

Literacy and English Curriculum Background and Evidence Paper

May 2026

Executive Summary

In Working Together to Make Change Happen (April 2025) it was identified that an outcome from the analysing stage of the Curriculum Improvement Cycle (CIC) would be the development of an evidence paper for each curricular area or context for learning published on the CIC website.

This paper provides an evidence base to inform the ongoing Curriculum Improvement Cycle for Literacy and English in Scotland. It draws on national and international data, academic research and stakeholder perspectives to support curriculum improvement and help shape a modern, inclusive, coherent and research-informed English curriculum for all learners aged 3 to 18.

Key Messages

- There is a need to clarify the definition of literacy and the definition of texts in line with an evolving social, economic, cultural and educational landscape. In clarifying the definitions of literacy and texts, the CIC should also review current assessment and accountability measures to ensure they do not unintentionally narrow the literacy curriculum, pedagogy, or assessment practices, and that the full breadth, depth and quality of learners' literacy experiences are recognised beyond what is most easily measured.
 - Listening and talking and early language development are foundational components of learning to read and write for children. Children's speech, language and communication is a key focus in the early years. Being able to discuss and debate effectively is also crucial to improving outcomes for children and young people and to developing valuable skills for the future. The CIC should ensure the continued prominence and parity of esteem between listening and talking and reading and writing; the other key strands of literacy.
 - The CIC should take the opportunity to provide 'increased clarity' within its curriculum guidance on the knowledge and skills young children need in the early stages of primary school in order to develop as successful readers and writers. Both the curriculum guidance produced and the associated professional learning in this area should be informed by the most up-to-date research and evidence.
 - Children and young people's independent reading for enjoyment and engagement is linked to positive economic, social and health-related outcomes, along with academic outcomes. The CIC should consider how this can be positioned effectively within curriculum guidance, illustrating clearly its relationship to broader aspects of reading and to developing literacy in general.
 - Writing is a crucial tool for learning, supporting critical thinking, communication and creativity. However, teachers report feeling less confident in their professional knowledge of writing and learners express declining enjoyment and engagement in this area of literacy. The CIC should fully consider the range of available research and evidence
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related to writing, in order to effectively position knowledge and skills for writing within the curriculum for 21st century learners.

- Digital technology plays a prominent and increasingly complex role in how children and young people both access and create texts. This includes the growing role of Artificial Intelligence. The implications of this should be explored fully within the CIC in order to future-orientate the evolved technical framework.
- Critical literacy is an important component of a future-orientated curriculum as it is a route to supporting children and young people to navigate contemporary challenges such as mis-information and dis-information. The CIC should fully consider the rich insights that academic research can offer in the area of critical literacy, such as supporting children and young people's capacity to recognise prejudice, perspective and power dynamics in language.
- The relationship between socio-economic background and learner outcomes in literacy should be tackled alongside all of the points raised above. This relationship is found to intersect with areas such as early language development, vocabulary acquisition and access to texts. The CIC should consider and maximise opportunities to mitigate these relationships.
- Curriculum and pedagogy should be continually informed by the considerable and ever-evolving body of research on literacy, accounting for the range of disciplinary perspectives, methodologies and approaches to literacy as an area of research.
- Implementation of evolved curriculum guidance for literacy and English must be complemented by improved professional learning for all practitioners including student teachers, probationer teachers, and more experienced teachers.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Next steps

The points and messages raised in this paper will provide an important grounding from which to progress the work of the CIC. The involvement of practitioners and stakeholders in the CIC will help to ensure that curriculum design and implementation support all those involved in literacy and English.

Through the work of the groups and stakeholders involved in the literacy and English CIC, close attention will be paid to these messages with a view to providing solutions that help bring about improved literacy and English learning experiences.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Purpose

This paper offers a snapshot of the current educational landscape, drawing on a diverse range of research and evidence to illuminate prevailing trends, challenges and successes across contexts. It serves as a foundation for ongoing curriculum development, offering insights into the policy environment, learner experience and professional perspectives. By incorporating both qualitative and quantitative data – alongside contributions from practitioners, learners, and the wider education community – it creates space for reflection and informed discussion. While not all available studies are included, those selected reflect the breadth of work currently shaping thinking in this area. The insights outlined here are intended to support Curriculum Improvement Cycle (CIC) stakeholder groups as they consider key issues and navigate the next steps in the evolution of the curriculum.

1.2 Sources of Evidence

A comprehensive body of research was developed through a collaborative effort involving representatives from Education Scotland's Curriculum, Learning, Teaching and Assessment (CLTA) team, the Data, Performance and Research (DPR) Team, Scottish Government Analytical Services and the Scottish Government Library Support Service. This collaboration brought together a wide range of expertise to support the identification, evaluation and organisation of relevant literature. The sources drawn upon include, but are not limited to, peer-reviewed academic papers, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE) publications, Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) and Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence Level (ACEL) data analysis, surveys, government data sets, research produced by national agencies, Scottish Government reports and international publications from organisations such as the OECD and the United Nations. Additionally, the perspectives of children and young people are represented through the work of bodies such as the Scottish Youth Parliament and the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland.

1.3 Scope of the Review

This paper explores the curriculum in its entirety across the 3 to 18 learner journey; considering breadth and depth of provision, progression and learner outcomes from early level through to the senior phase. The focus of the paper is 'literacy and English' as outlined within Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence. It highlights key policy drivers and educational practices that support the development of listening and talking, reading and writing for all learners. It reflects on learning and achievement in the broad general education (BGE), drawing on national indicators such as senior phase attainment across a range of qualifications, including National 4 and 5, Higher and Advanced Higher. The paper aims to support a holistic understanding of the current curricular landscape, highlighting key themes and emerging patterns that will inform ongoing discussion and decision-making through the Curriculum Improvement Cycle process.

1.4 Related National Policies

The Scottish Government's key policies, programmes and investments related to advancing literacy are outlined here. The Scottish Government remains committed to taking action that sustains and enhances literacy, enables skills development, promotes a love of reading and improves attainment. On that basis, the Scottish Government continues to invest directly in a number of dedicated initiatives each year to promote reading and improve access to reading materials. These include but are not limited to Read Write Count with the First Minister, Reading Schools, Bookbug, and the School Library Improvement Fund (SLIF).

[Realising the Ambition: Being Me](#) is Scotland's national practice guidance for early years, building on Pre-Birth to Three and Building the Ambition. It outlines the developmental needs of children from birth to Primary 1 (Education Scotland's focus is from age 3 onwards) and emphasises the importance of nurturing relationships, play-based learning and responsive pedagogy. Realising the Ambition: Being Me supports nurseries and other Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) settings by providing a clear, research-informed framework for facilitating the early level curriculum in a way that is developmentally appropriate, child-centred, and responsive to individual needs. The guidance supports continuity across transitions and highlights the foundational role of early learning in shaping lifelong wellbeing and educational outcomes.

Progress in literacy is regularly assessed and evaluated to help inform policy. This includes teachers' professional judgements (TPJ) on Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence Levels (ACEL), which are partly informed by National Standardised Assessments (NSAs), as well as participation in international studies like the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS).

National Strategy for School Libraries in Scotland – (Scottish Government, COSLA, 2018-2023)

The Scottish Library and Information Council (SLIC) published a National School Library Strategy – *Vibrant Libraries, Thriving Schools – in 2018*. The strategy articulated the central role played by libraries and qualified librarians in supporting reading and all forms of literacy. In addition, the paper also reflects the role of librarians in improving attainment, promoting equity, supporting confidence and wellbeing and preparing children and young people for the future.

It was designed to influence decisions regarding school library provision and highlight the impact that an excellent, dynamic school library service can have on schools.

In June 2025, the Scottish Government reconvened the national strategy implementation group, now known as the School Library and Education Policy Group (SLEPG), to help renew its national policy and approach to school libraries and ensure that they continue to play a central role in children and young people's education and wellbeing.

Scottish Attainment Challenge – (Scottish Government, 2016/17 - 2025/ 26)

The mission of the Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC) is to use education to improve outcomes for children and young people impacted by poverty. It was originally launched in 2015, but is backed by £1bn in investment over the course of this parliamentary term 2021-2026, including:

- Pupil Equity Funding (PEF) allocated directly to schools, designed to empower headteachers to undertake targeted activity at their discretion.
- Strategic Equity Funding (SEF), allocated to local authorities based on income-related data.

The funding supports local approaches to high quality learning and teaching. It aims to improve literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing through professional learning programmes, leadership development and local partnerships with third sector organisations, which are tailored to local need.

2 National Data Sets

The following section examines a range of data pertaining to literacy and English in Scotland **up to and including academic year 2023 - 2024**. It includes data collected by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) and the Scottish Government.

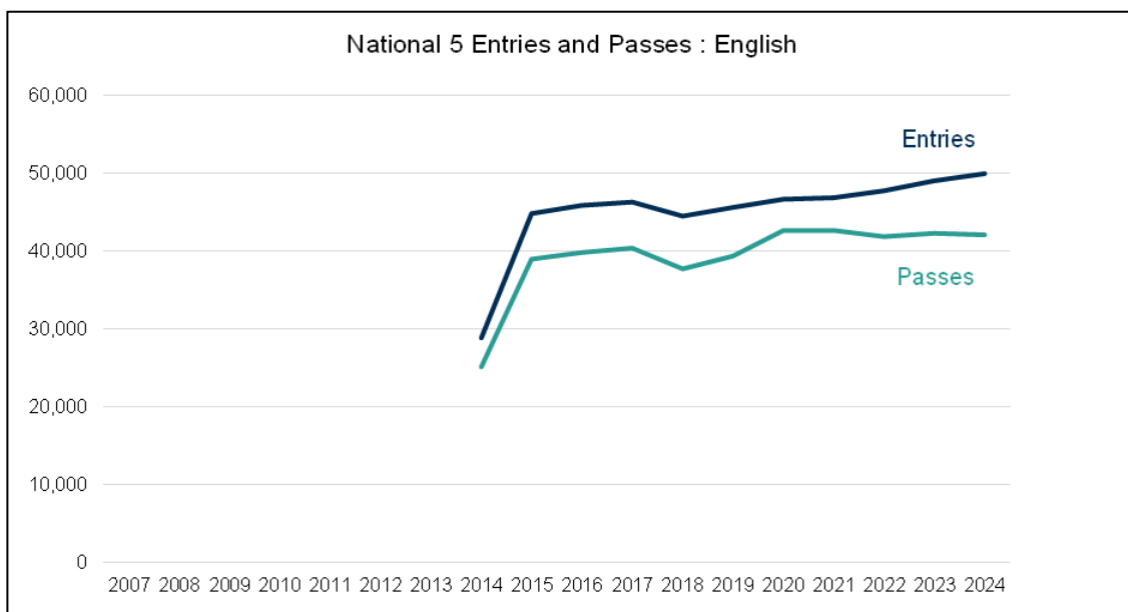
2.1 SQA Presentation and Attainment Data

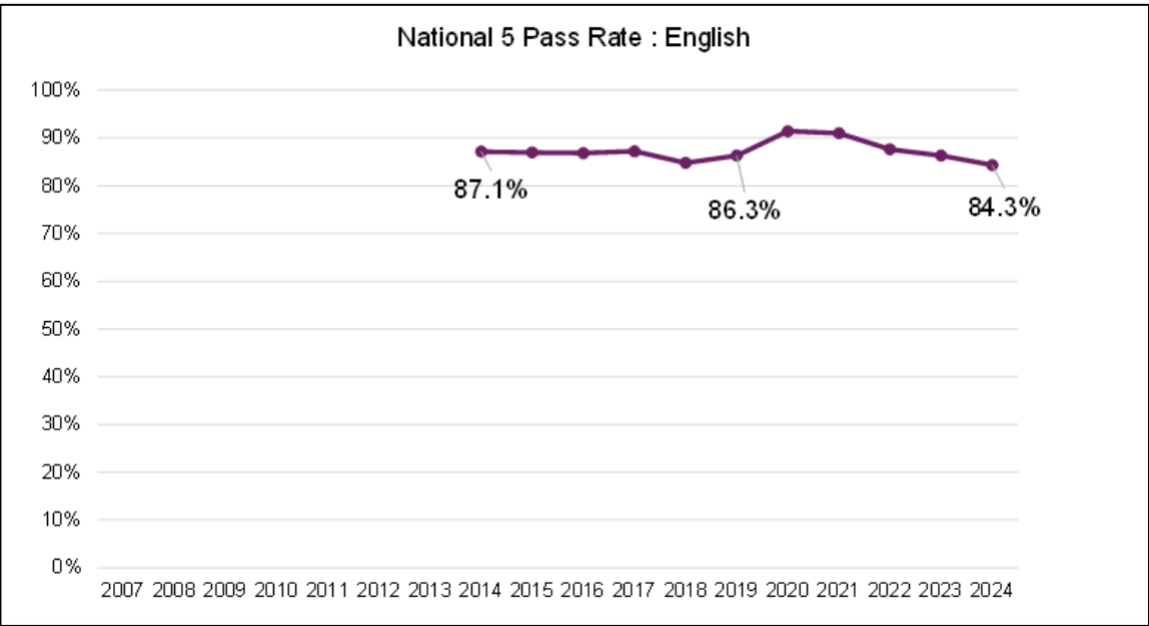
2.1.1 National Qualifications: – Entries and Pass Rates at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher English 2024

Note that alternative approaches to assessment in 2020 and 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic mean that these figures are not directly comparable to those for other years.

National 5 English: Entries and pass rates

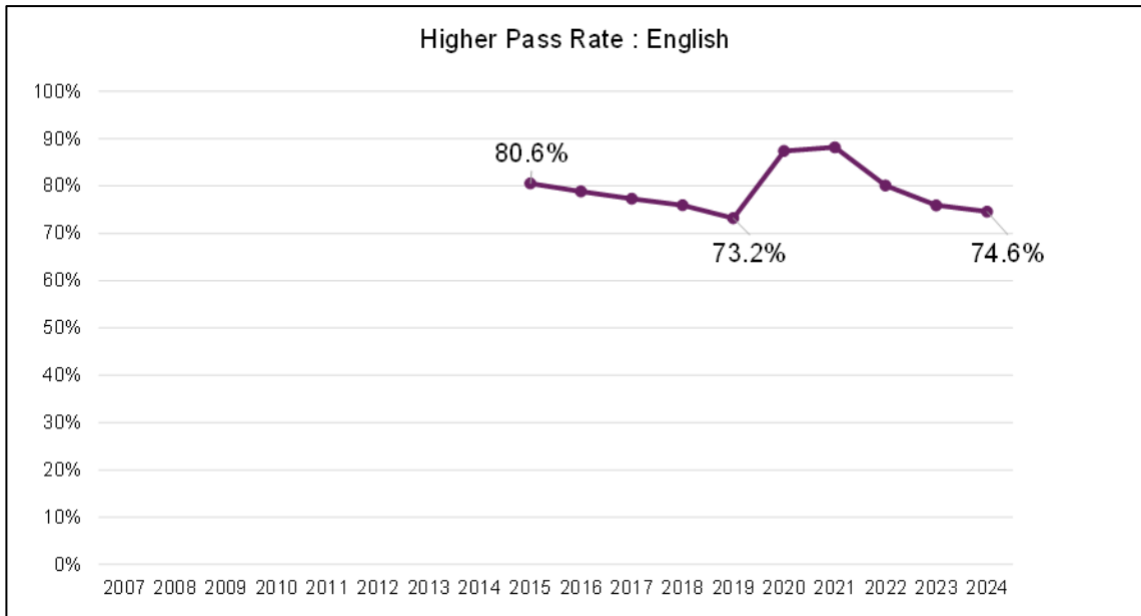
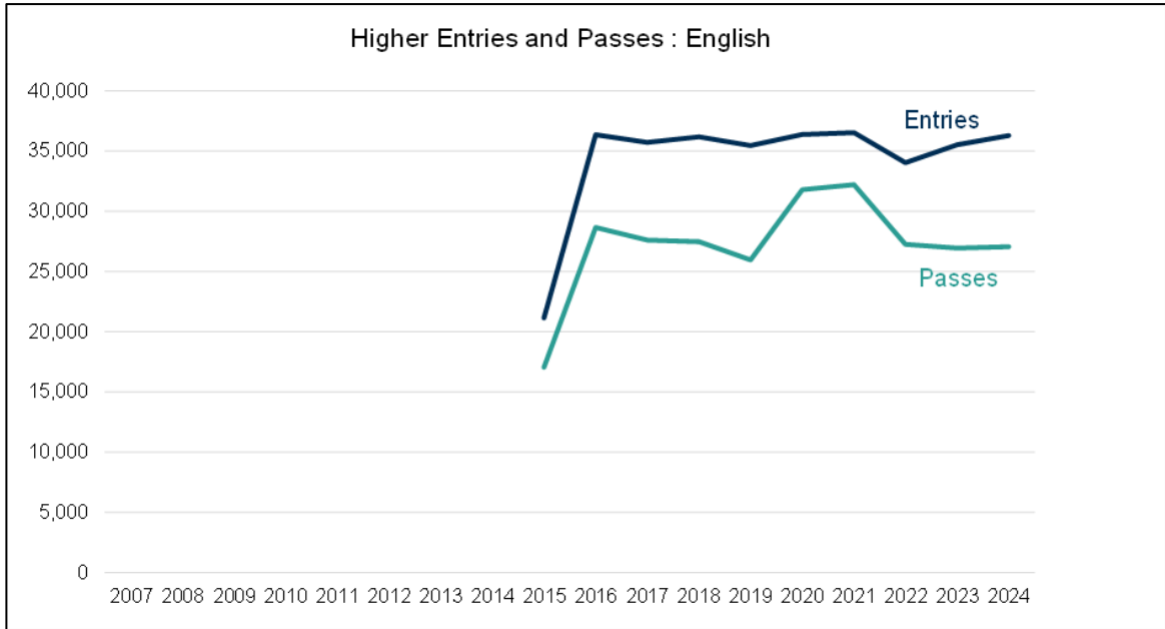
The number of entries to National 5 English were at their highest ever level at 49,295 in 2024 (+1.9% compared to 2023). Passes were down slightly on the previous year (-0.4%). The pass rate was down by 2.0 percentage points to 84.3%.





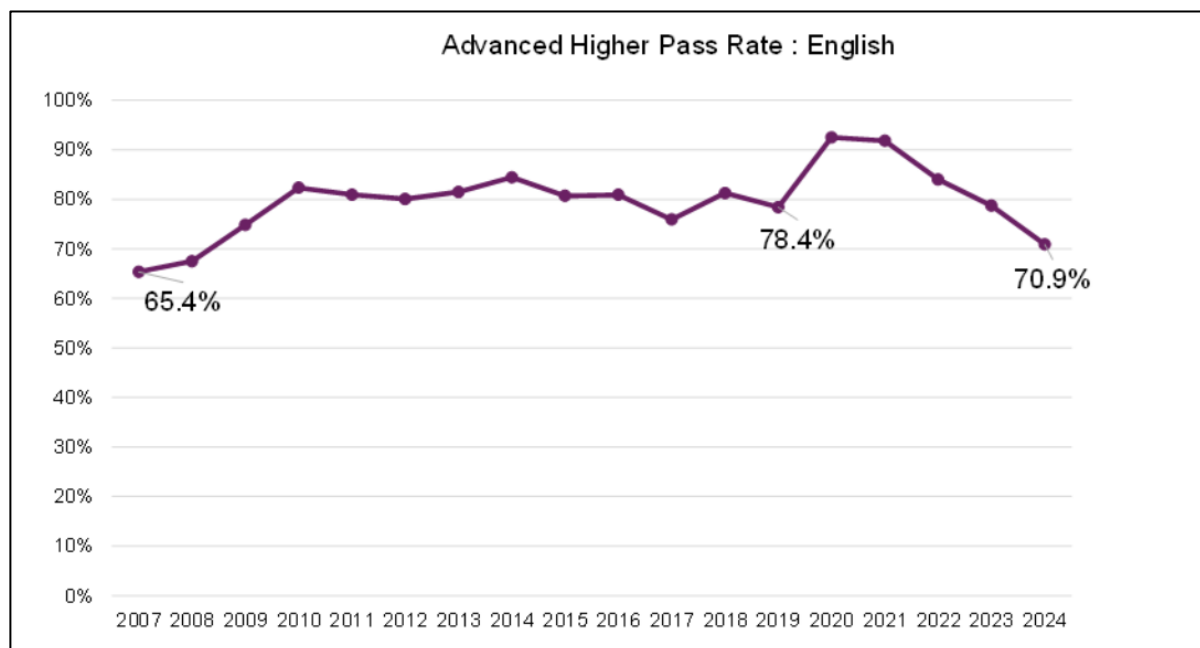
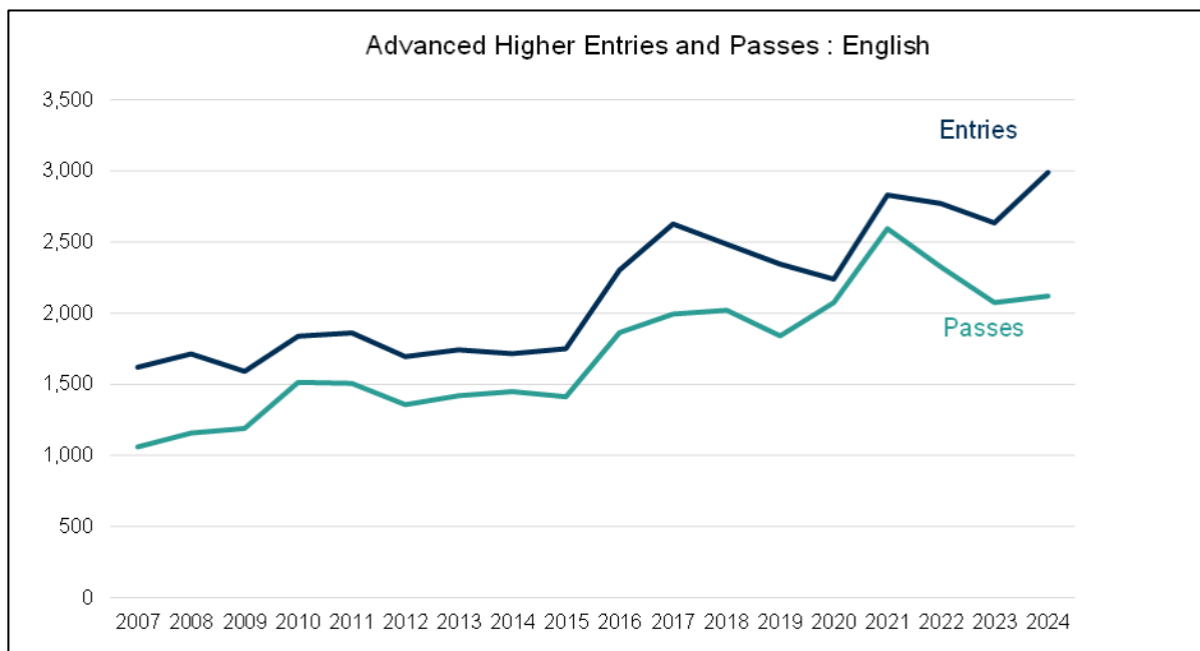
Higher English: Entries and pass rates

At Higher level, entries (36,300) increased by 2.2% on the previous year (2022-23) taking them back to similar levels to those last seen in 2021 after a dip in 2022. Passes (27,065) were similar to the last two years and slightly higher than the pre-pandemic level in 2019. The pass rate fell to 74.6%, 1.3 percentage points lower 2022-23, although it was slightly higher than in 2019 (+1.4 percentage points).



Advanced Higher English: Entries and pass rates

The number of entries at Advanced Higher rose by 13.5% during academic year 2023-24 to 2,990, the highest ever level. Passes increased by 2.2% to 2,120, which was the third highest year (the two higher years being 2021 and 2022). The pass rate was 70.9%.



2.1.2 School Leaver Attainment

SCQF Level	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
Level 3 or better	96.9	96.8	96.5	96.5	96.5	96.3	96.1	96.2	96.5	96.3	95.9
Level 4 or better	93.3	93.3	93.9	94.1	94.4	94.3	93.9	93.9	94.6	94.4	93.9
Level 5 or better	67.2	70.1	74.6	79.0	80.8	81.6	81.7	81.7	83.4	82.0	81.5

Figures for school leavers attaining literacy at SCQF Level 3 to Level 5 have been consistent over time with very little variation from year to year. The increase in Level 5 or better in the earlier period is likely to be related to the introduction of National 5 qualifications in 2014. At all levels attainment has been slightly lower in the latest year although changes are very small.

Further information is available at [School leaver initial destination and attainment statistics](#).

2.2 SQA Course Reports

Each year the SQA produces reports on all National Qualification English courses ranging from National 3 to Advanced Higher. Headline messages emerging from course reports for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher English are outlined below (2022-2024).

2.2.1 National 5 English 2022-2024

	Strengths	Challenges
Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation (RUAE)	<p>Strong engagement with texts, especially unseen passages.</p> <p>Candidates' ability to analyse and evaluate was a clear strength, as was their understanding of main ideas and the effects and impact of language.</p>	<p>Answering in their own words - many candidates relied too heavily on direct quotations or produced inaccurate paraphrasing.</p> <p>Inference-based questions proved challenging, with many struggling to identify implicit ideas or summarise with sufficient clarity.</p> <p>Misunderstanding of structure questions.</p>
Critical Reading – Scottish Set Texts and Critical Essay	<p>High levels of engagement and preparation for Scottish Set Texts element.</p> <p>Drama texts like <i>Macbeth</i> and <i>Sailmaker</i>, as well as longer prose, were areas where candidates performed well.</p>	<p>A lack of analytical depth in critical essay answers that failed to pay sufficient attention to the task.</p> <p>Candidates' tendency to summarise rather than analyse</p>
Writing Portfolio	<p>Candidates regularly demonstrating authenticity and engagement in their work.</p> <p>An increase in clear structure and technical accuracy - some submissions were of an exceptionally high standard, surpassing even National 5 expectations.</p>	<p>In creative writing, a few candidates struggled with maintaining plot coherence or following genre conventions.</p> <p>Personal pieces, while showing engagement with the task, sometimes lacked reflective depth or original language.</p> <p>For discursive writing, weaker responses tended to over-rely on quoted sources without providing sufficient personal analysis.</p> <p>Paragraphing and sentence structure issues still appeared in a small number of submissions</p>

[National 5 English - Course overview and resources - SQA](#)

2.2.2 Higher English 2022-2024

	Strengths	Challenges
Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation (RUAE)	Where responses are characterised by close, focused analysis	Surface-level analysis in language questions; stating that language features are effective without stating why. Capacity of candidate to explain responses in their own words.
Critical Reading – Scottish Set Texts	Answers which make use of short, targeted references rather than lengthy quotations Answers which demonstrated a broad understanding of the texts as a whole.	Failure to address all elements of tasks. Challenges linking literary techniques to central concerns Over-reliance on memorised quotations.
Critical Reading – Critical Essay	Good knowledge of texts supported by appropriate textual evidence Essays which maintain clear line of argument.	Submissions of ‘rehearsed’ essays which do not meet the requirements of the task Overly detailed micro-analysis of quotations.
Writing Folio	Imaginative writing in which candidates spend time on writers craft e.g. crafting characterisation or atmosphere. Discursive writing focused on well-researched personally relevant topics, making use of thoughtfully deployed evidence and correctly acknowledge sources..	Overly long essays which tend to become repetitive Imaginative writing with overly complex or unrealistic narratives.

[Higher English - Course overview and resources - SQA](#)

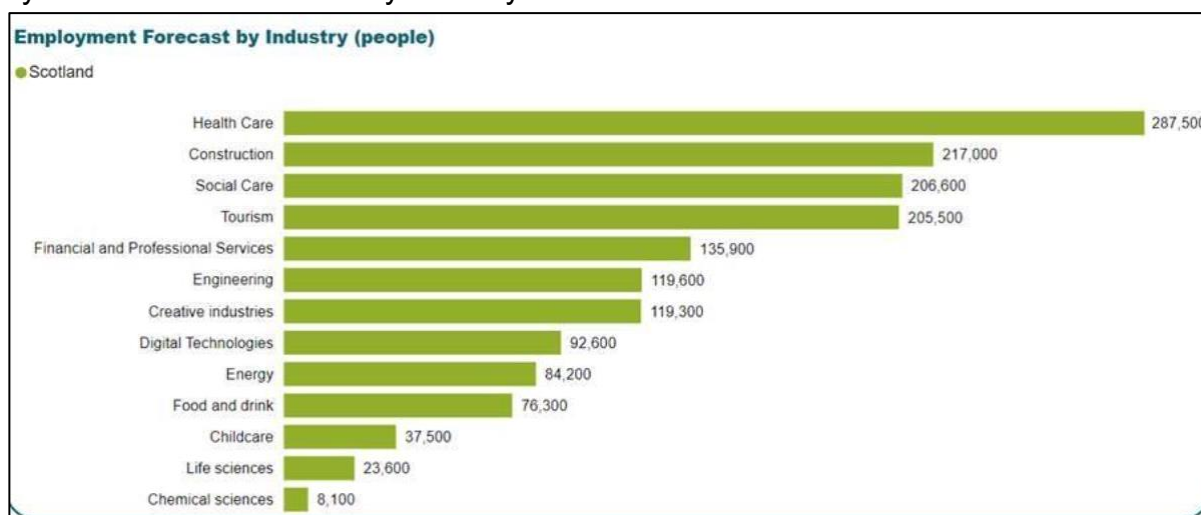
2.3 Labour Market Information

Skills Development Scotland (SDS) provide labour market information using a consistent evidence base to inform future investment in skills, built up from existing datasets and forecasts.

They work with key partners and stakeholders in the production of regional skills assessments to ensure an inclusive approach to their development, dissemination and utilisation. Regional skills assessments are published annually, covering all Regional Outcome Agreement areas, City and Growth Deal Regions and rural Scotland. The RSAs offer detailed information on regional labour markets across the country. The data included in these publications, including Oxford Economics forecast data, is the most up-to-date available at the time of writing.

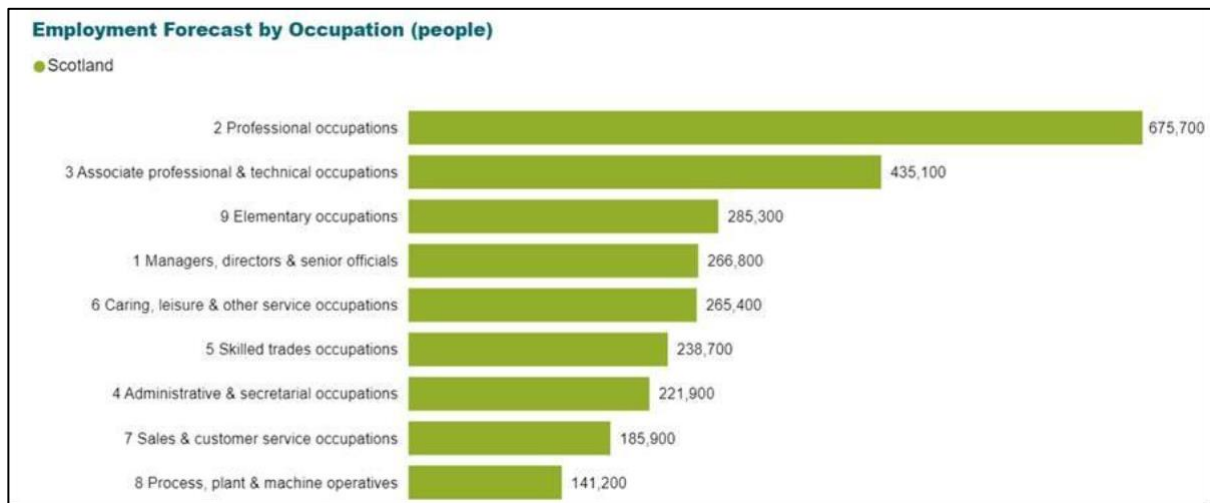
The following graphs show labour market information access in November 2024 to show a 10-year forecast for Scotland as a whole. They were taken from the [SDS skills planning data matrix](#).

Employment forecast for 2034 by industry:



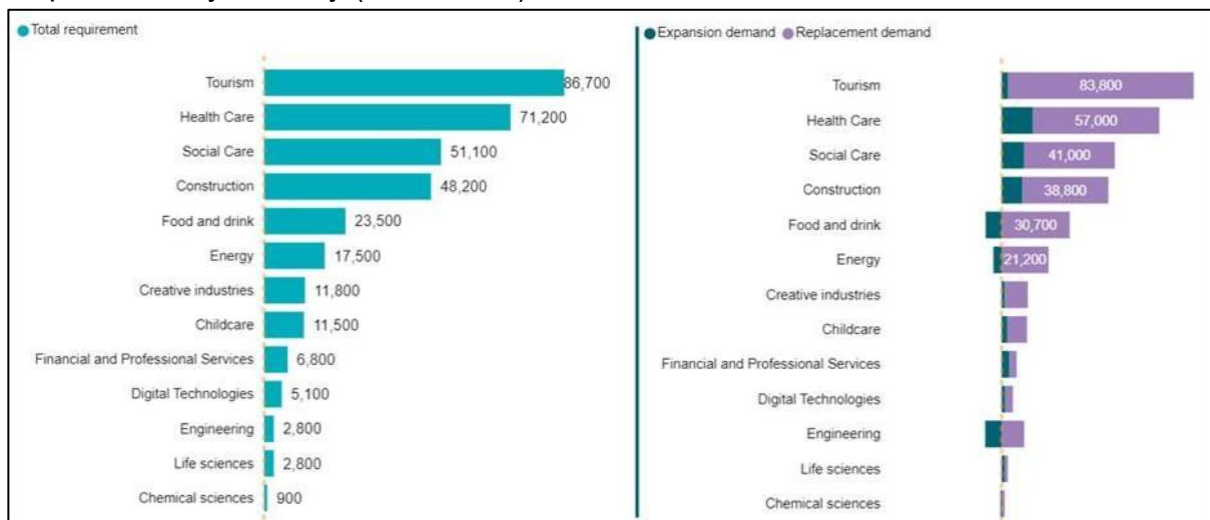
Graph 4: Bar chart showing the future employment forecast by industry for Scotland in 2034 ([SDS, 2024](#))

Language and communication skills, developed across all subject areas including English, are foundational to all other skills for work. As can be seen from the graph: health care, construction and social care are predicted to be the highest employing industries. These, and all the industries detailed in the graph, obviously require young people to be competent in oral communication, reading and writing. However, the nature of contemporary workplaces in all the industries detailed requires skills such as collaboration, empathy and critical thinking. These factors have implications, both for English as a curriculum area and for the teaching of language and communication across all subjects and curricular contexts.



Graph 5: Bar chart showing the future employment forecast by occupation for Scotland in 2034 ([SDS, 2024](#))

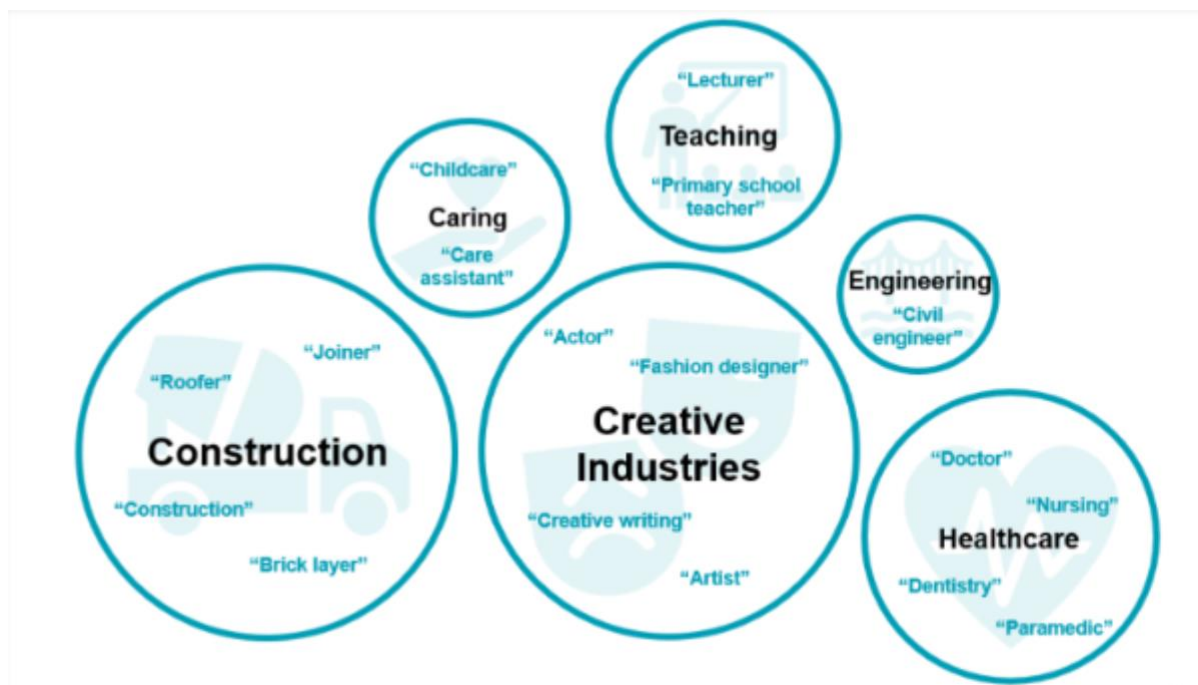
Total requirement by industry (2027-2034):



Graph 6: Bar chart showing the total requirement by industry for Scotland in 2027-2034 ([SDS, 2024](#)) (see glossary for definition of the terms: total requirement, expansion demand, replacement demand)

Despite healthcare being forecast to be the largest employing industry in 2034, the actual number of jobs needed to be filled is forecast to be greatest in tourism. The above graph on the right shows how much an industry is forecast to expand or reduce in requirement, as well as the likely replacement requirement (i.e. how many more people will be required due to people leaving the workforce). The graph on the left-hand side shows the total requirement. These numbers are different from the overall employment forecast as these graphs only show additional requirements and not those who will remain working in these industries. Health care, social care and construction show the greatest expansion demand, with food and drink, energy and engineering showing a reduction in requirements.

The recently published Young People’s Career Ambitions report (SDS, 2025b) report collects views from school leavers on a range of areas – ideal job and preferred industries being just one of these. In this report over 3000 participants engaged. One of the questions asked was: “Thinking about the future, what is your ideal job/career?”. The following infographic shows a thematic analysis of their responses. The larger the circle, the more the job/career area was mentioned.



Thematic analysis of young people’s responses to the question: “Thinking about the future, what is your ideal job/career?” (n=1,629) taken from [Young People’s Career Ambitions](#) (SDS 2025b)

Whilst there are some similarities to the labour market information, the largest area of interest to young people is creative industries, for which the requirement is less than half of that of healthcare (the top forecast industry in the labour market information). It can be said therefore that there is a mismatch in terms of what young people are interested in and what jobs will be available for them.

Interestingly, a [supporting infographic to the report](#) (SDS 2025c) shows that the preferred industry depends on a range of characteristics. For example, the following infographic shows the difference between males and females:

Top Industries (Top 5, % selected)

Female		Male	
Medicine and health	21%	Engineering	28%
Caring	17%	Construction	23%
Creative Industries	16%	Digital, computing, and IT	15%
Teaching / education	15%	Sport	12%
Media	11%	Media	10%

There are also differences in terms of ethnicity. However, the report has low sample numbers for this and does not disaggregate by ethnicity (only offering the categories ‘white’ and ‘minority ethnic’).

Top Industries (Top 5, % selected)


Minority Ethnic		White	
Medicine and health	23%	Engineering	16%
Digital, computing, and IT	17%	Construction	14%
Media	16%	Creative Industries	13%
Engineering	13%	Medicine and health	12%
Creative Industries	12%	Teaching / education	12%

It also shows that there are marked differences in young people who are LGBT:


Top Industries (Top 5, % selected)

LGBT		Non-LGBT	
Creative Industries	29%	Engineering	18%
Media	20%	Construction	15%
Digital, computing, and IT	14%	Medicine and health	13%
Caring	14%	Teaching / education	11%
Medicine and health	14%	Sport	11%


There is also a significant difference in industries selected for those from the most deprived areas (SIMD 1) compared to those from the least deprived areas (SIMD 5):

 Top Industries (Top 5, % selected)			
SIMD 1		SIMD 5	
Engineering	15%	Medicine and health	18%
Construction	14%	Engineering	16%
Caring	14%	Creative Industries	14%
Medicine and health	11%	Teaching / education	12%
Creative Industries	11%	Media	11%

Care experienced children compared to non-care experienced children also show differences in their preferred industries:

 Top Industries (Top 5, % selected)			
CE		Not CE	
Construction	20%	Engineering	16%
Caring	12%	Creative Industries	14%
Hospitality	12%	Medicine and health	13%
Armed forces, policing or security	10%	Construction	12%
Engineering	10%	Teaching / education	11%

Lastly, learners with disabilities and those without also shows different preferences:

 Top Industries (Top 5, % selected)			
Disabled		Non-disabled	
Creative Industries	21%	Engineering	18%
Medicine and health	16%	Construction	15%
Caring	15%	Medicine and health	12%
Teaching / education	14%	Digital, computing, and IT	11%
Media	13%	Teaching / education	11%

In addition, the report shows there are small differences in who each of the above groups listed as key influencers on their career, with the majority listing parents and carers as their top influencers (except care experienced learners who listed careers advisors). The next most listed influencers were career advisors followed by other family members. Teachers also featured.

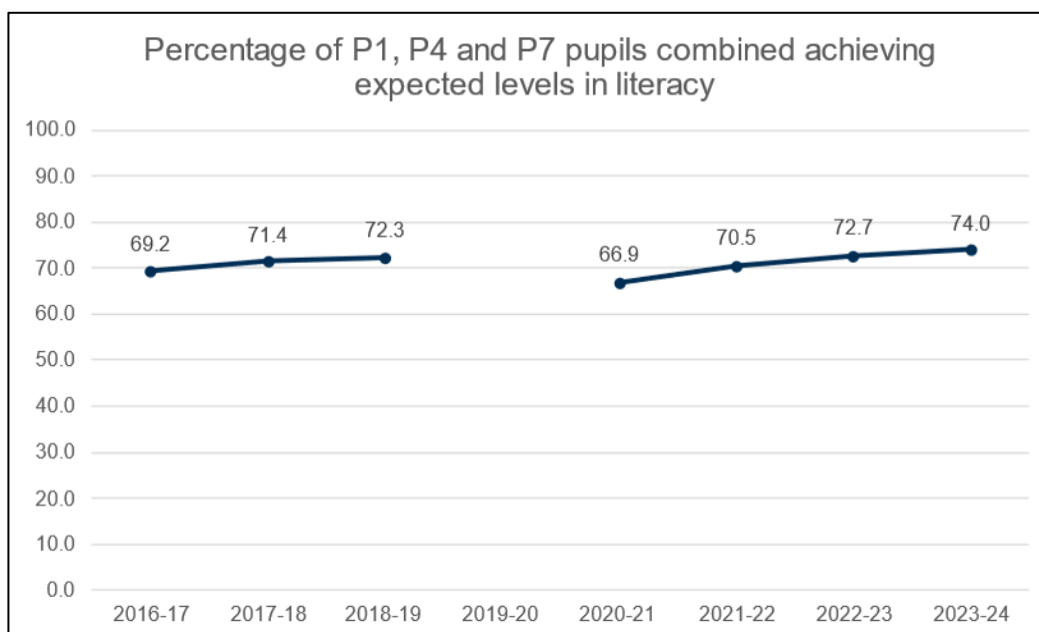
Finally, the factors influencing young people's chosen industry also vary by characteristic, with most fluctuating between their 'interests and hobbies' and 'the need to earn money'. 'Qualifications achieved' also featured highly and 'education/training' to a lesser extent. Interestingly, 35% of young people cited social media as an influence with Tik Tok ranking the highest followed by Instagram and YouTube. These differences highlight the importance of career education that works for and is inclusive of *all* learners, and that makes use of labour market information to help them to make informed choices. The Curriculum Improvement Cycle should consider this when reviewing the content and structure of each curriculum area, particularly in reference to skills.

2.4 National statistics - Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence Levels (ACEL)

[Achievement of Curriculum Levels](#) data is published annually. Based on teachers' professional judgement, the data reports on the percentage of school pupils in Primary 1 (P1), Primary 4 (P4), Primary 7 (P7) and Secondary 3 (S3) who have achieved the expected Curriculum for Excellence levels relevant to their stage. Data is available on Curriculum for Excellence levels grouped by Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD), pupil characteristics and by local authority. Data is also available for learners in Gaelic medium education and those in special schools or units.

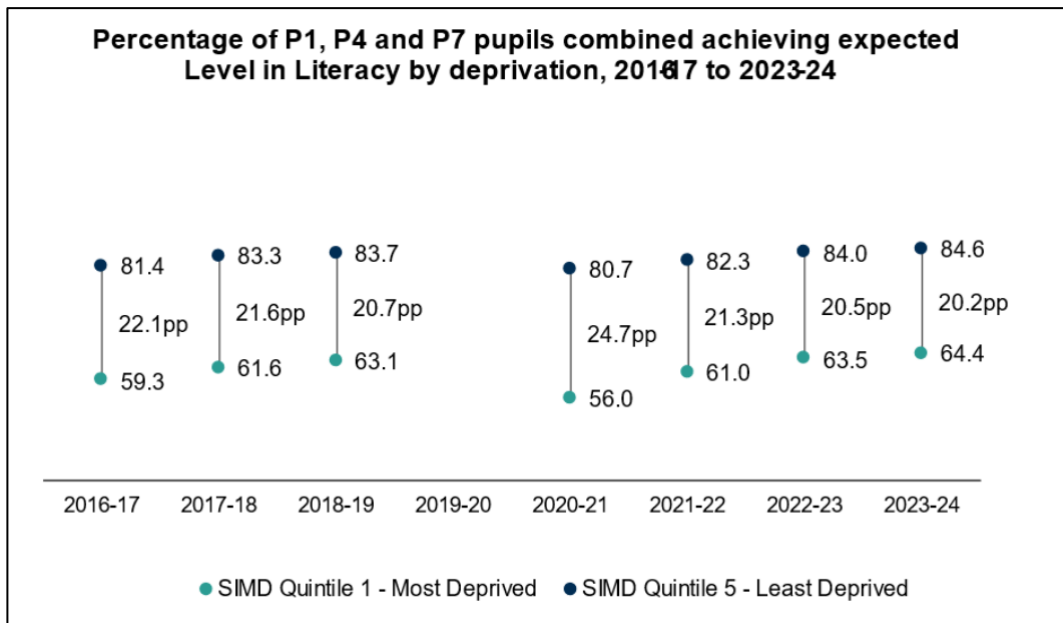
2.4.1 Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence Levels (ACEL) 2023 - 24

At primary level (P1, P4 and P7 combined) the percentage of pupils achieving expected levels in literacy in 2023-24 was 74.0%. This represents an increase of 1.3 percentage points over the last year (2022-23, 72.7%) and an increase of 1.7 percentage points on the recent high point (2018-19, 72.3%).

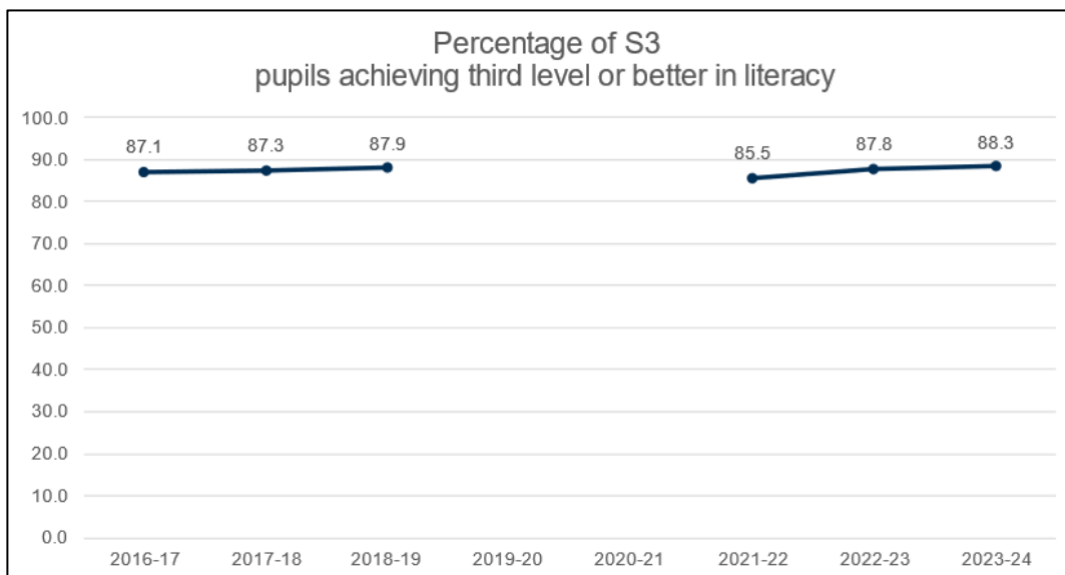


* No ACEL data collected in 2019/20

In 2023 – 24 the literacy gap between primary pupils in the most and least deprived areas was the lowest on record at 20.2 percentage points. This was 0.3 percentage points narrower than the previous year and 0.5 percentage points narrower than in 2018-19, the previous lowest figure.

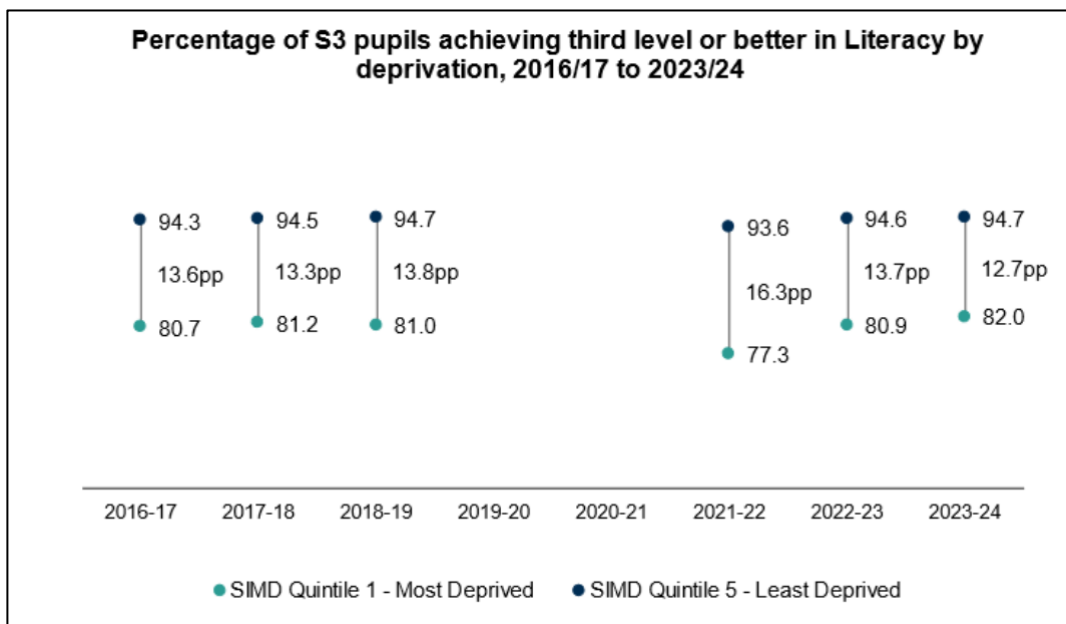


For secondary (S3) pupils the percentage achieving 3rd Level or better was (88.3%) in 2023-24. This represents an increase of 0.5 percentage points in the course of a year (2022-23, 87.8%) and an increase of 0.4 percentage points since the recent high point (2018-19, 87.9%).



* No ACEL data collected for S3 in 2019/20 or 2020/21

In 2023-24 the literacy gap between secondary pupils achieving 3rd level or better in the most and least deprived areas was the lowest on record at 12.7 percentage points. This was 1.0 percentage point narrower than the previous year and 0.9 percentage points narrower than in 2016-17, the previous lowest figure, as shown below.



2.4.2 National Standardised Assessments (NSA) in Literacy

The National Standardised Assessments (NSA) are low-stakes, online adaptive assessments administered to learners in Primary 1, Primary 4, Primary 7 and Secondary 3. Their main purpose is as a diagnostic tool, providing immediate feedback to teachers on learners' strengths and areas for development in specific aspects of literacy. In Primary 1, a combined literacy assessment covers both reading and writing, while in P4, P7 and S3, reading and writing are assessed separately.

Performance in the NSA is reported on a single overarching scale including 12 capacity bands. However, for individual stages, the reports specifically display six bands chosen to best represent the typical range of abilities for that stage. For P1 (Literacy), outcomes are reported across bands 1 to 6. Reading assessments for P4, P7 and S3 cover six bands - P4: bands 4 to 9; P7: bands 6 to 11; S3: bands 7 to 12. Writing assessments are an exception to this as they employ nine bands across stages. This is because the P1 literacy assessment is scaled with reading, rather than having a separate writing scale at this early stage.

Each of these capacity bands is accompanied by descriptions, aligned with Curriculum for Excellence, that outline the specific skills, knowledge and understanding demonstrated by learners within that band.

In reading, assessment items are focused on the organisers of *Tools for reading, Finding and using information* and *Understanding, analysing and evaluating*. For P4, P7 and S3, writing assessment items concentrate on spelling, punctuation and grammar, which fall under the *Tools for writing* curriculum organiser.

NSA data is intended to support teachers' professional judgement, helping them identify or confirm gaps in learners' understanding and inform future decisions on the focus of learning and teaching in literacy.

It is important to note that a learner's National Standardised Assessment (NSA) outcome in reading or writing is just one piece of evidence demonstrating progress in literacy. Decisions on the achievement of a curriculum level in listening and talking, reading, writing (and therefore a combined literacy measure) are ultimately arrived at through a teacher's professional judgement, informed by a range of learner evidence gathered over time and including NSA literacy outcomes.

The Scottish Government publishes an annual report providing a summary of national outcomes to supplement the information available to schools and local authorities: [Executive Summary - National Standardised Assessments for Scotland: national report - academic year 2023-2024 - gov.scot](#)

2.5 Other Data Sets

2.5.1 Growing Up in Scotland (GUS)

Growing up in Scotland (GUS) is an important longitudinal research study, tracking the lives of thousands of children and their families from birth. The study, which began in 2002, is commissioned and managed by the Scottish Government and is carried out by the Scottish Centre for Social Research. Three groups or 'cohorts' of children have been taking part in Growing Up in Scotland (GUS). Families, selected at random from Child Benefit records provided by DWP and HM Revenue and Customs, received a letter inviting them to take part in the study. Families from every Local Authority area in Scotland take part with participation on an entirely voluntary basis. Together, these families are representative of all families in Scotland with young children. Data has been collected from a main carer/parent, with ad-hoc surveys also conducted with teachers and the main carer/parent's partner. In addition, data from GUS has been securely linked to data sets including health and school records. The following reports, which draw upon the GUS dataset, have been selected for this paper because they focus on themes related to language development and literacy.

Growing Up in Scotland: Changes in child cognitive ability in the pre-school years (2011)

This report examines changes in cognitive ability between the ages of 3 (34 months) and 5 (58 months) years amongst children with different social background characteristics and seeks to identify which circumstances and experiences contribute to the relative improvement of cognitive ability of children in lower (and higher) socio-economic groups in the pre-school period. A key finding in the report is that at age 5, children in the highest income group have significantly higher vocabulary scores than those in the lowest income group. However, the report also found that the gap between children of degree-educated parents versus those whose parents had no qualification was even larger, and that this gap widened during the pre-school years.

Growing Up in Scotland: Changes in language ability over the primary school years (2019)

This report draws on measures of expressive language ability obtained first on children's entry to primary school (in 2009/10) and again when they entered Primary 6 (in 2014/15). It examines the gap in expressive vocabulary ability towards the end of primary school and finds factors present over these years which appear to help or hinder children's language development, relative to their peers.

In the report Law *et al*, found one factor driving the poverty-related attainment gap in Scotland was the high prevalence of early difficulties in language ability among disadvantaged children.

The report finds that language ability during the early years has long been recognised as important for later attainment and outcomes and a considerable body of research has demonstrated that poor early language ability is associated with low educational attainment. (Howieson and Iannelli, 2008; Ritchie *et al*, 2015, cited in Growing up in Scotland, 2019).

At the same time, the GUS data suggests that although being from a disadvantaged social background increases the risk of poorer language skills, it does not equate to poorer language skills for all children from disadvantaged backgrounds and vice versa.

2.5.2 Public Health Scotland (PHS): Early Child Development Statistics 2022/23

These PHS statistics provide an update on children's development as assessed during the 13–15-month, 27-30 month, and 4–5-year child health reviews. They are important in the context of literacy because of the close link between early language development and future success in school. The latest information presented comes from reviews provided to children becoming eligible for review between April 2022 and March 2023.

The report noted that at the 13-15 month review the most frequent domains about which developmental concerns were noted were gross motor (7%) and speech, language and communication (6%); at the 27-30 month review this was speech, language and communication (13%); and at the 4-5 year review speech, language and communication (8%) and emotional/behavioural development (8%).

The report also noted that there are persistent inequalities in the proportion of children who are found to have a developmental concern. At 27-30 months, this proportion is 2.7 times higher among children living in the most deprived areas (27%) than those in the least deprived (10%), a wider gap than previously observed.

2.5.3 National Early Language and Communication (NELC) Project

Related to the data referenced in the section above, the National Early Language and Communication (NELC) project aims to raise the profile of prevention and early intervention in relation to speech, language and communication development across Scotland with a pre-birth to school entry focus.

Children's speech, language and communication (SLC) has been particularly affected since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, with Public Health Scotland data from the health in the Early Years in Scotland (HEYS) Dashboard indicating that the proportion of children with SLC concern at the Health Visitor 27-to-30-month review increased from 9.7% in 2018/19 to 11.72% in 2023/24. Similarly, when early learning and childcare practitioners completed a survey for Early Years Scotland in 2022, 89% reported an increase in the number of children with SLC needs since the start of the pandemic and 61% reported low levels of confidence in supporting these needs. Evidence shows a disproportionate impact on children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Early language development supports the development of social skills, friendships and emotional regulation. Early difficulties with SLC often last throughout an individual's life resulting in poor educational outcomes, greater involvement in the criminal justice system and less participation in the economy, creating intergenerational cycles of poverty.

Early language and communication skills are amenable to early support leading to the possibility of improved health and employment outcomes for individuals and reduced costs to society as a result. The project states that 'In order to make sure that children have equitable opportunities to develop to their full potential, a systematic approach, at national and local level, is needed to promote and support early childhood language development, as well as to identify children with language difficulties as early as possible'.

The National Early Language and Communication (NELC) Project have developed a set of key messages for supporting early language and communication from pre-birth to age 5, which can be found at: ([Chatting Together Messages | National Early Language and Communication \(NELC\) Project](#))

3 International comparative studies and reports

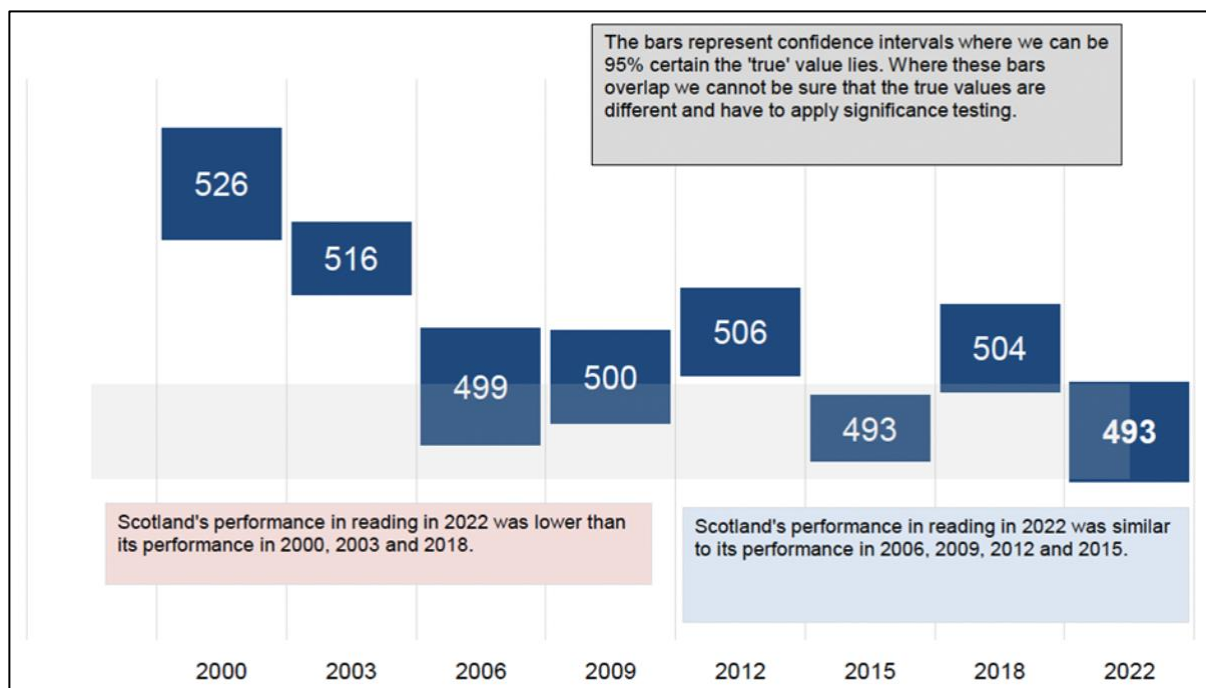
The following section outlines key messages about literacy and English emerging from International comparative studies.

3.1 International comparative assessments - Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)

PISA is the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment. PISA measures 15-year-olds' ability to use their reading, mathematics and science knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges. Like all participating jurisdictions, Scotland participates in PISA every three years, with the last survey taking place in 2022.

Scotland's mean score in reading in 2022 (493) was higher than the OECD average (476). It was similar to Scotland's mean score in 2006, 2009, 2012 and 2015 and lower than 2000, 2003 and 2018.

Scotland's PISA reading scores, 2000-2022



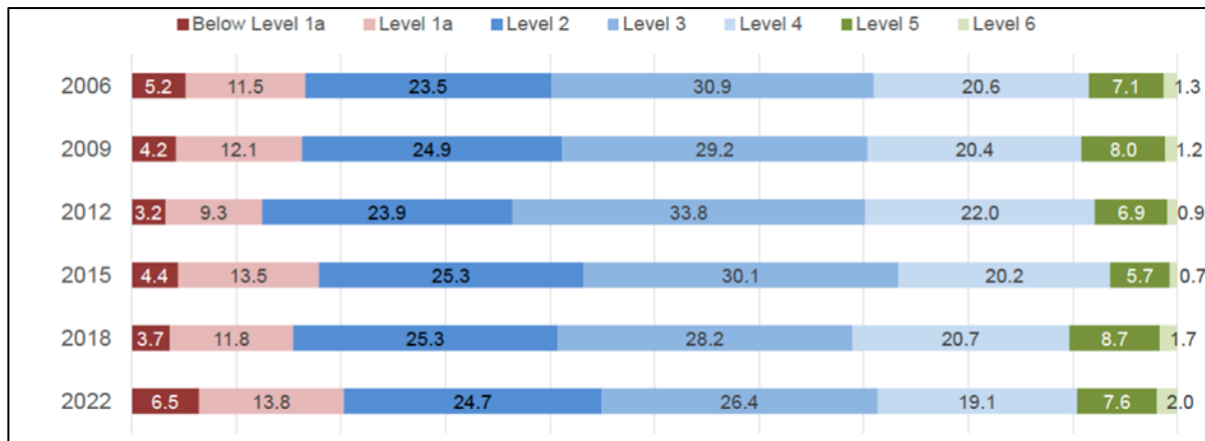
In 2022 in Scotland, girls' reading performance was higher than boys' (502 vs. 484). This is a consistent historic trend.

3.1.1 Achievement Levels

Achievement of PISA Level 2 is considered by the OECD to be the baseline at which students begin to demonstrate sufficient skill to enable them to participate actively in life situations involving reading. In 2022, 20.3 per cent of students in Scotland performed below PISA Level 2 in reading, which was lower than the OECD average (26.3 per cent). This was higher than 2018 (15.5 per cent) and 2012 but similar to 2006, 2009 and 2015.

PISA defines students attaining above Level 5 as top performers. In 2022, 9.6 per cent of students in Scotland performed at PISA Level 5 or better in reading, which was higher than the OECD average (7.2 per cent). The proportion of students performing at PISA Level 5 or better in Scotland was higher in 2022 than in 2015 (6.4 per cent) and similar to 2006, 2009, 2012 and 2018.

3.1.2 Scotland's reading scores, by PISA Proficiency Level, 2006-2022



In 2022, a greater proportion of boys (23.2 per cent) than girls (17.3 per cent) performed below PISA Level 2 in reading. In 2022 the proportions of girls and boys performing at PISA Level 5 or better in reading were similar (10.8 per cent of girls and 8.4 per cent of boys).

3.1.3 Relationship between performance and student background

The strength of the relationship between students' background and reading test scores (share of variation) in 2022 (11.1 per cent) was similar to all previous years.

The ESCS (economic, social and cultural status) gradient shows how much scores vary on average with each step (one point) in social background. The ESCS gradient was 37 points in the reading assessment for Scotland in 2022. This was similar to 2006 (42 points), 2009 (44 points), 2012 (34 points), 2015 (32 points) and 2018 (32 points).

The average scores in reading in Scotland of students from less affluent backgrounds (i.e. those at the 5th percentile by ESCS) and those from more affluent backgrounds (i.e. those at the 95th percentile by ESCS) are apart by 107 points, which implies a difference of around three-and-a-half years of schooling.

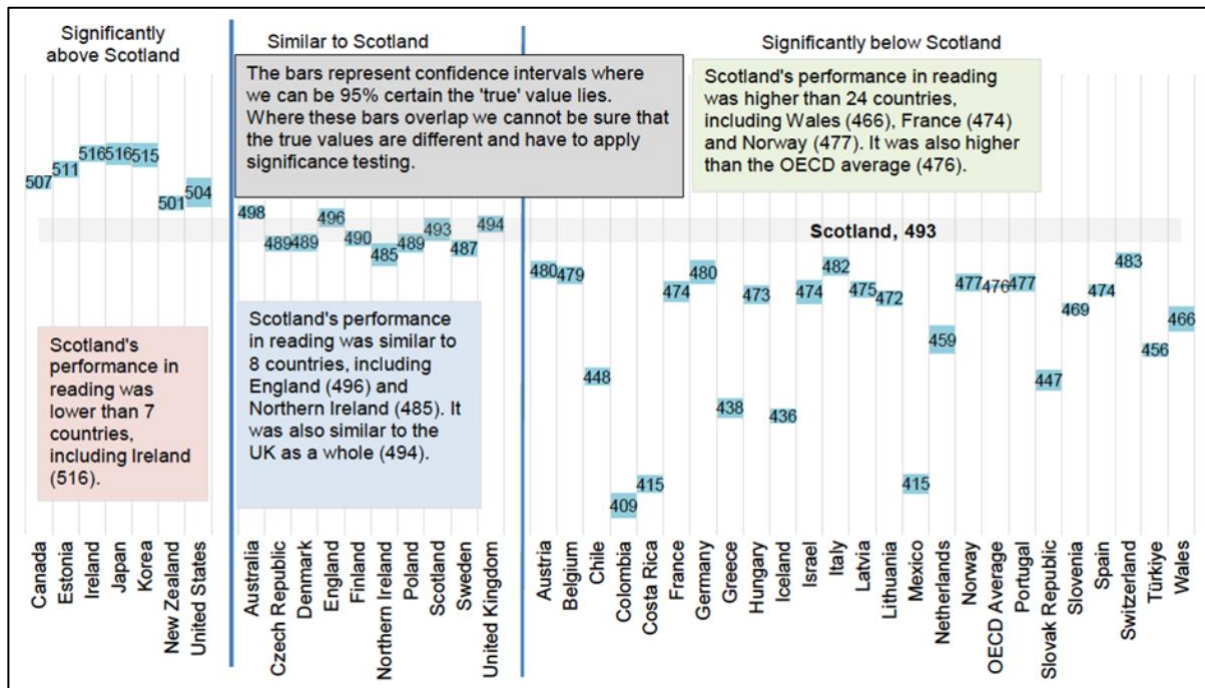
3.1.4 Scotland's performance in reading relative to countries in the OECD and UK administrations

Scotland's mean score in reading in 2022 (493) was higher than the OECD average (476). It was higher than 24 countries, including Wales (466), similar to eight countries, including England (496) and Northern Ireland (485), and lower than seven countries, including Ireland (516).

Scotland's mean score in reading among girls in 2022 (502) was higher than the OECD average (488). It was higher than 21 countries, similar to 10 countries and the UK as a whole (503), and lower than eight countries.

Scotland's mean score in reading among boys in 2022 (484) was higher than the OECD average (464). It was higher than 26 countries, similar to eight countries and the UK as a whole (486) and lower than five countries.

3.1.5 PISA reading scores in OECD countries, relative to Scotland, 2022



As indicated above, in 2022, 20.3 per cent of students in Scotland performed below PISA Level 2 (considered by the OECD to be the baseline of proficiency) in reading. This proportion was lower than the OECD average (26.3 per cent) and 17 countries, higher than four countries, and similar to 18 countries and the UK as a whole (20.1 per cent). 9.6 per cent of students in Scotland performed at PISA Level 5 or better in reading (defined by the OECD as top performers). This proportion was higher than the OECD average (7.2 per cent) and 18 countries, lower than four countries, and similar to 17 countries and the UK as a whole (10.1 per cent).

3.2 International Reports - OECD

The reports presented here draw upon PISA data and outline research carried out by the OECD regarding reading, reading for pleasure, and the impact of digital pedagogies on learners' reading environments.

3.2.1 [Does the digital world open up an increasing divide in access to print books? | OECD](#)

This paper relates to a shift in use over the last two decades for young people, from print books to digital books. It highlights a gap in access to, and availability of, 'traditional' print texts and demonstrates how this disparity has grown over the last twenty years.

The paper also discusses the variability across different countries in changes in home literacy environments. For example, in 2020 children from advantaged families in Germany and the Netherlands reported being able to access a similar number of books at home as in 2018. This is opposed to children from disadvantaged homes who reported diminished access to printed books between 2018 and 2020. By contrast, children from advantaged backgrounds in Chile and Mexico reported that they had less access to printed books, while children from disadvantaged backgrounds saw an increase in the printed books they had at home.

Drawing upon international data gathered through PISA 2018, the paper concludes that learners who balance their reading between digital and paper texts perform better on the PISA reading test and report higher levels of reading for enjoyment. The paper also finds that while strong readers use digital devices for homework or non-fiction reading, they also balance use of digital and paper texts when it comes to reading fiction. The paper also finds that, while the gap is closing for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds in terms of access to digital resources, access to forms of cultural capital such as print books has been reduced.

3.2.2 [What can we learn from the PISA reading fluency test? \(2023\)](#)

This 2023 report draws upon data gathered through the PISA reading fluency test, a component of the PISA reading assessment introduced in 2018. The test is based on the premise that "before students can become proficient readers, they must become fluent readers" (p. 2). The fluency test involves reading a variety of sentences that learners must classify as sensible or nonsensical. Quicker completion of the task indicates a higher level of fluency.

Data from the test suggests that fluency scores are related to reading proficiency among low-achieving students (classified as those who score at or below Level 2), as well as among those achieving the highest levels of proficiency (among those who score at Levels 4, 5 and 6 in PISA). It is also noted that the strength of the relationship between reading fluency and the ability of students to use and understand longer texts varies across countries and languages.

The data suggests that on average across OECD countries, more than one in five 15-year-old students do not reach a baseline level of reading proficiency. The paper finds that reading fluency tests can support early identification of struggling readers. When combined with tests of reading

comprehension, they can help teachers to understand why learners are struggling and support their decision making around interventions. Authors also caution against stigmatising students who are not yet fluent readers. Recommendations include providing learners with regular opportunities to read, including reading aloud in safe settings; revising basic reading skills (such as phonics, in English), even in post-elementary years, and that games can be used to enrich student's vocabulary.

3.2.3 [Fewer books and more educational software | OECD](#)

This publication from OECD examines how home literacy environments have changed since 2015.

Key messages

- The number of books available in the homes of 15-year-old students decreased between 2015 and 2022 on average across 59 countries and economies with comparable data, according to students' answers to PISA questionnaires. Despite this decline, books continue to be available in most students' homes. In 2022, some 30% of students reported having more than 100 books, on average, with a similar proportion reported having between 26 and 100 books.
- Dictionaries saw the most significant decline. In 2015, 92% of students reported having a dictionary at home, but by 2022 this dropped to 80%, with the steepest declines in Brazil, the Dominican Republic and Jordan. No country had an increase in dictionaries at home, but there was no significant change in Georgia.
- In contrast, the availability of classic literature (for example, Shakespeare or relevant classical authors in the country's language) at home increased from 52% in 2015 to 63% in 2022, with the largest gains in Denmark, Ireland, Lithuania, Switzerland, and Türkiye. Only Indonesia and Peru saw a decrease in classic literature at home.
- The proportion of families equipped with educational software increased from 53% in 2015 to 74% in 2022. Internet access and computers for schoolwork have remained widely available over the past decade. (p. 2).

The report concludes by stating the meaningful ways in which the home learning environment has changed, particularly since 2018. An increased use of digital technology means that the books now compete with devices and the internet as the main source of home learning. The decrease in availability of books in the home has coincided with an increase in the availability of digital devices.

Finally, the report states that education policy should support children and families to navigate these changes to allow them to tap into the potential of digital learning while avoiding the pitfalls of ever-increasing digital access.

3.3 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS)

The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) is an international assessment and research project designed to measure reading achievement at the fourth-grade level (children aged 9-10/primary 5), as well as school and teacher practices related to instruction. Children and parents/carers are asked to complete a reading assessment and questionnaire that addresses attitudes towards reading and their reading habits.

The Scottish Government has re-entered PIRLS for the first time since leaving the study in 2006 and will take part in the next round in 2026. Results are due to be published in December 2027.

4 Education Scotland Evidence

4.1 HMIE Evidence and Reports

This section draws upon HMIE summarised inspection findings reports from visits to establishments between January and June 2024. These findings are publicly available at [Inspection and review | Education Scotland](#).

During this time there was no thematic inspection carried out pertaining to literacy and English, though at the time of writing a thematic inspection was in progress, with a final report to be published in due course. In addition, this summary does not include reports on settings for which a previous inspection report had established the need for a return visit, undertaken during this period. Care Inspectorate reports have not been included at this stage due to the ongoing development of a new joint inspection programme. This plan introduces a refreshed approach to multi-agency scrutiny and improvement support, which is still in progress. Once the updated framework and findings are fully implemented and published, they will provide a more comprehensive basis for inclusion in future curriculum evidence papers.

From January to June 2024, HMIE visited:

- 32 secondary schools
- 98 Primary schools
- 5 Joint Campus / 3-18 schools
- 5 ASN / SEN settings

Observations of practice have been formed from a synthesis of Summaries of Inspection Findings published between January and June 2024. Areas of effective practice and areas for improvement, emerging from this synthesis are identified below.

4.1.1 Primary and secondary school settings

Areas of effective practice

Reading

- engagement with a variety of texts and genres
- creation of cultures of reading for enjoyment, using libraries where applicable
- development of skills such as fluency and expression, skimming and scanning and the use of discussion to support comprehension
- effective formative and summative, peer and self-assessment activities to monitor and support reading progress
- teacher engagement in professional learning to enhance reading practices

Writing

- use of a range of assessment approaches, including continuous assessment and feedback to improve writing skills
- use of digital technology to enhance writing skills
- a range of collaborative work and independent learning and writing for a variety of purposes
- professional learning and collaboration between sectors to support attainment

Listening & Talking

- learners supported in confident, active participation with good listening skills and respect for others' opinions
- effective questioning techniques to promote higher order thinking skills
- use of digital technology to support feedback
- activities planned around learners' interests

In addition, where **Literacy across the Curriculum** was mentioned in secondary schools, the following effective practice was identified:

- collaboration across departments to support literacy
- integration of literacy into BGE planning across all curriculum areas
- subject-specific literacy support
- recognition and promotion of literacy as a shared responsibility
- school-wide emphasis on the need to contribute to improvements in literacy

Areas for Improvement

Reading

- integrating digital tools and resources to enhance reading skills and engagement
- implementing targeted interventions to support children who need additional help
- fostering a culture of reading enjoyment and providing access to diverse reading materials across a range of genres which match needs, age and stage

Writing

- **the use of feedback and self-assessment to support pupil understanding of strengths and next steps**
- **opportunities for extended and independent writing across a range of genres**
- **utilising digital tools for drafting, editing and sharing work**
- **using structured and individualised approaches to support progression**

Listening & Talking

- encouraging active listening through structured activities, interactive learning and engaging tasks
- providing regular opportunities for presenting ideas and engaging in discussions
- offering structured feedback and opportunities for reflection

4.1.2 Additional Support Needs Settings

Areas of Effective Practice

- personalised, equitable support which considers age, stage of development and ASN
- relational approaches
- effective and individualised assessment strategies
- the use of technology and a range of tools including AAC (augmentative and alternative communication), signing and sensory approaches as appropriate

An **area for potential development** was further support for reading for pleasure and creating cultures of reading.

4.2 Education Scotland reports and evidence: The National Response to Improving Literacy (NRIL)

The National Response to Improving Literacy (NRIL) was established during 2023 and was overseen by a partnership board co-chaired by the Association for Directors of Education (ADES), Scottish Government (SG) and Education Scotland (ES). The findings of their interim report, finalised in November 2024, have particular importance to the Curriculum Improvement Cycle.

NRIL's interim report identifies five broad 'areas of focus'. These were synthesised on the basis of a diverse set of outputs produced from a range of activities, undertaken both by the board itself and in partnership with a range of stakeholders contributing to short-life working groups (SLWGs).

Given the overlap of timelines between the lifespan of NRIL and the commencement of the Curriculum Improvement Cycle, one of these proposals was to 'Ensure the findings and ongoing work of NRIL informs the cycle of curriculum review'. NRIL proposed that, given their close analysis of the current system for literacy to date, the membership of the NRIL partnership board should become central to the governance of the Curriculum Improvement Cycle. Furthermore, NRIL suggested that the findings from NRIL, could form a key source of evidence for the CIC.

NRIL proposed a further four areas of focus, and their agreed definitions, are reproduced below.

Areas of focus:

- 'Restate' Scotland's definitions of literacy and texts
- Support educational settings to develop the essentials of literacy
- Increase expertise of research-informed approaches to literacies
- Increase and broaden practitioners' professional knowledge and skill in literacy

Areas of focus and definitions

Restating Scotland's definitions of literacy and texts

NRIL proposed future planned action to support the system's shared understanding of Scotland's existing definition of literacy. Such a 'restatement' of the broad definition of literacy should serve to mitigate the unintended consequences of assessment and accountability, which narrow down curriculum and pedagogies for literacy to what can be 'measured'.

As a result, NRIL argued, the narrative promoted around the restated definition of literacy should reconcile conflicting perspectives on what literacy 'is'. Through this narrative, competency and confidence in the essentials of the knowledge and skills needed for listening and talking, reading and writing could be developed rigorously, through developmentally appropriate approaches. However, at the same time, understandings of progress and achievement in literacy, through engagement and creation of a broad range of 21st century texts and through many different 'ways with language' could allow schools and practitioners to put learners at the centre of their own literacy pathways.

Supporting educational settings to develop the essentials of literacy

NRIL proposed that activities within this area of focus should amplify, consolidate and add to the range existing programmes of professional support focused on the essentials of literacy, as identified by NRIL to date. Support for learners to develop essential skills and knowledge that allow them to engage with and create written texts, through reading and writing features within this recommendation.

Professional support in this area should be research-informed, seeking to improve teacher professional knowledge in how learners learn to read and write. For NRIL it is important that support provides increased clarity on the most promising approaches to the essentials of reading and writing, whilst ensuring teacher agency and curricular flexibility in order to meet the needs of all learners.

NRIL also emphasised that aspects of listening and talking should be an integral component of programmes concerning the essentials of reading and writing. However, initiatives focussing on the essentials of effective listening and talking, for its own sake, should also feature in the implementation of this recommendation.

Finally, 'essentials' programmes should seek to promote the planning and implementation of developmentally appropriate curricula and pedagogies for literacy, that meet the needs of learners at different stages of the 3-18 learner journey.

Increasing expertise of research-informed approaches to literacies

NRIL identified a need to increase and broaden system-level knowledge and expertise of a range of research-informed approaches to improving literacies for 21st century learning. Through the SLWG process NRIL found that areas such as Critical Literacy and Disciplinary Literacy are deeply researched fields with potential to develop the four purposes of the curriculum, yet well-developed practice in these areas is infrequent and understanding of what they entail can be ambiguous.

To sharpen this shared understanding, NRIL proposed that implementation plans should include the involvement of universities and third sector organisations. Schools, clusters and local authorities, where existing practice is having an impact on children and young people's learning, should also be key contributors to this process.

Increase and broaden practitioners' professional knowledge and skill in literacy

NRIL also proposed that future planned action should improve professional knowledge and skill within literacy for educators working across Early Learning and Childcare, primary and secondary sectors. This should include working with universities and colleges delivering initial teacher and practitioner (ELC) education to ensure that all newly qualified educators enter the profession with appropriately high levels of knowledge of literacy and developmentally appropriate practice.

Effective programmes of ongoing professional learning targeted at practitioners in the early years of their careers and those with longer experience should be made more widely accessible through collaboration with and between local authorities and other partners.

4.3 Education Scotland's Pilot Curriculum Reviews

A series of pilot curriculum reviews was held by Education Scotland between February 2023 and April 2024 in response to an OECD recommendation on the review of the curriculum in Scotland. Three central purposes were to trial and evaluate various methodologies and engagement approaches for a future full-scale curriculum review cycle; to explore views on the role of knowledge and identify key messages to inform the further development of Curriculum for Excellence.

4.3.1 The Literacy and English Pilot Curriculum Review

In March 2024, the pilot curriculum review for literacy and English was held involving representatives from early years settings, primary and secondary, as well as stakeholders from organisations including the SQA, Scottish Book Trust and a number of universities. The main purpose of this event was for participants to reflect on the current curriculum framework for literacy and English, what they valued within it and what they felt may be needed in the future.

Attendees were placed in mixed-sector groups and asked to discuss and respond to a range of questions. Interactive group tasks were designed to allow participants to explore key questions.

These questions, along with headline summaries of stakeholder responses are outlined below.

What do stakeholders value within the current curriculum framework?

- the wider purpose that literacy holds within the curriculum
- the positive impact literacy can have on wellbeing, as well as its position as a skill for life and work
- literacy as the responsibility of all, alongside broad and evolving definitions of texts.

What are the key valued features of the current definition of literacy?

- pupil-centredness
- the positioning of literacy as 'a set of skills' that allows children and young people to participate in society
- the broad definition of texts and forms of language
- references to critical literacy.

What is needed in a future curriculum framework?

- guidance should evolve to be clearer on what 'responsibility of all' looks like
- greater prominence for critical literacy within the curriculum
- a shared understanding of progression throughout the 3-18 learner journey, particularly at key transition points
- clarity on approaches to moderation and provision of exemplification
- foregrounding digital texts and media, particularly in light of advances in AI.

What knowledge and skills do learners require within literacy and English in order to realise the four capacities?

Successful Learners

- skills for understanding feedback to support learners to improve and make progress
- skills and knowledge associated with critical literacy and information literacy
- engagement with reading for pleasure

Confident Individuals

- critical literacy skills to be able to challenge the reliability and credibility of texts, with a good grasp of background knowledge.
- confidence in listening and talking
- experience of a range of fiction and non-fiction texts.

Effective Contributors

- effective communication through listening and talking skills.
- experience of communicating through a variety of text types
- foundational literacy skills and knowledge.

Responsible Citizens

- discussion and debate (listening and talking) skills that allow young people to consider conflicting points of view,
- openness to texts that challenge and extend their thinking, possess the
- foundational knowledge and skills to find, evaluate, and use information
- awareness of the impact of content they consume and produce.

It should also be noted that across discussions, participants recognised the importance of educators being open to different ways of communicating and of the role of children's families and communities in facilitating and consolidating their skills.

5 Stakeholder reports and reviews

5.1 Key stakeholder reports

This section presents the work of a range of stakeholders, with a particular interest or connection to literacy and English as a curriculum area.

5.1.1 Dyslexia Scotland

‘Towards a Dyslexia Friendly Scotland?’ reports on a survey of the dyslexic population in Scotland (1419 respondents), carried out by Dyslexia Scotland between 2023 and 2024. The published report reveals the inequalities faced by children, young people and adults and the reasons to be optimistic about the potential for a dyslexia-friendly Scotland. Key findings are outlined below.

- There are issues around the timely identification of dyslexia, with girls generally being identified, on average, two years later than boys.
- Participants note that dyslexia has a negative impact on their education and career pathways.
- Participants feel that the struggles faced by people with dyslexia are not always understood or appreciated in terms of the impact it has on reading, spelling and memory.
- The emotional toll of dyslexia is also referenced, reinforcing the fact that it can lead to feelings of frustration, inadequacy and mental health difficulties.
- Participants also recognise the day-to-day problems associated with dyslexia, such as financial management or engaging with the electoral process.
- While most participants feel capable of self-advocacy, they agree that further steps could be taken to ensure they can seek support independently when required.

The report made several recommendations and action points to support the journey towards a dyslexia-friendly Scotland.

- Enhance teacher training and professional development to help practitioners support children and young people with dyslexia. This could include mandatory CLPL on dyslexia.
- Ensure access to dyslexia testing for adults and young people who are not in education.
- Implement targeted dyslexia awareness and support in the workplace.
- Enhance mental health support for those with dyslexia.
- Improve digital literacy and access to assistive technologies.
- Address dyslexia stigma and discrimination.

5.1.2 Scottish Book Trust

Scottish Book Trust are a national charity who run a range of literacy programmes aimed at children and adults of all ages. Outlined below is some detail on the impact of programmes aimed specifically at supporting children in schools. Information on the full range of programmes and research conducted by Scottish Book Trust can be found [here](#).

Reading Schools

The Reading Schools programme was piloted in 2019 and is now a nationwide accreditation programme that aims to help schools build and sustain a reading culture. The 2023/24 independent evaluation states that Reading Schools has supported the development of a reading for pleasure culture in schools.

Key conclusions (2023/24) are that, overall, practitioners reported that Reading Schools had a significant impact for both learners and school staff, and was flexible, well-supported, and clear. Local Authority partners agreed that Reading Schools aligned with local strategies to develop a culture of reading for pleasure. The programme built on foundations created in many schools and offered new ideas and approaches to engage learners.

Learners at the schools visited as part of this evaluation stated that Reading Schools supported their interest in reading and encouraged them to read more widely. They also felt it would sustain their interest in reading as they get older. Schools reported that Reading Schools provided positive opportunities for pupil engagement and leadership. They learned how to plan events and activities, often facilitating family and community engagement.

Schools also reported a significant increase in reading for pleasure in learners who were not previously enthusiastic or engaged readers, as well as those with additional support needs, from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and those with English as an additional language. They felt strongly that taking part in Reading Schools had impacted positively on learning and attainment and contributed to wellbeing, empathy and creativity.

The impact of book gifting in Scotland

'Bookbug' and 'Read write count' are universal book gifting initiatives funded by Scottish Government. Both programmes strive to help families to play, read, and learn together, creating opportunities for parents and carers to bond with their children and to develop a love of reading. At birth, all children in Scotland receive two books in their baby box followed by six bags of books up until the age of eight. The book gifting impact study ([Book gifting impact study 2022.pdf](#)) assessed the cumulative impact of both initiatives for children and families in Scotland.

The study found that book gifting had a positive impact on a number of areas including access to texts, language and communication development, and children's development as readers. It also found that book gifting had a notable social and emotional impact by supporting bonding and attachment, relaxation, and providing comfort during difficult times.

The research also identified three key enabling factors associated with book gifting. Firstly, the universal aspect of the initiative meant that it created the conditions for a shared culture of reading for pleasure for families across Scotland. Additionally, the inclusion of high-interest texts meant that children and families were more likely to engage with the materials provided. Finally, the initiative benefitted from the supporting information provided by professionals at the point of access.

As a next step, the research noted that families with a lower SIMD profile were less likely to use them as frequently as their counterparts in higher deciles, making the case for targeted approaches to supplement and support the initiative. The success of the initiative also suggested that it could be extended to include older children.

School and Public Libraries

In 2024, Scottish Book Trust carried out research titled ‘The Value and Impact of Scotland’s Libraries’ ([The value and impact of Scotland’s public libraries - Scottish Book Trust](#)). The aim of this research project was to foreground the role played by school and public libraries in addressing issues of inequality within and across Scotland’s communities.

The research focused on approaches to reading for pleasure, digital inclusion, active citizenship, learning opportunities and efforts to close the poverty-related attainment gap. School libraries support reading for pleasure through initiatives such as Book Week Scotland, competitions, reading challenges, storytelling activities, and reading cafes. The research highlighted the important role of qualified librarians and adequate funding in delivering and sustaining these activities.

Further findings from the research also included the following.

- School libraries contribute to closing the poverty-related attainment gap by offering peer-supported reading groups and targeted support for young people with additional support needs.
- Libraries provide free and equitable access to books and function as safe inclusive spaces for all young people, with access to a qualified librarian to guide their reading. These inclusive environments further promote active citizenship by providing opportunities for discussion and engagement with a wide range of diverse issues.
- School libraries facilitate digital inclusion by providing access to devices and wi-fi that may not be available to some learners at home.

The report concludes that although school libraries are a vital part of a child or young person’s reading and learning journey, the school librarian often functions in isolation and in an environment of diminishing resources. It also posits that a well-resourced, well-supported library prepares learners to engage with democracy and creates pathways out of poverty.

5.1.3 The Wood Foundation

The Wood Foundation, set up in 2007, is a Scottish-based charity. It focuses on developing young people in Scotland and works collaboratively with education partners. Its aim is to provide opportunities for young people to develop key skills and experiences which enhance their school experience and better prepare them for the world of work.

The Wood Foundation's Excelerate investment is a community-connected learning approach that invests in professional learning opportunities for teachers to strengthen pedagogical approaches to learning and teaching, including project-based learning and oracy. In partnership with Oracy Cambridge, it is working with 19 schools in the North-east of Scotland to deliver professional learning with 'Oracy Leads' in partner schools. There are up to three members of staff from each participating school who are taking responsibility for cascading their learning and creating a whole-school approach to oracy.

Research published in August 2023 by Edge and the UCL Institute of Education (IOE) examined the approach taken by three secondary schools participating in the Excelerate programme and aimed to explore the features of the investment and the way in which the schools interpreted and implemented it.

For schools that had introduced oracy in their practice, staff reported positive effects on learners, including increased confidence in the way they articulated themselves and their learning. Teachers viewed oracy as closely linked with Project-Based Learning (PBL), seeing both as vital for developing communication, critical thinking and real-world problem-solving skills. Oracy was reported to empower young people, make learning more relevant and improve engagement.

Implementing oracy required changes in teaching methods, such as allowing more wait time for responses to promote deeper thinking. Teachers stated that the training received was crucial in helping them to be more reflective in their teaching practices. However, challenges remain, including a lack of dedicated time and resources. Participating teachers also emphasised that oracy should complement other pedagogical approaches as part of a broader approach to learning and teaching and not replace traditional methods. Overall, it was concluded that oracy helps teachers refine their practice and gives structure to existing teaching strategies.

More information on the work of the Wood Foundation can be found on their website <https://www.thewoodfoundation.org.uk/the-wood-foundation/>

5.2 Subject associations and other relevant organisations

Across the UK, there are a number of organisations and special interest groups that have an influence over education in literacy and English. This section describes their work and provides links to their resources.

[The United Kingdom Literacy Association \(UKLA\)](#)

UKLA seeks to support and inform anyone with an interest in the development of language, literacy and communication. It is a membership organisation which fosters collaborative relationships with literacy educators, communities and stakeholders. It promotes best practice in literacy education, informed by research evidence and the insight of literacy professionals. Funding for UKLA is obtained mainly through membership fees, publications and conferences.

Members can participate in a range of ways, including through Special Interest Groups and networks. UKLA also hosts annual national and international conferences, inviting submissions worldwide from a range of experts sharing research, expert practice and ideas regarding literacy.

[The English Association](#)

The English Association is a registered charity and cross-sector subject association focused on English as a discipline. It seeks to connect individuals and organisations from all sectors of education and all areas of English studies and offers a range of publications and professional learning events.

[National Association for the Teaching of English \(NATE\)](#)

The National Association for the Teaching of English is an educational charity and professional association that supports teachers of English through resource development, events and conferences. NATE publications, *Teaching English* and *English 4-11* (produced in collaboration with the English Association and the UKLA), are mainly aimed at secondary and primary teachers, respectively, while *English in Education* is NATE's international research journal. NATE also provides an independent voice for the profession by sharing insights on policy, practice and research.

[The National Literacy Trust \(NLT\)](#)

The National Literacy Trust is an independent charity dedicated to improving literacy levels across the UK to enhance life chances and social mobility. It works to ensure that everyone, regardless of their background, has the literacy skills needed to thrive in learning, life and work. The organisation addresses this aim by promoting listening and talking, reading and writing; tackling literacy inequalities linked to disadvantage, and by working in partnership with schools and settings, communities, businesses and policymakers to deliver evidence-informed programmes.

The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE)

The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education is a charity that works specifically with primary schools to support the teaching of reading and writing and to raise achievement in literacy. It offers paid in-person and online training opportunities and a number of free teaching resources through its website. CLPE also conducts and shares a range of research across different topics related to literacy.

5.3 Professional Associations

There is no evidence within scope for literacy and English from professional associations

5.4 Views of Children and Young People

This section presents findings from a number of consultations carried out with children and young people.

[All Learners in Scotland Matter: The National Discussion on Education](#) (2023)

In this report, children and young people recognised the fundamental nature of literacy and its relevance to their current learning and future success. However, they also expressed the need to avoid an overly narrow focus on the attainment of literacy, and other core areas of the curriculum, in favour of a more varied and collaborative learning experience that emphasises learning and teaching approaches such as group work, projects and practical learning.

[Education Reform: Consultation with children and young people](#) (2022)

The Education Reform consultation found that, in general, learners viewed literacy as fundamental for their personal development and future goals. They recognised its necessity for success in daily life and careers and highlighted the importance of reading and writing in particular. However, while acknowledging the core value of literacy learning, it was also felt that too narrow a focus does not always recognise the full range of talents and interests that children and young people possess and seek to express through educational experiences. Opportunities for personalisation and choice in literacy, such as selecting writing themes and topics, were appreciated. Learners also expressed positive views on the use of technology to support literacy learning and assessment, citing laptops, educational apps and other digital tools as being more engaging than conventional approaches.

[Scottish Youth Parliament: SQA Advisory Group Project Report](#) (2024)

In this report, young people intimated that learners who struggle with reading or writing, or for whom English is not their first language, find digital tools such as text-to-speech software useful and supportive. When considering study support, some expressed a wish to engage with information beyond simply “writing it all down”. In terms of preparedness for future pathways, some young people conveyed a need for greater emphasis on life skills such as CV writing, which they perceived as more relevant for future success. For one group of S5-S6 learners, there was a desire for improved flexibility in subject choices, with a feeling that they should “not be forced to take certain subjects such as English and Maths”

[Children and Young People's Reading in Scotland in 2023](#)

This report was co-produced by the National Literacy Trust and Scottish Book Trust. Evidence used in these reports stems from data collected during the NLT's Annual Literacy Survey in 2023. The reading report gathered data from 1,141 pupils aged between 8 and 18,

Key findings include:

- In 2023, 41.5% of children and young people reported enjoying reading in their free time, indicating that nearly three out of five did not. Reading enjoyment was marginally higher during free time when compared to reading at school.
- A strong positive correlation was observed between enjoying reading at school and in free time, with 70.6% of those who enjoyed reading in their free time also enjoying it at school and 73.7% of those who enjoyed reading at school also enjoying it in their free time. However, it was noted that one in four children did not enjoy reading in either setting.
- More than 1 in 4 children and young people read daily or almost daily in their free time. Overall, 3 in 5 read at least once a week, but 1 in 6 rarely or never read.
- In terms of reading materials and formats, fiction was the most popular choice on paper and was engaged with by over two in five readers. This was followed by non-fiction and comics/graphic novels.
- When reading on screen, news and fiction were more frequently consumed digitally than in print. Exclusively online formats proved very popular. These included personal or direct messages, in-game messages, social media content and websites.
- The main factors cited by children and young people for wanting to read more was having books recommended to them as well as accessing books that represent who they are. Seeing parents/carers read, and being encouraged to read by them, also had a positive influence.

[Children and Young People's Writing in Scotland in 2023](#)

As above, this report was also co-produced by the National Literacy Trust and Scottish Book Trust. Evidence used in these reports stems from data collected during the NLT's Annual Literacy Survey in 2023. The writing report gathered data from 1,080 pupils aged between 8 and 18,

Key findings include:

- 1 in 3 children and young people aged 8 to 18 in Scotland enjoyed writing in their free time in 2023, meaning 2 in 3 did not. More children and young people reported enjoying writing at school than in their free time
- Nearly 1 in 5 wrote daily or almost daily in their free time, while about half wrote at least once a week. However, 1 in 4 rarely or never wrote.
- When writing on paper, children and young people commonly engaged in writing diaries and letters, with about one in five also writing fiction or short stories. Exclusively online formats proved most popular for writing, including personal/direct messages and in-game communications. Additionally, three in five wrote social media content and two in five composed emails.

- The desire to share a memorable experience was the most significant factor in motivating children and young people to write more. Seeing people they look up to talk about writing and hearing friends and family talk about writing also motivated them.
- In terms of writing environments and inspiration to write, most children (over 4 in 5) had a quiet space at home and their own desk for writing or studying. Participation in creative-writing groups, author visits and book groups/fairs were linked with higher writing enjoyment and frequency.

[National Literacy Trust, Using Generative AI To Support Literacy In 2024](#)

This report outlines findings from questions relating to generative AI included in the National Literacy Trust 2023 and 2024 Annual Literacy Surveys. It explores children, young people's and teachers' attitudes, behaviour and confidence around using generative AI to support literacy and learning. The report focuses on findings from 15,830 young people aged 13 to 18 and 1,228 teachers from schools across the UK

In 2024, more than three in four children (77%), across genders and socio-economic backgrounds, reported having used AI. Of these, over two in five (44%) had used it for casual conversations, one in five (19%) for writing stories, one in eight (13%) for creating poems or lyrics, and one in eleven (9%) for producing non-fiction writing. More broadly, two in five (40%) stated that AI had helped them with their writing, and almost one in four (23%) found it had supported their reading.

Additionally, almost half of all teachers (48%) reported making use of AI tools, with usage more common among secondary school teachers (57%) compared to those in primary education (31%). Two in five (38%) had used AI to create lesson content, while around one in three had used it either to create model answers (35%) or to support lesson planning (32%).

Many educators expressed reservations despite the increasing popularity of AI. Two in five teachers (38%) expressed concerns about students' use of generative AI in 2024, with the proportion higher in secondary schools (45%) than in primary schools (20%). While nearly two-thirds (65%) acknowledged that generative AI could model good writing, almost half (49%) felt that it could negatively impact children's writing skills overall.

Teachers were also concerned that the use of AI could inhibit independent thinking (57%) and reduce engagement with learning (42%). More than half (56%) feared that students not supported in using AI effectively would face disadvantages in the future workplace. Nonetheless, the vast majority (82%) agreed that young people should be taught to engage critically with AI tools, and three in four (75%) wanted more training for themselves to use AI effectively.

In summary, it is clear that strong literacy skills can enhance the effective use of generative AI. However, there are persistent challenges as young people often lack the critical literacy skills needed to use AI appropriately or successfully and its use could contribute to a decline in some aspects of writing. Finally, there is still uncertainty among many teachers about how to use AI effectively in their own practice.

6 Academic Research

Research in the Field of Literacy

Academic research will play an important role in the Curriculum Improvement Cycle for literacy and English. The following section comes in two parts, accounting first for a rapid research review carried out by Education Scotland and then providing commentary on a broader range of research areas within literacy and English which are relevant to the Curriculum Improvement Cycle.

6.1 Rapid Research Review

A Rapid Research Review (RRR) carried out by Education Scotland in December 2024 revealed a significant gap in terms of research focused on the effectiveness of Curriculum for Excellence in delivering outcomes for children and young people within the area of literacy and English. In addition, the limited number of research papers that were identified through the RRR are varied and disparate in their subject matter. In research terms, 'literacy' and 'English' are vast fields encompassing many specialised aspects from 'oral language' to 'grammar in writing' to 'reading and the impact of digital texts'. The small number of papers identified through the RRR ranged in focus from comprehension to critical literacy, with some papers touching on English in a more general way within a broader focus on perceived curricular narrowing.

6.2 Academic Research related to Literacy and English

The account of academic research below is by no means exhaustive. The commentary provided is organised, in the first instance, around the three key strands of the current technical framework for literacy and English (Listening and talking; Reading and Writing). Thereafter, it is organised around a set of further specialised aspects of the very broad body of research encompassed within the terms of 'literacy' and 'English'. These are: Grammar; Critical Literacy; Multimodality; Disciplinary Literacy and Literacy Interventions

In each of these areas, seminal and contemporary research studies have been identified, with a focus primarily on peer-reviewed research articles, but also key books and other texts underpinned by academic research. This includes research reflecting different disciplinary traditions (e.g., sociological, sociocultural, educational, psychological) and different methodological approaches (e.g., reviews; observational, longitudinal or experimental studies; surveys, assessments interviews etc as a means of data collection). Therefore, the academic research highlighted in this section is not comprehensive, but has been curated, as much as possible, to support a breadth of literacy research knowledge. At this early stage of the Curriculum Improvement Cycle the commentary does not draw any conclusions on the basis of such wide-ranging research. Rather it is intended as a starting point for further discussion as we proceed through the four stages of the Curriculum Improvement Cycle, now and in the years to come.

6.2.1 Methodology

A range of educational research databases, including ERIC, BEI, Education Database, Web of Science and JSTOR were searched using the following terms:

- literacy
- literacy and English
- listening and talking
- reading
- writing
- literacy interventions
- critical literacy
- multimodality
- multiliteracies

The same search terms were also used to search using Google Scholar. The search was initially limited to research that took place between 2010 and 2024. However, to access a greater volume of material, this was broadened to include papers from any period. Research situated in several nations, including Scotland, England, USA, New Zealand and Australia, was reviewed as part of this process. Consideration was also given to grey literature such as national policy documents, reports and blogs.

Research referred to throughout this section of the paper can be found in the reference list. A wider reading section is also provided, which includes further papers pertaining to each of the sub-topics.

6.2.2 Listening and Talking

Listening and talking are essential components of the literacy and English curriculum, as they underpin effective communication, comprehension, and critical thinking.

Early language development follows a generally predictable sequence, albeit children progress at different rates. It is influenced by both the amount and quality of language input children receive from the adults around them, with quality being more crucial. Research highlights the importance of supporting early language skills through meaningful, responsive interactions with caregivers. Strategies such as labelling, elaborating on children's speech, and exposure to varied and decontextualized language are effective. (Cohen, 2001). There is increasing evidence that these early skills make a difference to later performance, and children whose skills develop more slowly than those of their peers may have difficulties with a number of different aspects of their development (Duncan *et al*, 2020).

Vocabulary growth depends on both the frequency and diversity of word usage in context. Oral language skills are foundational for reading comprehension, aiding understanding of word meanings and are also linked to word recognition. Longitudinal studies provide a causal link

between language and reading as bidirectional in nature as weak reading skills further compound existing language difficulties (Nation, 2019; Duncan et.al, 2020).

Spoken language development enhances students' ability to process and interpret information, supporting reading and writing skills (Mercer, 2000). Through discussion and oral expression, learners refine their reasoning, collaborate effectively, and engage in meaningful dialogue, fostering deeper understanding and social interaction (Alexander, 2017). Furthermore, strong listening skills contribute to academic success by improving attention, recall, and the ability to synthesize ideas (Vygotsky, 1978). As foundational literacy skills, listening and talking not only facilitate learning across subjects but also prepare students for active participation in society.

6.2.3 Reading

The development of reading draws on a complex interplay of skills and background factors. These include a range of linguistic and cognitive processes in making meaning from texts and understanding that these depend on children's background knowledge and life experiences, as well as their engagement with and motivation for reading. (Breadmore *et al*,2019, Wyse, D., and Hacking, C. ,2024).

Early skills in using and understanding spoken language, concepts of print, and phonological awareness strengthen the foundations needed for developing the knowledge and skills of learning to read. As identified by the National Reading Panel and other major studies since, the key components include phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000; Castles, A., *et al*, 2018).

Reading, and the teaching of reading, is widely considered to be of paramount importance in children's lives (Street, 1984; Hoover & Gough, 1990; Scarborough, 2001; Stuart, 2006; Ellis, 2007; Wyse & Bradbury 2022; Brooks, 2023). From their earliest experiences of school, performance in reading is one of the central measures through which children are defined, and through which they define themselves, as learners. Research in the field of reading is extensive, particularly with regards to early reading which is often characterised as a choice between an autonomous (Hoover & Gough, 1990) or ideological (Street, 1984) approach. Recent academic research gives voice to both stances and recognises the interconnected nature of different aspects of reading development (Wyse & Hacking, 2024). Reading for Pleasure, or volitional reading, is another vital component of reader development. Children who read for pleasure are more likely to experience positive economic, social and health related outcomes (Clark & Rumbold, 2006).

The reference list and the wider reading list at the end of this paper provides a range of research in key areas of reading research, including early reading, reading comprehension and reading for pleasure.

6.2.4 Writing

Writing is a fundamental component of the literacy and English curriculum as it fosters critical thinking, communication and creativity while reinforcing reading and language skills. Through writing, children and young people develop their ability to structure arguments, express ideas clearly and engage with texts analytically (Graham, 2019).

Writing also plays a crucial role in cognitive development, as it requires learners to process and organise information, enhancing comprehension and retention (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987). Furthermore, writing is essential for academic success and future professional communication, making it a key skill in education (National Literacy Trust, 2021). Therefore, integrating writing across the curriculum supports holistic literacy development and prepares students for lifelong learning.

6.3 Other areas for consideration

This section presents a selection of academic research and grey literature pertinent to areas such as grammar, critical literacy, multiliteracies and multimodality, disciplinary literacy, and literacy interventions.

6.3.1 Grammar

Grammar underpins effective communication, reading comprehension and writing skills. Research highlights that a strong grasp of grammar enhances learners' ability to construct coherent texts and engage critically with written material (Myhill et al, 2012). Additionally, studies suggest that, when integrated into meaningful contexts, explicit grammar instruction can significantly improve learners' writing proficiency (Hudson, 2004).

6.3.2 Critical Literacy

Critical literacy empowers learners to analyse, question and interpret texts beyond surface meanings. It encourages children and young people to recognise prejudice, perspective and power dynamics in language, fostering deeper engagement with diverse viewpoints (Janks, 2010). By critically examining texts, students develop the ability to challenge assumptions, make informed judgements and become active, reflective participants in society (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Critical literacy also enhances problem-solving and analytical thinking skills, preparing students for academic and real-world contexts where they must navigate complex information critically and ethically (Luke, 2010).

6.3.3 Multiliteracies/ Multimodality

Multimodality recognises that learners can make meaning through multiple modes, including text, images, sound, and digital media. In an increasingly digital world, children and young people must develop the ability to interpret and produce multimodal texts to engage effectively with diverse forms of communication (Kress, 2010). Multimodal learning enhances comprehension, creativity and critical thinking by encouraging learners to consider how different modes work together to convey meaning (Bezemer & Jewitt, 2009). Furthermore, it supports inclusivity by providing multiple pathways for expression, catering for different interests and abilities (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). Multimodality supports practitioners to equip learners with the skills necessary to navigate and contribute to contemporary communication landscapes.

6.3.4 Disciplinary Literacy

Disciplinary literacy equips students with the ability to navigate and master the distinct language conventions and cognitive approaches inherent in each academic subject. This specialised literacy goes beyond generic reading and writing skills, enabling learners to engage deeply with subject-specific texts and methodologies. For instance, research by Shanahan, Shanahan, and Mischia (2011) highlights that experts in disciplines like history, chemistry, and mathematics employ unique reading strategies tailored to their fields, underscoring the necessity for students

to develop similar skills to achieve academic success. Moreover, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) emphasises that recognising these nuanced, subject-specific differences ensures that literacy instruction is effectively integrated with the development of subject knowledge and skills, thereby enhancing overall educational outcomes.

6.3.5 Literacy Interventions

Literacy interventions refers to any targeted support for learners who experience difficulties with reading, writing, and listening and talking. Effective interventions are evidence-based and tailored to individual needs, helping to close achievement gaps and promote educational equity (Snowling & Hulme, 2011). Research highlights the importance of early intervention, as literacy difficulties can impact academic success and future opportunities (Ehri *et al*, 2001). By implementing well designed literacy interventions – supporting decoding, fluency and comprehension skills as appropriate – educators can ensure that all learners develop the foundational skills necessary for lifelong learning and participation in society.

6.3.6 Generative AI

The emergence of generative AI is the latest issue which challenges educators to redefine literacy alongside the technologies we use to communicate. In today's context, literacy increasingly involves the ability to engage with generative AI effectively, critically, and creatively. However, the education system is struggling to keep pace with the rapid development and expanding capabilities of these tools. As McKnight (2021) observes, literacy now includes interacting with and critically evaluating AI.

Generative AI has the potential to address significant educational challenges, but this requires ensuring that people understand that it is safe and effective to use. According to Luckin (2019), preparing for an AI-driven world may also mean shifting education's focus towards human intelligence, equipping learners with the skills needed to thrive alongside AI to ensure that it complements rather than replaces the skills required for listening and talking, reading, and writing.

7 Future trends

This section aims to use evidence and predictions available to outline future global trends, relating these to the likely impact on Scotland and its education system. Given that one of the aims of the Curriculum Improvement Cycle is to co-create a future-oriented curriculum, the trends in this section, whilst not certain, offer some insights for consideration.

7.1 Future Challenges

Some of the challenges facing the world, common to many future looking reports and analyses include:

- rising global conflict (PWC, 2024; Scottish Government, 2025; OECD, 2025a)
- climate change, biodiversity loss and reduced food security (Patton *et al*, 2016; Royal Society of Edinburgh, 2024; PWC, 2024; Scottish Government, 2025; OECD 2025a&b)
- rise in mental health concerns and obesity (especially in young people) (Patton *et al*, 2016; OECD, 2025a; PWC, 2024; Scottish Government, 2025)
- aging populations (Scottish Government, 2025; PWC, 2024)
- technological disruption and polarisation via increased used of AI and emerging technologies (Royal Society of Edinburgh, 2024; PWC, 2024; Scottish Government, 2025; OECD 2025a)
- widening inequalities (including concentration of wealth, social instability and health inequalities) (Patton *et al*, 2016; PWC, 2024; Scottish Government 2025; OECD, 2020; OECD 2025a)
- rising costs of living (World Economic Foundation, 2025)

It is also important to note that trends identified are likely to affect children and young people differently, or disproportionately, compared with impacts for older generations. This is, in part, is because children and young people have to live with the outcomes of identified trends for longer, and the long-term future has particular importance for those who are youngest now (Scottish Government, 2025). They are increasingly exposed to conflict, displacement, environmental degradation and unregulated commercial exploitation, especially in digital and food environments, as well as being the first generation to grow up under the 'shadow of climate change' (Patton *et al*, 2016).

Young people may also experience societal transformations differently from older generations because they are often at the leading edge of change or technology adoption. In addition, trends will have differential impacts for different equalities groups. Intersecting inequalities and disadvantage may reduce resilience or the ability of both households and communities to adapt to future challenges, or to take advantage of future opportunities. In many cases the trends have the potential to drive and deepen inequalities still further (Scottish Government, 2025).

7.2 Future Opportunities

Despite the challenges outlined in section 7.1, a future-orientated curriculum also presents a range of significant opportunities:

- Curriculum flexibility and personalisation – A modern curriculum that is fit for purpose should be sufficiently flexible to meet individual learners’ aspirations, support social justice, address climate goals, and contribute to a strong and sustainable economic future (OECD, 2020; Royal Society of Edinburgh, 2024).
- Learner agency and co-agency – Emphasising learners’ ownership of their own learning and their capacity to navigate uncertainty, supported by collaboration with educators, peers and wider communities (OECD, 2020; Patton et al., 2016).
- Empowerment – Positioning education as a key driver in enabling individuals and communities to understand environmental challenges and to take informed, responsible action (OECD, 2025b).
- Bodies and minds – Recognising the importance of socio-emotional learning, digital wellbeing and health literacy across all age groups, alongside cognitive development (OECD, 2025a; Patton et al., 2016).
- Transformative competencies – Moving beyond subject knowledge to include attitudes, ethics and values that enable learners to create new value, reconcile tensions and dilemmas, and take responsibility for their actions (OECD, 2020).
- Future-focused skills – Developing skills such as AI and big data literacy, analytical and creative thinking, resilience, flexibility, agility, and broader technological literacy, all of which are projected to grow in importance (World Economic Forum, 2025; OECD, 2020). Additional priority areas include the development of green skills (OECD, 2025b).
- Continued relevance of human-centred skills amid rapid technological change – Skills such as leadership and social influence, curiosity and lifelong learning, systems thinking, talent management, motivation, and self-awareness remain essential (World Economic Forum, 2025).
- Equity and inclusion – Curriculum design must address widening inequalities, for example through intercultural understanding, and ensure access to meaningful learning for all learners, regardless of background or circumstance (OECD, 2020; OECD, 2025a).
- Broader educational goals – Education should promote individual and collective wellbeing, sustainability and social cohesion, rather than focusing solely on academic attainment or economic productivity. This includes encouraging society to value a wide range of educational pathways and destinations (OECD, 2020; Royal Society of Edinburgh, 2024).

Taken together, these trends reflect a global shift towards education systems that are increasingly adaptive, inclusive and future-orientated. These principles align closely with Scotland’s Curriculum Improvement Cycle, supporting co-creation and learner agency, reflecting learners’ lived realities and preparing them for emerging and complex challenges.

8 Points to consider

This background and evidence paper reflects a snapshot of a range of evidence available for consideration at the outset of the Curriculum Improvement Cycle for literacy and English. While not exhaustive, it draws on a wide range of data sources and research to inform its findings. Given the dynamic nature of this field—where new reports, surveys, and guidance are published regularly—this paper aims to provide a broad and representative foundation for reflection and dialogue within the Curriculum Improvement Cycle (CIC) process. Drawing upon the evidence outlined elsewhere in this paper, the findings below do not represent definitive conclusions but rather identify aspects of current practice that could be explored further through dialogue, reflection, and collaborative planning during the CIC process.

8.1 Clarifying the definition of literacy

The term ‘literacy’ is defined in a range of ways, and this is a key consideration for the Curriculum Improvement Cycle in the context of an evolving and changing social, educational and economic landscape. Research evidence for literacy originates from a broad range of disciplinary perspectives, with each defining what it is to be ‘literate’ in individual and nuanced ways. The implication is that being ‘literate’ can mean more than being able to read and to write traditional print texts, and that there are many ways for children and young people to be ‘literate’.

Nevertheless, assessment and reporting mechanisms focus mainly on reading and writing, and specifically on the measurable aspects of these modes. Evidence from stakeholder engagement cited in this paper suggests that both teachers and young people find such a focus on the attainment of literacy to be a barrier to broader (less measurable) literacy experiences, such as collaborative learning through group talk.

In fact, CfE currently provides a broader definition of literacy, which stakeholders continue to endorse, particularly in its learner-centredness and in that it values a range of languages and a broad range of texts. The NRIL partnership board observed the unintended consequence of a narrowing literacy curriculum due to accountability mechanisms and consequently recommended a ‘restatement’ of CfE’s broad definition of literacy as a mitigation of this. There is an opportunity, then, for the Curriculum Improvement Cycle to consider literacy as a term, in its range of definitions, and how best to position it within evolved curriculum guidance.

8.2 Clarifying the definition of texts

Related to the above, there is widespread endorsement of CfE's broad definition of texts, which encompasses 21st century texts such as digital and multi-modal texts alongside traditional print. Responses from teachers and practitioners engaging with the NRIL and pilot curriculum review for literacy and English align closely with this view and see it as a key ingredient of a future-orientated curriculum. The Curriculum Improvement Cycle should consider how the curriculum supports children and young people's learning about, and experiences of, the range of texts that are relevant to their everyday lives. As such, the CIC should explore how curriculum guidance can support the right balance of learning and engagement with traditional print texts alongside other text types, with a focus on enabling children and young people to make meaning from all texts within the curriculum.

8.3 The role of listening and talking

Multiple sources consulted for this evidence paper highlighted the importance of listening and talking as a point for consideration, advocating the continuation of their prominent role within the literacy and English curriculum.

Different evidence sources cited in this paper stress the importance of early language development in improving outcomes for children. The academic research referenced here outlines the types of interactions that support young children with their early language development and stresses the importance of maximising opportunities to support progress at the early stages of their learning journey. The work of the Wood Foundation emphasises the role of listening and talking pedagogy in enabling older learners to engage in collaborative talk. The CIC should ensure that listening and talking continues to receive a prominent and enhanced role within evolved curriculum guidance.

8.4 Early literacy

A range of evidence explored within this paper indicates that early literacy is a crucial point for consideration for the CIC. Responding to their engagement with stakeholders, NRIL recommended that educators should be better supported to develop their professional knowledge of the most up-to-date, research informed approaches to learning to read and write. To support this the CIC should take the opportunity to provide the 'increased clarity' within the curriculum guidance on what knowledge and skills young children need in the early stages of primary school in order to develop as successful readers and writers. This should account for both the most up-to-date research on systematic approaches to phonics and the full range of experience, skills and knowledge that enable children to read with full comprehension, for example by promoting oral language development and nurturing children's reading enjoyment and engagement. Education Scotland's research-informed guidance on 'Learning to read in the early years' will form an important starting point for this.

8.5 Reading for enjoyment and engagement

The important role of reading for enjoyment (reading for pleasure), sometimes referred to in the research as ‘volitional reading’, emerged as a point for consideration for the CIC. Children and young people’s reading for enjoyment is found to link to a number of positive outcomes, including economic, social and health related, outcomes along with favourable academic outcomes. This is borne out by OECD research cited in this paper which reports that learners who balance their reading between digital and paper texts reported higher levels of reading enjoyment and performed more successfully on the PISA reading assessment. Schools who have participated in Scottish Book Trust’s ‘Reading Schools’ programme have also reported that intervening to increase young people’s reading for enjoyment has impacted positively on learning and attainment and contributed to learners’ wellbeing, empathy and creativity. However, Scotland-specific statistics, extracted from the National Literacy Trust’s UK-wide survey of children and young people’s reading for pleasure in 2023, suggested that as many as three in five children may report that they do not enjoy reading in their free time. The CIC should consider the position of reading for enjoyment within Scotland’s curriculum, drawing upon research and evidence related to children and young people’s enjoyment and engagement with reading in the contemporary world.

8.6 Writing

CIC must consider a number of factors in relation to the position of writing within the evolved technical framework. Research positions writing as a fundamental aspect of literacy and English, supporting the development of cognitive skills such as processing, organising, and selecting and using information. It also helps children to develop in areas such as critical thinking, communication and creativity. It should also be noted that Writing is a relatively under-researched area of literacy, in comparison to reading. Stakeholders and employers also value writing and text composition as a means of communication in an increasingly digital world. Employers also value the collaborative skills developed through working on joint composition with peers. Evidence suggests that the introduction of generative AI and other digital tools should serve to complement and enhance writing rather than replace it, yet teachers express concerns that increased use of AI for writing may inhibit the critical skills that are developed through the ‘human’ process of writing. Teachers seek improved professional learning to support their understanding of the potential of AI which is an increasingly prevalent aspect of education. Finally, while writing is viewed as important by children and young people, particularly as a vehicle for expressing or relating personal experiences, data from the National Literacy Trust suggests that the number of children who write ‘for pleasure’ has decreased.

8.7 Digital Technology and Digital Pedagogies

The increased prevalence of digital technologies in children and young people’s everyday lives, both within and outwith their educational setting, is an important point for consideration. OECD research cited in this paper suggests that the increased use of digital technology means that print books now compete with devices and the internet as the main source of home learning. They

contend that, whilst acknowledging the potential threat of digital technology to reading for pleasure and home learning, education policy should support children and families to navigate these changes. This would allow them to tap into the potential of digital learning, while avoiding the pitfalls of ever-increasing digital access. Learners themselves expressed positive views on the use of technology to support literacy learning and assessment, citing laptops, educational apps and other digital tools as being more engaging than conventional approaches. In addition, young people intimated that learners who struggle with reading or writing, or for whom English is not their first language, find digital tools such as text-to-speech software useful and supportive. Consequently, the CIC should fully consider the implications of digital and multi-modal texts within the curriculum, including their position in relation to traditional print texts.

8.8 Labour Market Information

Another point for consideration is the ongoing value of literacy and English within the labour market. As previously mentioned in Section 2.3, language and communication skills developed across all subject areas, including English, are foundational to all other skills for work. The highest employing industries – health care, construction and social care – undoubtedly require young people to be competent in oral communication, reading and writing.

However, the requirement for skills such as collaboration, empathy and critical thinking have clear implications for English as a curriculum area and for the teaching of language and communication across all subjects and curricular contexts.

8.9 Learners' Career Ambitions

Learners' career ambitions represent another important consideration. Although healthcare is projected to be the largest employing sector, and tourism is expected to offer the greatest number of job opportunities, young people's strongest area of interest lies in the creative industries. However, this sector is forecast to generate fewer than half the number of opportunities anticipated in healthcare.

Additionally, this evidence review surfaces the variance that exists in learners' ambitions, driven by characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, sexuality and socio-economic background. There is also variation among learners who are care-experienced and learners with disabilities. Furthermore, the factors influencing their chosen industry also vary by characteristic. Most learners' choices are driven by their 'interests and hobbies', 'the need to earn money', 'qualifications achieved' and, to a lesser extent, 'education/training'. While parents/carers (or in the case of care experienced children, careers advisors) were listed as the key influence when choosing a career pathway, 35% of young people cited social media as an influence, with Tik Tok ranking the highest followed by Instagram and YouTube.

8.10 Future-oriented Curriculum

A further point for consideration was the need to ensure that the process of the Curriculum Improvement Cycle leads to a future-orientated curriculum that recognises future global trends that are likely to impact on Scotland's education system.

Research carried out for Section 7 of this paper – Future Trends – identified several challenges that a future curriculum may face, including climate change, mental health concerns, and rising geopolitical instability. However, analysis of future trends also identified a number of opportunities presented by a future-orientated curriculum including greater personalisation and choice, increased learner agency, and the continued relevance of human-centric skills against a backdrop of rapid technological advances.

8.11 The relationship between learner performance and background

An important area for consideration is the relationship between learner performance and socio-economic background. Reports based on the GUS data, cited within this paper along with recent PHS data indicate that children from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to have language difficulties in the early years. Encouragingly, ACEL data from 2023-24 suggests that the literacy gap between learners in the most and least deprived areas is reducing for both primary and secondary school pupils. International OECD research also suggests that children from disadvantaged background may be experiencing reduced access to print books in an increasingly digital world. Projects such as the National Early Language and Communication Project; Scottish Book Trust's Read write count and Reading Schools play an important role with this current educational context. The CIC must also consider this factor in relation to all of the points to consider detailed here in order to ensure that evolved curriculum guidance supports equity for children from all backgrounds.

8.12 Critical Literacy

Critical literacy featured prominently as a point to consider in the academic research referred to in this paper.

Critical literacy encourages children and young people to recognise prejudice, perspective, and power dynamics in language, fostering deeper engagement with diverse viewpoints. It is a component of recent developments that focuses on enacting an anti-racist curriculum. Critical literacy encourages learners to critically examine texts, supporting the development of their ability to challenge assumptions, make informed judgements and become active and reflective participants in society. Critical literacy also supports inclusivity by providing multiple pathways for expression, thereby catering for different interests and abilities.

Critical literacy also featured in responses made by the literacy and English pilot curriculum review. Attendees valued critical literacy as a necessary future skill for children and young people to help them navigate challenges including ‘fake news’ and the ethical use of artificial intelligence.

8.13 Improving professional learning in literacy for all teachers and practitioners

Professional learning in literacy and English is also an important point to consider in the CIC, particularly in relation to the implementation of evolved curriculum guidance. The National Response to Improving Literacy also proposed that future planned action should improve professional knowledge and skill in literacy for educators working across Early Learning and Childcare, primary and secondary sectors. This should include working with universities and colleges to deliver initial teacher and practitioner (ELC) education to ensure that all newly qualified educators enter the profession with appropriately high levels of knowledge of literacy and developmentally appropriate practice.

All practitioners require high levels of professional knowledge and skill in different areas of literacy. To support the implementation of evolved curriculum guidance the CIC should also consider how the education system can provide effective programmes of ongoing professional learning for all practitioners.

9 Declaration

The content of this document was written by the author, exercising full professional judgement. Education Scotland approved AI tools were used to support review, clarity, and quality assurance. Education Scotland staff retain full responsibility and have reviewed and approved all content.

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Version History

Version	Date	Detail
Version 1	18 May 2026	First published

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