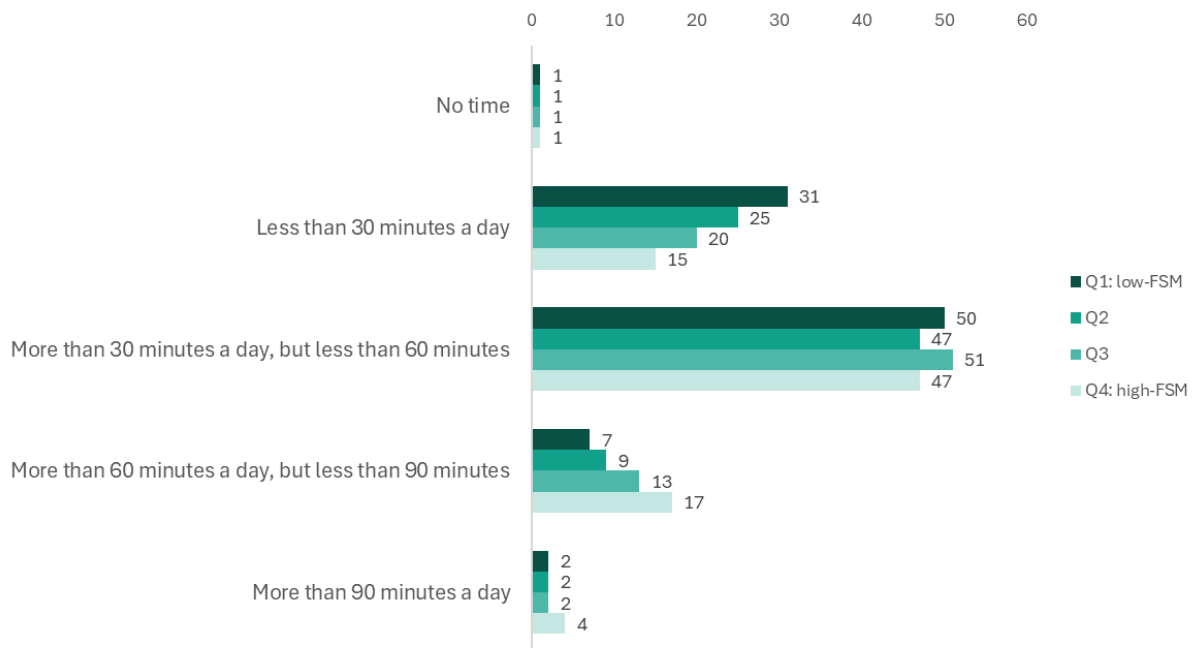
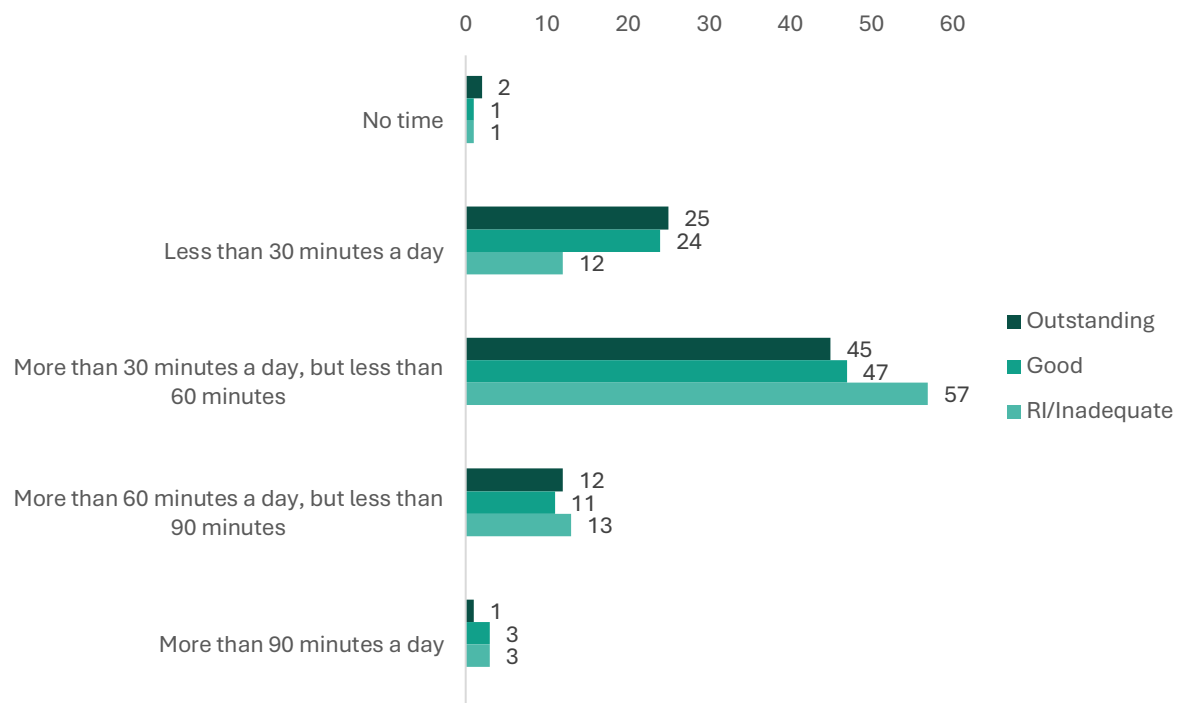


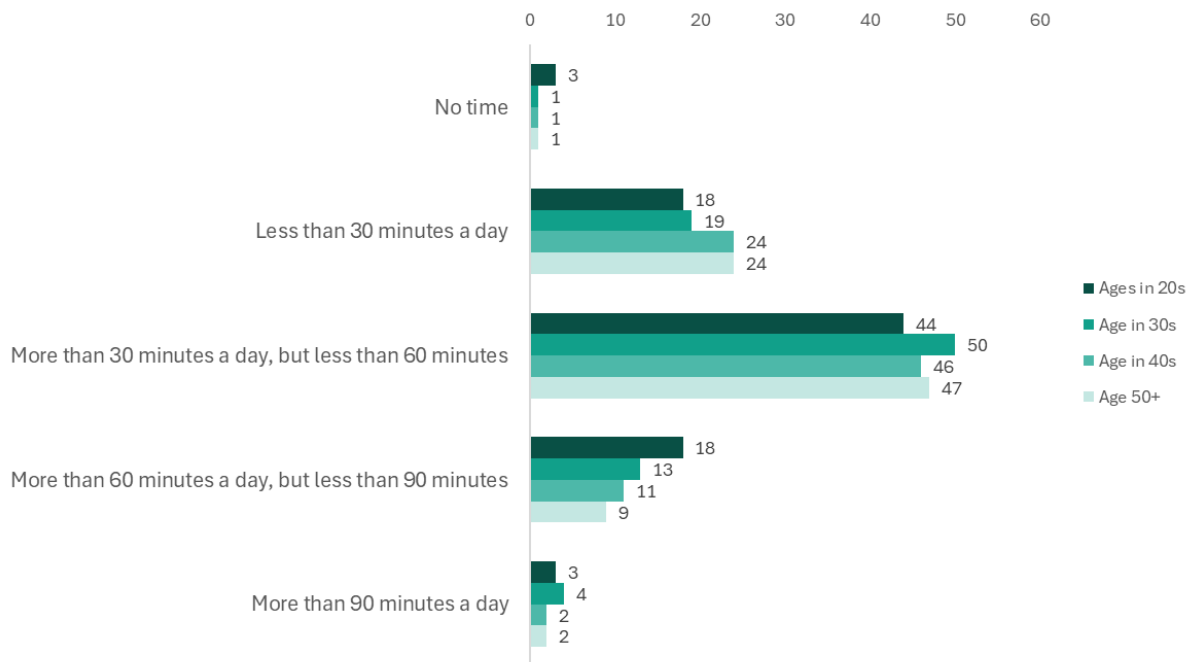
Figure 27: Teachers' responses to the question: 'How much lesson time each day was spent on phonics in the fortnight before the Phonics screening check?' – by school Ofsted rating⁷⁸



⁷⁷ Teacher could also respond 'Not relevant / cannot answer.' N=1,952.

⁷⁸ Teacher could also respond 'Not relevant / cannot answer.' N=1,952.

Figure 27: Teachers’ responses to the question: ‘How much lesson time each day was spent on phonics in the fortnight before the Phonics screening check?’ – by teacher age⁷⁹

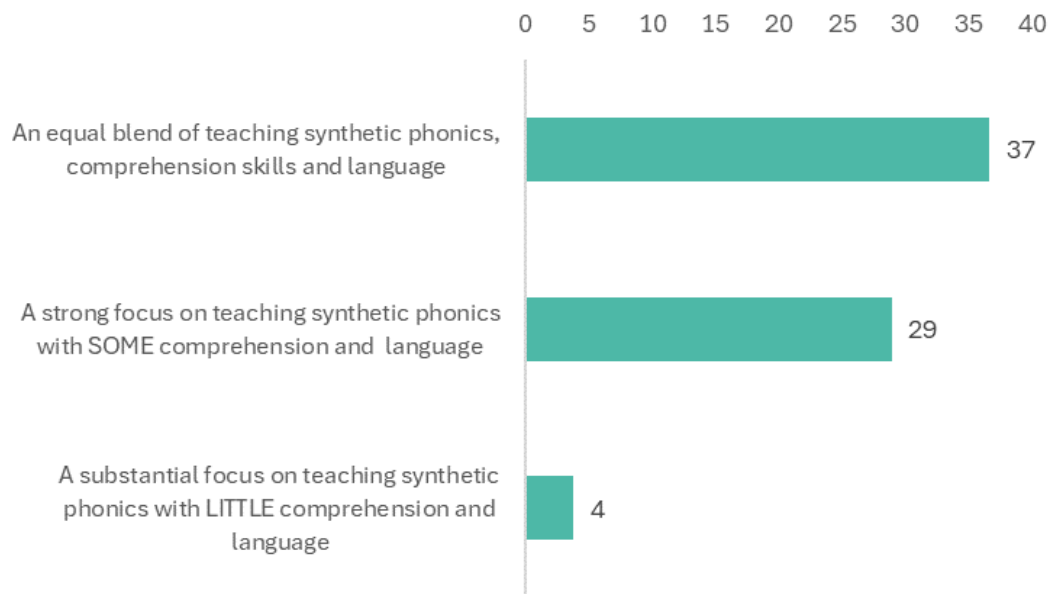


TeacherTapp archive question: ‘Which of the following best describes your school’s approach to teaching reading at KS1?’

This question was asked in 2022. Congruent with participants in the 2015 DfE evaluation, most respondents here reported an ‘equal blend’ of synthetic phonics teaching, alongside other skills development. However, a significant proportion reported a dominant focus on teaching synthetic phonics rather than comprehension and language development.

⁷⁹ Teacher could also respond ‘Not relevant / cannot answer.’ N=1,952.

Figure 28: Teachers' responses to the question: 'Which of the following best describes your school's approach to teaching reading at KS1?'⁸⁰

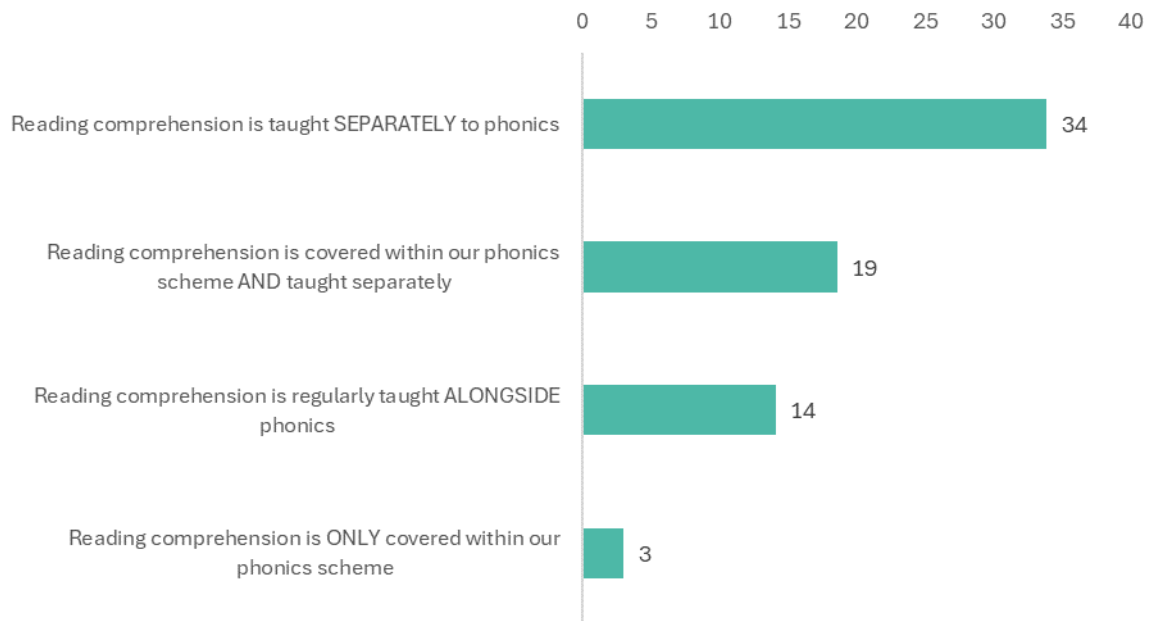


TeacherTapp archive question: 'How does your school teach reading comprehension and phonics at KS1?'

This question was asked in 2022. Responses again suggest variation in the incorporation of reading comprehension with phonics teaching, with most respondents reporting that it is taught separately to phonics at least to some extent.

⁸⁰ Teachers could also respond, 'I don't know,' and 'Not relevant / cannot answer.' Unweighted N=2,001.

Figure 29: Teachers’ responses to the question: ‘How does your school teach reading comprehension and phonics at KS1?’⁸¹



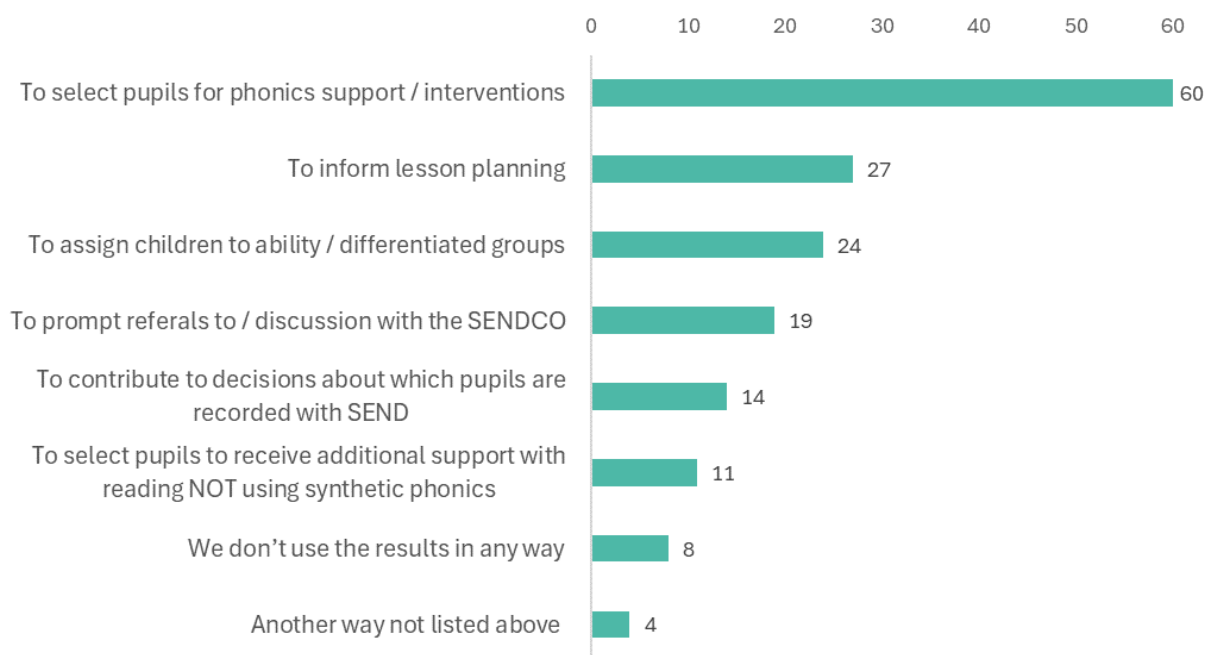
EPI-commissioned question: ‘How are results from the Phonics screening check used in your school?’

We commissioned TeacherTapp to ask this question in autumn 2023. Teachers could select multiple responses; most chose one to three options. Figure 26 shows the percentage of individual teachers choosing each response. Unsurprisingly, the most commonly reported use of the PSC is ‘To select pupils for phonics support / interventions,’ but uses for lesson planning, and ‘ability’ grouping / differentiation are also reported. Some teachers report that the PSC is used ‘to prompt referrals / discussion with the SENDCO’⁸² (19 per cent) and ‘to contribute to decisions about which pupils are recorded with SEND’ (14 per cent) – congruent with findings earlier in this report regarding shifts in the composition of pupils recorded with SEND after the introduction of the check.

⁸¹ Teachers could also respond, ‘I don’t know,’ and ‘Not relevant / cannot answer.’ Unweighted N=2,011.

⁸² Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Coordinator

Figure 30: Teachers’ responses to the question: ‘How is the Phonics screening check used in your school?’⁸³



Section summary

- When asked their view on the PSC, the most common response selected by surveyed teachers was that it ‘should be scrapped’ (39 per cent). Only 14 per cent said it ‘should be kept as it is now,’ while 24 per cent said, ‘A phonics check should be kept, but with significant changes.’
- Around a quarter of surveyed teachers reported that the PSC leads to ‘neglect [of] other curriculum areas that are important’.
- When asked about the amount of lesson time spent on phonics in the fortnight leading up to the check, 30-60 minutes a day was the most common response.
- Reported time spent varied according to other factors: older teachers, those in schools rated ‘outstanding’ by Ofsted, and those in schools with fewer FSM-registered pupils tended to spend less lesson time on phonics in the weeks leading up to the check.
- Many surveyed teachers reported that their school teaches reading through both synthetic phonics and comprehension skills and language (37 per cent) – but a

⁸³ Teachers could also respond, ‘I don’t know,’ and ‘Not relevant / cannot answer.’ Unweighted N=2,716.

substantial proportion (33 per cent) reported a dominant focus on teaching synthetic phonics.

- Most respondent teachers reported that reading comprehension is taught separately to phonics at least to some extent.
- Teachers reported using results from the PSC for various purposes, including 'ability' grouping, referrals to the SENDCO, and decisions about pupils' SEND.
- Teachers have raised concerns that the PSC does not accurately reflect all pupils' skills; that it does not provide new, useful information; and that it can lead to a focus on synthetic phonics at the expense of other reading strategies.

Summary and recommendations

Reading is one of the most crucial skills that children are taught during primary school, and strategies for primary reading and literacy development should be informed by evidence so that children can best be supported towards fluency.

There is, however, a lack of evidence on whether the introduction of the phonics screening check has led to improvements in reading. National data from the PIRLS study do not support this hypothesis, and the evaluation commissioned by the Department for Education of the PSC and published in 2015 reported:

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.⁸⁴

We built on this early evaluation throughout this report, drawing on its recommendations for further research. We map the data for ten national cohorts: those who were in year 1 (the school year in which the PSC is undertaken) in 2009, through to those in year 1 in 2018. We therefore reach back before the check's introduction in 2012, and forward to the years after it had been established.

Again, we find no evidence that the PSC has led to improved reading scores. Partly this is due to insurmountable methodological constraints: definitive causal evaluation of the PSC will never be possible, because it was rolled out nationally to all pupils in the same year, 2012. However, descriptive analyses can be carried out, and provide no support for the hypothesis that the PSC has positively impacted children's reading or writing attainment at KS1 or KS2, as recorded in the National Pupil Database. We find suggestive evidence that the implementation of the PSC may have shifted the composition of the group of pupils newly recorded with SEND in year 2, but none that this is related to either raised or depressed trajectories of subsequent attainment.

Given the limitations of the quantitative data, it is crucial also to consider other types and sources of evidence, including the reports of primary teachers who implement the check.

⁸⁴ Walker et al (2015)

Over the decade since the PSC was introduced, these reports have been mixed, with some support, but also concerns raised regarding the efficacy of the check and the unintended and negative consequences of its presence.

Policy recommendations

We therefore recommend that:

- The Department for Education should commission and publish a fresh, evidence-informed review of whether the phonics screening check is an effective national intervention that helps children learn to read.
- The Department for Education should transparently and widely consider the costs and benefits of the check, and of alternatives: including no check, and other strategies for supporting children’s reading development.
- This review should be undertaken by independent experts with a range of knowledge, including of children’s reading and literacy development, and of practices and pedagogies within primary schools.
- This review might be undertaken alongside and inform, or form part of, the overarching Curriculum and Assessment Review now planned by the new government.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Department for Education (2024a)

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