



Statutory guidance

2026 phonics screening check: administration guidance

Updated 16 March 2026

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This guidance is for schools administering the 2026 phonics screening check. The information expands on the 'Phonics screening check' section of the [2026 phonics screening check: assessment and reporting arrangements \(ARA\)](#).

It ensures schools can:

- prepare for check administration
- prepare check administrators
- receive and securely store check materials
- administer the check correctly
- score the check

Schools should administer the check during the week beginning Monday 8 June. The 'Important dates' section of the [2026 phonics screening check ARA](#) contains a list of dates to note.

Schools may also want to use [past check materials](#) to help pupils prepare for the check.

Headteachers are responsible for the check administration arrangements within their school. Failing to follow this guidance could lead to a [maladministration investigation](#).

1. Headteachers' responsibilities

As the headteacher at a school administering the phonics screening check, you have specific responsibilities, as detailed in the 'Responsibilities' section of the [2026 phonics screening check ARA](#).

2. Maladministration

In relation to the phonics screening check, the term maladministration refers to any act that:

- affects the integrity, security or confidentiality of the national curriculum assessments
- could lead to results that do not reflect pupils' unaided work

Your school could be subject to a [maladministration investigation](#) if it does not comply with:

- this check administration guidance
- the [2026 phonics screening check ARA](#)
- the check administration instructions provided with the check materials

You should consider taking steps to protect staff involved in administering the check. Misinterpretations about correct check administration can lead to allegations of maladministration. To avoid this, ensure all staff, participating pupils and their parents understand:

- how the check will be administered
- what assistance is and is not allowed in the check

Anyone with concerns about the administration of the phonics screening check, or any allegations of maladministration, should report them to the Standard and Testing Agency's (STA's) Maladministration team at STA.maladministration@education.gov.uk or contact the national curriculum assessments helpline on 0300 303 3013.

3. Participating pupils

With some exceptions (see [Pupils who should not take the check](#)), all pupils who have reached the age of 6 by the end of the school year must take the check during that academic year. For most pupils, this will be in year 1. This includes pupils registered at maintained nursery schools who will reach the age of 6 before

the end of the school year and have completed the year 1 programme of study.

Pupils who will have reached the age of 7 by the end of the academic year (most pupils will be in year 2) and who have not taken the check before, or who did not meet the expected standard in the previous year, must also take the check.

For a new pupil joining the school, and who will reach the age of 7 this academic year, the school should confirm if the pupil should participate in the check. The [common transfer file \(CTF\)](#) sent from the previous school should include information to confirm if the pupil met the expected standard in the check in the previous year. If this information is not provided, you should contact your local authority or sign in to 'Get information about pupils', using [Department for Education \(DfE\) Sign-in](#), to search for the pupil by their unique pupil number (UPN).

If you cannot establish whether the pupil took the check in the previous year, the pupil should take the check.

3.1 Pupils absent during the check week

If a pupil is absent during the check week, you can administer the check to them until Friday 19 June. Approval from, or notification to, STA is not required.

If a pupil does not take the check during this period and returns to school after Friday 19 June, they must be recorded as absent.

3.2 Pupils who should not take the check

Headteachers make the final decision about whether it is appropriate for a pupil to take the check. In any instances where pupils are not entered for the check, schools should explain their decision to the pupil's parents. If appropriate, they should provide the parents with documentary evidence to support their decision. If the headteacher decides not to administer the check to a pupil, schools should also explain how they are helping the pupil learn to decode using phonics.

If it is not appropriate for a pupil to take the check, it is important that teachers are aware of the pupil's progress in phonics so they can plan the next steps in their teaching.

You may want to provide a similar experience for pupils who will not formally participate in the check. You could do this by modifying the practice sheet to include only single letters or simple 2-letter blends so they can demonstrate their

skills. Check materials, including the practice sheet, are available within the 'Activities' tab on the [National Curriculum Assessments Portal \(NCA Portal\)](#) from Monday 8 June.

Schools must submit data for all pupils, including those who do not take the check. Pupils who do not take the check should be marked as 'D' (headteacher decided it was inappropriate for the pupil to take the check).

Pupils working below the standard

If a pupil has not completed the first year of the key stage 1 English programme of study or has shown no understanding of grapheme-phoneme correspondences, they should not take the check.

Pupils for whom English is an additional language

If a pupil has limited fluency in English, you may decide that they should not take the check. If a pupil has recently moved to the country and is unable to understand letters and sounds in English, they should not take the check.

Pupils who use British Sign Language

Pupils who use British Sign Language (BSL) or other sign-supported communication to spell out individual letters should not take the check. Some pupils may use BSL or other sign-supported communication to support their oral communication. You should consider whether you can support these pupils to take the check and demonstrate their ability in linking letters and sounds.

Pupils who are non-verbal or selectively mute

Pupils who are non-verbal or selectively mute are unable to participate in the check if they do not give verbal responses aloud in school. They may be able to identify the words but will not be able to demonstrate their knowledge by speaking the answers aloud.

Selectively mute pupils may demonstrate their knowledge at home informally with a family member who can discuss the outcome with the teacher. This arrangement will ensure the pupil has had a similar experience to their peers and gives them an opportunity to demonstrate their skills.

To avoid a potential security risk to the check materials, this arrangement may only take place after the check period ends on Friday 19 June.

4. Receiving and storing check materials

We will deliver materials to schools in the week beginning Monday 18 May, to school addresses taken from [Get Information about Schools \(GIAS\)](#). You can

update your school's details by signing in to GIAS, using [DfE Sign-in](#).

Headteachers must store check materials securely and treat them as confidential from the point they arrive in school or are downloaded from the [NCA Portal](#) until Monday 22 June. This is the school day after the last check can be administered to pupils.

If your school will be closed in the week beginning Monday 18 May, and you have not yet contacted us to arrange an alternative delivery date, you should contact the national curriculum assessments helpline on 0300 303 3013.

Schools do not need to order standard versions of the phonics screening check. STA sends materials to schools based on school census data. You will receive one set of materials per 30 pupils.

Each set of materials will contain:

- a copy of the 'Phonics screening check: pupils' materials'
- a pad containing 30 copies of the 'Phonics screening check: answer sheet'
- a copy of the 'Phonics screening check: practice sheet'
- a copy of the '2026 phonics screening check: scoring guidance'

You can download [past check materials](#) to see what the check looks like.

If schools have not received their check materials by Friday 22 May, they should contact the national curriculum assessments helpline on 0300 303 3013.

4.1 Additional materials

Schools can download check materials from the 'Activities' tab on the [NCA Portal](#) from Monday 8 June. This includes the answer sheet and modified versions of the check (excluding braille), including Word versions with:

- colour images
- black and white images
- no images

4.2 Braille versions

Schools can order uncontracted (Grade 1) Unified English Braille (UEB) versions of the phonics screening check from the national curriculum assessments helpline on 0300 303 3013 or from MTH@iwanttoconnect.co.uk by Tuesday 21 April.

4.3 How to check your delivery

We recommend the headteacher or delegated member of staff, and at least one other member of school staff, check your delivery against the delivery note on receipt. Schools should check their delivery to ensure:

- the delivery is for your school
- the school's details are correct
- the check materials are sealed and undamaged

You should contact the national curriculum assessments helpline on 0300 303 3013 if:

- any boxes or check materials are unsealed or damaged on arrival
- a delivery is incomplete
- you have not received materials by Friday 22 May

We may ask you to send a photograph of any damaged boxes or check packs.

Schools should leave the inner packs unopened and store the delivery securely until they are ready to administer the check from Monday 8 June.

When you have finished checking your delivery, store all materials securely in a locked cupboard. Keep your annotated copy of the delivery note somewhere accessible, in the event you receive a [monitoring visit](#).

4.4 Security of check materials

Headteachers must ensure the integrity, security and confidentiality of the check materials are maintained from the point they arrive in school or downloaded from the [NCA Portal](#) until Monday 22 June.

Headteachers should ensure teachers and all other staff who may handle the materials understand their sensitivity.

Schools must store check materials securely in a locked cupboard. The headteacher should allocate responsibility for overseeing the secure storage of check materials to a member of staff not directly involved with the administration of the checks. As part of that responsibility, this member of staff should keep a log of requests for access to the materials, so they are able to give an accurate account of everyone with access to the check materials from the point they arrive in school or are downloaded from the [NCA Portal](#) until Monday 22 June.

Teachers and check administrators must not discuss the content of the check with anyone and must ensure content from the check is not used to prepare pupils.

Specific content that could compromise the check must not be discussed, including sharing with colleagues, online, on internal digital channels or on social media.

You must not open check packs before Monday 8 June. You must only open them when the check is going to be administered for the first time.

Any school behaviour that leads to check materials being shared before Monday 22 June could lead to a [maladministration investigation](#).

Practical advice for keeping materials secure

For all check materials:

- put the unopened materials back into the original delivery box
- store check materials in a room where no IT equipment is kept, as this equipment is often targeted during burglaries
- limit access to the location of the materials
- check the boxes regularly to ensure they have not been tampered with
- plan a reporting procedure in the event of a problem – for example, if keys are lost or stolen
- check individual check packs have not been opened before the check period

Split-site schools

If check materials need to be sent to a location away from the main school site before administration, the headteacher must ensure that appropriate arrangements are in place to maintain the integrity, security and confidentiality of the check contents.

For transporting the check materials to and from a different site, schools can follow the guidance in [Administering the check at an alternative location](#).

Schools used as a polling station or to host public events

If your school is used as a polling station or to host a public event, you should:

- ensure check materials are secure and kept away from the polling station area and visitors
- check the materials before the opening and after the closing of the polling station or public event

If you suspect or experience a security breach, you must report the incident immediately to the national curriculum assessments helpline on 0300 303 3013.

5. Preparing to administer the check

5.1 Check administrators

Headteachers will need to consider the staff resource required to administer the check. The check must be administered to pupils on a one-to-one basis. The role requires professional judgement about which responses are correct.

Check administrators will usually be headteachers, teachers or teaching assistants. Check administrators should be trained in phonics, have experience delivering phonics sessions and be known to the pupil.

Adults administering the check must not be a relative, carer or guardian of the pupil taking the check.

Before administering the check, check administrators should familiarise themselves with this guidance and with:

- the printed instructions for administering the check
- past phonics screening check materials available in the collection of [past test materials](#)
- the information about [preparing to administer the phonics screening check](#)
- the printed scoring guidance on how to score pupils' responses – examples from previous years are available in the collection of [past test materials](#)

5.2 Access arrangements

You may need to adapt the check for some pupils. You must base adjustments on normal classroom practice for pupils with specific needs. You do not need to request permission from STA to make adaptations, but you must ensure any modifications do not advantage pupils.

Those who may need adjustments include pupils:

- for whom provision is being made in school under special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) support and whose learning difficulty or disability significantly affects their ability to access the check
- with an education, health and care (EHC) plan
- with a disability, as defined in section 6(1) of the [Equality Act 2010](#), that does not give rise to a special educational need but requires alternative access arrangements
- who are unable to sit and work for a sustained period because of a disability or behavioural, emotional or social difficulty

It is not possible to list all the circumstances in which pupils may need adaptations. If you need to discuss access arrangements to meet a pupil's specific needs, you should use the 'Message us - access arrangements' form within the 'Test administration' tab on the [NCA Portal](#).

For general enquiries, you should contact the national curriculum assessments helpline on 0300 303 3013.

Rest breaks

The check is not timed but we expect it will take each pupil between 4 and 9 minutes to complete. You should give pupils enough time to respond to each word. If you believe a pupil will find it difficult to concentrate, or may experience fatigue during the check, you may use rest breaks to make it more manageable. You can give rest breaks whenever they are needed.

When planning for the check, consider when it would be most appropriate for the pupil to take a break. If the pupil is likely to need a rest break more frequently than between the 2 sections of the check, or at the end of a page, we recommend you modify the materials so there are fewer words on each page. You can modify the materials by downloading them from the [NCA Portal](#) from Monday 8 June (see [Adapting check materials](#)).

Schools must supervise pupils and keep them under check conditions during a rest break and there must be no contact with pupils who have taken the check and no opportunity to discuss check content. The check must be completed on the same day.

Cued speech

If a pupil with a hearing impairment is familiar with cued speech, it can be used by an appropriately trained professional to make their responses clear. If a pupil with a hearing impairment would prefer to speak the words, you should use cued speech to help clarify what sounds they are aiming for.

Visual phonics

These techniques can be used to help pupils make their responses clear if this is normal classroom practice.

Sound buttons

If a pupil uses sound buttons to help them decode words as part of normal classroom practice, they may use them during the check. You must give the pupil a clean copy of the check so they can mark the sound buttons against the graphemes. You must not mark the graphemes for the pupil.

Readers

Readers are not allowed.

Adapting check materials

We provide check materials in font 'Sassoon Infant', style 'regular' and size '60'. Most pupils will use standard versions of the phonics screening check, but you may need to adapt check materials to meet pupils' specific needs.

Schools can download check materials from the 'Activities' tab on the [NCA Portal](#) from Monday 8 June. This includes:

- the answer sheet and modified versions (excluding braille)
- Word versions with colour images
- Word versions with black and white images
- Word versions without images

We have designed the materials so schools can modify them to meet the needs of their pupils and their own approach to teaching phonics. Examples of modifications may include:

- changing the font
- changing the font size
- having fewer words per page
- coloured overlays, if this is normal classroom practice

Schools are responsible for ensuring that any adaptations to check materials are made correctly. STA will not compensate or give special consideration where check materials have been incorrectly modified.

5.3 Preparing rooms

Administer the check in a room that is quiet and provides a comfortable, well-lit space. You should prepare rooms before pupils are admitted. If there are displays or materials which could help pupils, you must remove or cover them for the duration of the check. If more than one adult is administering the check to pupils at the same time, you may need more than one room to ensure pupils taking the check do not disturb, distract, or aid one another.

5.4 Administering the check at an alternative location

At the headteacher's discretion, the check can be administered at an alternative location. This may include a pupil referral unit or the pupil's home, as long as the pupil is in a fit state.

The headteacher is responsible for ensuring the integrity, security and confidentiality of the check are maintained, including the transporting of phonics screening check materials to and from the alternative location, and that the check is administered according to this check administration guidance.

There is no requirement to make an application or notification to administer the check at an alternative location.

On the day of the check:

1. Take out a copy of the check materials from the pack and immediately put it into a sealed, windowless envelope.
2. Reseal the rest of the check materials in their original package and return them to the box, then reseal the box and return it to the secured cupboard until you are ready to administer the next check to a pupil.
3. We recommend 2 check administrators transport the check materials in the envelope to the alternative location and administer the check to the pupil following the check administration guidance.
4. When the check has been administered, seal the completed check materials immediately in a windowless envelope and return it back to the school.

If schools need specific advice on administering the check at an alternative location, they should contact STA using the 'Message us - access arrangements' form within the 'Test administration' tab on the [NCA Portal](#).

5.5 Schools affected by disruption

In line with emergency planning guidance, schools' emergency plans should include contingency arrangements for possible disruption to assessments. This may include alternative venues or arrangements for assessments, as appropriate. Schools are encouraged to review contingency plans well in advance of assessments.

Where school facilities are affected by disruption, such as fire, flood or building closures due to reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC), you may wish to make use of the flexibilities within the assessment arrangements.

Where schools have concerns that they may still be unable to administer the phonic screening check, they should contact the national curriculum assessments helpline on 0300 303 3013 or at assessments@education.gov.uk.

6. Administering the check

Pupils must only attempt the check once during the check window. You should introduce the check as consistently as possible, bearing in mind some pupils may require more explanation to understand the instructions.

Schools must not administer the check virtually to pupils.

The check materials include a double-sided practice sheet with 4 pseudo-words on one side and 4 real words on the other side. You can use this to familiarise pupils with the check. If a pupil is struggling to decode the words on the practice sheet, you should stop and discuss with your headteacher whether that pupil should participate in the check.

The following text provides an example of how you could introduce the check:

“In this activity, I’m going to ask you to read some words aloud.

You may have seen some of the words before and others will be new to you.

You should try to read each word, but don’t worry if you can’t. If it helps you, you may sound out the letters before trying to say the word.

This practice sheet shows you what the words will look like.

Have a go at reading these 4 words aloud. You should have come across them before. [in, at, beg, sum]

The words on this side [turn over practice sheet] are not real words. They are names for types of imaginary creatures. You can see a picture of the creature next to each word.

Can you read out the words on this page for me? [ot, vap, osk, ect]

Now you are going to start reading out the words in this booklet and I am going to write down what you say on my sheet.

In this booklet, there are 4 words on each page. I will tell you at the start of each page whether they are real words that you may have seen before, or names for types of imaginary creatures.

The first page has names for types of imaginary creatures, and you can see their pictures.

Can you start reading the words to me?”

It is important to tell the pupil whether they are real words or types of imaginary creatures on each page.

6.1 Assistance

You must ensure that nothing you say or do during the check could be interpreted as giving pupils an advantage.

If a pupil is likely to be confused by the standard introduction, you may develop your own. Your instructions may refer to the practice words but must not refer to words within the check itself.

You can point to whole words to indicate which word comes next, but you must be careful not to point to the words in a way that indicates how to decode them – for example, you must avoid pointing from left to right or hovering over letters.

During the practice, you can give further guidance to ensure pupils understand the task – for example, you may remind the pupil during the practice that the word must be blended, but this guidance would not be allowed during the check itself.

You should give pupils as long as necessary to respond to a word, but in most cases 10 seconds should be enough. You should not indicate whether a pupil has decoded a word correctly or incorrectly during the check, but you may offer encouragement. You should decide when it is appropriate to tell the pupil to move on to the next word, taking care not to do so while they are still trying to decode the word.

6.2 Problems or queries during the check

Most pupils should be able to attempt all words in the check. It is important, however, that they do not become distressed or have a negative experience. If a pupil is struggling, you should consider stopping the check before the end.

Similarly, if a pupil is showing signs of fatigue, you should consider using a rest break (see [Access arrangements](#)). If a pupil needs frequent, lengthy rest breaks, think about stopping the check completely. When making the decision to stop, ensure you have given the pupil a full opportunity to show what they can do. If you stop the check before the end, you should report the pupil's score for what they have attempted.

6.3 Completing the answer sheet

You should use the answer sheets to record each pupil's responses during the check, so you have an accurate record of how many words a pupil reads correctly.

You can also use them to record your own comments – for example, any graphemes a pupil did not recognise or when blending was difficult. This may help

you plan future phonics teaching.

If you are not familiar with the answer sheets, you can refer to [past check materials](#).

6.4 Scoring the check

We have included instructions for scoring the check with the check materials. You should score the check as the pupil says each word. Make a record on the answer sheet of whether the pupil said each word correctly or not. You should consider the following points when scoring the check:

- if a pupil sounds out the phonemes but does not blend the word, you must not prompt them to do so, and you must score as incorrect
- pupils may elongate phonemes but if they leave gaps between phonemes and do not blend them, you must score as incorrect
- alternative pronunciations when deciding whether a response is correct – for real words, you must mark inappropriate grapheme-phoneme correspondences as incorrect – for example, reading ‘blow’ to rhyme with ‘cow’ would be incorrect
- you can allow alternative pronunciations of graphemes in pseudo-words – the scoring guidance gives some alternative pronunciations, but the list of acceptable pronunciations is not exhaustive
- a pupil’s accent when deciding whether a response is acceptable and there must be no bias for or against a pupil with a particular accent – pupils can use any acceptable regional pronunciation even if it is not within their usual accent
- any pronunciation difficulties when deciding whether a response is acceptable – for example, a pupil unable to form the ‘th’ sound who instead usually says ‘f’ should have this scored as correct
- if a pupil shows their ability to decode by revising an attempt, you must mark this as correct – you should not, however, prompt pupils to ‘have another go’ and must score the final attempt even if this is incorrect and a previous attempt was correct

7. After the check

7.1 Headteacher’s declaration form

Headteachers must complete and submit the headteacher’s declaration form (HDF) after your school has completed the check, as detailed in article 5A(1)(c) of

[The Education \(National Curriculum\) \(Key Stage 1 Assessment Arrangements\) \(England\) Order 2004.](#)

You must still complete the HDF if all pupils are working below the standard of the check.

The HDF confirms either that:

- your school has administered the check to all eligible pupils according to the published guidance
- the check was not administered because all pupils are working below the standard or are unable to access it
- you cannot confirm the statements in the HDF and you have reported any issues to STA

The HDF will be available within the 'Activities' tab on the [NCA Portal](#) from Monday 8 June and must be submitted by Tuesday 30 June.

If you or a delegated member of staff cannot complete the HDF, need help completing it, or have made any errors when completing it, you should contact the national curriculum assessments helpline on 0300 303 3013 or at assessments@education.gov.uk.

You cannot amend the HDF after submission.

Failure to complete the HDF by the deadline may result in a maladministration investigation.

8. Reporting check results

We will publish the threshold mark on [GOV.UK](#) on Monday 22 June. Schools do not need to wait until we publish the threshold mark before submitting their data to the local authority.

8.1 Reporting to local authorities

Schools must report their pupils' check scores to the local authority by the submission deadline the local authority specifies. You must submit results for all pupils who are eligible to take the check using the following codes:

Description

What to record

Pupil took the check and met the expected standard	Score: record in the phonics mark field
Pupil took the check and did not meet the expected standard	Score: record in the phonics mark field
Absent	A: record in the phonics outcome field
Headteacher decided it was not appropriate for pupil to take the check	D: record in the phonics outcome field
Pupil left the school	L: record in the phonics outcome field
Check subject to maladministration	Q: record in the phonics outcome field

The local authority will tell you how to submit your data and by when. We have advised management information system (MIS) suppliers of the data requirements for the check. Your local authority or MIS supplier, depending on local arrangements, may offer support for these systems.

Local authorities must submit phonics screening check data to DfE using [COLLECT](#) by Friday 17 July. There is no facility to amend data once the collection has closed. Further support for schools and local authorities is available in DfE's [phonics screening check data collection and submission guidance](#).

8.2 Pupils who move schools

If a pupil moves school:

- before the check administration period, the receiving school should assess the pupil and submit data for them even if they do not take the check
- during the check period, the receiving school should find out whether the pupil has already taken the check – if not, they should assess the pupil and submit data for them
- after taking the check, their result should be submitted by the school where they took the check and provided to the new school in the CTF

If a pupil arrives from a non-participating school – for example, they have recently arrived from overseas or were electively home educated – the receiving school should consider administering the check and must submit data for them.

If a pupil arrives after the check administration period and has not taken the check, they do not need to be included in that year's data submission.

8.3 How results will be used

DfE does not publish school-level results for the phonics screening check.

Results will be available in [Analyse School Performance \(ASP\)](#) and schools will also have access to [national and local authority results](#) to allow them to benchmark their pupils' performance.

Pupils with a 'D' code are included in the results, as DfE wants to measure the percentage of all 6-year-olds meeting the standard and not only those who took the check.

Those who are absent are also included in calculations, to encourage schools to ensure that all eligible pupils take the check where possible. Any pupil who is absent for the check must complete it by the end of year 2.

Pupils whose phonics screening check outcome was subject to maladministration are also included to ensure complete coverage of the cohort.

8.4 Reporting results to parents

Headteachers must report the pupils' scores to parents by the end of the summer term. This should include whether their child has met the expected standard, to ensure they are aware of their child's progress in developing phonics decoding skills. If a pupil has not met the expected standard, headteachers should outline the support that the school will put in place to help the pupil progress.

Headteachers can choose how to communicate results to parents, but they should provide the results in the context of the child's overall attainment and progress. Headteachers must provide reports for all pupils, including those who have left the school or were absent during the check.

8.5 Pupils who do not meet the expected standard

DfE has published a [reading framework](#), including guidance about what schools should do to support pupils in phonics.

Pupils who do not meet the expected standard at the end of year 1 should retake the check in June 2027 and follow the processes on participation set out in [Participating pupils](#).

You are expected to maintain a programme of support for these pupils.

9. Help and support

For general questions about administering the phonics screening check, you can contact the national curriculum assessments helpline:

National curriculum assessments helpline

Call: 0300 303 3013

Email: assessments@education.gov.uk

Online: [NCA Portal](#) 'Support'

For enquiries relating to access arrangements to meet a pupil's specific needs, schools can use the 'Message us - access arrangements' form within the 'Test administration' tab on the [NCA Portal](#).

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