Witness name: Jonathan Douglas
Statement no.: 1
Exhibits: NLT/01 – NLT/31
Dated: 19.06.25

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF JONATHAN DOUGLAS IN RESPONSE TO MODULE 8 OF THE UK COVID-19 INQUIRY ('THE INQUIRY') REQUEST FOR EVIDENCE PURSUANT TO RULE 9 INQUIRY RULES 2006 REFERENCE: M08-NLT-001

I, Jonathan Douglas, of the National Literacy Trust will say as follows: -

1. I am the Chief Executive Officer of the National Literacy Trust. I have held this position for the last 18 years.

2. This witness statement is produced to address questions that have been raised in a Request for Evidence pursuant to the Rule 9 (Module 8) of the Inquiry Rules 2006.

3. This statement sets out the National Literacy Trust's response during the COVID-19 pandemic. I respond to the Inquiry's questions under six broad headings: A) about the National Literacy Trust; B) challenges facing children before the pandemic; C) the National Literacy Trust's work during the pandemic; D) The National Literacy Trust's research about the impact of education disruption; E) interventions and recovery; and F) lessons learned. This submission is exhaustive, but I would welcome the opportunity to provide any additional detail as required.

SECTION A: ABOUT THE NATIONAL LITERACY TRUST

4. The National Literacy Trust is an independent charity that empowers children, young people, and adults with the literacy skills they need to succeed. Where you are born shouldn't determine your life chances which is why our mission is to break down barriers to opportunity by raising literacy skills across the UK, focusing on the most disadvantaged areas. Over the last 30 years, we have provided vital support to the people who need it most by working in schools, families and communities on a local and national level. To do this, we have three breakthrough areas:

    i) Literacy to grow: Every child starts school with language and communication skills ready to grow and learn at school and beyond.

    ii) Literacy to learn: Every young person, wherever they grow up, leaves school with literacy skills for life.

    iii) Literacy to thrive: Everyone leaving the criminal justice system has improved literacy skills to help them thrive.

5. We are working to create a fairer society and alongside our national campaigns, we have dedicated teams on the ground in 21 UK areas with the greatest literacy challenges, where we can make the most impact. Through partnerships across the public, private, and third sectors, we fund local programmes and recruit Literacy Champions—community volunteers who engage children, young people, and families. We support educators across all age groups with tools, techniques, and professional development to improve literacy provision nationwide. We know literacy is a social justice issue and a key factor in the cycle of disadvantage, so we also campaign to make literacy a national priority, using our research and experience to influence policy at both local and national levels. Additionally, we directly support parents, carers, young people, and adults by building literacy skills and confidence through digital resources, classes, free books, and expert guidance.

6. Our workforce comprises former teachers, librarians, civil servants, and communication specialists, who are experts in children and young people's literacy. We have a deep understanding of the challenges of supporting the

literacy levels of children, young people and families, particularly in disadvantaged areas.

7. Our research underpins our programmes, campaigns and policy work to improve literacy skills, attitudes, culture and habits across the UK. When the Covid-19 pandemic hit in March 2020, we worked rapidly to adapt our work to ensure that we supported as many families and communities as we could.

The Trust's work with stakeholders in the education sector

8. We work closely with the Department for Education (DfE), providing advice as well as sharing research, best practice and expertise. We also bid for DfE contracts as appropriate. For example, we were awarded the Early Years Disadvantage VCS Grant and as part of that contact, we are currently working to close the disadvantage gap at age 5 by delivering tools to boost the Home Learning Environment.

9. We develop the most effective tools and techniques for teachers and educators to support literacy, providing both resources and programmes designed to engage and inspire children, especially those who have had a tough start in life. Our curriculum-linked resources, focused interventions and funded programmes are rooted in robust research evidence. We support students from early years settings, primary and secondary schools as well as alterative provision settings, to develop the literacy skills they need for academic success, and to help them benefit from reading and writing for pleasure. Through our CPD training, conferences and membership we provide educators with innovative, evidence-based strategies and practical ideas to support literacy in the classroom.

10. The National Literacy Trust works with schools across the UK to build literacy capacity and skills within the teaching profession as well as direct delivery of programmes into schools. We do this through a matrix approach in line with our ongoing strategy, focused primarily on the areas of the country experiencing the highest levels of economic disadvantage. So far this year, we have worked with 9,342 schools, early years and community settings. We do this through a number

of coherent approaches and across the literacy themes of reading, writing and oracy. This includes:

a) **Funded programmes**: Drawing on our research expertise, we identify literacy needs, co-develop and pilot targeted interventions, and scale proven programmes through external funding. For example, our current work with the schools and early years settings includes:

- ***Libraries for Primaries***, a national campaign which addresses the lack of library provision in disadvantaged areas by transforming school library spaces with new books, furniture, and staff training. 1 in 7 state primary schools do not have a library or reading space, rising to 1 in 4 in disadvantaged areas. To date, over 1,500 primary schools have benefitted from this campaign.

- ***Early Words Matter***, a national campaign which encompasses a suite of programmes, such as *First Words Together, Early Words Together, the Words for Life portal,* and training for early years staff and volunteers to work with families, building parents' confidence so that they can support their children's communication, language and literacy skills at home.

- ***Young Readers*** and ***Young Writers*** programmes, which provide direct literacy enrichment where schools face limited capacity. For example, our Young Readers Programme continues to successfully support thousands of children's access to reading resources. Through this programme, we give children the opportunity to choose books that they can take home and keep. These are often the first books they have ever owned. See point 118 for further detail.

- ***Words for Work***, which is an employability programme that is co-delivered with schools and partners, to develop students' communication and leadership skills, and prepare them for the

world of work.

- The ***Empower* programme** which, with funding from the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, works to improve media literacy among young girls in alternative provision or at risk of exclusion. Since 2022, Empower has reached 5,456 students across 584 cohorts in 266 settings (83% of which were alternative provision settings).

- The ***Represent* programme**, which is designed for girls aged 11 to 14 in alternative provision. It uses engaging texts and with a strong oracy focus, to support communication skills, resilience and wellbeing.

- The ***Premier League Primary Stars*** programme, which provides free lesson plans, activities and video content for children aged 5 to 11. The content is designed to inspire learning in Maths, English, PE and Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE). Working with the Premier League, we created all the English resources for the programme including a variety of literacy resource packs. We have continued our Virtual Club Author Days which are still hugely successful.

- ***Words that Count*** a Key Stage 3 financial literacy programme designed for young people aged 11 to 14 who have been excluded or are at risk of exclusion in mainstream and alternative provision settings in England and Scotland. This fully resourced programme aims to unpick the financial terms and concepts that have many young people stumped so that they feel empowered to make good financial decisions and can build financial resilience.

- ***Game Changers*** which is a 20-session reading programme specifically designed for students who are excluded, at risk of

exclusion or self-excluding.

b) **Professional development**: We deliver evidence-based training across the early years, primary, and secondary phases to upskill educators and align literacy teaching with national curriculum goals. This includes a wide-ranging offer for primary teachers, combining in-person and flexible online formats informed by pandemic-era innovation, as well as bespoke support for secondary schools and Multi-Academy Trusts, particularly in embedding *disciplinary literacy*—the integration of subject-specific literacy instruction.

c) **A strong membership network** of over 2,000 schools, which receive tailored resources, support for national events (e.g. Holocaust Memorial Day), and access to impactful literacy initiatives, as well as access to literacy celebration and aspiration-raising activities, such as the *National Reading Champion Quiz* and *Football Book Quiz*.

11. We know that literacy challenges are inherent across the school system – all schools will have children experiencing poverty or with complex needs – and so we provide our education programmes on a nationally accessible basis. However, through our community hubs (in 21 of the most deprived areas of the country) we take a matrix approach where we work closely with community and education leaders to co-design and deliver coherently both community activation work and targeted education programmes.

SECTION B: CHALLENGES FACING CHILDREN BEFORE THE PANDEMIC

An assessment of key issues and challenges in children's literacy prior to the pandemic relating to inequalities in different groups

12. In 2019, we found that 1 in 11 families had no books at home, making access to materials a significant barrier—especially during school and library closures. Overall, 9.3% of children aged 9–18 receiving free school meals (FSMs) said they had no book of their own, compared to 6.0% of their non-FSM peers. Our

research showed that children who own books are six times more likely to read above their expected level (22% vs 3.6%) and nearly three times more likely to enjoy reading (56.2% vs 18.4%; see NLT/01 - INQ000642113).

13. Our extensive early years research and programmes show that the home learning environment (HLE) has a greater impact on a child's development and long-term outcomes than parental education, income, or socioeconomic status. A strong HLE boosts young children's vocabulary, spelling, literacy and communication. However, our pre-pandemic research indicated that parents from lower-income backgrounds often have less time to support learning at home, and their children are exposed to fewer words from an early age (see NLT/02 - INQ000642120). These gaps emerge by age two and can affect progress throughout education and wider development.

14. Before the pandemic, children from lower-income homes started school an average of 4.6 months behind their peers. By the end of primary school, this gap widens to 9 months, and by the end of secondary school, it had increased to 18 months. Progress in closing this gap had stalled by 2019, with a widening at primary level for the first time since 2007, largely due to rising persistent poverty (see NLT/03 - INQ000642108 and NLT/04 - INQ000642106).

15. Our research also revealed persistent inequalities in literacy engagement based on socio-economic status and region. Data from our Annual Literacy Survey, a UK-wide survey that captures the reading, writing, speaking and listening habits of tens of thousands of children, showed a steady decline in reading enjoyment among children before 2020. In early 2020, before the Pandemic, only 47.8% of 8–18-year-olds said they enjoyed reading—the lowest level since we began tracking in 2005 (see NLT/05 - INQ000642119). Key findings from the years leading up to 2020 include:

    a) More primary-aged children enjoyed reading than secondary-aged peers (58.5% vs. 42.3% in 2020).

b) Boys were less likely than girls to enjoy reading or read daily (28.6% of boys vs. 32.9% of girls read daily in 2020).

c) Children on free school meals (FSM) consistently reported lower enjoyment and frequency of reading than their non-FSM peers.

d) Writing enjoyment also declined, dropping 7% between 2010 and 2020. By early 2020, only 39.8% enjoyed writing, and just 21.5% wrote daily in their free time.

e) Boys, older students, and those from higher-income backgrounds were least likely to write regularly outside school.

f) Writing enjoyment varied by region—for example, in 2017/18, it was highest in Greater London (58.1%) and lowest in Yorkshire & the Humber (42.4%).

16. Additionally, prior to the pandemic, nearly 9 in 10 children (89%) in Youth Offender Institutions (YOIs) had been excluded from school. We know that those with low literacy are more likely to be excluded from school and more likely to truant. In 2014, we identified that 9% of very poor readers are persistent truants compared to 2% of those who are average or above average readers (see NLT/06 - INQ000642098).

An overview of the Trust's understanding of the digital divide

17. Before the pandemic, we also knew that 30% of disadvantaged households did not have access to good quality broadband. Additionally, our survey of more than 200 UK teachers found that less than half said their pupils had access to iPads or laptops, and just 2 in 5 to desktop computers, with the picture worse in secondary settings. Almost a quarter of teachers said they had received no training in using technology to support literacy. Similarly, our later research focusing on using technology to support disadvantaged teenage boys found that almost 3 in 5 (58.4%) teachers cited lack of hardware, software and Wi-Fi as the main barriers to using technology to support literacy in the classroom (see NLT/07 -

INQ000642122).

18. While many teachers we surveyed believed technology could have a positive impact on children's literacy (particularly for reluctant or less able readers and writers), varying levels of access to digital tools and infrastructure, as well as a lack of training, presented barriers to its effective use (see NLT/08 - INQ000642123). The digital divide is often associated with home access, but we know that differences in digital resources and training within schools also played a role. We believe this slowed the shift to online learning in some schools. Where a child is born should not determine their access to key resources, but we know that children in disadvantaged households and communities face additional barriers. For instance, we were aware that a third of state schools in affluent areas and over half of all private schools had platforms ready, compared to just one fifth of the most deprived schools, giving better-off schools a clear head start.

SECTION C: THE NATIONAL LITERACY TRUST'S WORK DURING THE PANDEMIC

19. In 2020, the National Literacy Trust established that COVID-19 was set to have a major impact on literacy. In particular, we recognised it would exacerbate the challenges faced by the 4.6 million children living in poverty in the UK, who already started school with vocabularies up to 19 months behind their more affluent peers and who were twice as likely to leave secondary school without good GCSEs in English and maths. With school closures and teachers only able to provide limited support to pupils at home, we knew that the literacy gap between disadvantaged children and their peers was likely to skyrocket, resulting in serious consequences for future opportunities and outcomes.

20. While schools remained open for vulnerable children and the children of keyworkers, DfE figures in May 2020 showed that only 5% of those children were attending. We knew that these same children were less likely to have the technology or connectivity they needed to effectively learn from home, and their parents were less likely to be empowered with the skills, resources, time and confidence to support their learning outside of a school environment.

21. During the Covid-19 pandemic, we launched a significant and sustained response to support children and families in the most deprived communities across the country. Recognising the profound impact of school and library closures, social isolation, and economic hardship on children's learning and wellbeing, we swiftly adapted our delivery model to ensure continued access to high-quality literacy resources and opportunities for engagement.

The Trust's initiatives launched during the pandemic

22. We responded immediately in two ways: 1) digital support, and 2) physical resources for the digitally excluded. These two strands became our strategy in 2020/21 and enabled us to support the literacy of over 1.8 million children.

23. Our programmes and missions were delivered online and through community partnerships with foodbanks, faith centres and domestic violence charities. We galvanised local partnerships and frontline services across the 15 Literacy Hubs we were operating at the time (this number has since increased), as well as regional campaigns, to provide families in some of the nation's most vulnerable communities with essential digital resources, physical books and telephone support. Our response focused on four key aims:

    a) Mitigating the impact of school and library closures on children's access to books and literacy support.

    b) Providing inclusive, alternative channels for engagement to acknowledge digital and material access inequalities.

    c) Maintaining a trusted presence in communities through adapted, localised delivery.

    d) Supporting families experiencing heightened financial pressures, many of whom were already at a disadvantage prior to the pandemic.

24. To achieve these aims, we drew on our expertise to deliver a wide-ranging portfolio of adapted and new initiatives, which evolved through the year as the situation changed. Our incredibly hard-working team of experts created suites of

innovative initiatives that were highly effective and impactful in mitigating some of the literacy and wellbeing challenged faced by the communities we work in (see NLT/09 - INQ000642115). From April 2020 to the end of March 2021 we:

a) Supported the literacy of the 700,000 children who were out of school and couldn't access digital learning.

b) Instigated and facilitated the distribution of 575,643 books, magazines and writing resources by working with our publisher partners during lockdown to support children in disadvantaged communities.

c) Directly put 300,000 books and literacy packs into the hands of children and families in the most disadvantaged areas.

d) Had over 1 million unique users to our family-focussed website, *Words for Life*.

e) Worked with 6,492 schools, supporting their efforts to reengage learners.

f) Inspired 83 businesses to prioritise literacy through the Vision for Literacy Business Pledge 2021.

g) Reformed the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Literacy, through an event attended by over 100 parliamentarians as a vehicle to better deliver our advocacy work throughout this critical time.

25. Our powerful response during lockdown demonstrated the deep value of community-based literacy support, and we've since adapted and strengthened our initiatives to reflect both the lessons learned and the changing circumstances on the ground. Despite widespread digital exclusion, we pivoted quickly and effectively to online engagement. Our teams developed dedicated Facebook pages for each area we work in, and these Facebook Hub platforms became vibrant spaces for connection. For example, the Middlesbrough Reads Facebook page saw 20,000 video views in just six weeks. Initiatives such as Digital Literacy

Champions, online reading groups, and virtual author sessions helped keep literacy development alive when schools and libraries were closed.

26. We tailored delivery to local needs—through social media, local radio, and printed activity packs—ensuring high levels of community engagement. These efforts deepened our local networks. We also built new partnerships, including with emergency food providers, and strengthened existing ones, significantly increasing our capacity for community-based delivery during and beyond the crisis.

27. Our initiatives included the **Virtual School Library** (see NLT/10 - INQ000642118), a response to children not being able to access school or public libraries, which was developed in partnership with Oak National Academy. We created a new Virtual School Library, providing free universal digital access to hundreds of books. The virtual library was used by over 1 million young readers who couldn't access their school or public libraries.

28. Our innovative **Doorstep to Digital** initiative supported the home learning environment of children who were unable to access schools, libraries and settings and who had few resources in the home. The initiative combined book gifting with digital engagement by distributing books through schools, food banks, community hubs, and, when possible, directly to families at home. Now known as Stories@Home, the programme pairs physical books with online videos of authors reading aloud and sharing creative prompts. Our model was highly successful and enabled families to engage offline and online, bridging the digital divide and offering continuity in literacy development at a time when formal learning was heavily disrupted.

29. In 2020/21 through our excellent partnerships with publishers, schools, food distribution points, early years settings, children's centres, we **delivered over 575,000 books, magazines, and writing resources** across our local areas. When safety restrictions allowed, we also delivered directly to the homes of families who needed additional support. For example, in Middlesbrough, we worked with the council and Penguin Random House to gift 1,800 books to vulnerable children via social workers and 150 books to isolated adults and

families with food parcels. Many of our book gifts included printed literacy activity packs, offering offline learning for families without internet access.

30. Thousands of children also took part in Connecting Stories, our reader development project supported by 26 publishers and Arts Council England, ensuring continued access to books and literacy experiences during a time of crisis. The scale and speed of our response ensured continued access to books for children who might otherwise have had none at home.

31. To meet the surge in online engagement, while recognising digital access disparities, we launched numerous digital offers, including **two new online platforms called Family Zone (for children up to the age of 11) and Zone In (for children age 13+).** These platforms were supported by KPMG and brought together some of the UK's most exciting literacy activities, resources and free books to engage children at home and supplement more formal lesson plans. Family Zone proved invaluable, with **140,000 families visiting over the first six weeks**. As funding became available, Family Zone content was merged with the existing *Words for Life* platform (see NLT/11 - INQ000642128), which is also where the Virtual School Library is now available. To achieve this, we conducted a complete review of audience needs, tone, and accessibility informed the redevelopment of this family-facing site, which offered literacy support for a range of ages and family contexts (for examples, see NLT/12- INQ000642109).

32. Our new family-oriented websites were just one element of our digital offer during the pandemic. Their success was matched by that of the wealth of innovative, diverse and comprehensive online resources and projects we launched during this time. This inclusive digital response also included:

    a) ***The Book of Hopes* project** which was our pioneering digital partnership initiative (see NLT/13 - INQ000642124). We worked with high-profile figures and organisations like Katherine Rundell and Bloomsbury to create free access to uplifting stories, helping children manage their wellbeing amidst the emotional challenges of the pandemic (see the webpage here). This free digital book brought together contributions from leading children's authors and was

accompanied by a structured strand of support for families and educators, especially in areas most affected by the digital divide. **The resource generated over 608,000 page views between April 2020 and March 2021**. We also distributed physical copies through our Hubs to reach families without internet access, directly in their communities.

b) **Online author events** (e.g. with Cressida Cowell and Konnie Huq) accessed by tens of thousands of families (see Annex I for examples).

c) **Story sessions, writing challenges, and competitions** promoted via social media and email newsletters.

d) **Local area microsites** were developed, aggregating bespoke resources, local updates, and opportunities for engagement.

e) **Development of local Facebook groups**, which provided targeted, community-focused support and communication. For example, the Middlesbrough Facebook Group reached over 7,000 people with a single post, helping to sustain local engagement and ensure visibility of resources.

f) **Teaching resources** were developed with partners like Babcock, Twinkl, and Place2Be to support both academic and emotional recovery during remote learning and the return to classrooms. These resources were downloaded 14,985 times from issue to March 2021.

g) **The National Reading Champions Quiz**, sponsored by the Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society (ALCS), was converted to a fully online format. This has been hugely successful, and we have since kept this format as the removal of financial and barriers means that now, over 500 schools from across all four UK nations participate.

h) **My Dear New Friend** letter-writing initiative connected children with older adults in care homes, fostering empathy, social cohesion and writing motivation.

i) **The Covid-19 Observatory** was established by our Research team, providing an extensive evidence base to track changes in literacy behaviours and attitudes. Findings were shared through newsletters and Education Recovery pages.

33. The National Literacy Trust's COVID-19 Observatory was an initiative launched during the pandemic to consolidate and analyse information on how COVID-19 affected children's and young people's literacy in the UK. Recognising a lack of centralised information on this issue, we aimed to provide a comprehensive resource for educators, policymakers, and parents. The Observatory gathered research studies, articles, insights and policy developments relating to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's learning, literacy and wellbeing, with a particular focus on less advantaged children and young people. It also included research conducted by the National Literacy Trust during this time (for example, analyses of the impact on the Home Learning Environment and on children and young people's reading and writing engagement; see NLT/14 - INQ000642110).

34. By drawing together key findings focused on literacy across the early years, primary and secondary age groups, we hoped to help all those supporting literacy, from parents and teachers to businesses and policymakers. Along with keeping track of research, assessments and policy developments as they were released, the Observatory provided regular insights and analysis of the developing evidence base. It also offered policy recommendations, advocating for a cross-government strategy to improve literacy outcomes, especially in disadvantaged communities (see NLT/15 - INQ000642107). This strategy would focus on community-based programmes, reducing literacy-related stigma, and ensuring digital access for all families.

35. The COVID-19 Observatory informed our organisation's work by serving as a centralised, evolving evidence base that shaped both internal understanding and external action on literacy during the pandemic. It enabled us to respond quickly and credibly to emerging challenges, and to advocate for evidence-based policy and practice. It directly shaped our strategic and operational responses by informing the design and targeting of education recovery programmes, especially

in communities hardest hit by school closures, by increasing internal understanding of the scale and nature of learning loss and the widening attainment gap, the disproportionate impact on children from lower-income households or in under-resourced regions and the importance of digital inclusion and the home learning environment. Learning was used to refine messaging, shape staff training, and guide future research priorities.

36. As schools moved from initial closures to phased reopening, we launched an **Education Recovery webpage** to guide teachers and schools through the evolving landscape. The page featured messaging tailored to recognise the resilience of learners and avoid deficit framing, as well as recovery-focused content such as teaching sequences, summer school modules, and trauma-informed approaches inspired by Carpenter's Five Levers and Place2Be's recovery themes (e.g. self-efficacy, hope, connectedness). The resources we curated included:

    a) *Comics Rule* (in collaboration with *The Beano*)

    b) Critical literacy materials from NewsWise

    c) Spoken word-focused *Monologue Jam* (for age 14+)

    d) Birmingham's reflective poetry workshops and accompanying national resource

    e) A digital *Words for Work* book club

37. At the National Literacy Trust, we also recognised the impact of the pandemic on teacher wellbeing. Therefore, we swiftly developed high-quality communications strategies that ensured our teacher members remained supported through fortnightly e-bulletins with literacy resources, wellbeing materials, and updates tailored to the evolving situation. As a key extension of education recovery, we published links to mental health services and practical wellbeing strategies for teachers, as well as literacy-based activities, such as journaling and reading for pleasure, to promote emotional resilience.

38. We also transitioned our teacher training and practitioner support to online formats, enabling continued professional development and literacy delivery. This ensured teachers had access to practical support and timely content during periods of exceptional pressure.

39. Our place-based working model means that we have an excellent understanding of how to operate localised family engagement and outreach. Therefore, in each of the 15 local areas, we delivered targeted responses, tailored to the communities in which we work. For example, in Peterborough and Manchester, we ran mobile book drops, while in Doncaster and Nottingham, we supported early years development through partnerships with Early Years Hubs, providing speech, language, and communication resources.

40. We also collaborated with housing associations and community organisations to distribute resources at trusted local venues. In areas like Doncaster, Blackpool, Swindon, and Bradford, we worked with teachers, librarians, authors, illustrators, and community champions to create engaging, hyperlocal literacy content. For example, Doncaster Stories launched a YouTube channel with weekly creative writing challenges inspired by local landmarks, brought to life with vibrant illustrations.

41. Our network of Literacy Hubs played a key role in regional advocacy as Strategic Steering Groups (SSGs) in each Hub, comprising local authority, education and public health partners, worked with other local leaders to shape education recovery plans. These groups influenced decisions around local resource distribution, reading programmes, and community recovery priorities.

42. We understand the power of early intervention. Yet at the onset of the first national lockdown in March 2020, we identified that the pandemic would disproportionately impact early years development. Therefore, we responded quickly by providing families who had limited resources with access to extra books and take-home activity packs via our community partners and early years settings, and our newly established Family Zone portal.

43. In May 2020, we also launched **Early Words Together Online** webinars in two formats: 1) practitioner-led sessions and 2) NLT-led sessions, including Facebook

Live storytimes with craft activities and safely delivered resource packs. These digital formats were especially accessible for working parents, and nearly 75% of practitioners reported improved digital engagement skills. Inclusivity sits at the core of everything the National Literacy Trust does, therefore, we created Time Together booklets—offline versions of the programme—for families without internet access. These were distributed via food banks and translated into key community languages.

44. We recognised that some disadvantaged families had limited access to safe outdoor spaces during the pandemic. Therefore, we launched **Early Words Together at Two Outdoors**. In September 2020, we trained 25 practitioners from 15 children's centres in Southwark, using Forest School principles developed with an expert leader. These outdoor sessions promoted language development and mental wellbeing through sensory, nature-based activities. Nearly **90% of staff** told us this enabled them to gain confidence in delivering outdoor learning, and **75% of parents** reported increased use of natural spaces for learning at home.

45. We quickly adapted the DfE-funded Hungry Little Minds (HLM) campaign during lockdowns to support home learning. Starting with six delivery partners (and later expanding to 12 of our Hubs), activities moved online using social media, newsletters, and our *Words for Life* website. Physical resources—books, magazines, and flyers—were delivered directly to families, with 'garden gate' visits where possible. Health visitors and other frontline services helped us reach vulnerable families, including those in temporary housing. We also partnered with local libraries, food banks, women's refuges, refugee groups, and arts organisations to expand the campaign's reach. Furthermore, through new collaborations with parks teams, we created 12 Story Trails in local parks, promoting early literacy through safe outdoor play. As restrictions eased, in-person events resumed with strong attendance and positive family feedback on the welcoming, inclusive settings.

46. Through our community work, we recognised that many parents were struggling to support their children's home learning during the first lockdown. Therefore, we adapted our school programmes to help families and teachers continue to support the literacy of pupils who needed it most. To do this, we produced 15 new

videos for the *Words for Life* and *HLM* websites, digital booklets, and hosted live *Digital Family Days*. A range of social media content—including Facebook Lives and interactive posts—kept families connected to literacy resources during isolation.

47. Our delivery partners also progressed volunteer recruitment and shared best practice across regions. For example, in partnership with Early Years in Mind (Anna Freud Centre), we developed practitioner and family-facing resources to support transitions into and back to early years settings. These focused on emotional wellbeing and communication and were linked to stories and session plans that we adapted to suit changing public health guidelines.

48. For older children, we created a wide range of simple and fun **activity sheets from our** *Dream Big* programme to help children in Key Stage 1 explore different jobs for free on Family Zone. Additionally, we made our Skills Academy reading programme for Year 7 and 8 students available for free, which rewarded progress with exciting freestyle football, beatbox and breakdance videos. And our **Words for Work** employability programme was delivered with business volunteers to offer students online workshops and support with CV writing, interviews and more to prepare them for the world of work.

49. Our team who specialise in alternative provision and the use of sport to support literacy also redesigned our Game Changers programme, which is a KS3 reading intervention aimed at students who had been excluded from, or who were at risk of being excluded from, mainstream education. Originally, the physical pack we had available was a traded offer, but we created a free digital version and created printed workbooks which were sent out to settings.

50. Additionally, we produced our first two Premier League Primary Stars (PLPS) online author events (Virtual Club Author Days, VCADs). The online events use football as a way of sparking an enjoyment of reading and they were attended by thousands of children who. Our PLPS programme provides free lesson plans, activities and video content for children aged 5 to 11. The content is designed to inspire learning in Maths, English, PE and Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE). Working with the Premier League, we created all

the English resources for the programme including a variety of literacy resource packs. We have continued our Virtual Club Author Days which are still hugely successful.

51. During COVID-19, we also quickly adapted our two-year **Literacy for Learning** programme, funded by the JJ Sainsbury's Foundation, to support over 40 secondary schools in high-need areas like Birmingham, Nottingham, Greater Manchester, and the North East. Launched in 2019, boosting teachers' confidence and skills in teaching literacy across all subjects.

52. When schools closed in March 2020, we shifted to online delivery to sustain teacher communities, support remote learning, and provide accessible professional development. Trainers received expert Zoom training, and sessions were redesigned into shorter, focused modules. New content addressed emerging needs, including: an introductory asynchronous disciplinary literacy module (free on the NLT website); a KS2–KS3 academic writing transition module and, a vocabulary development module. Resources were widely used, with over 4,000 downloads—especially for vocabulary development. Over **90% of teachers** found the online sessions engaging or very engaging.

53. In addition to professional development, we delivered virtual conferences and week-long online programmes for secondary schools, featuring author events for students and teachers. We also held an online Festival of Science and Imagination with talks from scientists and writers to inspire students. Despite COVID-19 challenges, we quickly shifted to high-quality digital content and virtual events, expanding our national reach and keeping teachers and students engaged in literacy learning across the curriculum.

54. We also wanted to ensure that the literacy curriculum on offer during remote education was broad and creative. Therefore, our initiatives centred on:

    a) **Reading for Pleasure**, which was central to many of our initiatives, including the Virtual School Library, Connecting Stories, and the Book of Hopes project. We have extensive research into the wide-ranging benefits of reading for pleasure including the positive impact on

academic attainment, social cohesion, wellbeing, productivity and economic growth.

b) **Creative writing and storytelling**, which we delivered through localised content—like Doncaster Stories' YouTube creative writing challenges— to kept literacy contextual and engaging.

c) **Early Years speech, language and communication**, which we embedded throughout our programmes like *Early Words Together Online* and complemented with our nature-based learning initiatives for toddlers.

d) **Employability and functional literacy,** which we focused on through our *Words for Work* and *Zone In* web pages that offered CV writing, interview skills, and oracy support for older students.

55. With the rapid closure of schools and libraries, children, especially those in areas of deprivation, lost crucial access to reading materials and structured learning. We quickly identified this as a pressing issue, as these communities often rely heavily on public services for educational support. The pandemic exacerbated existing challenges, including limited access to books and educational materials at home.

56. We sought to mitigate the impact of these closures by maintaining direct contact with beneficiaries, providing resources and support through digital platforms and physical distribution where possible. Our approach was informed by ongoing feedback from local partners and its SSGs. These groups, comprising key local leaders, provided real-time insights into the changing needs of communities. This local intelligence enabled us to quickly adapt our initiatives to address specific challenges faced by different areas, such as book gifting through food banks and tailored outreach efforts.

57. We worked closely with local partners to get resources directly to families. Existing local storage units were repurposed as mini-distribution centres, with infection control measures in place to comply with public health guidelines and

ensure safety. Books and magazines were distributed through trusted organisations already embedded in communities, including:

a) **Food banks and support services**, such as the *Trussell Trust* and council-run teams

b) **Social work and housing organisations**, like *Middlesbrough Borough Council* and *CavCa*

c) **Community groups and charities**, including *Shared Health (Manchester)* and *Age Concern*

d) **Sports foundations**, such as the *Port Vale Foundation* and *Stoke City FC Foundation*

58. The transition to online learning underscored the need to maintain the communities of practice that had been developing among educators. Teachers valued the peer support that these communities offered, and we quickly pivoted to online training and digital networking to ensure continued collaboration and professional development. The shift was necessary to support teachers in adapting to new delivery methods, especially as literacy became even more crucial in remote learning environments. Many schools, particularly those open for vulnerable children, became key distribution points. Therefore, we supplied:

a) **Instant Libraries and literacy toolkits** to schools in areas like Doncaster, Wythenshawe, and the North East

b) **Stationery donations,** through our partnership with WH Smith, to children identified as lacking essential materials

59. As discussed in section 14, we recognised the digital divide as a significant barrier, particularly for families with limited access to technology. In response, we adapted our resources to be printable and mobile-friendly, ensuring that families without access to computers or printers could still engage. This consideration ensured that the support reached those who needed it most, even if they had limited or no digital access.

An overview of the Trust's policy and advocacy work during the Specified Period

60. During the Specified Period, we engaged in advocacy work to influence government and societal responses to the pandemic, particularly around the widening literacy gap. While our primary focus was supporting children, young people, families and communities on the ground, in 2021, we reformed the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Literacy, at an event attended by over 100 participants. The impact of the pandemic on early language and literacy for children from the most disadvantaged communities in the UK has been a focus for this group. In 2023, this led to the publication of our Building Firm Foundations report (see NLT/16 - INQ000642099), which made recommendations for early years language and communication recovery following the COVID-19 pandemic.

61. Our advocacy work highlighted pandemic-related learning loss, digital exclusion, poverty and the need for long-term systemic change to reduce literacy inequality. We regularly shared survey data and updates with policymakers to provide real-time evidence of COVID-19's impact on reading habits, access to resources, and mental health. We also advocated for equitable access to digital tools and print materials, financial support, improved early years provision, and partnered with charities and think tanks to push for inclusive literacy support. Our research showed reading and writing supported children's mental health during lockdowns, reinforcing the need for wellbeing-focused strategies in schools and local authorities.

62. Our policy response to the Covid-19 pandemic was driven by our longstanding mission to address literacy inequality, particularly for children and families in deprived communities who are already at a disadvantage. With the sudden closure of schools and libraries, these vulnerable groups lost critical access to books, structured learning, and pastoral care, creating an urgent need to mitigate learning loss and support wellbeing during an exceptionally disruptive period.

63. During this period, government support was mostly indirect, through existing or extended funding agreements like Opportunity Areas, which aided work in places such as Blackpool, Doncaster, and North Yorkshire Coast. Some National Literacy Trust staff remained active through government-backed contracts, which

also influenced eligibility for furlough. Most of our Hubs worked with the Local Authority in the area and pivoted work to engage with early help, social work and other teams which had ongoing access to families.

64. We have encouraged government to adopt a cross-sectoral approach to post-pandemic education recovery. Over 100 businesses work with the National Literacy Trust to support our programmes and campaigns (see NLT/17 - INQ000642127). These include the Premier League, British Land, Very Group, WHSmith, KPMG and all major publishers. CEOs and leaders from over a dozen of these organisations sit on the Literacy and Business Council. In November 2021, the then Secretary of State for Education, Nadhim Zahawi, met the Council to discuss the role of the business community in supporting post-Pandemic literacy recovery. Subsequently, we took business leaders in to meet with Claire Coutinho, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children, Families and Wellbeing at the DfE to demonstrate the concerns of the business community for the impact of the pandemic on early language and literacy.

65. During the pandemic, we also received funding from the Department for Education's Early Years Disadvantage Voluntary Community Sector Grants Programme, which helped us create programmes engaging parents in their children's early learning. However, in addition to the initiatives discussed above, we also developed and expanding our partnerships with a wide range of organisations in order to fund, produce, and distribute content, including:

    a) 26 publishers who donated large quantities of books

    b) **Corporate funders**: *KPMG*, *BUPA*, *AWS*, *The Premier League,* and *The Greggs Foundation* helped cover increased material and staffing costs

    c) **Cultural and educational organisations**: *The Guardian Foundation*, *NewsWise*, *Twinkl*, *Place2Be*, *Oak Academy*, and *Babcock* supported content delivery and outreach

    d) *Lancome* to deliver "Behind the Cover", a book club for children

SECTION D: THE NATIONAL LITERACY TRUST'S RESEARCH ABOUT THE IMPACT OF EDUCATION DISRUPTION

An overview of the Trust's Research during and since the Specified Period

66. Through our extensive research, programme, and community work, we know that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound and multifaceted impact on children's literacy. Drawing on a range of surveys, research studies, and community-based work, the evidence below demonstrates declining literacy engagement and attainment across age groups, with disproportionately negative effects for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

67. Disruptions to early years education severely affected young children's language and communication development, especially in disadvantaged areas. In 2023, 185,000 five-year-olds started school without the literacy, communication and language skills they need. During the pandemic, school closures shifted the responsibility for early education to families, exposing significant challenges in the home learning environment.

68. Our research demonstrated that reduced parental wellbeing, limited digital access, and inconsistent practitioner support, all weakened literacy engagement at home (see NLT/18 - INQ000642126). The surveys we conducted from 2019 to 2021 showed a steady decline in parental involvement in key literacy activities for children aged 0–5. For example, daily parent–child conversations fell from 90.3% in 2019 to 76.2% in 2021, while daily reading dropped from 66.1% to 53.1%. These declines were steeper in lower-income households, where only 50% of parents from the C2DE social grade reported daily reading, compared to 56% of ABC1 parents (see NLT/19 - INQ000642114). Lower-income families, already at a disadvantage before the pandemic, faced even greater barriers during lockdown due to a lack of time, confidence, and resources to support learning at home.

69. As schools reopened and daily routines resumed, reading enjoyment dropped back to pre-pandemic levels by early 2022 (47.8%) and declined further to 34.6% in 2024—the lowest level since 2005 (see NLT/20 - INQ000642103).

Analysis by age group shows that this is a particular crisis for secondary school pupils. For instance, while for 8- to 11-year-olds, the proportion of children who said they enjoyed reading in their free time dropped from 56.2% in 2023 to 51.9% in 2024, for 11- to 14-year-olds the drop was over twice as much: from 40.4% to 30.7%. With daily reading levels, those aged 14 to 16 saw a particularly sharp drop of 10.9 %. We also saw a narrowing of the FSM gap. Unfortunately, rather than a levelling up, we witnessed a levelling down, with the drop in reading enjoyment and reading frequency being more pronounced for those who don't receive free school meals.

70. Our 2024 research also shows twice as many children who enjoy reading in their free time have above average reading skills compared to their peers who do not enjoy it, and they also said it helps them to relax (57%), feel happy (41%), learn new things (51%), understand views of others (33%), learn about other cultures (32%) and be confident (26%).

71. In 2024, our research showed that 9.8% of children reported not owning a book, up from 6% in 2021 (see NLT/21 - INQ000642100). Among children receiving FSM, 12.4% did not own a book in 2024, compared to 9.2% in 2021. For non-FSM pupils, the figure rose from 5.3% to 8%. However, we know that book ownership strongly correlates with reading habits. Children aged 8–18 who owned a book were more than three times as likely to read daily (23.1% vs. 7.0%) and nearly four times as likely to enjoy reading (38.7% vs. 10.1%). Children without a book were more likely to read below average (16.7% vs. 7.3%) and less likely to read above average (10.6% vs. 22.5%) compared to peers with a book.

72. Throughout the pandemic, we identified that some children used writing as a means of creative expression and emotional regulation. Between 2020 and 2022, there was a notable increase in daily writing across all age groups. Many children reported enjoying writing more when it was self-directed and helped them process their emotions during this uncertain time (see NLT/22 - INQ000642104). However, in 2024, fewer than 3 in 10 (28.7%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 said that they enjoy writing in their free time. Levels

of writing enjoyment have decreased by 18.1% over the past 14 years, with levels decreasing by 5.9% over the past year alone. Enjoyment levels dropped for all children and young people in 2024, but the drop was particularly pronounced for boys aged 5 to 8, with levels decreasing by 11.9% between 2023 and 2024 (see NLT/23 - INQ000642105).

73. Our research also found that audiobooks and podcasts gained popularity during the pandemic. In our 2021 survey of 58,346 children, nearly one in four (23.4%) reported listening to audiobooks more than before lockdown, with many attributing this to improved accessibility and the comfort these formats provided. Boys, in particular, engaged more with audiobooks than girls (25.0% vs 22.4%), making this the only format where boys reported higher engagement and enjoyment. Podcasts, too, were widely appreciated for their relaxing and inspiring qualities, though children from lower-income households were less likely to engage with them (see NLT/24 - INQ000642101). Additionally, in our 2024 survey of more than 37,000 children, 2 in 5 (42.3%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 told us they enjoyed listening to audio in their free time in 2024 (see NLT/25 - INQ000642102). This is a slight increase on levels of listening enjoyment in 2023 (39.4%). In 2024, a higher percentage of children and young people said they enjoyed listening than enjoyed reading in their free time (42.3% vs 34.6%). This is the first time that more enjoyed listening than reading since we first started asking about listening in 2020.

An assessment of how disruptions affected children's literacy and learning across different groups

74. Upon the reopening of schools and education settings, we identified significant gaps in children's literacy, particularly in early years and those from disadvantaged backgrounds:

    - Early Years regression: Practitioners observed a notable delay in speech, language and communication skills.
    - Key Stage 2 (KS2) and secondary gaps: Teachers highlighted the loss of reading stamina, vocabulary knowledge, and writing fluency among older pupils.

- School-led assessments: Teachers used informal diagnostics and structured assessments to identify and address learning loss.

- Trust support: The NLT developed "Education Recovery" resources and training focused on closing gaps through trauma-informed teaching, vocabulary development, and bridging primary-secondary transitions (e.g., KS2–KS3 writing modules).

- Lower-income families faced significant barriers during lockdown due to reduced parental wellbeing, limited digital access, and inconsistent practitioner support. Surveys from 2019 to 2021 showed a steady decline in parental involvement in key literacy activities, particularly in lower-income households.

- Our research into book ownership in 2021 found a similar picture to 2019, with more children who received free school meals (FSMs) saying they didn't have a book of their own compared with their peers who did not receive FSMs (9.2% vs 5.3%). Book ownership was associated with greater reading enjoyment and frequency, with more than twice as many book owners enjoying reading (52.8% vs 21.1%) and reading daily in free time (31.8% vs 13.5%) compared with those who didn't have books.

- In 2021, our survey found the gap in reading enjoyment between children who received FSMs and those that didn't had doubled over the course of the year, increasing from 2.1 percentage points in early 2020 to 4.6 in 2021, with more non-FSM than FSM pupils saying they enjoyed reading. Indeed, the year between 2020 and 2021 had a particularly detrimental impact on the reading enjoyment of boys who received FSMs, with a 5.2% decreased in reading enjoyment levels in this group. Just 2 in 5 (41.4%) boys who received FSMs enjoyed reading in 2021 compared with 46.1% of non-FSM boys.

75. Through our work in Youth Offender Institutions (YOIs), we also identified that the pandemic's effect on education provision has been especially severe. Already among the most educationally vulnerable groups, children in custody experienced significant setbacks as access to structured learning and literacy

support diminished. This drop is particularly troubling, given the critical role literacy plays in rehabilitation and future opportunities for these individuals.

76. Additionally, as schools transitioned back to in-person learning, the long-term effects of the pandemic became increasingly evident. Teachers reported to us that more children were falling below expected standards in reading and writing, with disadvantaged pupils disproportionately affected. Many teachers used informal diagnostics, as well as structured testing, to try and identify and address learning loss. Through discussions with schools, we particularly noted concerns with the transition from primary to secondary school, where existing learning gaps appeared to be widening further. Teachers also highlighted the loss of reading stamina, vocabulary knowledge, and writing fluency among older pupils.

77. The pandemic also demonstrated the importance of disciplinary literacy—the ability to read, write, and communicate effectively in all subjects. Through our work with schools, we understand that students' weakened literacy skills have made it harder for them to engage with subject-specific content. The rise in misinformation during the pandemic underscored the need for critical literacy, where students are taught to evaluate the reliability of information, particularly online.

78. Both during and post-pandemic, our research has focused on children's literacy development. This means that we have not directly conducted assessments on how the pandemic impacted the attendance rates of vulnerable children nor how COVID-19 affected children's social and emotional development.

An assessment of the challenges children encountered in remote or online education

79. However, we did identify that, the shift to remote learning during the pandemic had a profound and uneven impact on children's literacy, revealing and deepening long-standing inequalities. While some learners adapted to online environments, many—particularly those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds—faced significant barriers that limited their engagement with and progress in literacy. Through our frontline work in communities, we saw first-hand that many children lacked access to reliable internet, appropriate devices, or

even basic resources such as books. As such, remote learning disproportionately affected disadvantaged children.

80. During the pandemic, affluent families were more likely to receive home-schooling support from schools, such as resources and guidance, than disadvantaged families. Through our work in communities, we know that many families lacked the technology and connectivity required to access online learning, which is why we launched initiatives like Doorstep to Digital. Many children lacked access to reliable internet, suitable devices, or even basic learning materials like books. Fewer than a quarter of the most deprived schools had online learning platforms in place at the start of the first lockdown, compared to much higher levels in more affluent schools. Even where platforms existed, over a quarter of children in the most financially vulnerable households couldn't access them. Overall, remote education highlighted and deepened existing inequalities. Children's experiences and outcomes depended heavily on access to resources, home support, and school preparedness—factors that varied widely across the country.

81. Through our work with schools and teachers, we also identified that assessment during remote learning was inconsistent. While direct data on school-led post-lockdown measures is limited, we recognised that schools played a crucial role in addressing learning loss after reopening.

An overview of the remote learning and curriculum the Trust offered

82. The remote education we offered during the pandemic comprised a mixture of formats:

- Digital platforms: Online learning was delivered via platforms such as Family Zone (ages 0–11) and Zone In (ages 13+), offering interactive resources, books, writing challenges, and recorded author events.

- Live and pre-recorded content: Literacy programmes included live author readings, writing sessions, and asynchronous CPD content for teachers.

- Offline materials: To reach digitally excluded families, we distributed over 575,000 books, magazines, and printed activity packs, often via food banks, children's centres, and direct delivery.

- Hybrid models: Initiatives like *Doorstep to Digital* paired physical book gifting with online author videos and creative prompts, allowing families to engage regardless of digital access.

83. The literacy curriculum during remote education was broad and creative:

- Reading for Pleasure: Central to many initiatives, including the Virtual School Library (in partnership with Oak National Academy), *Connecting Stories*, and the *Book of Hopes* project.

- Creative writing and storytelling: Localised content—like Doncaster Stories' YouTube creative writing challenges—kept literacy contextual and engaging.

- Employability and functional literacy: *Words for Work* and *Zone In* offered CV writing, interview skills, and oracy support for older students.

- Early Years focus: Programmes like *Early Words Together Online* supported language acquisition for the under-fives, complemented by nature-based learning initiatives for toddlers.

84. Assessment during remote education was inconsistent and often informal:

- Schools and platforms: While schools provided their own assessments, our platforms were largely supportive and enrichment-focused rather than formally evaluative.

- Feedback loops: Teacher and practitioner surveys, local feedback through Facebook groups, and partnerships with schools allowed some tracking of engagement and impact.

- Monitoring access and engagement: Digital metrics (e.g., Family Zone usage) and practitioner reports indicated uptake and revealed barriers, guiding ongoing refinement.

The Trust's assessment of the factors that impacted the effectiveness of remote learning

85. Socioeconomic status had a profound impact. In 2020, we knew that 4.6 million children were living in poverty in the UK, with disadvantaged children already 19 months behind in vocabulary development by the time they started school. They were twice as likely to leave secondary school without a pass in English and maths. The pandemic widened these gaps dramatically, as many lacked digital access, quiet learning spaces, and basic literacy resources like books.

86. Age and educational stage mattered as our research shows that primary-aged children were more engaged in reading than secondary-aged peers, and pre-pandemic literacy gaps widened with age—from 4.6 months at school entry to 18 months by secondary school exit for disadvantaged pupils.

87. Through our work in communities and partnerships with education professionals and other third sector organisations, we understand that SEND learners and those with complex needs fell behind further due to the lack of tailored support and specialist resources during school closures.

88. Our research also identified that gender played a role in engagement, as boys were consistently less likely than girls to enjoy reading and writing or engage in these activities daily.

89. Home environments were deeply unequal. Many disadvantaged families lacked internet connectivity (30% had no reliable broadband), access to books (1 in 11 had no books at home), or the physical space for quiet study. Libraries and schools—critical sources of literacy materials—were closed.

90. School Hubs provided more structure, but with only 5% of vulnerable pupils attending, most missed out on this opportunity. We understood that home-based learners in overcrowded or unstable environments were especially disadvantaged.

91. These disparities created a two-tier experience: many wealthier families had the resources to make the home could be a productive learning space; for others, it was a source of stress, educational disruption and disconnection.

92. Parental support was a decisive factor in how effectively children engaged with remote learning. Many lower-income parents lacked the skills, confidence, or time to support home learning. Pre-pandemic, children from these households already had reduced exposure to language and reading activities, which worsened under lockdown.

93. To address this, we developed and disseminated a wide array of accessible, inclusive resources to support families:

    - Digital resources: Mobile-friendly and printable literacy packs, accessible through platforms like *Words for Life* and the *Family Zone*.
    - Physical book distribution: For digitally excluded families, books and learning materials were distributed via foodbanks, faith centres, and domestic violence shelters.
    - Community partnerships: Local delivery through we's 15 Literacy Hubs and targeted campaigns ensured families in the most vulnerable communities received support.
    - Tailored content: We created guidance for parents on storytelling, reading aloud, and fostering home literacy environments.

94. Our surveys also showed that during the pandemic, 90.3% of parents with children aged 0–5 said they chatted daily with their child, and 66.1% read daily—suggesting positive impacts of our engagement efforts during lockdown.

95. We found that the digital divide significantly affected the effectiveness of remote learning, particularly for disadvantaged learners. Many children lacked access to reliable devices and internet connections at home, and even within schools, digital infrastructure and staff training were inconsistent. Many teachers reported that their pupils did not have access to devices like laptops or iPads, and many practitioners had received no training in using technology to support literacy.

96. These disparities slowed the transition to remote learning, especially in the most deprived schools, where only around very few had online learning platforms in place at the start of the first lockdown.

97. Access to digital reading material did show some promise. Our research found that less engaged readers, including boys and pupils eligible for free school meals, were more likely to read fiction digitally than their peers. This highlights the importance of offering a variety of reading formats to engage all learners, particularly those less motivated by print.

98. While direct data on school-led post-lockdown measures is limited, we recognised that schools played a crucial role in addressing learning loss after reopening. However, catch-up and re-engagement efforts varied, particularly between schools in different socio-economic areas. Therefore, we used our partnerships and expertise to support schools with:

- Targeted literacy interventions, especially for those most affected by the pandemic.
- Teacher training and professional development to adapt to new teaching approaches and blended learning models.
- Ongoing support for children's mental wellbeing, recognising that reading and writing could support emotional resilience, particularly for those who had disengaged during remote learning.

99. We also maintained communities of practice among educators by transitioning professional networks and training online, supporting collaboration and innovation in post-lockdown literacy delivery.

E. INTERVENTIONS AND EDUCATION RECOVERY

An overview of the Trust's education interventions designed to assist with recovery in children's literacy since the pandemic

100. To support children's literacy development post-pandemic, we have taken a place-based approach. For example, in order to facilitate change in Bradford, we've focused on encouraging writing through innovative poetry projects like the **West Yorkshire Young Poet Laureate** programme and the **Goldsmiths' 500 Writers Programme**, improving school readiness by working with dads, and recruiting local **community volunteers as Literacy Champions** to improve

access to books and literacy experiences. Furthermore, originally an American school bus, the *Bradford Stories Bus* has been transformed into a vibrant mobile space for storytelling, reading, and writing. Created during the pandemic to reach isolated communities, it now runs literacy-themed events that inspire children and families to read and write for pleasure. Now in its fourth year, the bus reaches tens of thousands of children and young people in Bradford, especially in areas with the greatest literacy needs. It is a familiar presence at festivals, schools, and community events. In partnership with Morrisons, the bus will host a series of mini festivals at store locations, bringing creativity and literacy to everyday community spaces. Our work in Bradford has had incredible impact. Since 2015, attitudes toward reading and writing among Bradford's young people have improved significantly in the schools we support. In 2015, only 48.1% of children in Bradford enjoyed reading (vs. 55.0% nationally). By 2024, this rose to 42.1% in our partner schools, outperforming the national average of 34.6%. Writing enjoyment was 45.8% in 2015, similar to the national rate (48.8%). By 2024, 36.4% of children in supported schools enjoyed writing, compared to 28.7% nationally. Students in our intensive support schools are 22% more likely to visit their local library and 17% more likely to read for pleasure than peers nationally. Through support from Arts Council England, we have also continued to work with local and national authors to create a diverse tapestry of reading and story experiences to inspire the children and young people of Bradford (see NLT/26 - INQ000642125).

101. Additionally, post-pandemic, we identified that the drop in post-pandemic book ownership is now an even more significant problem, particularly given that 1 in 7 state primary schools lack libraries, rising to 1 in 4 in the most deprived areas. As such, the pandemic has exacerbated the issues of book ownership and access.

102. This is why, following the pandemic, we co-founded Libraries for Primaries with Penguin Random House to ensure every UK state primary school has a library or dedicated library space. By the end of this academic year, we will have:

- Raised nearly £13 million (including book discounts)
- Established 1,500 libraries or designated library spaces

- Reached half a million children, who now benefit from the programme
- Trained around 3,000 teachers and support staff
- Distributed 628,000 books in primary schools

103. The Libraries for Primaries programme provides a specially curated collection of 400-500 books that encompass representation and inclusivity, training for staff, furnishings and access to other specialist support. It is a campaign that supports all four nations. So far:

a) In **England**, we have created libraries and reading spaces in 1266 primary schools across 76 local authority areas. This means **we have improved over 400,000 children's access to high-quality book provision at school, with an investment value of £7.4 million** in England to date.

b) In **Northern Ireland**, we have created libraries and reading spaces in 35 primary schools across Belfast, London Derry and Derry. This means **we have improved over 10,000 children's access to high-quality book provision at school, with an investment value of £221,806** in Northern Ireland to date.

c) In **Scotland**, we have created libraries and reading spaces in 106 primary schools across Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee and Fife. This means that **we have improved over 30,000 children's access to high-quality book provision at school, with an investment value of £798,860** in Scotland to date.

d) In **Wales**, we have created libraries and reading spaces in 95 primary schools across Newport, Cardiff, Merthyr Tydfil and Caerphilly. This means that **we have improved 20,443 children's access to high-quality book provision at school, with an investment value of £714,656** in Wales to date. Additionally, since the pandemic, the Merthyr Tydfil Libraries for Primaries programme, funded by the Unwin Charitable Trust, included a programme supporting early years transition. In consultation with

the local authority and school partners, the project focused on Welsh medium settings to support families whose children were moving from meithrin (nursery) to derbyn (reception), the majority of whom do not speak Welsh at home. The project provided quality bilingual activities to support literacy at home in both languages and included bilingual story sessions in nursery, over the summer in public libraries and at school in September, bilingual book gifting and video resources.

104. Additionally, since 2020, our Young Readers Programme has continued to successfully support thousands of children's access to reading resources. Through this programme, we give children the opportunity to choose books that they can take home and keep. These are often the first books they have ever owned. This work is even more critical given the post-pandemic book ownership statistics presented above. This initiative continues to have a huge impact as we have such a broad reach. Since 2020, we have secured partnerships for our Young Readers Programme with:

a. Amazon, British Land, Bupa, Browne Jacobson, Cranleigh School, Estee Lauder, Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer, Laing, Mott MacDonald, Penguin Random House, Slaughter and May, Turner and Townsend, Unwin, and WHSmith **to reach over 42,400 pupils in England.**

b. British Land, Moondance, WHSmith, Amazon and Bupa **to reach over 6,300 pupils in Swansea, Merthyr Tydfil, Newport, Flintshire and Cardiff.**

c. Amazon, British Land, Turner and Townsend and WHSmith, **reaching over 5,600 Scottish children in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Inverness and Fife**, with Glasgow Life being critical delivery partners for this work.

105. Through our work in schools and communities, we have seen first-hand the impact that the national lockdowns had on children's wellbeing, relationships and

emotional development. We identified that many students found the transition back to education settings highly challenging and we identified that teenage girls were a demographic in need of tailored support. Therefore, we launched our ***Represent* programme**, which is designed for girls aged 11 to 14 in alternative provision (AP). Using engaging texts and with a strong oracy focus, this programme aims to support communication skills, resilience and wellbeing. Building on our existing work, this programme offers mainstream secondary schools and AP settings the chance to support girls and young women who have been excluded from, or who are at risk of being excluded from, mainstream education. Through funding from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, we have been able to offer Represent to settings across England for free. The programme is 10-sessions long and uses selected texts and interesting activities, including scaffolded oracy resources, to engage students in discussions about the stories shared. The activities also include scaffolded comprehension activities, to strengthen students' deep understanding of the key messages in the text, and to support literacy skills development. The content also develops the course leaders' ability to differentiate their teaching and learning, acknowledging the wide range of ability often found in these settings. Overall, the programme successfully improves participants' communication skills, understanding of how to form positive relationships, resilience and sense of wellbeing (see NLT/27 - INQ000642112),

106. Furthermore, the pandemic really highlighted the need to strengthen critical, media and digital literacy skills through education to combat misinformation online. We recognised the need to act and as a response to this and the rise of AI, in 2022, our team—specialists in literacy and AP— launched the ***Empower* programme** with funding from the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (ongoing until 31 March 2025). We also developed *Empower* to improve media literacy among young girls in alternative provision or at risk of exclusion. In the first year of the programme, we focused on support Key Stage 3 students (aged 11-14) with being able to critically interrogate news stories. In year 2 of the programme, we updated the content to incorporate lessons on AI and also designed an additional course for girls aged 14-16. We also trained 26 volunteer teachers as Media Literacy Leaders to support whole school

implementation. Since 2022, **Empower has reached 5,456 students across 584 cohorts in 266 settings (83% of which were** AP **settings)**. Our work in this programme has had fantastic results:

a) Trust-checking of news sources increased from 34% to 74%.

b) 89% of students understood how different news outlets present stories differently.

c) 85% reported increased understanding of how social media affects mental wellbeing.

d) Confidence in debating rose from 42% to 63%.

e) Ability to listen and understand others rose from 60% to 81%.

f) 94% of teachers said they would apply Empower content in future teaching.

g) All Media Literacy Leaders who gave feedback felt motivated to embed media literacy school wide.

107. As explained above, during the pandemic, we worked with the Premier League to improve children's access to literacy resources and provided opportunities to develop a love of reading through their enjoyment of sport. Post-pandemic, we have continued this work and use the excitement and passion surrounding sport to motivate and inspire young people to improve their literacy skills, as well as their physical health and mental wellbeing.

a) **Premier League Reading Stars:** is an evidence-based and effective **recovery reading intervention** that we developed for children who might not enjoy reading but do enjoy football! Supporting pupils to read a wide range of formats about the subject they love, Reading Stars is free, delivered in partnership with the Premier League and is part of Premier League Primary Stars.

b) We have developed the **Premier League Magazine Team** in partnership with teachers and magazine professionals from *BBC Match of the Day* magazine, *Girl Talk* and *MEGA* to ensure it really works in schools and has the kudos to engage your pupils. The Premier League Magazine Team supports the delivery of the statutory requirements for the English Programme of Study in the English and Welsh curricula.

c) We know that reading can be challenging for many pupils, and phonics can play a big part in that. Therefore, with our partners, we developed **Premier League Footy Phonics** as an active literacy intervention to support children in developing the important skill of understanding phonics. We have built this intervention based on current phonics research and programmes. In Footy Phonics, leaders are given the tools to revise and reinforce phonics skills that have been taught in the classroom through football-themed, engaging activities.

d) The National Literacy Trust and the Premier League Charitable Fund also host regular free virtual author events. Each event comes with a specially created **challenge resource** to keep the fun going.

108. Additionally, prior to the pandemic (2019), we published a report exploring the association between literacy and financial capability (see NLT/28 - INQ000642117). We found that children and young people who have good reading skills are four times as likely to have good financial skills than their peers who have poor reading skills (35.6% vs 8.8%) and children and young people who have poor reading skills are four times as likely to also have poor financial skills (56.3% vs 12.3%). Therefore, post-pandemic, we have developed and implemented a new programme, ***Words that Count***, which is a free financial literacy programme we have created in partnership with Experian and Foundation 92.. Now in its fifth year, the programme is highly successful and works in collaboration with football foundations and community sports organisations to empower young people aged 14 to 19 to feel more confident and informed about making their own financial decisions. The programme includes six in-person workshops delivered by community role models, covering topics such as income, tax, budgeting, debt, credit, money

mindset and money safety. We also run a complementary digital campaign alongside this to support the initiative. We have mobilised and built links with well-known influencers in the field of financial well-being, and generated content where they share their tips and advice on TikTok and Instagram to maximise engagement.

109. Through our work in Youth Offender Institutions (YOIs), we have identified that the pandemic's effect on education provision has been especially severe. Already among the most educationally vulnerable groups, children in custody experienced significant setbacks as access to structured learning and literacy support diminished. This drop is particularly troubling, given the critical role literacy plays in rehabilitation and future opportunities for these individuals. Therefore, since the pandemic, we have continued to support young offenders' literacy through programmes like *Books Unlocked*, run in partnership with the Booker Prize Foundation. The programme donates books to prisons and youth offender institutions, broadcasts Booker Prize audiobooks via National Prison Radio, and arranges author visits to reading groups.

110. In 2023/24, we donated a total of 3,258 Book Prize-nominated books to reading groups, prison libraries, individuals in prisons/YOIs and community settings. We now reach three-quarters of the custodial estate in the UK, as well as 11 community settings that are approved premises, custody suites and mental health services. In 2023/24, 1 in 2 participants told us that they enjoyed reading more as a result of taking part in the programme and 1 in 2 also reported an improvement in their overall wellbeing.

111. To support young offenders post-pandemic, we have also continued to run our New Chapters programme which offers young people who are serving custodial sentences a space in which they can exercise creative freedom, find their voice, develop their literacy and communication skills and, most importantly, feel heard. New Chapters offers a diverse programme of writing workshops, led by authors with lived experience of the criminal justice system and other issues facing young people in custody. We also work with publishers to donate books to prison libraries and give participants signed books of their own to keep. We

broadcast audiobooks and interviews with authors through National Prison Radio and share recordings of New Chapters participants themselves.

112. Through New Chapters, we collate an annual anthology and organise writing competitions to showcase the work of participants, with the support of National Prison Radio. Together with partners like Buckinghamshire Culture, we seek to build connections between people in custody and the local community through creative writing. Since the pandemic, we have we have received funding from the Youth Endowment Fund to assess the impact of our New Chapters creative writing programme, which we will continue to deliver in three Young Offenders Institutions (HMYOI Feltham, HMYOI Werrington and HMYOI Wetherby) and one Secure School (Oasis Restore) over the next two years.

113. In addition to our programmatic work, we have also further developed our policy and public affairs advocacy work following the Covid-19 pandemic. Firstly, we identified that the early years, book ownership and children's oracy were key areas of literacy that required more support from the government, public, private and third sectors. Therefore, we published three policy outputs:

a) **Unlocking the Power of Reading**, which laid the foundation for our Libraries for Primaries campaign and explored the power of reading for pleasure (see NLT/29 - INQ000642116).

b) **Building Firm Foundations**, which offered recommendations for change in early years speech, language and communication development (refer back to NLT/16 - INQ000642099).

c) **Creating Confident Communicators,** which presented 10 steps for change in supporting children's speaking, listening and communication skills from 0-18 (see NLT/30 - INQ000642111).

114. These publications all made recommendations and outlined steps for change that could be implemented to support children and young people's literacy education recovery. Worsening literacy rates across the UK are the enduring impact of the pandemic. School census data in all four nations indicates that speech, language and communication needs are beginning to overtake

behavioural, social and emotional needs in schools. Four years after the first lockdown, the same systemic barriers still stand in the way of the literacy opportunities of children, families and communities. Since the pandemic:

- Reading enjoyment dropped to its lowest level since 2005
- Writing enjoyment has declined steadily, particularly among young boys
- Fewer children own books today than before the pandemic, with significant implications for reading attainment and engagement

F. LESSONS LEARNED

115. For us as organisation, the pandemic was an extensive learning opportunity. The key lessons we learned were the importance of:

- Promoting a national culture of reading for pleasure
- Empowering families to create a strong Home Learning Environment
- Committing to a place-based model of working, which responds to local needs and challenges with targeted support, as opposed to an inadequate one-size-fits-all approach
- Prioritising media, digital and critical literacy education to combat the spread of misinformation, which was so prevalent during the pandemic, and the rise of AI
- Working in partnership with businesses, communities and the third sector to give families the tools they need to thrive

116. The pandemic also further highlighted the inextricable links between poverty and low literacy. Systemic change addressing the root causes of poverty is also critical in breaking this cycle of disadvantage.

117. There are clear lessons to be learnt both for now and if a future pandemic were to occur. Alongside strategic, systemic and foundational efforts to reduce

child poverty, we identified five key areas of focus to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on children's learning and literacy:

i. **Promote a culture of reading for pleasure.** Children's enjoyment of reading is at crisis point. Our latest research reveals 2 in 3 children don't enjoy reading with reading enjoyment at an all-time low. We are calling for urgent government action on an initiative that promotes a culture of reading for pleasure on a national scale. There is no short-term fix, any action must have a lasting legacy as we know reading for pleasure has countless benefits. When children enjoy reading, they read more often, helping to build vital reading skills and bringing wider benefits for wellbeing, confidence and learning.

   Our research shows twice as many children who enjoy reading in their free time have above average reading skills compared to their peers who do not enjoy it, and they also said it helps them to relax (57%), feel happy (41%), learn new things (51%), understand views of others (33%), learn about other cultures (32%) and be confident (26%). Children are not engaged by texts they cannot relate to, so greater diversity of texts is key. Lack of access to materials is also significant. 1 in 8 children from disadvantaged backgrounds do not own a single book at home and 1 in 7 state primary schools lack libraries, rising to 1 in 4 in the most deprived areas.

   This is why, following the pandemic, we have co-founded Libraries for Primaries with Penguin Random House to ensure every UK state primary school has a library or dedicated library space. By the end of this academic year, we will have:

   - Raised nearly £13 million (including book discounts)
   - Established 1,500 libraries or designated library spaces
   - Reached half a million children, who now benefit from the programme

- Trained around 3,000 teachers and support staff
- Distributed 628,000 books in primary schools

If we encourage a culture of reading for pleasure and create a daily reading habit, children are more likely to build the skills they need to thrive in school and beyond. This will not only help school outcomes rise over the next decade but is also integral to delivering sustained growth in all areas of the country and achieving broader societal goals such wellbeing and social cohesion. Our research with British Land shows that if all UK children read for pleasure every day, the number of children getting five good GCSE grades would increase by 1.1 million over a generation (see NLT/31 – INQ000642121). This would boost the average lifetime earnings of those individuals by £57,500 and increase the UK's GDP by as much as £4.6 billion per year over a generation.

ii. **Empower families to strengthen the home learning environment.** Low literacy and poverty are inextricably linked in a cycle of disadvantage. The pandemic highlighted – and exacerbated – the persistent literacy gap between disadvantaged children and their peers. Families experiencing poverty are less likely to have the resources, time and confidence to create the home learning environment needed for children to thrive.

To close this gap, early intervention is key. In 2023, 185,000 five-year-olds started school without the literacy, communication and language skills they need. To meet the new government target of 75% of children starting school with a good level of development, strategies to strengthen the home learning environment must be put in place. This would break down barriers to opportunities by giving families the foundations to ensure their children reach their full potential from the early years right through to adulthood.

iii. **Put inclusivity and community needs at the heart of the national conversation by taking a place-based approach.** Where families live should not determine the quality or availability of support they receive, yet this is the reality. We need to end this postcode lottery. The pandemic cemented our belief that tailored initiatives that address the unique local needs, characteristics and challenges of areas are essential.

At the National Literacy Trust, we understand the power of communities. This is why we have a place-based model, with frontline teams on the ground in areas across the country—working in, and coming from, the communities they serve. Due to the success of this model, we have greatly invested in this part of our operation since the pandemic, when we ran 18 hubs, as we are now about to open our 21st hub this summer.

The current problems within the system go beyond access. Promoting access to services that families do not engage with is pointless. Our success is rooted in our focus on community enhancement, engagement and peer support. We work in co-production with families, businesses and local services to build on existing relationships with underserved communities and bring together community leaders, champions and volunteers who are trusted figures and reflect the diversity of the communities, all to boost engagement.

We have also reintroduced the engaging social and cultural activities that were disrupted by lockdown. This includes learning through play, Literacy Champion volunteer initiatives and opportunities for people to share ideas, experiences, and information in familiar, local spaces. This is because we know that peer-to-peer learning often has a greater impact than expert advice alone. We urge the government to understand that national change requires inclusive, meaningful local action.

Prioritising digital inclusion for all families is crucial in supporting children's learning, especially in the wake of the pandemic to ensure there is no "class ceiling" on the ambitions of disadvantaged youth. This includes ensuring families can access a variety of story formats, including print, digital, and audio materials, both in and out of school so children have multiple ways to engage with literacy content. We recommend the government adopts a place-based approach to deliver services across the country. This includes expanding the Family Hubs programme to ensure national coverage. When considering the great diversity of urban, rural and coastal areas across the country, it is logical that a one-size-fits-all approach will always be inadequate. Families in communities across the country all deserve equal access to the tailored support they need to thrive.

iv. **Keep pace with technological advancements through a focus on media, digital and critical literacy.** The next generation must be equipped with the media, digital and critical literacy skills needed to thrive in the modern world. Current strategies often overlook technological advancements. Yet keeping pace with these changes and empowering families to become informed, confident digital users is now more important than ever – particularly with AI on the rise.

The rise of misinformation during the pandemic was equally a watershed moment in highlighting the need for embedding critical literacy across the curriculum and as such has been one of the four pillars of our recommendations to the current Curriculum and Assessment Review. Teaching students how to assess the reliability of information and navigate the information ecosystem will help them engage more effectively with media and strengthen their ability to evaluate sources. Promoting critical literacy skills not only supports academic achievement and social cohesion but

also prepares students to navigate the complexities of the modern world, giving them the skills needed to thrive in the workplace and an increasingly digital society.

v. **Commit to working in partnership with businesses and the third sector to give children and families the tools they need to thrive.** Everyone has a role to play in ensuring children across the country have the best start to life. Partnership working between government, business, communities and civil society – at local, regional and national levels – must be at the heart of any literacy strategy.

118. It is the National Literacy Trust's hope that by pursuing these lines of enquiry in Module 8, the Inquiry will be able to ensure that the appropriate lessons are learned and that there is adequate preparation and planning for any future pandemic.

119. In line with the learnings and recommendations above, we believe the following initiatives need to be implemented and sustained to futureproof us from another pandemic:

a) Promote a culture of reading for pleasure – so that pupils have a stronger sense of intrinsically motivated engagement with reading and learning to sustain them during periods of educational disruption;

b) Empower families to strengthen the home learning environment so that they have the resources and confidence to take on an a more active role in their children's education;

c) Keep pace with technological advancements through a focus on media, digital and critical literacy, so that children have the skills to engage in self-directed digital learning, critically and safely;

d) Understand that education provision is stronger when it conceived of as place-based and multi-disciplinary. Multi-agency support delivered through community alliances and partnerships was a factor in successful initiatives during the pandemic (whether it was distributing books and learning resources through foodbanks or donations from local businesses to support online learning). These principles were at the heart of the National Literacy Trust's delivery during the Pandemic and need to be central to the education system.

e) Commit to working in partnership with businesses and the third sector to give children and families the tools they need to thrive.

120. This submission is exhaustive, but we are happy to provide any additional detail as required

121. It is the National Literacy Trust's hope that by pursuing these lines of enquiry in Module 8, the Inquiry will be able to ensure that the appropriate lessons are learned and that there is adequate preparation and planning for any future pandemic.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief in its truth.

Signed: Personal Data

Dated: 19 June 2025