



Department  
for Education

# **Phonics screening Check Evaluation:**

## **Final report**

**Research report**

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# Executive summary

## Introduction

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

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

## Scope of the evaluation

The evaluation has two main aims:

1. To explore whether issues raised in the 2011 pilot evaluation<sup>3</sup> have been addressed, specifically:
  - the confidence of teachers in the administration of the screening check and how schools have prepared for it
  - the appropriateness of the screening check for specific groups of pupils (specifically, those with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and English as an Additional Language (EAL))

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

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

<sup>3</sup> DfE recruited 300 primary schools to take part in piloting the PSC in 2011. The process evaluation report from the pilot can be found at:

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/182621/DFE-RR159.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/182621/DFE-RR159.pdf)

2. To identify and track the impact of the check on teaching and learning, including:
  - understanding the impact of the teaching of phonics in primary schools
  - assessing the impact of the PSC on teaching of the wider literacy curriculum
  - quantifying the impact of the check on the standard of reading and assessing its value for money

## Methods

In Year 3 of the evaluation (2014) interviews were undertaken with senior school leaders, literacy coordinators, Year 1 and Year 2 teachers, Reception teachers and parents and carers in 19 case study schools. The schools were randomly selected to capture a diverse geographical spread, as well as diversity in terms of size, school type, and the proportion of pupils in receipt of free school meals (FSM), with special educational needs (SEN), and who have English as an additional language (EAL). Survey responses were collected from 573 literacy coordinators and 652 Year 1 teachers. Analysis of the school characteristics of those teachers responding to the surveys, such as key stage 1 performance band and the proportion of pupils eligible for FSM, revealed that respondents were from schools that exhibited broadly similar characteristics to primary schools nationally. Given this, the sample sizes achieved are large enough to detect statistically significant differences. Where appropriate, comparisons are made to responses collected in Years 1 and 2 of the evaluation<sup>4</sup>. Data collection commenced the week beginning 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2014, the week after the administration of the check. An analysis of results from the National Pupil Database (NPD) was also undertaken. This involved a comparison of national results on the PSC, with results for the same pupils one year earlier, on the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP), and one year later, at the end of key stage 1.

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

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<sup>4</sup> The methods used in the first and second year of the evaluation included interviews with senior school leaders, literacy coordinators, Year 1 and 2 teachers and Reception teachers. In 2012 (Year 1), interviews were undertaken with staff in 14 case study schools and survey responses were collected from 844 literacy coordinators and 940 Year 1 teachers:

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/198994/DFE-RR286A.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/198994/DFE-RR286A.pdf)

In 2013 (Year 2) interviews were undertaken with staff in 19 case study schools and survey responses were collected from 583 literacy coordinators and 625 Year 1 teachers:

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/307229/Evaluation\\_of\\_the\\_phonics\\_screening\\_check\\_second\\_interim\\_report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/307229/Evaluation_of_the_phonics_screening_check_second_interim_report_FINAL.pdf)

## Key Findings

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

- Analysis was undertaken of national results on the PSC, together with results for the same pupils one year earlier, on the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP), and one year later, at the end of key stage 1. The evaluation did not find any evidence of improvements in pupils' *literacy* performance, or in progress, that could be clearly attributed to the introduction of the PSC. However, no conclusive statement can be made because of the methodological limitations described above.
- *Phonics* attainment, as measured by the proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard on the check, improved over three years and there is some evidence that this may have been an impact of the introduction of the check.
- Pupils are unlikely to reach the expected standard in reading and writing at the end of key stage 1 without being able to demonstrate the phonics skills measured by the PSC.

### Phonics teaching practices and views on phonics teaching

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



check results primarily for reviewing and revising phonics teaching plans for individuals and groups. Teachers reported using evidence from the check to make decisions about extra support for individuals, alongside their own records of assessment.

- For those children who had not met the standard in 2013, the most frequent type of support provided was to continue with systematic phonics teaching; this was followed by intensive learning in small groups.

### **Teachers' views on the value of the check**

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

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

- Most teachers reported they undertook less preparation for the check this year than they did when it was first introduced. The most frequent form of preparation, as captured in the literacy coordinator survey, was individual familiarisation with the DfE *Check Administrators' Guide*<sup>5</sup>. A quarter of responding Year 1 teachers reported undertaking no specific preparation for the check in 2014.
- Fewer Year 1 teachers reported having to stop the check early this year (2014: 41 per cent) than was the case last year (2013: 46 per cent). Of those that had to stop early, the majority reported finding it 'quite' or 'very easy' when making a decision to do so (85 per cent).
- Survey findings suggest that less than half of participating Year 1 teachers had to disapply children from the check. As the check becomes embedded into school practice it seems that schools feel more secure in their expectations and in the disapplication process.
- The costs associated with the introduction of the check and its on-going annual cost to schools and central government are around £400-500 per school, or £10-12

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/check-administrators-guide-phonics-screening-check-2014>  
[23/02/15]

per pupil. The largest on-going cost for schools is for supply cover while the check is administered, at £150 per school, or £3 per pupil.

- There is evidence that over the last three years teachers have become more familiar with and accepting of the standard of the check. In 2014, more than three quarters of Year 1 teachers (77 per cent) reported that the standard of the check 'was about right' (an increase of 33 percentage points since 2012).
- Over the course of the study, a small number of respondents have expressed concerns that the check disadvantages higher achieving readers. However, as reported in Chapter 2, the analysis of the NPD data found no identifiable pattern of poorer performance on the check than expected in those children who are already fluent readers.
- The findings from the surveys suggest that most schools provide some sort of information to parents/carers prior to the administration of the check. Most schools communicate the outcomes of the check to parents/carers via end-of year pupil reports. A smaller proportion of literacy coordinators reported that additional information was given to parents/carers in 2014, both in terms of details of the in-school support planned (39 per cent in 2014; 50 per cent in 2013; 61 per cent in 2012), and in terms of information regarding how parents/carers can support their child (43 per cent in 2014; 59 per cent in 2013; 73 per cent in 2012).

## Conclusions

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

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

To assess whether its introduction also had impacts on pupils' *learning* is more difficult, as the national introduction of the check made it impossible to have a control group. A further complexity concerns the date of implementation of the PSC. It was introduced for the first time nationally in 2012, but was piloted in 2011. Awareness of the proposed introduction of the check may have given rise to a heightened emphasis on phonics in schools prior to its national introduction. The process evaluation of the pilot (Coldwell *et al*, 2011) found that the sample of schools in the pilot were already making some changes to their phonics practice.

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

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Overview

This is the final report from the evaluation of the Phonics Screening Check (PSC), commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) and undertaken by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER). This report provides an overview of participating schools' phonics teaching practices, and explores whether there is any evidence that the introduction of the check has had an impact on the standard of reading and writing. It also highlights any changes in schools' practices since 2012, when the check was first introduced. It draws on data collected from case study interviews and surveys with literacy coordinators and Year 1 teachers over three time points between 2012 and 2014. In 2014, this included interviews with staff in 19 primary schools and endpoint surveys of 573 literacy coordinators and 652 Year 1 teachers in schools. The most recent round of data collection commenced the week following the administration of the check in June 2014.

## 1.2 The Phonics Screening Check

A number of research studies, most recently in this country Torgerson et al. (2006)<sup>6</sup>, attest to the effectiveness of systematic phonics programmes in early literacy teaching. Similarly, the Ofsted report 'Reading by Six'<sup>7</sup> emphasises the importance of 'diligent, concentrated and systematic teaching of phonics' in successful early literacy.

The government is committed to ensuring high quality teaching of phonics in primary schools and promoting the use of systematic synthetic phonics in the teaching of early reading, and has produced a set of criteria for high quality phonic work, presenting the key features of an effective, systematic, synthetic phonics programme. This envisages phonics as 'the prime approach to decoding print, i.e. phonics 'first and fast' approach'. It specifies that children should 'apply phonic knowledge and skills as their first approach to reading and spelling even if a word is not completely phonically regular' and notes that 'children should not be expected to use strategies such as whole-word recognition and/or cues from context, grammar, or pictures'. This guidance fits within a context where phonic work is seen not as one of a range of optional methods or strategies for teaching reading but as a body of knowledge and skills about how the alphabet works, which all children should be taught. The guidance to use synthetic phonics was given in the Rose Review (2006), and phonics first and fast was the method outlined in Letters and Sounds

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<sup>6</sup> Torgerson, C.J., Brooks, G. and Hall, J. (2006). *A Systematic Review of the Research Literature on the Use of Phonics in the Teaching of Reading and Spelling*, DfES Research Report 711, London: DfES.

<sup>7</sup> Office for Standards in Education (2010). *Reading by Six: How the Best Schools Do It*. London: Ofsted.

in 2007. The check and the matched funding provided by the government from 2011 to 2013 were aimed at supporting and reinforcing the use of systematic synthetic phonics.

The new national curriculum programmes of study for English (DfE, 2013)<sup>8</sup> reflect the government's commitment to ensuring pupils are taught phonic knowledge and skills. Word reading makes up one of the two dimensions of reading (alongside comprehension) and the word reading requirements for Year 1 pupils consist entirely of phonic skills. The programmes of study state that pupils should 'apply phonic knowledge and skills as the route to decode words' and also make clear that 'phonics should be emphasised in the teaching of reading to beginners'.

Since the 2010 Schools White Paper<sup>9</sup>, there has been a clear commitment to ensure that the teaching of phonics is firmly established in the first years of school. This is supported by the core criteria for phonics programmes and also by a stronger focus in Ofsted inspections. The PSC, which was piloted in 300 schools in the summer of 2011, is now statutory and complements these as a central strand of policy implementation.

The purpose of the PSC is to confirm whether individual pupils have learnt phonic decoding to an expected standard. Since June 2012, the check has been administered annually to all Year 1 pupils in maintained schools, academies and free schools. It aims to identify the children who need extra help so that they are given support by their school to improve their decoding skills<sup>10</sup>. Since 2013, children not reaching the expected standard in Year 1 have been re-taking the check at the end of Year 2 so that schools can monitor progress in phonic decoding through to the end of key stage 1.

### 1.3 Aims of the evaluation

The evaluation has two main aims:

1. To explore whether issues raised in the 2011 pilot evaluation have been addressed, specifically:
  - the confidence of teachers in the administration of the screening check and how schools have prepared for it
  - the appropriateness of the screening check for specific groups of pupils (specifically, those with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and English as an Additional Language (EAL))

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-english-programmes-of-study>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-importance-of-teaching-the-schools-white-paper-2010>

<sup>10</sup> This involves: recognising the sounds that each individual letter makes; identifying the sounds that different combinations of letters make (such as 'sh' or 'oo'); and blending these sounds together to make a word.

2. To identify and track the impact of the check on teaching and learning, including:
- understanding the impact of the teaching of phonics in primary schools
  - assessing the impact of the PSC on teaching of the wider literacy curriculum
  - quantifying the impact of the check on the standard of reading and assessing its value for money

Specifically, in this third and final year, the evaluation aims to explore the following research questions:

- What has been the impact of the check on the teaching of phonics in primary schools during Reception and Years 1 and 2?
- Has the PSC changed the teaching of the wider literacy curriculum?
- Has the introduction of the PSC had an impact on the standard of reading and writing?

This will add to the evidence on the research questions already addressed in the first two interim reports:

- How suitable is the check for specific groups of pupils?
- How did teachers identify the children who were disapplied from the check?
- What use has been made of phonics training and classroom materials for the teaching of phonics?
- How have schools communicated with parents/carers about the check?

## **1.4 Methodology**

The methods used in this year of the evaluation include in-depth qualitative research with senior school leaders, literacy coordinators, parents and carers and Year 1 and 2 teachers in 19 primary schools, as well as extensive quantitative data collection in the form of endpoint surveys with 573 literacy coordinators and 652 Year 1 teachers. The synthesis of these different elements provides the optimum understanding of participating schools' phonics teaching practices and the implementation and emerging impacts associated with the introduction of the PSC.

The research conducted with schools this year focused on Aim 2 of the evaluation, as detailed in Section 1.3 above. As such, the emphasis has been on exploring whether there have been any changes in the baseline position in teachers' attitudes and responses to the check and in exploring whether the check has impacted on the standard of reading and writing. Where appropriate, comparisons are made to responses collected

in Year 1 and Year 2 of the evaluation<sup>11</sup>. In total, data collection activities have been undertaken three times throughout the course of the study to gather data over time. Surveys and case studies were undertaken in the summer term in June-July 2012, June-July 2013 and June-July 2014.

## Surveys

Surveys were administered to a national sample of literacy coordinators and Year 1 teachers. The literacy coordinator surveys explored areas such as: phonics teaching practices in schools; schools' preparation for the implementation of the screening check; communication with parents and carers; and their views about phonics and literacy teaching in general. The Year 1 teacher survey focused on: their experiences of preparing for and administering the check; the appropriateness of the check for different groups of pupils; any changes in their practice; and their experience, if any, of local authority monitoring. Response rates to the most recent round of surveys can be seen in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Survey response rates**

Survey	Surveys Sent (n)	Responses received (n)	Response rate (%)
Year 1 teachers	1400	652	47
Literacy coordinators	1400	573	41

Source: NFER survey of literacy coordinators and Year 1 teachers, 2014

Analysis of the school characteristics of those Year 1 teachers responding to the survey, such as key stage 1 performance band and the proportion of pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), revealed that the sample of achieved Year 1 teacher respondents<sup>12</sup> were from schools that exhibited broadly similar characteristics to primary schools nationally (see Table 2 below). Given this, the sample sizes achieved are large enough to detect statistically significant differences.

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<sup>11</sup> The methods used in the first and second year of the evaluation included interviews with senior school leaders, literacy coordinators, Year 1 and 2 teachers and Reception teachers. In 2012 (Year 1) interviews were undertaken with staff in 14 case study schools and survey responses were collected from 844 literacy coordinators and 940 Year 1 teachers:  
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/198994/DFE-RR286A.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/198994/DFE-RR286A.pdf)  
 In 2013 (Year 2) interviews were undertaken with staff in 19 case study schools and survey responses were collected from 583 literacy coordinators and 625 Year 1 teachers:  
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/307229/Evaluation\\_of\\_the\\_phonics\\_screening\\_check\\_second\\_interim\\_report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/307229/Evaluation_of_the_phonics_screening_check_second_interim_report_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> A separate analysis revealed that the literacy coordinator sample was also broadly similar to primary schools nationally.

**Table 2: Representation of participating primary schools compared to schools nationally (based on responses to Year 1 teacher survey)**

		National population		Achieved Year 1 teacher sample 2014	
		Number	%	Number	%
KS1 English performance band 2010	1 Lowest 20%	3285	21	127	20
	2 2nd lowest 20%	2964	19	125	19
	3 Middle 20%	3005	19	111	17
	4 2nd highest 20%	3026	20	145	23
	5 Highest 20%	3144	20	136	21
Standard Primary Bands - % pupils eligible for FSM	1 Lowest FSM <= 8%	5349	35	222	34
	2 Low FSM > 8% & <= 20%	5081	33	218	34
	3 Middle FSM > 20% & <= 35%	3114	20	133	21
	4 High FSM >35% & <= 50%	1470	10	55	9
	5 Highest FSM > 50%	410	3	16	2
% of pupils with statements of SEN (2009/10)	1 None	3897	25	187	29
	2 1 - 2%	8761	57	344	53
	3 3 - 29%	2392	16	107	17
	4 30% +	367	2	6	1
% pupils with English as an additional language 2010/11	1 None	3236	21	147	23
	2 1 - 5%	6845	44	286	44
	3 6 - 49%	4678	30	184	29
	4 50% +	665	4	27	4
Primary school type	1 Infant/First	2149	14	100	16
	2 Primary/Combined	12054	78	513	80
	3 Middle	30	< 1	0	0
	4 Special schools/Pupil Referral Units	353	2	6	1
	5 Academy	838	5	25	4
Total schools			N=15,424		N=644

Note: Of the 652 responses to the Year 1 teacher survey, eight were not able to be matched to school-level data.

### School case studies

In order to gather a more in-depth understanding of the impact of the PSC and to capture any changes in practice since 2012, when the check was first introduced, a series of school case studies were undertaken between June and July 2014, focussing on the experiences of 19 schools<sup>13</sup>. As reported above, the case study findings presented in this report are taken from the third of three rounds of visits to schools to build up a picture of the impact of the check over time.

<sup>13</sup> A total of 31 different case study schools have been involved in the study over the three years of the evaluation. Of these, five schools have taken part as a case study in each year of the evaluation. The characteristics of the case study schools in Years 1 and 2 are presented in the first two interim reports.



The schools were randomly selected to capture a diverse geographical spread, as well as diversity in terms of size, school type, and the proportion of pupils in receipt of FSM, with special educational needs (SEN), and who have English as an additional language (EAL). The characteristics of the schools are presented in Table 3.

Ten of the 19 case-studies involved a visit to the school, while nine were conducted by telephone. The case-studies consisted of qualitative interviews with senior school leaders, literacy coordinators, Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 teachers and parents/carers. Topics covered as part of the visits to schools included: experiences of administering the check; impacts associated with the introduction of the check; and the costs and benefits associated with the check.

### **Analysis of National Pupil Database**

An analysis of results from the National Pupil Database (NPD) was also undertaken. This involved a comparison of national results on the PSC, with results for the same pupils one year earlier, on the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP), and one year later, at the end of key stage 1. Further details are provided in Chapter 2 and in the technical appendix published alongside this report

**Table 3: Selected characteristics of the 19 schools involved in the case study phase of the evaluation in 2014**

	School type	Age range	Number on roll	% SEN (with statements or on School Action Plus)	% FSM	% EAL	% achieving Level 4 or above in reading, writing and maths (2012)
1.	Community	3-11	550	3%	30%	93%	75%
2.	Academy – Converter	5-11	100	9%	4%	7%	86%
3.	Academy – Converter	3-11	230	12%	38%	67%	81%
4.	Academy – Converter	4-11	90	6%	10%	SUPP	73%
5.	Voluntary Aided	3-11	100	6%	SUPP	SUPP	SUPP
6.	Community School	3-11	520	10%	26%	47%	67%
7.	Academy – Converter	4-11	420	8%	7%	70%	93%
8.	Foundation Special School	3-11	100	100%	48%	7%	SUPP
9.	Community School	3-11	220	8%	7%	2%	64%
10.	Community School	3-11	380	6%	34%	3%	52%
11.	Academy – Converter	3-11	310	6%	17%	10%	96%
12.	Voluntary Controlled School	3-11	100	6%	12%	SUPP	69%
13.	Community Special School	2-16	90	100%	37%	25%	SUPP
14.	Voluntary Controlled (Special)	5-11	100	100%	34%	45%	SUPP
15.	Academy – Converter	3-11	660	3%	9%	6%	89%
16.	Community School	3-11	400	12%	40%	2%	57%
17.	Community School	5-9	50	SUPP	7%	SUPP	SUPP
18.	Academy – Converter (Special)	3-19	180	100%	27%	SUPP	SUPP
19.	Voluntary Controlled School	3-11	50	6%	SUPP	SUPP	71%
England – all schools average				4%	17%	9%	75%

Source: NFER evaluation of the phonics screening check, 2014

\*SUPP – Information has been suppressed by DfE because the underlying numbers are too small  
The data above have been rounded to the nearest whole number

## 1.5 The profile of research participants

NFER distributed endpoint surveys to Year 1 teachers and staff 'with responsibility for the school literacy policy affecting the teaching of phonics and the use of the Year 1 phonics screening check' (hereafter referred to as the literacy coordinator questionnaire) in a nationally representative sample of primary schools in June 2014. Data collection commenced the week beginning 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2014, the week after teachers administered the check to their pupils.

Staff responding to the literacy coordinator questionnaire were asked to indicate the role(s) in which they were responding to the questions. The findings are presented in Table 4 below.

**Table 4: Profile of staff responding to the literacy coordinator questionnaire**

<b>Role</b>	<b>%</b>
Literacy coordinator	64
Key stage/year group coordinator	27
Other senior leader	21
Headteacher	19
Other	8
Missing	3
N=573	

Source: NFER survey of literacy coordinators, 2014

More than one answer could be given so percentages may sum to more than 100

The majority (64 per cent) identified themselves as being the literacy coordinator, while a notable minority were in a key stage/year group coordinator, headteacher or other senior leader role.

## 1.6 Analysis and reporting

This report draws on analysis of the data collected as part of the baseline and endpoint surveys, supplemented with data gathered from case study visits to 19 schools in 2014, as well as the case study evidence collected in Years 1 and 2 of the evaluation. Changes in respondents' practices or views, as compared to those detailed in the first and second interim reports, are highlighted throughout. The report is structured as follows:

Chapter 2 explores the impact of the check on pupil attainment and progress in literacy. It draws on data collected through the National Pupil Database (NPD).

Chapter 3 explores survey and case study schools' views on the impact of the check on the teaching of phonics and the wider literacy curriculum

Chapter 4 reports on survey and case study schools' views on the PSC, their experiences of administering the check, the costs associated with the check, their views on the appropriateness of the check with different groups of learners, and the impacts associated with the check.

The concluding chapter draws together the key messages from the different strands of the evaluation and provides an assessment of the extent to which the PSC has made an impact on the teaching of phonics in primary schools during Reception and Years 1 and 2.

Findings from descriptive analysis are reported within the chapters; for further details, please refer to the technical appendix published alongside this report. The responses from Literacy Coordinators and Year 1 teachers are reported separately. Comparisons between the findings in 2012 and 2014 are reported where available and appropriate. Through statistical modelling known as latent class analysis, a typology of teachers' engagement with current policy recommendations has been built and linked to the PSC and Key Stage 1 outcomes in the sample schools. Further details are provided in Chapter 2. Key findings are summarised at the beginning of each of the chapters.

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

### Key findings

- Analysis was undertaken of national results on the PSC, together with results for the same pupils one year earlier, on the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP), and one year later, at the end of key stage 1. The evaluation did not find any evidence of improvements in pupils' *literacy* performance, or in progress, that could be clearly attributed to the introduction of the PSC. However, no conclusive statement can be made because of methodological limitations.
- *Phonics* attainment, as measured by the proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard on the check, improved over three years and there is some evidence that this may have been an impact of the introduction of the check.
- Pupils are unlikely to reach the expected standard in reading and writing at the end of key stage 1 without being able to demonstrate the phonics skills measured by the PSC.

This chapter explores one of the central research questions of the evaluation: what, if anything, has been the impact of the introduction of the PSC on standards of literacy? As the check was introduced as part of a policy to strengthen phonics teaching in primary schools and to raise expectations and performance, it might be hypothesised that phonics teaching in general would improve as a result; or, more specifically, that the learning needs of individual children might be more effectively met. Either of these developments could be expected to lead to an improvement in attainment, in phonics specifically and/or in literacy more broadly.

As the PSC was introduced for all schools, it is not possible to identify a control group of pupils comparable in other respects but without the PSC. The absence of such a group means that it is not possible to reliably attribute the introduction of the check to any reported changes, nor to rule out the effect of other factors. Because of this methodological limitation, interpretations of the data must be made cautiously.

A further complexity concerns the date of implementation of the PSC. It was introduced for the first time nationally in 2012, but was piloted in 2011. Awareness of the proposed introduction of the check may have given rise to a heightened emphasis on phonics in schools prior to its national introduction. The process evaluation of the pilot (Coldwell *et al*, 2011) found that the sample of schools in the pilot were already making some changes to their phonics practice.

Thus this central research question is a challenging one to answer. In response, different types of analysis have been undertaken in order to better understand what, if any, impact the check has had on standards of literacy. The sections below set out each analysis and explain what light it sheds on the key questions of attainment and progress.

## 2.1 Attainment scores from the National Pupil Database

The National Pupil Database (NPD) holds data on PSC (PSC) scores for all pupils nationally, each year since its introduction. It also holds scores for the same children at two other time points: on EYFSP at the end of Reception, one year earlier when they were about five years of age; and at the end of key stage 1 (KS1), one year later when they were about seven. The NPD analyses reported here include all children nationally for whom the relevant scores were available, a cohort of just under 600,000.

### Scores on the Phonics Screening Check

Scores on the PSC itself give a measure of pupils' attainment in phonics, and increases in these scores would therefore give evidence of improvements in phonic skills.

The national published results show an increase in the proportions of pupils meeting the expected standard in the PSC year on year since its introduction in 2012 (Table 5). From 2013 onwards, it also includes those who, having fallen below the expected standard in Year 1, took the check again in Year 2 and this time met the standard.

**Table 5: National results on the PSC**

	2012 %	2013 %	2014 %	Change
Year 1 pupils meeting the expected standard of phonic decoding	58	69	74	+16
Pupils achieving the expected standard by the end of Year 2	-	85	88	+3

Source: Statistical First Release, PSC and national curriculum assessments at key stage 1 in England, 2014. N= 1,846,470. The threshold for the expected standard was 32 marks out of 40 each year. The percentage meeting the standard by the end of Year 2 includes those who achieved it in Year 1.

The table shows an increase of 16 percentage points in the proportion of pupils meeting the expected standard over the first three years of the PSC. Of pupils reaching the end of Year 2, a large majority achieved this standard, and this figure, too, shows a small increase over the two years when it could be measured. It is worth noting that, in the PSC pilot of 2011, only 32 per cent of pupils were reported to have achieved the standard.

These published figures show a considerable improvement in pupil attainment in phonics, as measured by the PSC, over the three years. The evaluation evidence collected as part of this study suggests some features of the context within which these improvements in scores have taken place. Further details of this evaluation evidence are set out in the later chapters of this report.

As with any new assessment, a process of 'bedding down' has been apparent as schools have become familiar with its requirements. The evaluation has found evidence of teachers becoming accustomed to the standard of the check and they were more likely to

consider it an appropriate level of difficulty in 2014 than when they first encountered it (see Chapter 4, Section 4.4). There is also evidence of teachers ensuring that all the features of the PSC, and particularly the need to decode pseudo-words, are familiar to children.

Teacher reports from the evaluation give evidence of increases in the time, frequency or pace of phonics teaching and greater attention to ongoing assessment in phonics. This shows some 'tightening up' of phonics teaching practice, reported by teachers as a response to the introduction of the check.

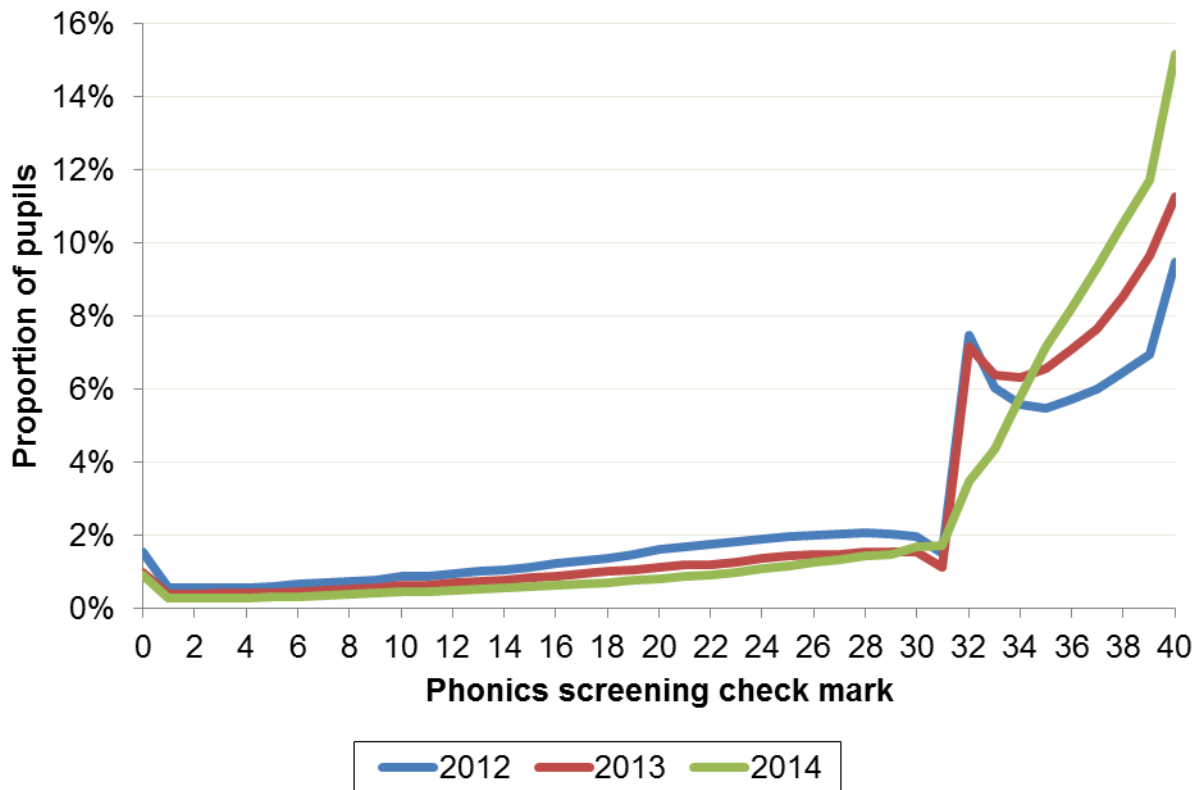
These features of the school context give a plausible explanation for some improvement in children's performance in phonics, although the methodology is not able to establish a causal link.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of PSC scores for each of the three years since its introduction in 2012. The maximum score, and the most frequent score in each year, was 40. The expected standard in each year was 32 marks. It is notable that there is a spike at the expected standard and a dip just below the expected standard in 2012 and 2013.

The spike implies that some pupils have been misclassified in addition to the misclassification that would be expected due to measurement error. Standards and Testing Agency (STA) analysis estimated that approximately four per cent of pupils would have been misclassified in the PSC (STA 2012). Other analysis estimated that 46 per cent of pupils would be expected to reach the expected standard if there was a smooth distribution of scores around the expected standard, as was observed in the pilot (Townley and Gotts 2013). This compared to 58 per cent of pupils that actually reached the expected standard in 2012, a difference of 12 percentage points.

The expected standard was not communicated to teachers in advance of administering the PSC in 2014, though it was shared with teachers prior to uploading the data to local authorities. This is the most likely explanation for the change in the shape of the score distribution in 2014, particularly around the expected standard.

**Figure 1: Distribution of PSC scores by year**



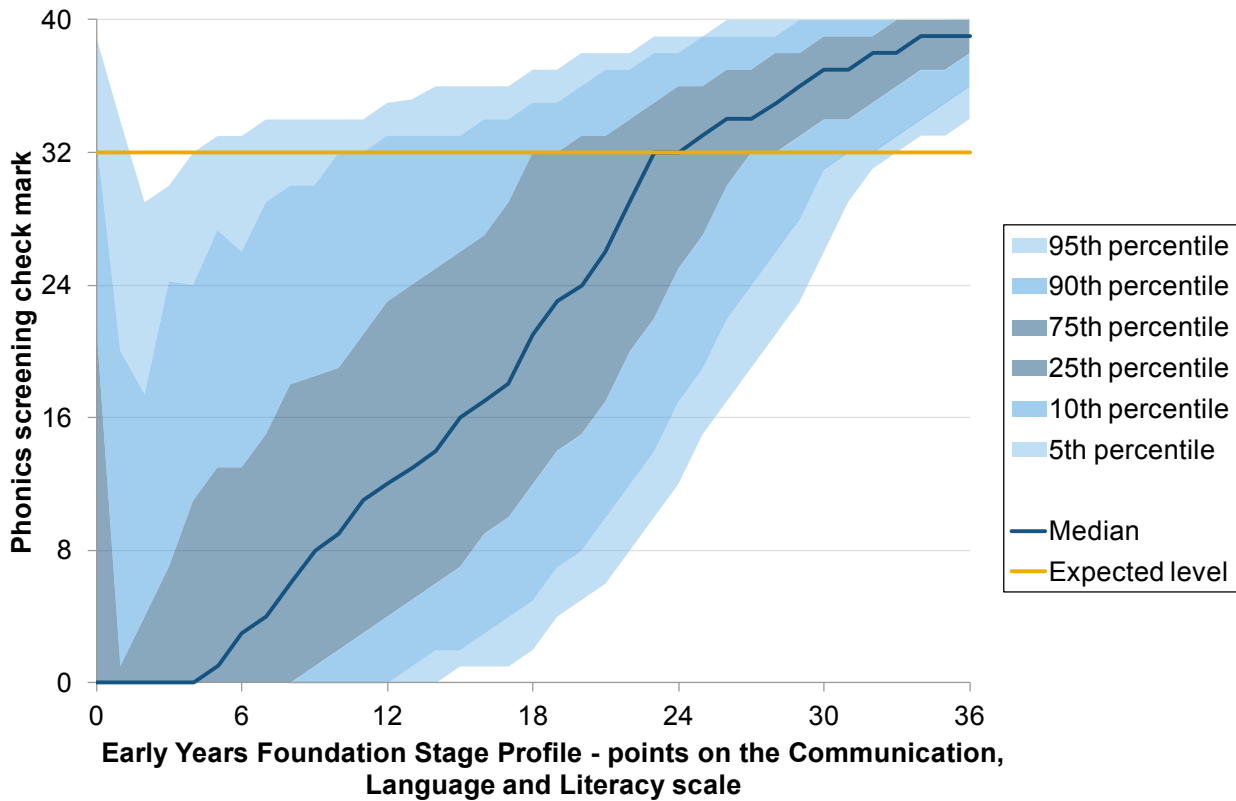
Source: Department for Education (2014) *Statistical First Release: Phonics screening check and national curriculum assessments at key stage 1 in England, 2014*. 25 September.

## The PSC and prior literacy attainment

It is also possible to use NPD analysis to investigate the performance on the PSC of pupils with different prior attainment. This analysis can provide evidence on the question of whether better readers tend not to show their true attainment on the PSC because they are confused by pseudo-words. This concern has been expressed by a number of case study participants across the three years of the evaluation. For this analysis, the measure of prior literacy attainment was the score on the Communication, Language and Literacy (CLL) scales of the EYFSP. Figure 2 shows the outcome of this analysis. This figure shows the distribution of phonics marks for each point on the EYFSP CLL scale. It shows that pupils who score higher on the EYFSP do better on the phonics check. Virtually no pupil who scores 36 on the CLL scale fails to meet the phonics expected standard. This figure shows the 2012 cohort; the picture is the same for the 2013 cohort.



**Figure 2: Distribution of PSC scores for each point on the EYFSP CLL scale**



Source: NFER analysis of National Pupil Database data. N=568,883

Overall, then, there is no identifiable pattern of poorer performance on the PSC than expected in those children who are already fluent readers.

### The PSC and key stage 1

The assessment at the end of KS1 is a teacher judgement of a pupil’s attainment in reading and writing and both are reported as national curriculum levels. They include evidence from a national test of reading comprehension and writing composition, alongside teachers’ ongoing assessments. Averaged together they thus represent a broader construct of literacy than phonics alone and therefore performance on the PSC and KS1 might be expected to be similar, but not identical. The national curriculum levels will be abolished in 2016 but for the purposes of this evaluation they provide a useful measure for analysing the relationship between the PSC and KS1, looking at the same cohorts of pupils in subsequent years, as captured by NPD. Following the procedure in both interim reports, this analysis combines reading and writing points at KS1. As described in the national curriculum, phonics underpins both reading and writing, as pupils with good phonics skills read and write rapidly at the word level, contributing to their ability to comprehend and compose written texts.

Among those who achieved the expected standard of level 2 or above at KS1 in 2014 (87 per cent of pupils):

- 79 per cent reached the expected standard as a Year 1 pupil in the 2013 PSC
- 18 per cent reached the expected standard as a Year 2 pupil in the 2014 PSC
- three per cent did not reach the expected standard in 2014
- less than one per cent had missing phonics check data in 2014.

When only those pupils meeting the more demanding threshold of level 2B at KS1 are considered (71 per cent of pupils in 2014):

- 88 per cent reached the expected standard as a Year 1 pupil in the 2013 PSC
- 11 per cent reached the expected standard as a Year 2 pupil in the 2014 PSC
- one per cent did not reach the expected standard in 2014
- less than one per cent had missing phonics check data in 2014.

These analyses give evidence of the relationship between the attainments measured by the PSC and those assessed at KS1. They show that there is an association between the likelihood of pupils reaching the expected standard in reading and writing at the end of KS1 and meeting the expected standard on the PSC.

### **Analysis of attainment trends – absolute impact**

Pupils' progress in literacy (rather than specifically in phonics) can be measured using their scores on the EYFSP at age five and at the end of KS1 at age seven. The EYFSP points represent children's attainment at the end of the Reception year of school. During this time they are very likely to have made a start in learning phonics; and thus it cannot be regarded as a true baseline measure in determining the subsequent impact that the PSC makes in improving children's literacy skills. This is, however, the only national assessment available for younger children and it gives a useful measure of prior attainment a year before the check.

In the absence of a comparison/control group, it is possible to consider the EYFSP-KS1 progress measures before and after the introduction of the PSC. This before-after comparison could to some extent be seen as representing the situation with and without the check. However, it is difficult to make a reliable interpretation as other factors affecting attainment and progress over this period cannot be ruled out. A number of phonics initiatives had already been introduced and the PSC itself was piloted in 2011.

Table 6 shows the mean scores for literacy at KS1 (reading and writing) and EYFSP (Communication, Language and Literacy) from 2011 to 2014. The year refers to the year the pupils were assessed for KS1, and EYFSP scores relate to the same cohort, but two years previously. For the first two years in the table, the PSC had not been introduced, whereas pupils reaching the end of KS1 in 2013 and 2014 had taken the PSC.

Across these four years, there has been an apparent upward movement in average KS1 reading and writing points over time. There was also an increase in the average EYFSP Communication, Language and Literacy points for the same cohorts of pupils.

By calculating pupils' KS1 points compared to what might be expected given their EYFSP points, a measure of 'value added' can be obtained, and this has also been slowly increasing over time. As 2011 is the first year included in the calculations, value added in 2011 is set at zero and this forms the 'base year' against which further patterns are measured.

**Table 6: Mean national scores at KS1 and EYFSP, 2011-2014**

	<b>KS1 reading and writing points</b>	<b>EYFSP CLL points</b>	<b>FSP-KS1 value added</b>
2011	15.1	25.3	0.00
2012	15.3	25.6	0.11
2013	15.6	25.9	0.25
2014	15.8	26.4	0.20

Source: NFER analysis of National Pupil Database data. N=2,281,655

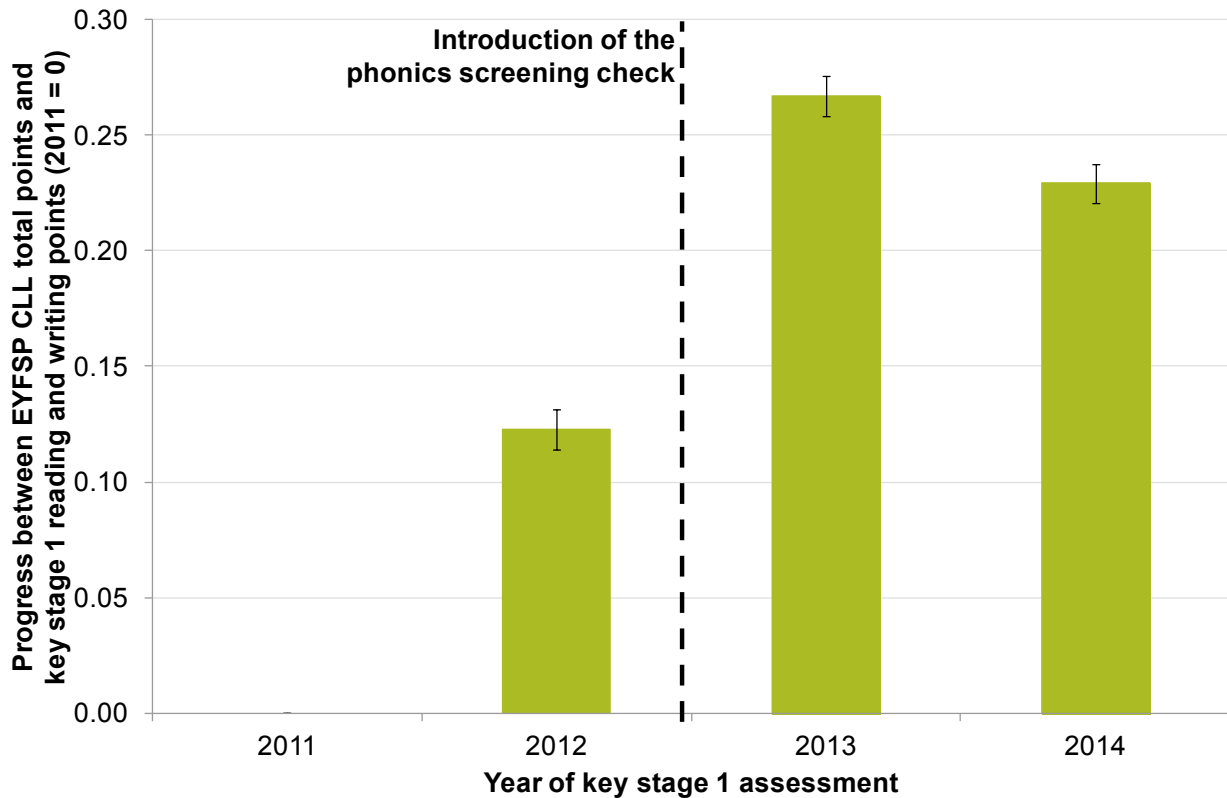
These analyses of national data therefore indicate small improvements in attainment at KS1, which were a feature before the introduction of the check and continued at a similar pace following the introduction of the check. Similarly, progress in literacy from EYFSP to KS1 has improved since the introduction of the check, but was also improving before its introduction. This analysis is inconclusive and is unable to offer any clear evidence of improvements in literacy performance, or in progress, directly attributable to the impact of the PSC.

As a check that this relationship was not influenced by known changes in other characteristics (such as an increase in deprivation), value added was estimated in a regression model including pupil and school background factors. Figure 3 below is from that regression model and shows that the results are very similar even after background factors are controlled for. This regression analysis controls for known background factors, but is unable to take account of unquantifiable changes in the educational context (such as a possible increasing emphasis on phonics over the whole of this period) which could have affected the patterns observed.

The first two years are cohorts that did not have the PSC, whereas the last two years are cohorts that did have the PSC. One interpretation is that value added is higher in years when the phonics check was being administered. Another interpretation is that value added was increasing and there is little departure from that trend.

Either way, the difference is not very big, at less than 0.3 of a point at KS1. To put the magnitude in context, one level at KS1 is six points; the standard deviation of KS1 points is 3.6. Statistically the differences are significant, but as these estimates are based on very large numbers – all pupils in the NPD – statistical significance is not very meaningful. Correspondingly, though, these small changes in mean scores reflect improved attainment among thousands of children.

Figure 3: Value added 2011-2014, controlling for known background factors



Source: NFER analysis of National Pupil Database data. N=2,193,102. Small black bars show the 95% confidence interval.

The evidence offered by these analyses is therefore inconclusive in identifying any impact of the PSC on literacy performance at KS1 or on progress in literacy between ages five and seven. It would be of interest to examine the impact of the PSC on KS1 reading and KS1 writing separately. It will be of continuing interest to review the results at KS1 in future years and also the results at KS2 as the pupils who took the check progress through their later years of schooling (Department for Education, 2015).

### Progress of lower- and higher-attaining pupils

It may be, however, that there is a differential impact on particular groups of pupils. For example, the check could be having a particular impact on the attainment of lower-attaining pupils.

To investigate this, the pupils can be split into five quintiles according to their performance on the EYFSP at the end of the Reception year. Then, the progress of each quintile can be examined separately. Table 7 defines the attainment groups.

**Table 7: Quintiles of literacy attainment**

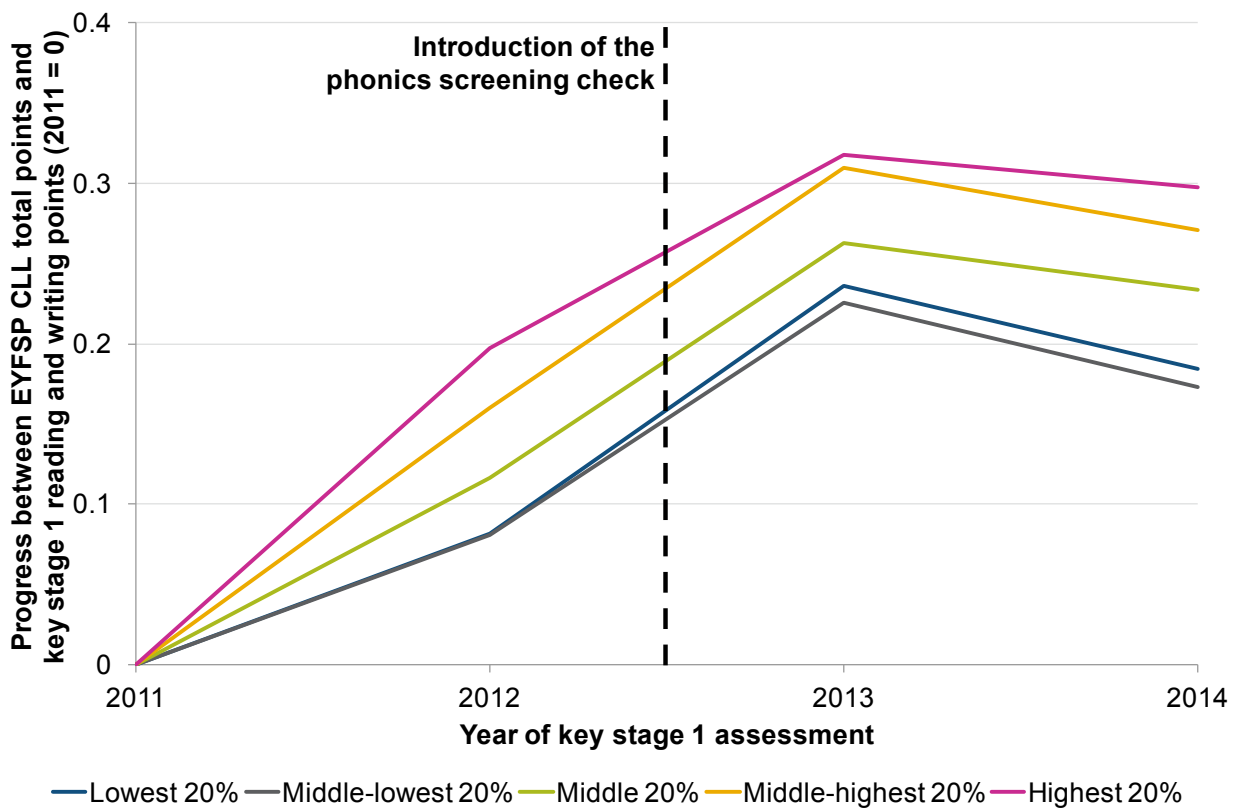
Attainment group	EYFSP CLL points	PSC 32 or above (in Year 1)	Average KS1 R and W points
Lowest 20%	0-21	22%	11.3
Middle-lowest 20%	22-25	51%	14.5
Middle 20%	26-28	71%	16.1
Middle-highest 20%	29-31	85%	17.5
Highest 20%	32-36	95%	19.2

Source: NFER analysis of National Pupil Database data. N=2,283,242

Overall, the table shows the expected pattern, with pupil scores on the EYFSP reflected in lower or higher scores on the PSC at the end of Year 1 and at KS1.

The progress of the five groups over time is depicted in Figure 4 below. In this graph, the progress of the middle group in 2011 is set at zero and progress of other groups is shown relative to this. Once again, it is important to remember that the 2013 and 2014 cohorts took the PSC whereas the previous cohorts did not.

**Figure 4: Progress in literacy of different attainment groups, 2011-2014**



Source: NFER analysis of National Pupil Database data. N=2,193,102

The graph makes clear that over the years, the greatest relative improvement in progress was made by the highest attainers, those in the highest and middle-highest bands. The other three groups, the lowest, middle-lowest and middle attainers, also make increasing progress over the first three years, with a small fallback in all groups in 2014. The progress of the lowest 20 per cent and the middle-lowest 20 per cent improve slightly less rapidly than the other groups. It appears from the figure that improvements continued both before and after the introduction of the check for all groups.

Figure 4 confirms that progress in literacy learning was greatest for children of higher literacy attainment and that improvements in progress were underway before the PSC was introduced in 2012 and continued into 2013. Again, therefore, the findings are inconclusive: there is no clear evidence of any particular impact of the introduction of the PSC on pupil progress in literacy for learners with different levels of prior attainment.

## 2.2 Revisiting NFER's typology of schools

In principle, the relationship between schools' teaching methods and pupils' attainment is of interest in a study of this kind. However, as Chapter 3 below will explain in more detail, it is not possible to distinguish groups of schools that are characterised by a particular teaching method, to the exclusion of others. It was possible, however, to use the questionnaire responses of literacy coordinators to investigate the school's 'stance', or overall attitude, towards current phonics policies. By combining their views of the check, their reported teaching approach and their attitudes towards systematic synthetic phonics and other methods of literacy teaching, a typology of schools was established that suggests some systematic differences between schools in their attitudes towards phonics. The questions included in this analysis were:

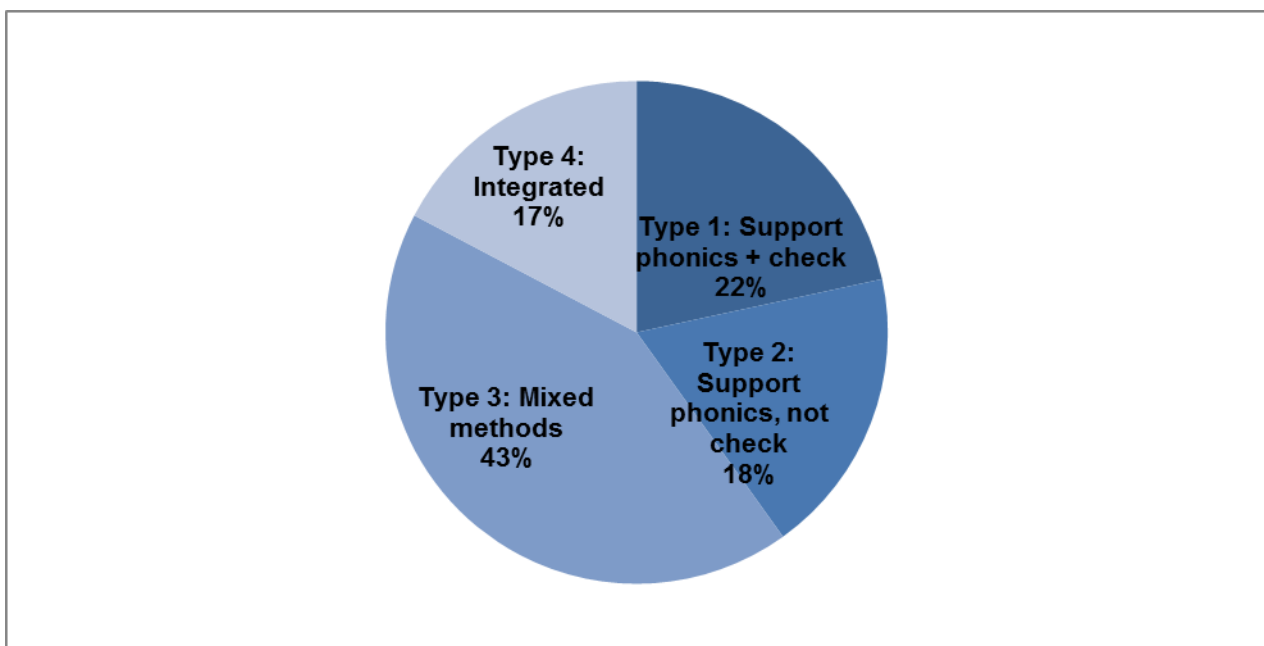
- 'Which of these statements best characterises the approach to phonics within early literacy teaching in your school?' There were three answer options. The first, 'systematic synthetic phonics is taught 'first and fast'', had further clarification added in 2014 that this option was intended to exclude other cueing strategies. The second option was 'phonics is taught discretely alongside other cueing strategies' and the third, 'phonics is always integrated as one of a range of cueing strategies'.
- 'Please indicate the extent to which you agree with each of these statements.' This question had five response options: agree; agree somewhat; uncertain or mixed views; disagree somewhat; disagree.
  - I am convinced of the value of systematic synthetic phonics teaching
  - Phonics should always be taught in the context of meaningful reading
  - Phonics has too high a priority in current education policy

- A variety of different methods should be used to teach children to decode words
- Systematic phonics teaching is necessary only for some children
- The phonics screening check provides valuable information for teachers
- The phonics screening check provides valuable information for parents/carers

Previous interim reports have detailed the exploratory analyses of this kind that were undertaken in the first two years of the evaluation. In this final year, the analysis was repeated on the current year's data. Once again, the overall stance of the school was derived from key questionnaire responses by the literacy coordinator. A latent class analysis (see Technical Appendices for full description) sought out patterns of response that allowed a grouping of respondents.

Despite the significant change to one question this year, described above, the results this time were broadly consistent with the typologies identified in the first and second interim reports. Four types of school have emerged. These have been labelled 'Type 1: Supporters of synthetic phonics and of the check', 'Type 2: Supporters of synthetic phonics but not of the check', 'Type 3: Supporters of mixed methods' and Type 4: Supporters of integrated literacy teaching'. These are depicted in Figure 5.

**Figure 5: Typology of schools**



Source: Latent class analysis of Literacy Coordinator Questionnaire. N=573

This typology gives an overall indication of the school's attitude, based on a combination of different questionnaire responses. When schools are divided up into groups according to type, it is possible to examine the characteristics of each type separately.

A key characteristic distinguishing these types is their response to the questionnaire item offering three overall approaches to phonics teaching. Types 1 and 2 are highly likely to identify themselves as teaching systematic synthetic phonics 'first and fast' (85 and 91 per cent, respectively). In contrast, 94 per cent of Type 3 respondents and 99 per cent of Type 4 respondents did not select this option, instead favouring a mixed or integrated approach, respectively. The proportion of schools falling into the 'mixed strategies' type has increased noticeably from previous years, which is most likely to be the result of the change in the question mentioned above.

In the discussion below, the percentages refer to the proportion of literacy coordinators selecting either 'agree' or 'agree somewhat' in response to a variety of statements expressing views about phonics teaching and the phonics check.

#### **Type 1: Supporters of synthetic phonics and of the check (22 per cent of sample)**

Together with their adherence to the 'first and fast' teaching of synthetic phonics, this group of respondents are highly convinced of the value of systematic synthetic phonics teaching (96 per cent). They are less likely than the other groups to support the teaching of phonics 'in the context of meaningful reading' (79 per cent) and the teaching of a variety of methods of decoding (65 per cent). They are the group least likely to believe that systematic synthetic phonics is necessary only for some children (15 per cent) or that phonics has too high a priority in current education policy (nine per cent). Overall, this can be seen as the type most favourably disposed towards systematic synthetic phonics as embodied in current policy recommendations. Moreover, in contrast to the other three groups, a majority of these respondents (65 per cent) agree that the PSC provides valuable information for teachers, and just under half (46 per cent) agree that it provides valuable information for parents/carers.

#### **Type 2: Supporters of synthetic phonics but not of the check (18 per cent of sample)**

This group share many characteristics with Type 1 and are overall almost equally positive towards systematic synthetic phonics. As well as embracing its teaching 'first and fast', they are highly convinced of its value (95 per cent). Like Type 1, they are less likely to support a variety of methods of decoding (77 per cent) but 92 per cent support the teaching of phonics in the context of meaningful reading. Twenty-six per cent of this group believe that phonics has too high a priority in current education policy and 27 per cent of them think that systematic synthetic phonics teaching is necessary for only some children. In strong contrast to Type 1, this group do not support the PSC, with only three per cent believing that it provides valuable information for teachers and four per cent viewing it as providing valuable information for parents/carers.



### **Type 3: Supporters of mixed methods (43 per cent of sample)**

This group is distinguished by their practice of teaching phonics alongside other cueing strategies, rather than ‘first and fast’. Ninety-three per cent report teaching phonics ‘discretely alongside other cueing strategies’. Their level of support for systematic synthetic phonics teaching is only slightly lower than Types 1 and 2, at 89 per cent. Almost all of this group, 98 per cent, think that a variety of different methods should be used to teach children to decode words. A similar percentage to Types 2 and 4, 90 per cent, support the teaching of phonics in the context of meaningful reading. Thirty-eight per cent of Type 3 teachers think that phonics has too high a priority in current education policy and 32 per cent think that systematic synthetic phonics is necessary for only some children. These teachers are slightly more positive towards the PSC than Type 2, with 20 per cent believing it gives valuable information to teachers and 14 per cent to parents/carers. Thus, some of these teachers seem to see the check as a useful ingredient within their overall mixed approach.

### **Type 4: Supporters of integrated literacy teaching (17 per cent of sample)**

This group is distinguished by their selection of the option ‘Phonics is always integrated as one of a range of cueing strategies’ (99 per cent). Their view of the value of systematic synthetic phonics teaching is less positive than the other three types, at 75 per cent (although this still represents a substantial endorsement). Almost all of this group, 99 per cent, think that a variety of different methods should be used to teach children to decode words. Ninety-three per cent, the highest of all groups, support the teaching of phonics in the context of meaningful reading. Forty-three per cent of Type 4 teachers, the highest of any group, think that phonics has too high a priority in current education policy and 32 per cent think that systematic synthetic phonics is necessary for only some children, suggesting that this is the most negative of the four groups towards current phonics policies. These teachers are slightly more positive towards the PSC than Type 2, with 27 per cent believing it gives valuable information to teachers and 19 per cent to parents/carers. Like Type 3, some of these teachers seem to see the check as a useful ingredient within their overall integrated approach.

This typology of schools provides a classification of the broad stance towards the teaching and assessment of systematic synthetic phonics which may be useful in analysing other findings. It is noteworthy that all four types strongly endorse the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics, but differ in their views of the extent to which this should be accompanied by other cueing strategies and their views of the PSC.

The stance of the school may be associated with pupils’ attainment and progress; to explore this, typologies have been used as part of the multilevel model analysis reported below. The typologies described in section 2.3 below are the ones corresponding to the year of analysis. As the multilevel model findings were based on the 2012 and 2013 PSC cohorts (in order to include their KS1 results) the typologies in section 2.3 are those resulting from the 2012 and 2013 questionnaire analysis, rather than the 2014 results described above.

## 2.3 Multilevel modelling

Multilevel modelling is a way of discerning which factors are significant, taking all other factors into account. It works by jointly examining the relationship between an outcome of interest and many potentially influential background characteristics including prior attainment. It has a number of distinct advantages over other estimation procedures. First, it allows comparison on a like-with-like basis. It is important that any analysis technique used takes account of the differences in the circumstances in which different pupils and schools are situated.

The second major advantage of multilevel modelling, which is particularly important in the analysis of educational data, is that it takes account of the fact that there is often more similarity between individuals in the same school than between individuals in different schools. By recognising the hierarchical structure of the data, multilevel modelling allows the most accurate estimation of the statistical significance of any effects of the intervention being investigated.

Two multilevel analyses of pupil performance were conducted, based on the NPD data described above. The first took as its outcome the score on the PSC, while the second was based on reading and writing outcomes at KS1.

Background variables included in the model were:

- pupil characteristics: gender, age, ethnicity, SEN, and EAL
- pupil prior attainment: points on the EYFSP scale
- pupil-level indicators of socio-economic status: Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI), eligibility for FSM
- school characteristics: type, size, region, key stage 1 attainment band; proportion of pupils eligible for FSM; proportion of pupils with SEN; proportion of pupils with EAL
- school type, following the typology described in section 2.2 of this report.

The analysis was based on a sample of 39,024 pupils in the evaluation schools who took the check in 2012 and 26,720 pupils who took it in 2013. This sample was a good representation of national figures; further details are given in the separate technical appendices document. The actual analysis samples were smaller because they did not include schools that only returned one of the questionnaires.

### **Attainment by typology – relative impact**

Because the multilevel model takes into account all of the background factors then seeks out the significant differences that remain, it was used to analyse any possible impact of school type, as described in section 2.2 above, on pupil attainment, both in the PSC and at KS1. The analysis by type in Table 8 was based on questionnaire responses in the same year as the PSC results, 2012 and 2013 respectively.

The multilevel model revealed that positive attitudes towards the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics and the value of the check (Type 1) are reflected in higher scores on the check for pupils. This pattern held true for both cohorts of pupils in the evaluation: those taking the PSC in 2012 with KS1 results in 2013; and those taking the PSC in 2013 with KS1 results in 2014.

Schools that are positive towards systematic synthetic phonics, although unconvinced of the value of the check (Type 2), also had higher scores amongst the first cohort, but this pattern was not found in the second cohort.

In contrast to the PSC scores, there were no significant associations between school typology and the results at KS1. Thus attainment in reading and writing more broadly appears unaffected by the school’s enthusiasm, or not, for systematic synthetic phonics and the check, and by their attitude to phonics. These results are summarised in Table 8.

**Table 8: Multilevel model outcomes: impact of school type on PSC and KS1 scores**

Impact on:	Cohort 1		Cohort 2	
	PSC	KS1	PSC	KS1
Type 1: Supporters of phonics and the check	positive	insignificant	positive	insignificant
Type 2: Supporters of phonics but not the check	positive	insignificant	insignificant	insignificant
Type 3/4: Supporters of mixed / integrated methods	base	base	base	base

Statistical significance is from a t-test at 95% confidence level. The typology analysis was repeated each year. In 2012, it distinguished 4 types and in 2013 only 3, with the third combining the characteristics of the previous types 3 and 4. ‘Base’ indicates that types 1 and 2 were analysed relative to type 3/4; the positive findings for type 1 and 2 indicate that schools in type 3/4 had significantly lower results.

Schools in the KS1 analysis are defined according to the typology that related to when the pupils were in Year 1. The 2012 analysis, like that in 2014, identified four types rather than the three in 2013. However, the results of the multilevel analysis were not affected by amalgamating the ‘mixed methods’ and ‘integrated’ groups.

This table does not include the cohort of pupils who took the PSC in the summer of 2014. Notable differences in 2014 made an analysis of this PSC cohort, which would have been cohort 3, difficult to interpret. Firstly, a key question was changed for the final literacy coordinator questionnaire survey and impacted on the proportion of schools in each type. Secondly, the EYFSP changed in 2012-13 so this cohort of pupils were assessed, in summer 2013, by a completely different scale. In the resulting multilevel model, no significant differences by school type emerged.

The overall pattern described in these analyses suggests that a strong enthusiasm for systematic synthetic phonics and for the PSC amongst teachers tends to be associated with higher phonics attainment, as measured by the check. However, it is not associated with any improved performance in the reading and writing assessment at the end of KS1.

### 3. The impact of the check on the teaching of phonics and the wider literacy curriculum

#### Key findings

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

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

##### Teachers' views on the value of the check

- Despite the evidence above that the results of the check were used for a variety of purposes within schools, when asked directly, less than 30 per cent of literacy coordinators agreed with the statements 'The phonics screening check provides

valuable information for teachers’ and ‘The phonics screening check provides valuable information for parents/carers’. The case study evidence suggested that the reason for this was a view that check results do not reveal anything of which teachers are unaware.

- Year 1 teachers were more positive, with just over half (53 per cent) reporting that the check gave them useful information ‘to a great extent’ or ‘to some extent’. These responses were also more positive than in 2013.

One of the aims of the evaluation in years 2 and 3 is to understand the impact of the teaching of phonics in primary schools, and to assess the impact of the PSC on teaching of the wider literacy curriculum.

Drawing on the findings from the surveys and case studies, this chapter explores schools’ approaches to the teaching of phonics. It looks specifically at the extent to which schools reported making changes to their phonics teaching practices since the introduction of the check. It also explores how teachers have used the results from the check. The chapter also explores teachers’ views on the value of the check, and whether these views have changed over time.

### 3.1 Schools’ phonics teaching practices

As in 2012 and 2013, responses from teachers in both the survey and case study schools indicated that almost all schools have committed to teaching phonics to some degree and that, within literacy teaching, considerable emphasis is placed on phonics as a method of teaching children to learn to decode.

Table 9 presents survey data indicating schools’ perceptions of their approach to phonics within overall early literacy teaching. In 2014, the following clarification was added to the statement about teaching systematic synthetic phonics ‘first and fast’, in response to an apparent misunderstanding in previous years of the meaning of ‘first and fast’: *This envisages phonics as the only way to decode words, i.e. with no other cueing strategies, which should underpin pupils’ reading of all words.*

As can be seen in Table 9, in 2014, there was a marked drop in the percentage of schools identifying themselves as teaching phonics ‘first and fast’, due to the clarification added to that question. In 2013, the research team noted that ‘Of those who selected ‘first and fast’, 87 per cent also believed that ‘A variety of different methods should be used to teach children to decode words’. This year, despite the clarification, there were still 23 per cent of those choosing ‘first and fast’ agreeing to this statement, and 34 per cent of these respondents agreeing that ‘phonics should always be taught in the context of meaningful reading’.

**Table 9: Teacher reports of their school's approach to phonics teaching: 2012, 2013 and 2014**

	2012 (%)	2013 (%)	2014* (%)	% change
Systematic synthetic phonics is taught 'first and fast'	53	60	35	+7 -25
Phonics is taught discretely alongside other cueing strategies	26	21	39	-5 +18
Phonics is always integrated as one of a range of cueing strategies	5	7	17	+2 +10
Missing	17	12	8	-5 -4
	N = 844	N = 583	N = 573	

Source: NFER survey of literacy coordinators, 2012, 2013 and 2014

Due to percentages being rounded to the nearest integer, they may not sum to 100

\*clarification added to first statement "*This envisages phonics as the only way to decode words, i.e. with no other cueing strategies, which should underpin pupils' reading of all words.*"

Both the literacy coordinator survey and case study schools provided a fuller picture of how schools teach phonics, including the resources they use to deliver phonics teaching. Literacy coordinators were asked which 'mainstream' or 'core' published phonics programme was used to structure most or all phonics teaching in each year group. Respondents could identify more than one programme. The most widely used phonics programme was Letters and Sounds (76 per cent of survey respondents reported using this), primarily in Reception and key stage 1 but to some extent in Year 3 and less so in Year 4 and beyond. Just over a third (37 per cent) of schools who participated in the survey said they used Jolly Phonics. The majority of those who used this did so in Reception, with its use becoming less frequent moving through key stage 1. Jolly Phonics was used very little beyond key stage 1.

Read Write Inc was used by 26 per cent of schools in the survey, again mainly in Reception and key stage 1. Use of this programme, like the others, declined in subsequent years.

Relatively small percentages reported using 'Other' published programmes, or no core published programme at all.

Case study responses, as in 2013, show that most schools hold discrete phonics sessions for children in Reception and key stage 1, at least four times per week. The tendency shown last year for schools to group children by phonics ability for these focused sessions also appears to have continued. One literacy coordinator described her school's approach to phonics, the features of which were referred to by many of the case study schools:

*Pupils from Reception to Year 2 take part in 'phonics o'clock' for 20 minutes every day. They are grouped according to ability and both teaching assistants and*

*teachers lead the groups. Mostly, staff use Letters and Sounds but in the Foundation Stage they also use Jolly Phonics. From Year 2 onwards, pupils begin to focus on spellings.*

### **3.1.1 Changes to phonics teaching practices as a result of the check**

In each year of the study literacy coordinators who participated in the survey have been asked whether they have made any general changes to phonics teaching in that school year, in light of their experience of the check in the previous year. Substantial proportions of respondents reported changes in each year of the evaluation: just under half the sample had done so this year (49 per cent), compared with 56 per cent in 2013 and 34 per cent in 2012 (in 2012 the question concerned changes made in anticipation of the check). This suggests that a high proportion of schools overall made some change. To investigate this further, the research team looked at the responses from schools that had returned questionnaires in all three years of the study, a smaller sample of 296 schools. Of these, 77 per cent made some changes at some point over the three years. These figures suggest that the introduction of the check has had some effect on phonics teaching and classroom practice.

In 2013 and 2014 respondents were also asked to indicate which year groups these changes had applied to (Reception, Year 1, and Year 2). In both 2013 and 2014 the year group most affected by changes to phonics teaching was Year 1; changes here were reported by 52 per cent and 42 per cent of respondents respectively – this is not surprising given this is the year in which the check takes place.

Table 10 shows the key changes reported across the three year groups. In Reception and Key Stage 1, the biggest change was increasing the pace of phonics teaching, a new statement included in the literacy coordinator questionnaire for 2014 (a fuller discussion of case study findings relating to changes made by teachers can be found below).



**Table 10: Proportion of literacy coordinators reporting specific changes to phonics teaching in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 during the 2013/2014 school year**

Change	Reception (%)	Year 1 (%)	Year 2 (%)
Increased the pace of phonics teaching	16	22	15
Increased assessment of progress in phonics	13	20	15
Started to teach pseudo-words	11	20	14
Introduced grouping/setting for phonics	11	16	14
Increased the time devoted to phonics teaching	11	17	12
N=573			

Source: NFER survey of literacy coordinators, 2014

Multiple response – percentages may not sum to 100. Note: these are percentages of all respondents, rather than percentages of those making a change. These figures are not, therefore, directly comparable to the similar table in the second interim report.

Other than increasing the pace of phonics teaching, the specific key changes reported by literacy coordinators are the same as those reported in 2013. Increased assessment of progress in phonics was among the most frequent changes reported in all three years of the evaluation. This suggests that the introduction of an *external* assessment has increased the use of *internal* assessment, arguably a positive change. As discussed in more detail below, teachers reported that, in terms of determining appropriate support for children, they are more likely to rely on their own assessments than the data provided by the check. This is perhaps not surprising given that the check is administered at the end of Year 1.

Responses collected in the case studies provide further evidence of changes made in response to the check. Reports from teachers reflect the finding in the survey data regarding an increase in the pace of phonics teaching so that pupils reach the required phonics phase by the time of the check. A number of schools mentioned teaching children phonics faster, and several of these referred to the fact that children may be taught phonemes that they are not quite ready to learn:

*I suppose you're aware of it [the check] so I suppose those children that probably needed a bit longer on a certain phase you may push them a little bit quicker because you know that the test is coming up...*

Headteacher

Two schools also referred to increased phonics sessions in the weeks before the check: one of these had introduced 'booster classes' in the afternoons, in addition to the daily morning session, moving children ahead more quickly than would otherwise have happened.

Again reflecting survey findings, some teachers in case study schools also reported an impact of the check on the assessment of phonics. One headteacher described how the school had introduced baseline phonics testing at the beginning of the year, as well as termly tests to monitor children's progress. Others commented that although the check had not affected phonics teaching in their schools, it had affected assessment practices, in many cases increasing the extent and rigour of phonics assessment:

*I don't think it's changed the way we teach ... we do screen them more now though just to see where they are before the formal assessment is done.*

Year 1 teacher/Literacy coordinator

The majority of case study schools did make some reference to assessment practices, amongst these were: individual assessments at the end of a phonics phase; termly assessments using a standard school proforma to track progress; a phonics passport to log phonemes that need further work; and ongoing informal assessment. However, it is not always clear from the case studies whether such changes were new for this year, whether they had been put in place at an earlier point after the introduction of the check, or whether these practices had been embedded within school for a longer period of time and were therefore not directly related to the screening check.

The survey findings indicate that teaching pseudo-words was another change made by teachers in response to the check. In 2013 ten case study schools said they had introduced pseudo-words or increased the focus on these, and interviewees gave a similar message this year. However, analysis did not determine what form this increased focus took, and it is not clear in many cases whether this was a new change for 2014, or whether this increased focus was already established in 2013 or earlier. The views of the two teachers below reflect many of the comments regarding pseudo-words, and indicate that the inclusion of these in phonics teaching is a direct reaction to the check:

*Alien words are now taught where they were not taught before.*

Year 1 teacher

*I don't think we would be teaching alien words if it wasn't for the phonics screening check.*

Headteacher

Teachers from three schools explained that although they were reluctant to teach pseudo-words in school, they were aware that these words were being practised at home as a result of parents being more aware of the check.

Another clear finding to emerge from the case studies was the effect of the check on Reception teachers. It seems that accountability has moved down the school, with Reception teachers more mindful of their role in phonics teaching since the introduction

of the check in Year 1; one school also referred to an increased focus on phase 1 phonics in Nursery. Some Reception teachers reported a change in teaching:

*I think it's made us teach phonics faster as you need to get the pupils to a certain level before Year 1.*

*Time on phonics is now more focused...*

Others described an increased focus on assessment in Reception in order to identify gaps in teaching, or to monitor progress more rigorously:

*We're aware that it [the check] comes up in Year 1 ... we put in place assessment strategies ... to check how they're doing...*

Reception teacher

Three schools commented that they had made wider revisions to their school curriculum in order to 'align to expectations' of the National Curriculum 2014. One literacy coordinator described a major reformulation of the school's strategy in literacy in order to take into consideration the requirements of the new curriculum; this included a new phonics policy for Nursery until the end of Year 2, and within this, reference to phonics screening.

As in 2013, many schools reported making no changes at all, commenting that their approach to phonics teaching, assessment of phonics, and support for children struggling with phonics had not been affected by the check:

*We value phonics – we always have done and I don't think the screening check has made any difference.*

Headteacher

*I think we've always taught phonics in the same way. We have good results and phonics from our reading across Key Stage 1 and that's always happened. Having this hasn't made any difference to our results.*

Headteacher

In contrast, these teachers reported that the introduction of the check had had an effect on phonics teaching practices in their schools, although this appeared to be a minority view:

*The check ... made us teach synthetic phonics ... We wouldn't have introduced 'Phonics o'clock' and reading results wouldn't have gone up as much [without it].*

Literacy coordinator

*Teachers are more skilful at teaching phonics as a result of the check. [The check has given teachers an] opportunity to reflect on and see how they can improve their phonics teaching.*

Headteacher

Other interviewees felt that although school practices relating to phonics had not changed, the check had perhaps resulted in an increased focus on phonics, the following comment typifying this opinion:

*We deliver phonics day in and day out, but the accountability of the check sharpens things up a bit.*

Headteacher

In 2013 some teachers expressed concern over what they perceived to be 'teaching to the test', particularly in the context of teaching pseudo-words, a view echoed by some teachers this year. One Year 1 teacher said she wants children to be successful in phonics so they can read, not so they can pass a test, and another school struggled with this dilemma:

*As a National Support School there is pressure to support this initiative, but we've been reluctant to introduce pseudo-words in the classroom.*

Headteacher

One headteacher, when asked whether the check had had any impact on the teaching of Year 2 pupils, replied: 'I've tried not to let it ... we know we've got a phonics system that works...'; another said that she had seen other schools:

*... focusing very much on 'What way can I get you to pass this test and actually it doesn't matter if you turn out to be a good reader in the end.' I've seen that go on and that's just made us even more reluctant to go down that road.*

Headteacher

### **3.1.2 Schools' use of the check results and provision of further support**

Further data from the survey of literacy coordinators adds to this discussion of the impact of the check on schools, including the use of check results. Respondents were asked what actions, if any, would be taken to use the results of the 2014 check within their school. The findings are presented below in Table 11, together with the findings from the same question in previous years, where applicable.

**Table 11: The actions taken to use the results of the phonics screening check**

	2012 (%)	2013 (%)	2014 (%)
Review of results by individual Year 1 teacher	81	74	84
Review of results by individual Year 2 teacher	N/A	70	83
Discussion amongst class teachers	N/A	74	85
Discussion between Year 1 and/ or Year 2 teacher(s) and literacy coordinator, Headteacher or other senior leader	88	82	87
Identification of children experiencing difficulties with phonics	80	78	87
Specific teaching plans for children experiencing difficulties with phonics	61	64	81
Discussion between Year 1 and Year 2 teachers	79	72	80
Discussion between Year 2 and Year 3 teachers	N/A	58	74
No action	N/A	3	3
Other	8	4	1
	n=844	n=583	n=573

Source: NFER survey of literacy coordinators, 2012, 2013 and 2014  
Multiple response – percentages may not sum to 100

As in previous years, responses suggest that the results of the 2014 check will be used frequently within schools for review and discussion, for identifying children experiencing difficulties, and for the formulation of teaching plans. Note that the question was asked differently in 2014, with responses divided between ‘all pupils’, ‘pupils not meeting the threshold in Year 1’ and ‘pupils not meeting the threshold in Year 2’. The percentages in the 2014 column in Table 11 may therefore not be directly comparable with previous years’ results.

Literacy coordinators also reported a range of ways in which Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 teachers had used the results of the previous year’s check. The most common use of the results by Reception teachers was to review or revise phonics teaching plans in general (39 per cent of respondents), and high numbers of respondents said this was also the case in Years 1 and 2 (54 and 49 per cent respectively). Year 1 and 2 teachers used the check results primarily to review or revise teaching plans for individuals or groups (57 and 60 per cent respectively). Use of the results to inform discussions with the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) was the third most frequent choice across all three year groups (26, 41 and 46 per cent for Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 teachers respectively). In Years 1 and 2, around a third of respondents (34 and 31 per cent) reported using the results to conduct diagnostic assessments in phonics. These figures have remained very stable from 2013 to 2014.

As part of the case studies, Year 2 teachers were specifically asked what use they would make of the check results. The key message from these schools was that, whilst Year 2 teachers would provide opportunities for children not meeting the threshold to have further support in literacy or phonics sessions, these children had already been identified as needing additional intervention. In this respect, teachers in the case studies appear to feel as though the results of the screening check are unnecessary – see Section 3.3 for a fuller discussion of teachers’ views on the value of the check.

Literacy coordinators involved in the survey were asked what evidence they would use to help them decide if and what type of extra support should be provided to a child. The findings are presented below in Table 12 and indicate that teachers’ own records are favoured as a source of information on progress, followed by the results of other assessments. In addition, notable percentages of respondents said they would use evidence from the check, suggesting that the check results are commonly used alongside other sources of information in making decisions about additional support. These figures are very similar to last year; slightly higher in most cases.

**Table 12: Evidence used to decide if and/or what type of extra support should be provided to a child**

	<b>Year 1 pupils (% of cases)</b>	<b>Year 2 pupils (% of cases)</b>
Teachers’ own records of progress	94	86
The results of other assessments	86	79
The PSC results	79	70
Discussion with the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO)	71	68
Other	3	3

Source: NFER survey of literacy coordinators, 2014 (n=573)  
Multiple response – percentages may not sum to 100

Literacy coordinators were also asked what type of support had been given to Year 2 pupils who did not achieve the standard in the check last year. Teachers were asked to divide their responses according to three categories: pupils who last year had difficulty completing section 1 of the check; those who could complete section 1 but had difficulties in section 2; or those who scored close to, but under, the threshold score.

**Table 13: Support offered to Year 2 pupils who undertook the check in 2013**

Children who last year...	Continued with systematic phonics teaching (%)	Intensive learning in small groups (%)	Extra one on one time with teacher/classroom support (%)	Diagnostic assessment in phonics (%)	Additional teaching assistant/classroom support in usual classroom activities (%)	None ticked (%)
had difficulty completing section 1 of the check	68	65	49	27	46	14
could complete section 1, but had difficulties in section 2	67	64	35	27	39	13
scored close to, but under, the threshold	72	46	22	20	32	12

Source: NFER survey of literacy coordinators, 2014 (n=573)

Multiple response – percentages may not sum to 100

Table 13 shows that across all three categories, the most frequent type of support given was to continue with systematic phonics teaching. Intensive learning in small groups was also important in terms of providing support, particularly for those who had difficulty completing section 1 or who could complete section 1 but had difficulties in section 2.

For those children who had difficulty completing section 1 of the check (the group who struggled the most), around half of respondents reported providing them with extra one-to-one time with a teacher or classroom support; or committing additional teaching assistant/classroom support in usual classroom activities (49 and 46 per cent respectively). These two kinds of support were also used by notable percentages of respondents (35 and 39 per cent) for children who could complete section 1 but had difficulties in section 2. Overall, a considerable amount of support was provided for individuals in Year 2 who undertook the check in 2013, although it is difficult to say whether or not this would have happened regardless of the screening check.

Pupils who do not meet the standard retake the check during the summer term of Year 2. When asked at which point in the year most of these pupils had reached the expected standard for the check, just over half (56 per cent) said the spring term of Year 2. A further quarter (25 per cent) said the summer term, and much smaller numbers felt that pupils reached the standard in the autumn term (6 per cent) or had still not reached it (7 per cent). These figures have remained almost exactly the same as in 2013.

Literacy coordinators were also asked which teaching methods they had used with pupils who were disapplied from the previous year's check (in 2013). Just under half (46 per cent) of respondents reported using systematic synthetic phonics with these pupils, and a small proportion (7 per cent) reported using 'other' teaching methods, such as a new phonics scheme, or using other cueing strategies such as sight reading and picture cues. Almost half of respondents (47 per cent) said this was not applicable or that they did not disapply any pupils from the 2013 check.

### 3.2 Teachers' views on phonics and literacy teaching

To complement the information about practice, the literacy coordinator questionnaire and the case study interview schedules contained focused questions designed to establish an understanding of teachers' views about phonics teaching, independent of their feelings towards the PSC itself. In the survey, those responding to the literacy coordinator questionnaire were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with a series of statements relating to their views about phonics and literacy teaching.

**Table 14: Teachers' views about phonics as an approach to teaching reading**

Statement	Agree (%)	Agree somewhat (%)	Uncertain or mixed views (%)	Disagree somewhat (%)	Disagree (%)	No response (%)
I am convinced of the value of systematic synthetic phonics teaching	58	31	7	2	1	1
Phonics should always be taught in the context of meaningful reading	64	25	5	3	2	2
Phonics has too high a priority in current education policy	10	20	18	29	20	2
A variety of different methods should be used to teach children to decode words	64	23	6	3	3	1
Systematic phonics teaching is necessary only for some children	9	19	17	30	23	3
N= 573						

Source: NFER survey of literacy coordinators, 2014

Due to percentages being rounded to the nearest integer, they may not sum to 100

The percentages shown in Table 14 are very similar to those recorded in both previous years of the evaluation; systematic synthetic phonics continues to enjoy strong support, but so does a multi-method meaning-based approach. From 2012 to 2014, there was a very small but statistically significant shift from 'agree' to 'agree somewhat' in those convinced of the value of systematic synthetic phonics (in 2012, 64 and 25 per cent



respectively 'agreed' and 'agreed somewhat'; in 2014, these figures were 58 and 31 per cent respectively).

The key messages regarding phonics teaching and its contribution to reading development from the case studies were very similar to 2013. In accordance with the survey data, interviewees continued to be very positive about phonics as an approach to teaching reading, describing it as 'the foundation of a successful reader' (Year 1 teacher); 'the building block and a route into reading and writing' (Reception teacher); and 'a very powerful tool' (Headteacher).

Some teachers felt that phonics had had a clear impact in their school:

*Since we've put that [teaching of reading and spelling through phonics] in place, standards have definitely risen...*

Literacy coordinator

Just over half of respondents (53 per cent) in the survey disagreed to some extent with the statement 'Systematic phonics teaching is necessary only for some children'. This provides further evidence of teacher support for a phonics-based approach to reading, a view echoed by this literacy coordinator:

*You have structure, sequence and endless resources to support you ... It seems logical and sensible to give every child a way of attacking reading ... It gives children access to reading and they realise there's a code they can follow and be successful.*

However, alongside these positive messages about teaching phonics, in the majority of case study schools the teaching of other strategies alongside phonics was also favoured. Even amongst those who were strongly supportive of phonics was a firm conviction that phonics is one of a bank of strategies and that other strategies can be of equal value:

*Our policy on reading is very strong and we give them positive reading experiences, because phonics is not the be all and end all.*

Literacy coordinator

*Phonics teaching definitely has an impact on reading and writing, but it doesn't suit all children and some have different strategies.*

Year 1 teacher

Teachers' responses to the statement that 'Phonics has too high a priority in current education policy' were very similar to last year, with just under half (49 per cent) disagreeing to some extent. As was the case in 2013, some teachers clearly felt that the current focus on phonics somewhat contradicts what they feel they should be doing in

terms of teaching children to read, and that it can be to the detriment of other aspects of reading. The following comments highlight some of these concerns:

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

Literacy coordinator

*Even if they get the phonics, it doesn't mean they're going to become these wonderful readers ... Sometimes we need to look at the bigger picture. We can't keep prioritising phonics over everything. We need to focus on the comprehension too.*

Year 2 teacher/Literacy coordinator

As in 2013, a small number of teachers involved in the case studies voiced concerns about a phonics focus having a detrimental effect on spelling, commenting on what they see as one of the disadvantages of phonics:

*The flipside of this [a phonic-based approach] is that further up the school some children struggle with spellings. I think in the next few years we may see more spelling issues.*

Headteacher

*Spelling is different – you can tell that they're using their phonic knowledge to write down a word. But then they have to unlearn it all a year or so later as it's usually spelled incorrectly.*

Reception teacher

### **3.3 Teachers' views on the value of the check**

Both the surveys and the case studies contained questions to ascertain teachers' views regarding the value of the phonics check. Literacy coordinators were asked to what extent they agree with the statements 'The PSC provides valuable information for teachers' and 'The PSC provides valuable information for parents/carers'. Less than 30 per cent agreed ('agree' and 'agree somewhat') with each of these two statements. These percentages have changed very little over the three years of the evaluation.

Year 1 teachers, however, gave a more positive message when asked to what extent the results of the 2014 phonics check gave them useful information, in terms of planning teaching and learning. Just over half of respondents (53 per cent) selected 'to a great

extent' or 'to some extent', with only 16 per cent reporting that the check did not give them any useful information at all. These responses are more positive than in 2013, where only around a third (32 per cent) selected at least 'to some extent' and just over a quarter (28 per cent) said the check results were of no use at all.

Year 1 teachers were also asked whether the results of the check were in line with their expectations of how pupils would do. A high proportion (61 per cent) felt the results were very much in line with expectations, and a further 35 per cent reported they were in line with expectations 'to some extent'. Very few teachers felt the results reflected expectations only to a small extent or not at all (a total of three per cent).

Responses from case study interviewees provide some further detail and explanation, with respondents expressing a view that the check results do not add anything or reveal any difficulties of which teachers were unaware. The following comments encapsulate overall opinion here:

*The results mean nothing because by the time they do it it's too late. No teacher needs to do that test to know which children in their class are struggling in phonics. You know by Christmas in Reception which children are not picking things up – it's pointless really.*

Literacy coordinator

*As a teacher you know when someone needs additional support. We use our professional judgement. Sometimes I do my own phonics screening with them so I know how they're doing. The check doesn't help with my own teacher assessments...*

Year 1 teacher

A small number of teachers commented specifically on what they saw as the lack of intrinsic value of the check being due to its focus on phonics: 'Just because you have a child that has met the standard doesn't mean that you have a child that can read a book... It's not just about decoding, it's a balanced skill, about comprehending the meaning of the text.' (Year 2 teacher and literacy coordinator).

In contrast, a Year 1 teacher from one school commented that the test was positive in the sense that it could identify gaps in understanding, supported by this remark from the literacy coordinator in the same school:

*I produce a grid after the check, so that teachers can see where the common errors are. The most useful thing is which words they got wrong or right...*

Literacy coordinator

Four schools asserted that they did not have an objection to the check per se but to the way in which the outcomes were used. These teachers said they would prefer to use the check as part of a bank of tools:

*What would be useful is if we were given it [the check] as a diagnostic tool ... not to have the results published, not to have to report to parents ... We wouldn't have any objection to it as a resource to use in school and I am sure that we would use it because we would get some information to put alongside the things we already have.*

Literacy coordinator

It should be noted that the government do not publish school-level results from the PSC in performance tables, although the national results are used to track standards over time. Ofsted have access to school-level results via the RAISEonline website for use in inspections. They use the check results alongside other information about a school's teaching when considering a school's performance<sup>14</sup>.

As discussed in section 3.1 in the context of changes made to schools' teaching practices, some teachers felt that the value of the check was in promoting and encouraging phonics teaching, with several references to teaching now being 'sharper' as a result of the check:

*It [the check] makes sure that teachers know the expectations for children in terms of learning early reading skills. It makes sure that everyone is committed to that happening, that you're accountable for the children's progress earlier down the school.*

Literacy coordinator

*It's made people more aware of the need to teach phonics as separate entities from writing and reading.*

Year 1 teacher

Underlying many of the messages and comments from teachers involved in the case studies was a sense of indifference to the check. Many did not show a strong hostility towards it, nor did they perceive it as having much value:

*[Teachers are] just accepting really. You don't have a choice do you?*

Key Stage 1 teacher and coordinator

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<sup>14</sup> See Section 9 on 'How results will be used by the Department for Education and Ofsted': <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/key-stage-1-assessment-and-reporting-arrangements-ara/phonics-screening-check> [24/02/15]

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

### Key findings

- Perhaps unsurprisingly, most teachers reported they undertook less preparation for the check this year than they did when it was first introduced. The most frequent form of preparation, as captured in the literacy coordinator survey, was individual familiarisation with the DfE *Check Administrators' Guide*<sup>15</sup>. A quarter of responding Year 1 teachers reported undertaking no specific preparation for the check in 2014.
- Fewer Year 1 teachers reported having to stop the check early this year (2014: 41 per cent) than was the case last year (2013: 46 per cent). Of those that had to stop early, the majority reported finding it 'quite' or 'very easy' when making a decision to do so (85 per cent).
- Survey findings suggest that less than half of participating Year 1 teachers had to disapply children from the check. As the check becomes embedded into school practice it seems that schools feel more secure in their expectations and in the disapplication process.
- The costs associated with the introduction of the check and its on-going annual cost to schools and central government are around £400-500 per school, or £10-12 per pupil. The largest on-going cost for schools is for supply cover while the check is administered, at £150 per school, or £3 per pupil.
- There is evidence that over the last three years teachers have become more familiar with and accepting of the standard of the check. In 2014, more than three quarters of Year 1 teachers (77 per cent) reported that the standard of the check 'was about right' (an increase of 33 percentage points since 2012).
- Over the course of the study, a small number of respondents have expressed concerns that the check disadvantages higher achieving readers. However, as reported in Chapter 2, the analysis of the NPD data found no identifiable pattern of poorer performance on the check than expected in those children who are already fluent readers.
- The findings from the surveys suggest that most schools provide some sort of information to parents/carers prior to the administration of the check. Most schools communicate the outcomes of the check to parents/carers via end-of year pupil reports. A smaller proportion of literacy coordinators reported that additional information was given to parents/carers in 2014, both in terms of details of the in-school support planned (39 per cent in 2014; 50 per cent in 2013; 61 per cent in

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

2012), and in terms of information regarding how parents/carers can support their child (43 per cent in 2014; 59 per cent in 2013; 73 per cent in 2012).

## 4.1 Schools' preparation for the check

Teachers reported a number of ways in which they prepared for the check. As in previous years of the evaluation, the most frequent form of preparation, as captured in the literacy coordinator survey, was individual familiarisation with the DfE *Check Administrators' Guide* (2014: 86 per cent, 2013: 89 per cent, 2012: 97 per cent). Throughout the study, the proportion of respondents who have taken part in year group, key stage or other staff discussions and/or a discussion with the literacy coordinator have remained fairly constant at around 60 per cent. There was also evidence that the staff who administered the check had previous experience of doing so, with 73 per cent of Year 1 teachers reporting they had also administered the check in 2013. This could account for the fact that about a quarter of responding Year 1 teachers reported undertaking no specific preparation for the check this year. Similarly, over the three years there has been a reduction in the proportion of Year 1 teachers reporting they have attended external training from 50 per cent in 2012 to only 16 per cent in 2014. There has also been a reduction in the proportion reporting they have used the online video *Scoring the PSC training*, down from 82 per cent to 62 per cent.

## 4.2 Administration of the check

### Who administers the check?

As reported above, the survey showed that the majority of Year 1 teachers who administered the check this year had also administered the check in 2013. Two-thirds (64 per cent) also administered the check with Year 2 pupils. These are similar figures to those reported last year. However, there was evidence from the case studies to suggest that it is not always the class teacher who administers the check. This issue was explored in 16 of the 19 schools visited this year. In just over half of the schools, the Year 1 teacher administered the check with Year 1 pupils. In other cases it was reported that it was the literacy coordinator or the headteacher that administered the assessment. The reported reasons for this included the need for consistency and objectivity, as highlighted by the following quotation from a headteacher:

*I've done it for the last three years because I thought it was important to know that we have been consistent.*

### Local Authority Monitoring

This year, 13 per cent of literacy coordinators reported their school had received a local authority monitoring visit during the week of the check. This is similar to the number of

visits reported last year, and is in line with national guidelines<sup>16</sup>. On average this year, two check administrations were observed per school. The most frequently reported method for choosing observations was the Year 1 teacher making the decision (2013: 29 per cent, 2014: 32 per cent). However, as was seen last year, over a quarter (2014: 26 per cent) did not indicate the method by which observations were chosen.

## Stopping the check early

Over half (59 per cent) of the Year 1 teachers responding to the survey reported they did not have to stop the check early. Of those that reported they did have to stop early, the majority (85 per cent) reported finding it 'quite' or 'very easy' when making a decision to do so. The proportion of teachers reporting that they stopped the check early was slightly less than last year (2013: 46 per cent), but the ease with which teachers reported they were able to make this decision was similar to last year. The three most common factors reported as influencing the judgement included: the child becoming distressed (around 80 per cent); the child becoming tired or distracted (around half); and the child beginning to struggle or getting several words in a row incorrect (also around half). These findings are supported by the evidence from the case studies. In four out of 11 cases, the check was stopped early for at least one pupil. In three schools, the pupils were given a break and then resumed the check. In another school the teacher reported that they had made the decision to stop where the child appeared to be struggling:

*What we decided was if the first five words were not recognised we would stop it then.*

Year 1 teacher

## Disapplication

Children who are working well below the level of the screening check (for example, if they have shown no understanding of letter-sound correspondences), can be disapplied so they do not take part. In 2013, just over half of the responding Year 1 teachers reported that a decision regarding the disapplication of pupils had not been made because no pupils had needed to be disapplied (2013: 55 per cent). This question was omitted from the 2014 survey and so no direct comparison can be made for 2014. However, of the mainstream case study schools who answered this question in 2014, two-thirds reported they had disapplied pupils. Where pupils had been disapplied, it was reported that it was generally understood in the school why this would be the case. In three schools, the class teacher had made the decision on disapplication. For others, the disapplication process was a discussion with the headteacher or literacy coordinator, and one

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<sup>16</sup> The guidance document 'Monitoring visits: guidance for local authorities' suggests that LAs must visit at least 10 per cent of schools administering the check within their authority:  
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/310447/2014\\_KeyStage1\\_phonics\\_screening\\_check\\_visits\\_guidance\\_for\\_LA\\_s.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/310447/2014_KeyStage1_phonics_screening_check_visits_guidance_for_LA_s.pdf) [09/12/14]

headteacher used their own experience to decide those that should not sit the check, as explained below:

*I used my experience and knowledge of the test to determine who should be disapplied. Even some of those children who get through the test really struggle towards the end and find it quite long. So, yes, just through experience of doing it for three years [you get a feel for who will and won't be able to do it].*

As the check becomes embedded into school practice it seems that schools feel more secure in expectations and the disapplication process. One school decided that a child who had been disapplied would undertake the practice sheet so that they would feel involved.

The experience of teachers in special schools was different to those in mainstream schools and is explored in Box 1 below.



## Box 1: Discussion of the suitability of the check amongst staff in special schools

Four non-mainstream schools were included in the case study sample. Of these, three disappplied a number of their pupils. There seemed to be a 'tacit' understanding that if pupils were below certain levels (P6-8\*), then undertaking the check would not be of benefit to their learning, as the following literacy coordinators explained:

*It's a useful process [discussion of disapplication of pupils] because it's a marker of how you're getting on. So if I go to the headteacher and say 'this year I'm disapplying everyone because they're P6 or below' then that's just a short conversation.*

*I looked at the ones [pupils] that were P8 and above to see if they could do any phonics screening.*

The perceived value of the check was mixed. For some, it was an excellent link to mainstream setting. The contentious issue was the pseudo-words which for some were positive, as the following literacy coordinator explained:

*I like what its doing because it's a very clear and well thought-out thing because the kids like the idea that it's a name of a creature. They find it fun and quite visual so it's nice to do with the children because that would be a no no if they found it dull or boring in any way or non-motivational. They actually wanted to do the test again.*

However, a few schools noted the difficulty that pupils had with the concept of pseudo-words and their position within the booklet, as the following class teachers explained:

*Most of the difficulty came on the first page because the words weren't sense, so children didn't know how to handle them.*

*Aliens still completely throw them and they want to talk about what they see rather than the word itself.*

For others, the challenges were due to the special educational needs that their pupils have, as the following literacy coordinator explained:

*Reading a word like 'zeg' is quite difficult for them because they try and turn it into a word they do know and understand it is a word, but because they've got their little alien faces and that makes it easier because we can say "this is a made up word, it's his name", so that's important that stays on it.*

\* The use of performance scales (P scales) is statutory when reporting attainment for pupils with special educational needs who are working below level 1 of the national curriculum. For further information, see:

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/329911/Performance - P Scale - attainment targets for pupils with special educational needs.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/329911/Performance_-_P_Scale_-_attainment_targets_for_pupils_with_special_educational_needs.pdf) [24/03/15]

### 4.3 Costs associated with the check

Literacy coordinators reported financial costs that were associated with the check and the additional time spent by staff members on different activities. Further evidence on the costs of developing the check and delivering it each year was provided by the Department for Education (DfE) and the Standards and Testing Agency (STA). The costs associated with the introduction of the check and its on-going annual cost to schools and central government are around £400-500 per school, or £10-12 per pupil per year. The cost is “very low” compared to other education interventions in the Sutton Trust Teaching and Learning Toolkit<sup>17</sup>. A full breakdown of the costs is provided below.

#### One-off costs of developing and introducing the check

A large portion of the cost of the PSC was a series of one-off costs, which were incurred at the introduction of the check. DfE and STA developed the materials for the check, evaluated the pilot and evaluated the national roll-out of the check. Also, many teachers prepared for the check through training courses, which is largely a one-off activity.

Table 15 summarises figures provided by the DfE and STA and show that the up-front cost of developing the check was around £865,000 in real terms. Some test development will continue in future years as the PSC develops – STA is currently developing check materials for the next three years, but the costs were not available at the time of writing. However, it is expected that these costs will be substantially less than the cost of the initial phase of test development.

**Table 15: Department for Education one-off costs associated with the phonics screening check**

<b>Cost item</b>	<b>Cost (£)</b>
Test development (including for pilot)	321,000
Pilot evaluation	80,000
Item level data collection	180,000
PSC evaluation	284,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>865,000</b>

Source: Figures provided by DfE and S TA. Reported in real terms (2014 prices), rebased using the Consumer Prices Index, and rounded to the nearest £1,000.

Divided by the number of pupils that have taken the check in the first three years (2.3 million, including Year 2 pupils that took it twice) the one-off costs are around 40 pence per pupil.

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<sup>17</sup> Higgins, S., Katsipataki, M., Coleman, R., Henderson, P., Major, L.E., & Coe, R. (2014). The Sutton Trust-Education Endowment Foundation Teaching and Learning Toolkit. October 2014. London: Education Endowment Foundation.

Schools also faced some costs when the check was introduced that are unlikely to be incurred again, at least at the same scale. Whereas 55 per cent of literacy co-ordinators said teachers in their school had externally provided phonics check training in the first year of the check, the proportion was 26 per cent in 2013 and 19 per cent in 2014. The median cost of phonics training reported by literacy co-ordinators was £150, with a day of supply cover of around £175 in most cases. Across all schools, the cost of phonics check training was around £180 per school in 2012. In 2014, the cost of training was around £60 per school.

### On-going costs of the check

Some of the costs associated with the check are incurred by DfE and by schools each year and can be expected to continue in the future.

On-going costs for DfE and STA are for distributing the check materials and guidance to schools, producing the guidance and collecting and producing data and a set of national statistics. Table 16 shows that these costs have been around £370,000-380,000 for the years 2012-2014. The number of pupils taking the check was smaller in the first year because only Year 1 pupils took it, which explains the smaller distribution cost in the first year. The costs for producing guidance have reduced over time, as a consequence of the check 'bedding in' and fewer changes being made from year to year. The average cost per pupil has reduced from 64 pence in 2012 to 44 pence in 2014.

**Table 16: Department for Education on-going costs associated with the phonics screening check**

Cost item	Cost in 2012 (£)	Cost in 2013 (£)	Cost in 2014 (£)
Distribution to schools	205,000	265,000	270,000
Production of guidance	128,000	95,000	70,000
Data collection and production	47,000	18,000	31,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>380,000</b>	<b>378,000</b>	<b>371,000</b>
Number of pupils	592,376	846,640	838,382
Cost per pupil	0.64	0.44	0.44

Source: Figures provided by DfE and STA. Reported in real terms (2014 prices), rebased using the Consumer Prices Index, and rounded to the nearest £1,000.

In most cases the PSC is administered by a Year 1 teacher, so schools need to provide activities for the rest of the class during the check administration. In 2013 and 2014, 44 per cent of literacy co-ordinators reported spending money on supply cover for the check administration. The median reported cost was £300 in 2013 and £350 in 2014, which is equivalent to around two days at commercial rates (typically between £150 and £200 per day). Across all schools, the cost of supply cover for the phonics check in 2014 was around £150 per school, or £3 per pupil.

Literacy co-ordinators also reported that members of staff spend an average of 12 hours additional time administering the check to the pupils. However, this is not an additional cost when considered alongside the cost of supply cover for teaching lessons while the teacher is carrying out the check. Further, many teachers were conducting phonics assessment before the check and would have spent some of this time without it. On balance, it is not appropriate to regard check administration time as additional.

The largest amount of other additional time associated with the check is around nine hours spent by school staff on planning and preparation each year. Literacy co-ordinators also reported that school staff were spending, on average across all schools, four additional hours on paperwork, three hours on reviewing results and two hours on training each year. Most of that additional time was Year 1 teacher time, but some was Year 2 teacher, classroom assistant or senior leader time. These are not large amounts of staff time compared to teachers' 1,265 contracted working hours per year. Some of this activity, for example planning for and reviewing the results of phonics assessment, might also have been done in the absence of the PSC.

### **Costs associated with the check in context**

In total, considering the one-off and on-going costs to DfE, STA and to schools, the cost of the PSC is around £400-500 per school, or £10-12 per pupil. The one-off costs associated with the check's introduction are around 40 pence per pupil, considering the number of pupils that have sat the check in the first three years. The largest on-going cost is schools requiring supply cover to administer the check, which is around £150 per school per year, or £3 per pupil per year.

In general, the check has some burden on teachers' time, but the amount of additional time required is a small proportion of teachers' contracted annual hours. The amount of time that is due directly to the introduction of the check is uncertain because some teachers would have conducted phonics assessment in the absence of the PSC.

According to the Sutton Trust Teaching and Learning Toolkit categorisation of the costs to schools of educational interventions, the cost would be regarded as "very low".

### **Value for money of the check**

As discussed in Chapter 2, there is evidence that the introduction of the PSC has had some effect on phonics teaching and teacher expectations, but the study has found no clear evidence of improvements in pupils' literacy performance, or in progress, as result. Isolating a genuine effect would have been difficult: without a control/comparison group, it is not possible to determine how far the costs of the check displaced other costs that would have been incurred, and the longer term impacts are uncertain. It is therefore not possible to estimate the value for money of the PSC.

## 4.4 Evidence on the suitability of the check with different groups of learners

### Accessibility and views on the standard of the check

Comparisons were made between Year 1 teachers' views of the difficulty of the check in 2012, 2013 and 2014. As can be seen in table 17 below, the proportion of teachers reporting that the standard of the check is 'about right' has increased in every year of the evaluation, with more than three quarters of respondents (77 per cent) agreeing with this statement in 2014. Similarly, the proportion of teachers who reported that the check was either 'much' or 'slightly' too difficult has decreased. As the standard of the check has not changed over the last three years, the findings could perhaps be attributed to the fact that teachers are now more familiar with the expected standard and have raised their expectations.

**Table 17: Year 1 teacher views of the standard of the check in 2012, 2013 and 2014**

	2012 per cent of cases	2013 per cent of cases	2014 per cent of cases	Percentage point change	
Much too easy	0	0	0		
Slightly too easy	1	1	1		
It is about right	44	66	77	+22	+11
Slightly too difficult	40	27	20	-13	-7
Much too difficult	11	3	2	-8	-1
None ticked	4	3	2	-1	-1
	n= 940	n= 625	n= 652		

Source: NFER survey of Year 1 teachers, 2012, 2013 and 2014

Research participants reported mixed views on the accessibility of the check for pupils with special educational needs. Of the five mainstream schools who commented on the accessibility of the check for children with special educational needs, three reported that the check was accessible, even if pupils did not meet the threshold. By contrast, two felt that the check was not accessible, as the following teacher explained: 'Lower ability pupils found it difficult and some children are very nervous because they know it's something out of the ordinary'.

Of the four case study schools that commented on the accessibility of the check for pupils learning English as an additional language, three thought that the check was accessible. For one school, which had a higher proportion of children learning English as an additional language, the accessibility of the check has wider implications in terms of

phonics teaching – the school has made the decision to teach phonics at a pace that suits the pupils as they enter the school with low levels of English acquisition.

### **Did the check effectively demonstrate which children were meeting the standard?**

Over the course of the study, a small number of respondents have expressed concerns that the check disadvantages higher achieving readers as illustrated by the following quote:

*Some of mine have not got as many as I expected and if you listen to them read you wouldn't think that they would fail the phonics, whereas some of my lower readers, because they are not as confident, they work really slowly and they have come out higher.*

Teacher

However, although teachers can point to individual cases where pupils may have not reached full marks where they perhaps should have done, analysis of the NPD data (see Chapter 2) found no identifiable pattern of poorer performance on the check than expected in those children who are already fluent readers.

Concern was also raised about pupils who may use alternative strategies for reading, as illustrated by the following quote from a literacy coordinator:

*I can see a place for checking on how children are progressing, but some children who don't meet the standard use other strategies.*

Moreover, under half of the schools that discussed the outcomes for different learners in the checks believed that the check reflected the true levels of the pupils.

The theme of schools already having 'strategic and rigorous monitoring' so they already had identified the pupils who would not reach the expected standard on the check was prevalent in the case studies. However, interviewees could see how it may benefit other schools that did not have such strong assessment practices in place.

## **4.5 How schools communicate with parents and carers about the check**

The findings from the surveys suggest that most schools provide some sort of information to parents/carers prior to the administration of the check. Most schools communicate the outcomes of the check to parents/carers via end-of year pupil reports. Comparisons were made between the responses of literacy coordinators in 2012, 2013 and 2014 about the additional information provided to the parents and carers of pupils who were shown to

require extra support. A smaller proportion of literacy coordinators reported that information was given to parents/carers in 2014, both in terms of details of the in-school support planned (39 per cent in 2014; 50 per cent in 2013; 61 per cent in 2012), and in terms of information regarding how parents/carers can support their child (43 per cent in 2014; 59 per cent in 2013; 73 per cent in 2012). When the check results are relayed to parents/carers, nearly all case study schools report the vast majority of parents/carers give little or no reaction, either positive or negative, to the check results. Interviews with parents/carers largely support this view, although those parents/carers whose children have been identified as requiring further support generally appear to be more involved with their school, and receive more frequent correspondence about their progress.

## 5. Conclusions

The final chapter of this report draws together the key messages from the different strands of the evaluation and provides an overall assessment of the extent to which the PSC is making an impact on the teaching of phonics in primary schools during Reception and Years 1 and 2. It starts by addressing each of the evaluation's seven underpinning research questions.

### 5.1 Summary of findings in relation to the evaluation's research questions

#### 1. How suitable is the check for specific groups of pupils?

The proportion of Year 1 teachers reporting that the standard of the check is 'about right' has increased in every year of the evaluation, with more than three quarters of respondents (77 per cent) agreeing with this statement in 2014. As the standard of the check has not changed over the last three years, the findings could perhaps be attributed to the fact that teachers are now more familiar with the expected standard and have raised their expectations. Teachers appear confident in disapplying children for whom the check is unsuitable, and in discontinuing the assessment when pupils are struggling to continue.

However, throughout the evaluation issues have been raised about the suitability of the check for SEN and EAL pupils. These issues included children finding the monster pictures distracting and getting confused by the pseudo-words, with some struggling with the lack of context. The national published results confirm that pupils with no identified SEN significantly outperformed pupils with a SEN, but they also show that first language has no impact on phonics results<sup>18</sup>. In addition, over the course of the study, a small number of respondents have expressed concerns that the check disadvantages higher achieving readers. However, analysis of national test data reveals there is no identifiable pattern of poorer performance on the PSC than expected in those children who are already fluent readers.

#### 2. How did teachers identify the children who were disappplied from the check?

Children who are working well below the level of the screening check (for example, if they have shown no understanding of letter-sound correspondences), can be disappplied so they do not take part. In 2013, just over half of the responding Year 1 teachers (55 per cent) reported that a decision regarding the disapplication of pupils

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[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/356941/SFR34\\_2014\\_text.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/356941/SFR34_2014_text.pdf) [25/02/15]



had not been made because no pupils had needed to be disapplied. Of the minority that did, most reported that the lack of grapheme-phoneme correspondence was the major reason for disapplication. For some children this was judged as having no letter-sound recognition, while for others it was judged as being unable to blend phonemes. Year 1 teachers and headteachers were the staff most frequently involved in making decisions regarding disapplying children from the check.

### **3. What use has been made of phonics training and classroom materials for the teaching of phonics?**

Perhaps unsurprisingly, most teachers reported undertaking less preparation for the check this year than they did when it was first introduced. The most frequent form of preparation, as captured in the literacy coordinator survey, was individual familiarisation with the DfE *Check Administrators' Guide*<sup>19</sup>. There was also evidence that the staff who administered the check had previous experience of doing so, with about seven out of ten Year 1 teachers reporting they had also administered the check in 2013. This could account for the fact that about a quarter of responding Year 1 teachers reported undertaking no specific preparation for the check this year. Similarly, over the three years of the evaluation there has been a reduction in the proportion of Year 1 teachers reporting they have attended external training from 50 per cent in 2012<sup>20</sup> to only 16 per cent in 2014. There has also been a reduction in the proportion reporting they have used the online video *Scoring the PSC training*, down from 82 per cent to 62 per cent.

### **4. How have schools communicated with parents/carers about the check?**

The findings from the surveys suggest that most schools provide some sort of information to parents/carers prior to the administration of the check. Most schools communicate the outcomes of the check to parents/carers via end-of year pupil reports. Comparisons were made between the responses of literacy coordinators in 2012, 2013 and 2014 about the additional information provided to the parents and carers of pupils who were shown to require extra support. A smaller proportion of literacy coordinators reported that information was given to parents/carers in 2014, both in terms of details of the in-school support planned (39 per cent in 2014; 50 per cent in 2013; 61 per cent in 2012), and in terms of information regarding how parents/carers can support their child (43 per cent in 2014; 59 per cent in 2013; 73 per cent in 2012). When the check results are relayed to parents/carers, nearly all case-study schools report the vast majority of parents/carers give little or no reaction, either positive or negative, to the check results. Interviews with parents/carers largely support this view, although those parents/carers whose children have been identified

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/check-administrators-guide-phonics-screening-check-2014> [10/12/14]

<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that in 2012 this question was asked in a different manner and thus comparisons should be viewed with caution

as requiring further support generally appear to be more involved with their school, and receive more frequent correspondence about their progress.

#### **5. What has been the impact of the check on the teaching of phonics in primary schools during Reception and Years 1 and 2?**

There is evidence that the introduction of the PSC has had some effect on phonics teaching and classroom practice. The evidence suggests that a majority of schools made some changes to sharpen up their phonics teaching and/or to improve phonics assessment. They also ensured that pupils were familiar with the pseudo-words they would encounter in the check. These findings are supported by The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2013/14<sup>21</sup>, which found that the introduction of the check 'has increased the attention being given to the essential early skills that pupils need for reading and writing' (p.7).

There is also evidence to suggest that, since the check was introduced, teachers are making more use of the results of the check, whether to review or revise phonics teaching plans or to help inform decisions about the support offered to individual pupils.

Despite these self-reported changes to schools' teaching practices, there is little evidence to suggest that many schools are teaching, or have moved towards a position whereby they are teaching, systematic synthetic phonics 'first and fast', to the exclusion of other word reading strategies. Indeed, one of the key messages to emerge from the evaluation is that many schools believe that a phonics approach to teaching reading should be used alongside other methods. Responses from teachers in both the survey and case-study schools reveal that almost all schools are committed to teaching phonics, and that, within literacy teaching, considerable emphasis is placed on phonics as a method of teaching children to learn to decode. However, the findings indicate that most teachers do not see a commitment to systematic synthetic phonics as incompatible with the teaching of other decoding strategies.

#### **6. Has the PSC changed the teaching of the wider literacy curriculum?**

Responses from teachers in both the survey and case-study schools revealed that almost all schools are committed to teaching phonics, and that, within literacy teaching, considerable emphasis is placed on phonics as a method of teaching children to learn to decode. Many schools, however, appear to believe that a phonics approach to teaching reading should be used alongside other methods. In this sense, the check does not appear to have changed teachers' views on and approaches to the teaching of phonics in the wider literacy curriculum.

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<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/ar201314/Ofsted%20Annual%20Report%20201314%20HMC1%20commentary.pdf> [10/12/14]

## **7. Has the introduction of the PSC had an impact on the standard of reading and writing?**

One of the central research questions this evaluation has tried to address is what, if anything, has been the impact of the introduction of the PSC on standards of literacy? The statistical information on the achievements of eligible pupils in the PSC shows that over the past three years, phonics attainment, as measured by scores on the check, has improved. Specifically, 74 per cent of Year 1 pupils met the expected standard of phonic decoding in 2014, compared with 69 per cent in 2013 and 58 per cent in 2012. When those pupils who retook or took the test for the first time in Year 2 are included, the proportion of pupils meeting the expected standard of phonic decoding by the end of Year 2 was 88 per cent in 2014, an increase of three percentage points from 2013. These are findings that should be celebrated.

The evaluation has also sought to explore whether the improvement in the proportion of children meeting the expected standard of phonic decoding has resulted in better subsequent attainment or improvements in literacy overall, as distinct from in phonics. As the check was introduced as part of a policy to strengthen phonics teaching in primary schools, it might be hypothesised that phonics teaching in general would improve as a result; or, more specifically, that the learning needs of individual children might be more effectively met. Either of these developments could be expected to lead to an improvement in attainment, in phonics specifically and/or in literacy more broadly.

Overall, however, analyses of pupils' literacy (reading and writing) scores in the national datasets over four years were inconclusive: there were no improvements in attainment or in progress that could be clearly attributed to the introduction of the check, nor any identifiable impact on pupil progress in literacy for learners with different levels of prior attainment. These findings should be viewed within the context of the methodological limitations of this study; namely, the absence of a control group and the context of a number of existing phonics initiatives in national policy.

## **5.2 Conclusions**

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

The three years have also seen a range of changes in schools which were, according to teacher reports, made in response to the check; the evidence suggests that a

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

To assess whether its introduction also had impacts on pupils' *learning* is more difficult, as the national introduction of the check made it impossible to have a control group. A further complexity concerns the date of implementation of the PSC. It was introduced for the first time nationally in 2012, but was piloted in 2011. Awareness of the proposed introduction of the check may have given rise to a heightened emphasis on phonics in schools prior to its national introduction. The process evaluation of the pilot (Coldwell *et al*, 2011) found that the sample of schools in the pilot were already making some changes to their phonics practice.

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

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